

A Secret Never Forgotten

An Unexplained Night at Cherry Springs — October 27, 1971

“Facts which at first seem improbable will, even on scant explanation, drop the cloak which has hidden them and stand forth in naked and simple beauty.”

— Galileo Galilei

This account is connected to my book *Julius and the Mysse Curse*, but I deliberately left this story out of that book.

For more than fifty years, I have debated whether I should tell it.

I have always been skeptical of three things that I cannot explain: Sasquatch or the Yeti, UFOs and extraterrestrial visitors, and ghosts.

I still consider myself skeptical.

But on October 27, 1971, **Julius, Dean, and I witnessed something none of us could explain.**

I cannot tell you what it was.

I can only tell you what happened.

And I will make every effort to separate what I actually remember from what I have wondered about since.

October 24, 1971

October 24, 1971, was a Sunday.

Paul and Bernice Milam and their friends had left Ingomar and were heading back toward Bigfork, Montana.

Julius, Dean, and I were still at Cherry Springs, working on the corrugated-steel roof of the log lambing barn we were building for the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

The roof had become one of the most frustrating parts of the entire project.

The prairie winds seemed determined to make the job as difficult as possible. The strongest winds usually came in the afternoon, and handling large sheets of corrugated steel in those conditions was dangerous. A sheet of metal caught by the wind could become a weapon.

That Sunday was no different.

We worked when the wind allowed us to and stopped when it didn't.

By late afternoon, frustration had taken over. We decided to eat supper early, regroup, and get some sleep so we could start fresh Monday morning.

We were exhausted from the work, hunting, and activity of the previous few days.

While I was cooking supper, a Cherry Creek sheep herder named **Carl Watson** drove into our camp with his ranch pickup pulling his sheep wagon.

His two dogs, Cootie and Little Jimmy, were in the front seat. His mare, Ryan, followed behind, apparently expecting the oats Carl kept in his sheep wagon.

Carl had been around Cherry Creek for years, and I had known him for about ten years. Normally he was smiling, joking, and upbeat.

That evening he was none of those things.

He asked us whether we had seen anything strange during the previous few days.

None of us had.

Dean had hardly left the worksite. Julius and I had spent most of our time either working on the building or taking Paul and Bernice's friends hunting and sightseeing.

Carl's face was tense.

His manner and speech were unusually apprehensive.

Julius finally asked him if he had seen a ghost or something like that.

Carl simply shook his head.

I asked whether he had received bad news from home.

Again, he said nothing.

He kept looking back toward his old camp as though he expected something to follow him.

I invited him to supper.

He accepted.

We sat on the tailgates of the pickups and ate hamburger steaks.

Finally, Carl began to tell us what had been bothering him.

Carl's Story

Carl explained that something strange had been happening with his band of sheep.

He normally checked his sheep several times each day—moving them toward water, watching for ewes that had separated from the band, and making sure they were safely bedded down at night.

The past five or six days had been different.

Carl said he would bed the ewes down near a reservoir about a mile from Yoakum Springs.

In the morning, they would be gone.

Not one or two.

The entire band.

He would get on Ryan and search for them.

Sometimes they were still together. More often, they had scattered into several groups in unusual locations across the northern part of the ranch.

Some had crowded into large coulees.

Others appeared to be trying to hide.

Carl said it was as though something invisible was chasing them.

He described it as being like fifty ghost coyotes scattering the sheep in every direction.

The Cherry Creek property was enormous—roughly fifteen miles across and ten miles deep by Carl's estimate—so finding scattered sheep could be extremely difficult.

But what bothered Carl most was that sometimes he actually watched the sheep become agitated while he was with them.

He couldn't see anything frightening them.

He couldn't hear anything unusual.

Yet they would suddenly scatter.

Carl had also ridden to the camps of Jack “Rummy” Rumdahl and Jimmy Mulholland to find out whether they were experiencing anything similar.

They weren't.

Their sheep were behaving normally.

That made Carl even more uneasy.

He finished his supper and prepared to leave.

The sun was setting, and the moon was beginning to appear over the prairie.

Before he left, Carl asked us one more question.

Had any of us heard anything strange during the previous four or five nights?

We hadn't.

