



By **David Olson**

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Deputy Val Johnson is on patrol in the middle of the night.

The Minnesota highway is dark, except for a light that appears to float above the road about a mile away.

Curious, Johnson turns his cruiser toward the object.

Suddenly, impossibly, the light is upon him in a blinding flash.

Brakes slam and just before the deputy blacks out he hears the sound of breaking glass.



Photo taken of Johnson's cruiser the night he reported the incident. Bruce Crummy / The Forum

Fast forward 27 years to the Briese farm outside of Tappen, N.D.

Sixteen-year-old Evan Briese gets out of bed for a glass of water. Glancing out a window, he spots something moving near the family's hog pen.

He arms himself with a rifle and goes to investigate.

Stepping into the corral, he's startled by the sight of beings 8 to 9 feet tall doing something to one of the hogs.

The rifle fires and one of the giants lets out a shriek.

Before the boy can comprehend more, something throws him to the ground and he loses consciousness.

## Unsolved mystery

Spooky stuff.

But is it true?

This time of year, when tales of witches, ghosts and things creepy hold sway, what is one to make of first-person accounts of strange and bizarre happenings?

Dennis Brekke has yet to come up with an answer.

Nearly 30 autumns have passed since the retired Marshall County sheriff got a call that one of his deputies needed assistance.

It was Aug. 27, 1979.

Deputy Johnson sent a radio transmission around 2:19 a.m. stating he needed help.

When Brekke got there, Johnson was gone, but his battered police cruiser was not.



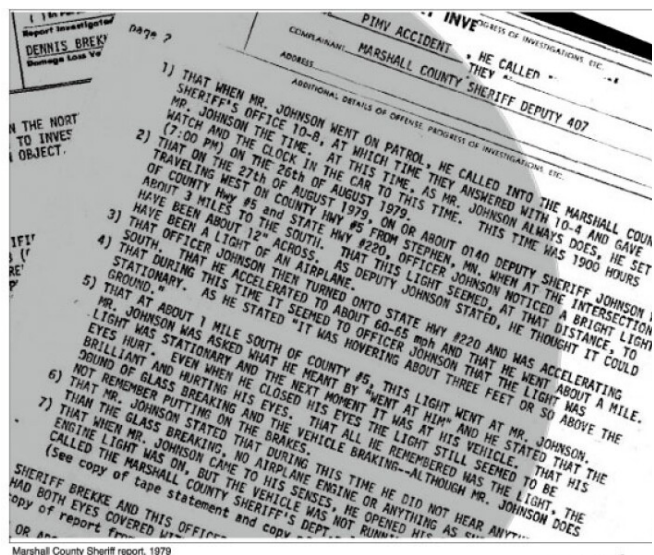
Headlight damage is seen on Deputy Johnson's patrol car in the Marshall County Historical Society Museum in Warren, Minn. Bruce Crummy / The Forum

"The car was standing crossways in the middle of the road and the ambulance had just taken off with him (Johnson)," said Brekke, who still lives in Warren, Minn.

"I drove that car in that night. It drove OK, but the antennas were bent and there were some holes," said Brekke, who investigated what became a classic case in UFO lore.

"He said he'd seen a bright light and that's about the last thing he knew," Brekke said, referring to Johnson, who later estimated he had been rendered unconscious for about 40 minutes.

"He had welder-type burns in his eyes. That's what the doctor said," Brekke recalled.



## Missing minutes

Brekke's report on the incident noted that Johnson routinely set his watch at the start of each shift by calling dispatch for the official time. After the incident, Johnson's watch and the clock in his car were 14 minutes slow.

A headlight on the driver's side of the car was smashed and there were small dents in the hood just below where the windshield was fractured, also on the driver's side.

Two antennas on the car were bent, though they had spring bases to prevent that from happening.

Brekke consulted scientists in Minneapolis who told him whatever struck the car was something very fast.



A broken windshield is seen on Deputy Johnson's patrol car in the Marshall County Historical Society Museum in Warren, Minn. There is an additional unexplained hole in the small, round red light on top of the cruiser. Bruce Crummy / The Forum

"Our first thoughts were maybe it could have been somebody with an airplane and drugs," Brekke said. "We called the Air Force and talked to them. There was nothing they had seen in that area.

"We did everything we could," Brekke said. "There's no good answer to what happened."

The brown 1977 Ford LTD Johnson drove that night was taken out of service shortly after the incident and ended up in the Marshall County Historical Society Museum in Warren.

Now and then, it is dusted off and driven in parades.

Every time UFO stories appear on TV, a new flock of curiosity seekers finds its way to the museum, said curator Ethel Thorlacius.



