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The Prettiest Thing I've Ever Seen...

There was a time in the 1960s and 1970s when UFO investigators would refer to the "soda pop factor" as a possible indication that a witness was telling the truth about a UFO sighting.

Supposedly it originated years earlier when a UFO witness, in telling about what happened during a sighting, mentioned that he went across the road to get a bottle of soda pop. The soft drink had absolutely nothing to do with the story, but the investigator felt that somehow that irrelevant bit of information helped make the man's story all the more believable. And with that, the term became part of the jargon of the UFO world.

For me, an old man's smile was a "soda pop factor." His name was Adolph Birkland. I had been sent to Superior, Wisconsin to look into the report of a UFO landing and in checking that out I heard about Birkland and a number of other people who had had sightings not related to the landing case.

Birkland was a retired laborer who'd worked on Lake Superior ore docks and railroad section gangs. He was a little man, shrunken with age, who lived alone in a small white frame house at the end of a dirt road a few miles west of Two Harbors, Minnesota, itself thirty miles northeast of Duluth. The Big Knife River ran through the woods just behind Birkland's home.

I went to his house about nine thirty one morning with Gene Lundholm, a librarian at the University of Wisconsin at Superior and a veteran UFO investigator.



Gene had looked into many UFO reports in the area over the years and was enormously helpful during the week I spent in the Superior-Duluth area, telling me who to see and where to go to find out for myself what it was all about. Our visit to Birkland's home came on one of the few days Gene could get free from his university duties.



Adolph Birkland couldn't remember the date of his sighting, but thought it had been in September the year before, 1974.

"I'd just gone to bed and hadn't fallen asleep when I saw the whole house light up," Birkland said as we sat in his sparsely furnished living room with its bare floor. An old, broken television with a round screen sat in one corner, and near his threadbare couch was a big rusty bucket. He chewed tobacco.

"I thought a car was coming up the road with bright lights and I wondered who in the world that could be," he said. "The house was just as bright as daylight. I got up to see who it was and then I saw lights out the kitchen window in back. And I saw this thing just come sailing slowly in from the woods, cross the river and just come floating across my garden."

A BEAUTIFUL MEMORY

The object was about sixty feet from the house. "It was lit up something terrible. It wasn't going very fast, just slowly along. It was only about six foot long and not quite a foot thick. It looked to be flat on the top and bottom but you couldn't tell, it was lit up so bright. It had whitish lights on the top and bottom, like my kitchen lights, and little red lights on the side. There were six or seven of them, kind of pointed in back like tear drops.

"It didn't make any noise. Talk about light, you could see just as plain all the way to the end of the garden."

He pointed out a window to where he'd seen the thing. "It crept crawling along and then it passed behind my woodshed and suddenly everything went black. That's the last I saw of it."

Throughout the interview, Birkland talked quietly without any emotion or expression on his face. After he finished telling his story, he stared at the floor for a minute or two and then said quietly: "It was really nice to see, though. It was pretty... prettiest thing I've ever seen in my life."

As he said this, his face lit up and came to life. He smiled sweetly, and a look of rapture crossed his face. For those few seconds he was off somewhere else in his mind, seeing again that strange device floating across his garden.

At that time I had never heard of the "soda pop factor" but in that moment I knew Birkland was telling the truth.

His description of the object was a surprise. Until I had flown to Superior four days earlier, I had known nothing about UFOs except that I was certain they didn't exist. By the time I talked to him, however, I was beginning to suspect I might be wrong.

Since arriving in Superior, I had talked to twenty-five to thirty people who'd had sightings, but they'd told me mostly about strange lights in the sky, several disc-shaped objects, some no bigger than a basketball, and a big monster one that had hovered over a highway. But something only six feet long and a foot thick? If there were any little green men inside that thing, they had to be really small.

FRIGHTENING ENCOUNTER

Just a day later, however, a secretary in the Wisconsin state highway department office in Superior told me she had seen a similar unidentified flying object. She said it was about six feet long, not much more than a foot thick and somewhat triangular in shape. It was remarkably similar to what Birkland had described, but she'd never heard of him or his story.