Then Carl told us something I have never forgotten.

He said he had been hearing **what sounded exactly like a human baby crying** somewhere out on the prairie.

He wasn't sure when it had started.

He knew the normal sounds of the prairie. He knew the cries of rabbits, the calls of antelope, the sounds of deer, birds, coyotes, and the other animals he encountered every day.

This sound was different.

He said it sounded **human**.

Exactly like a newborn baby crying.

He had heard it at different times during the night, often when the darkness seemed deepest.

He had tried to locate the source, but walking alone across the prairie at night carried too many risks.

He finally told us he assumed it was probably some bird or animal he simply didn't recognize.

Then he left for Mud Lake.

I watched him disappear into the darkness.

I didn't think much more about it that night.

My mind was still on the log lambing shed.

But before I fell asleep, I did wonder:

What would a human baby be doing out in the middle of nowhere?

October 25

The next morning I walked from my sheep wagon toward the outhouse and found Julius sitting on the tailgate of the Skunk Wagon.

His shotgun was across his lap.

He told me he had stayed awake most of the night patrolling the camp and protecting Dean and me.

I asked him what he thought he was protecting us from.

He didn't answer.

He walked toward the north end of the corrals, talking to himself.

Dean eventually woke up, and we started working on the roof.

The steel was giving us trouble. Keeping it square while fighting the wind was becoming a constant battle.

At some point Dean and I realized Julius was gone.

We learned he had been talking with Dean about Carl and then had gone toward the water access at Cherry Springs.

Julius didn't smoke.

That was why I was surprised when I found him smoking a cigarette he had borrowed from Dean.

He told me, in no uncertain terms, to leave him alone.

So I did.

By then, I was beginning to think that all three of us had been on the prairie too long.

Later that afternoon Julius returned to camp.

He was pale.

He was carrying his shotgun.

He still wasn't talking.

Dean teased him about smoking.

Julius ignored him and went into the Skunk Wagon.

That night I stayed awake for a while, listening.

Particularly for the sound Carl had described.

I heard nothing.

October 26 — My Birthday

October 26 was my twenty-first birthday.

It was also the strangest birthday I had ever experienced.

Julius continued borrowing cigarettes from Dean.

He told Dean he had never smoked before but thought this might be an occasion when it was warranted.

I finally asked Julius why he was acting so strangely and why he kept carrying the shotgun.

He didn't answer.

He walked away, muttering to himself.

That evening, after supper, Julius finally told us why Carl's story had affected him.

He had experienced something similar while traveling through the wilderness south of Anchorage, Alaska, with his brother.

According to Julius, they had been fishing for salmon.

That night they were awakened by a bright light in the distance.

His brother believed they were looking at a UFO.

Julius said the object appeared extremely bright—brighter than an arc-welding light—and that it seemed to move closer before suddenly disappearing upward.

He said it wasn't the first time his brother had seen something like it.

Then Julius told us something even more disturbing.

He and his brother had heard **a human baby crying** near their camp.

His brother believed the sound was being used to lure people into the woods.

Julius told us to ignore such sounds if we ever heard them.

He said he remembered being terrified.

Dean was skeptical.

He suggested the object might have been a helicopter, a searchlight, or some form of surveillance aircraft.

Dean had served six years in the U.S. Air Force and believed he was familiar with most of the aircraft the United States was using.

Julius disagreed.

By the time the conversation ended, Julius was visibly shaken.

Dean went to bed convinced that something traumatic had happened to Julius in Alaska, but he didn't believe it involved extraterrestrials.

I was less certain.

Not about aliens.

About Julius.

I was more worried about what Julius might do than I was about anything flying through the sky.

That night I locked the door to my sheep wagon.

And I listened.

Nothing.

October 27 — The Night

The next morning Julius wanted to drive to Carl's camp at Mud Lake.

He said he was worried about Carl and the sheep.

Dean and I agreed.

Julius left in my pickup with two of his rifles.

Dean and I finished the roof work.

Around noon Julius returned.

He said Carl seemed better.

The sheep were behaving normally.

Carl had not heard the crying again.

That afternoon we concentrated on cleaning up the area around the nearly completed lambing shed and corrals.