Chicken wire fencing encloses the famous "UFO car" that Marshall County Deputy Sheriff Val Johnson was driving when he said he encountered a strange light in August 1979. A sheriff's department investigation came to no conclusions as far as what caused damage to the car. Ethel Thorlacius, curator at the Marshall County Historical Society Museum in Warren, Minn., says interest always goes way up when the episode is featured in the press. Bruce Crummy / The Forum

### **'Look at that!'**

The museum display includes a testimonial from Evarist and Kathy Ruzicka, a Grafton, N.D., couple who said they saw a bright flash of light the night Johnson said he had a run-in with something unexplainable.

Reached by phone at their home, which is not far from the Stephen, Minn., area where Johnson's car was found, the Ruzickas vividly recall the incident.

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"It was an extremely bright flash. I just kind of yelled, 'Look at that!'" Evarist Ruzicka said, describing the moment he saw something weird in the eastern sky as they were driving home that night.

His wife was a bit sleepy during the ride, but she said her husband's shout woke her in time to see a blinding burst of light.

Evarist Ruzicka said he suspected an earthly explanation for what they saw - a government experiment, perhaps - but at first he wasn't keen on telling anyone about the episode.

"I really didn't want to get involved. At the same time, I hated to see what they were doing to the deputy," Ruzicka said, referring to grief Johnson took from some people.



Johnson and Sheriff Dennis Brekke were photographed together with the patrol car shortly after the incident. The photograph is one of several surrounding the incident on display at the Marshall County Historical Society Museum in Warren, Minn. Bruce Crummy / The Forum

The incident left Brekke philosophical.

"We're sitting here on this planet. It's possible there could be people in other places," he said.

Brekke said Johnson left his job not long after the incident, but he isn't sure where he ended up.

It might be Wisconsin, according to Torrey Briese, a Tappen-area farmer whose family went public last fall with some odd stories of their own. They've since become tied into the UFO community.

After they were approached by The Forum, Briese and his wife, Myra, described a number of things they say happened to their family, including a tale about giant beings attacking their son, Evan, and stealing the family's hog, Ruthy, one night in September 2006.

Briese's depiction of a creature he saw on his family's farm in September 2006. Special to the Forum

## **Peculiar calls**

On top of that, Torrey Briese said he experienced a strange episode himself in July 2006.

While giving a neighbor a ride into town, Briese said he saw a strange blue light in the sky that would move when the vehicle moved and stop when the vehicle stopped.

The aerial display continued for about 30 minutes before the object zoomed away and was out of sight within seconds, Briese said.

After the revelations were made public last fall, the family's story was featured on a nationwide radio show and plastered on countless Internet Web sites.

A wedge-shaped UFO was reported near Tappen, N.D., in April 2006. Witness Evan Briese drew this picture. Arrow indicates the direction the object departed. Special to the Forum

Torrey Briese, a member of the Tappen School Board, said his family only recently turned their telephone back on after shutting it off for six months.

"We had a lot of peculiar phone calls," said Briese, who added he knows who Johnson is and has heard the former deputy isn't interested in talking to the media anymore.

Briese said he wasn't sure he should be talking either, not after the reaction they got from some people last fall.

### **'A serious matter'**

He believes his son experienced something that can't be explained and the family still has the shredded shirt Evan Briese was wearing the night he said he was assaulted by beings that did not look human.

"Whatever it was, was some kind of physical presence, because it took that animal," Torrey Briese said, referring to Ruthy the hog, who has not been seen since.

"People don't realize this was a serious matter and it still is," Myra Briese said.

"I think the big thing our family learned is don't be quick to judge others."

She said they don't laugh at people who approach the family with strange stories, some of which, she said, come from others in the Tappen area.

Another thing they don't do, Myra Briese said, is spend a lot of time looking over their shoulders for strange lights or things that go bump in the night.

"We just do our everyday thing. We're not into looking for them all the time," she said.

*Readers can reach Forum reporter Dave Olson at (701) 241-5555.*

1/2: Official Marshall County sheriff department investigation documents incident are on display in the Marshall County Historical Society Museum, Warren, Minn. Bruce Crummy / The Forum landscape

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Dave Olson is a reporter, photographer and occasional videographer. He graduated from Minnesota State University Moorhead with a degree in mass communications, and during his time at The Forum he has covered many beats, from cops and courts to business and education. Currently is writing business stories, but jumps on daily news as needed. He's also written about UFOs, ghosts, dinosaur bones and the dwarf planet Pluto. You may reach Dave at 701-241-5555, or by email at [dolson@forumcomm.com](mailto:dolson@forumcomm.com).

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