The one she saw had flown just a few feet over her head at dusk eighteen months earlier as she and her husband and a teenage friend were walking near a lake west of Gordon, Wisconsin.

"We could hear a motor coming out of the woods," the secretary said as we sat at her

desk. "We had heard the motors off and on earlier. When it would shut down, it would sound like a computer dying down, and when it started up it would all of a sudden rev right up and go.

"When we heard the motor this time, we listened for a few minutes and then we saw these lights coming towards us. It was low, just above the trees, and we could see flashing lights on it. One was red, one was white and one was green. They pulsed and the sound got louder and louder as it came over us.

"We ran and hid under a bush because we didn't know what in the world was happening. We knew it wasn't a helicopter because the trees would have blown and we would have felt a breeze or something, and there was nothing like that.

"It passed right over us. It was scary. It was a solid, black object with no windows or anything, and it had like a little hill on top. It wasn't very large, only about six feet long. We could have thrown a stone and hit it, it was that close."

She laughed as she admitted she and her husband and the teenager were frightened, but it wasn't funny when was happening.

FLEEING IN TERROR

I've heard perhaps two thousand UFO stories since then, and no witness ever thought that what she or he was seeing at the time was funny. Often they were quite frightened, because it is something unknown to them and they felt quite powerless.

One Wisconsin witness, Kathy, definitely found nothing funny about her close encounter. She was too hysterical.

Kathy ran into a big thing on the night of April 20, 1975, just three weeks before I talked to her in Superior. Then twenty-five, she had visited a friend in the village of Solon Springs, eight miles north of Gordon, and had started for home shortly before three in the morning, driving north on U.S. 53.

Four or five miles north of the town of Solon Springs, she saw a shooting star falling in the sky to her right. When she looked back at the highway, a big object was hovering right



above the road.

"It had a red light on it and I thought there'd been an accident, but as I got closer I realized it wasn't," Kathy said. "I didn't know

what it was.

"I slowed down and by the time I pulled over it was about two hundred feet away. It was big and dome-shaped on top, but the bottom was sort of irregular. It covered both sides of the highway and was as high as the trees. But it was off the ground maybe ten feet. I could've driven under it if I had wanted to, but I wasn't about to try that.

"The whole thing was a bright, light green that was sort of like gasses or molten steel swirling around, but it didn't change colors. What really scared me was a huge red light maybe five feet across on the bottom. It was pulsating slowly and I didn't know what it was doing. It was over my side of the road.

"I was scared! I thought 'I've got to get away from it' and I began to panic. I slowly turned around, being careful not to slide into the ditch, and started driving back to Solon as fast as I could."

Terror gripped her heart as she mashed the gas pedal to the floorboard. "I kept looking at that thing in my rearview mirror until it disappeared. But less than a minute later I saw two white lights behind me!

"My God!" I thought, 'They're after me, they're sending a little car after me!' And the lights kept gaining and gaining and pretty soon they were right behind me."

'BASKET CASE'

She was totally panicked by now and was going ninety miles an hour. But the lights

stayed right behind her for several miles more until she pulled into Solon Springs. Only then, to her enormous relief, did she realize a policeman was chasing her.

It was Sheriff's Deputy Jack Hunker, who thought he'd collared a crazy speeder. Instead, he found himself having to calm a hysterical woman.

"She was a complete basket case," Hunker told me later, explaining that he had delayed stopping her until they reached the streetlights of the town. "She was shaking and so nervous she couldn't even light a cigarette."

It took him a half hour to calm Kathy down. He had seen nothing except a strange patch of smoke or fog when he passed through the area where she said she'd seen the UFO. He said it had smelled terrible, like burning garbage, which he thought was unusual since there's no garbage dump in the area.

Deputy Hunker didn't give her a speeding ticket. "As scared as she was and everything, there was no way she could have made up that story."

Three weeks earlier, I might have given her a ticket if I had been that cop. But by the time I heard her story, my days as a skeptic were fast coming to an end.

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