We gathered scrap lumber, wire, cans, glass, and other debris.

Dean measured the door openings.

He would eventually build the custom doors and hardware.

We were close.

The log lambing barn was almost finished.

I was proud of what we had accomplished.

I kept thinking that in another week or so I would be heading home to Bigfork and preparing for school in Missoula.

For the first time in days, I was happy.

That evening we celebrated with supper.

Julius wanted to find one of his jugs of chokecherry wine.

Dean and I wanted no part of it.

Julius offered moonshine.

Again, we refused.

I cooked potatoes, carrots, and steaks.

We ate like we hadn't seen food in months.

For a while, Julius seemed like himself again.

Then Dean went to the outhouse.

From inside, he began making sounds like a crying baby.

I knew immediately what he was doing.

It was a terrible joke considering Julius's state of mind.

I tried to get between them when Dean came out.

Dean apologized.

Julius told him to go to hell.

At least they didn't start fighting.

Eventually they settled down.

The sun was almost gone.

The western sky was spectacular.

I took my camera from the sheep wagon.

I had only a few exposures left on my roll of thirty-six slide photographs.

I pointed the camera toward the western horizon.

That's when I saw it.

A light.

At first I assumed someone was driving along the prairie.

The light seemed to rise and fall.

It became extremely bright and then almost disappeared.

I called to Julius.

He immediately asked how anyone could be driving over the sandstone cliffs near Yoakum Springs.

The light changed from yellowish to almost white.

It moved slowly.

Deliberately.

I took three photographs.

I wasn't trying to photograph the object.

In fact, I tried to take the pictures when the light was not visible because I thought it detracted from the sunset.

I finished photographing the sky and went back inside my sheep wagon.

I put the camera away.

I was waiting for the water to heat so I could wash the supper dishes when intense flashes of light began coming through the western window.

Sometimes the light was brilliant white.

Then I heard Dean yelling.

“Get your ass out here right now, Mr. One Share!”

I assumed a ranch pickup had gotten lost.

I stepped outside.

There was no pickup.

I looked toward Dean and Julius.

Both were staring upward.

Neither was speaking.

Their mouths were open.

I looked up.

And I saw it.

What We Saw

I am going to describe what I remember as accurately as I can.

I am not going to tell you what I think it was.

The object appeared as a glowing light moving toward us.

The color changed from bright white to golden yellow and then toward orange.

At first the light was below the horizon near Yoakum Springs.

Then it became visibly airborne.

It moved slowly in a zigzag pattern.

North to south.

Then back again.

It moved up and down.

As it came closer, the shape seemed to change.

At first it appeared round.

Then it looked more like a pill or a large propane tank.

It became brighter as it approached.

I had never seen an aircraft move that slowly in such a pattern.

Then, almost instantly, it stopped.

It appeared to be completely stationary.

For a moment, it seemed to hover above the horizon.

Then it disappeared.

I looked at Dean.

He was stunned.

Julius was staring at the same place.

Dean said he had never seen an aircraft do anything like that.

A few moments later I saw the object again.

This time it was farther north, near Carl's new camp.

Again, the three of us watched it.

Again, the color changed.

White.

Yellow.

Orange-red.

Julius said he was going to get his rifle.

Dean told him not to.

Then the object disappeared again.

We searched the sky.

Nothing.

Then suddenly it appeared almost directly overhead.

This time it looked enormous.

It resembled a huge propane tank or an elongated metallic capsule.

I couldn't tell how high it was or how far away.

That meant I could not accurately determine its size.

But compared with what we had seen moments earlier, **it appeared enormous.**

The surface appeared smooth.

I couldn't see windows.

I couldn't see wings.

I couldn't see anything attached to it.

It seemed suspended in the air.

Its color had changed to a deep orange-red, sometimes appearing almost bluish.

The strange part was the light.

It seemed to come from inside the object.

The object itself appeared metallic.

It remained above us for what I estimated to be several minutes.

I cannot say exactly how long.

As I stared at it, I noticed my glasses had become extremely dark.

They were photochromic glass lenses—the technology existed long before the Transitions brand name—and they darkened in sunlight through a chemical reaction in the glass.

I eventually took them off because they had become too dark for me to see clearly.

Then the object moved.

It traveled toward the eastern horizon.

It did not appear to slow down.

Then it changed direction at what looked like a right angle and disappeared toward the south.

There was no sound.

No engine.

No roar.

Nothing that I could hear.

Julius was the first to speak.

He was convinced we had seen a UFO.

Dean was much more cautious.

He said he had never seen anything capable of the movement we had just witnessed.

He asked whether any of us had heard an engine.

None of us had.

The three of us stood there trying to make sense of what had just happened.

I looked at my hands.

They were shaking.

So were my legs.

What Was It?

Julius believed it was an alien spacecraft.

Dean wasn't convinced.

He believed it could have been something made by humans—or something else we simply didn't understand.

At one point Dean said he hoped it was something the United States had built.

The Cold War was still very real in 1971, so the possibility that an unknown aircraft might have been military technology was not an absurd concern.

But there was one thing I don't want to exaggerate.

We did not know what we had seen.

And we still don't.

That distinction matters.

Project Blue Book was no longer operating by then. The U.S. Air Force had terminated the program on December 17, 1969, two years before our experience.

So when we worried about government attention, we were speaking from the fears and assumptions of three young men standing in the Montana darkness—not from knowledge that an active Project Blue Book investigation would follow.

The Morning After

The next morning, October 28, I got up early.

I looked toward the sky repeatedly.

Dean was already working on the measurements for the lambing-shed doors.

Julius was waiting for the outhouse.

Nobody talked about the previous night.

Finally I asked:

“What did we see last night?”

Julius answered first.

He said it was an alien spacecraft.

Dean interrupted.

He said he knew what he had seen but couldn't tell us whether it had come from somewhere beyond Earth or had been created by humans.

Then Dean suggested something else.

Maybe it had been a time machine from the future.

Julius dismissed that idea.

I suggested another possibility—perhaps it had come from another dimension.

That idea came largely from watching *Star Trek*.

Dean told me I had probably been drinking too much of Julius's wine.

For a few minutes we laughed.

Then Dean became serious.

He told us we should never tell anyone what we had seen.

He was afraid that if the government heard about it, we could attract unwanted attention.

That fear was not based on a current Project Blue Book program—it had already ended—but on the broader atmosphere of the Cold War and the possibility that what we had seen might somehow have been connected to military technology.

Julius agreed.

Then Dean proposed that we make a pact.

We would never tell anyone.

Not ever.

Even if we were drunk.

We would simply say we didn't believe in UFOs, ghosts, Sasquatch, or Yetis.

We all agreed.

A Secret Kept for More Than Fifty Years

Dean and Julius have both gone to their graves.

I am the only one of the three of us still here.

That is why I am finally telling this story.

Not because I can prove what we saw.

I cannot.

One of the photographs I took that evening appears to contain a small point of light beneath the horizon.

I know what I remember seeing.

I also know that **the photograph, by itself, proves nothing.**

But whenever I look at that photograph, I remember the night.

I remember standing beside Julius and Dean.

I remember the silence.

I remember the strange light.

And I remember the feeling that something had happened that I could not explain.

More than fifty years later, the memory is still vivid.

What Happened Later

The experience stayed with me.

Years later, while working in Saudi Arabia, my friend Buddy Maxey and I traveled to Egypt.

We visited Cairo, the pyramids, the Sphinx, Luxor, the Valley of the Kings, the Temple of Hatshepsut, and other ancient sites.

I never told Buddy about the Cherry Springs encounter.

But our conversations about ancient Egypt caused me to begin asking questions about things I had previously taken for granted.

How had ancient people moved enormous stones?

How had they organized massive construction projects?

How much knowledge had ancient civilizations actually possessed?

Those questions fascinated me.

But today I would phrase my conclusions differently than I did when I first wrote this article.

The fact that we don't fully understand how an ancient structure was constructed does not prove that extraterrestrials built it.

It proves that there are still things worth studying.

That distinction matters.

The "Enlightened One"

A year later, while working in India, Buddy and I visited a man we were told could see into people's pasts and futures.

At the time, we approached the experience partly for entertainment.

We were curious.

We were skeptical.

Then he told each of us things we believed he could not have known.

What he said about my encounter with Julius and Dean caught my attention immediately.

He described what he believed was **a "star person" traveling in a star vehicle.**

Buddy asked whether he meant an alien spacecraft.

The man said yes.

He went on to describe what he believed about humanity's origins, ancient civilizations, and beings from the stars.

I wrote down what happened.

I did not know what to believe.

I still don't.

Later, some of the predictions he made about Buddy's life appeared to come true in extraordinary ways.

That experience affected me deeply.

But again, **I cannot prove what caused it.**

I can only tell you what happened and what I thought about it.

Ancient Questions

Over the years I became increasingly interested in ancient civilizations.

I visited Greece with my wife.

I saw the Parthenon and other historical sites.

I visited Delphi with my wife, Michelle.

The ancient Greeks believed Delphi was a sacred center of the world, and the sanctuary was associated with Apollo and the priestess Pythia.

Standing there caused me to think again about the questions that had first begun on the Montana prairie.

Were ancient stories simply humanity's attempts to explain things it didn't understand?

Could similarities between myths from different civilizations have arisen independently?

Could some stories have originated from events that were later transformed into mythology?

And, perhaps most provocatively:

Could any ancient stories have been inspired by encounters with something real that ancient people could not explain?

I don't know.

And I no longer believe I should pretend to know.

The Abydos "Helicopter"

One example that fascinated me was the famous image at the Temple of Seti I at Abydos that has been called the "helicopter hieroglyph."

When viewed from certain angles, the overlapping forms can look remarkably like modern machines.

For years I thought images like this were evidence of advanced technology in ancient Egypt.

The historical evidence, however, provides a much more conventional explanation.

The image is generally understood as a **palimpsest**—a later inscription carved over an earlier one. As the material used to cover the earlier inscription deteriorated, portions of both inscriptions remained visible, creating the modern appearance of a helicopter and other machines.

That explanation does not make the carving any less interesting.

It simply means that **something that looks like a helicopter isn't evidence that ancient Egyptians possessed helicopters.**

That is a lesson I should have applied more broadly to some of my earlier thinking.

What I Believe Today

I still believe it is possible that life exists elsewhere in the universe.

Given the enormous scale of the universe, I don't think that is an unreasonable question.

But possibility is not proof.

NASA's UAP research makes essentially the same distinction: unidentified observations deserve scientific investigation, but eyewitness accounts by themselves generally do not provide enough information to determine what caused an event, and there is currently no conclusive evidence that UAP are extraterrestrial.

That is exactly where I stand with what happened at Cherry Springs.

I don't know what we saw.

It might have been something created by humans.

It might have been an unusual natural phenomenon.

It might have been something we misunderstood because of distance, darkness, perspective, or other limitations.

It might have been something we still don't have an explanation for.

And yes, I remain open to the possibility that life exists elsewhere.

But I will not turn an unanswered question into a proven fact.

The Secret

There is one thing I know.

Three men stood together on the Montana prairie on October 27, 1971.

We watched something in the sky that none of us could identify.

We saw it move.

We saw it change color.

We saw what appeared to be a smooth, glowing object.

We saw it apparently hover.

We saw it disappear.

And we saw it again.

We talked about what we had witnessed.

Then we agreed never to tell anyone.

For more than fifty years, I kept that promise.

Until now.

I am not asking you to believe it was an alien spacecraft.

I am asking you to believe that I remember what I saw.

There is a difference.

Perhaps that is why this night remains burned—almost tattooed—into my memory.

I was twenty-one years old.

I was living in a sheep wagon in the middle of the Montana prairie.

I was tired, dirty, and focused on finishing a log lambing barn.

I had no reason to expect anything extraordinary to happen.

Then, for a few minutes on one October evening, **the ordinary world became something I could not explain.**

Julius had his explanation.

Dean had his possibilities.

I had questions.

More than fifty years later, I still do.

And perhaps that is the real secret.

Some experiences don't need to be solved to remain unforgettable.

I know what I saw.

I still don't know what it was.

And I will leave that mystery where it has always belonged—
with you.



Craig Milam
October 22, 2011



Pictures taken on my Nikon 35mm camera on October 27, 1971.



