

The Night at Red Bluff

by James Lynn Smith

It was a good night for teenage boys to go camping. My cousin, Smitty, a friend Jeff, and I had set out from Columbia, MS, to Red Bluff that November afternoon in 1957. Our mood was adventurous as recent events created an atmosphere of expectation. We had recently seen the movie *War of the Worlds*, in which Martians invaded the earth in fiery spaceships. We also heard that President Eisenhower had recently made comments about the US space efforts, but we did not know details.

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Red Bluff was a favorite place for exploration and climbing. After driving uphill for some time, one came to an abrupt overlook beside the road. A multi-colored series of bluffs loomed in ancient splendor over the piney woods and swamps of the Pearl River area. We set up our campsite some hundred feet back from the bluff precipice in a clump of tall pines. Somehow, gritty bacon and burned eggs were quite palatable in this atmosphere. There was no need for a tent; we merely laid our bedrolls on piles of pine needles. We intended to sleep in the car in the unlikely event of rain. Although Red Bluff was in a remote part of the Mississippi piney woods area, it was rather well known locally, and was frequently visited. This night, however, we were the only campers around. We were happy about this and intended to savor the privacy.

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After eating, we lay around the campfire, watching flames dance about the glowing embers. The burning wood hissed and popped occasionally, with

thousands of small sparks drifting up and then winking out. The campfire cast a faint, flickering glow against the surroundings, animating the nearby trees and rocks with dancing patterns of light and shadow. Beyond the short distance illuminated by the fire, there seemed to be a black curtain shutting off the rest of the world. We agreed among ourselves that our decision to come to Red Bluff that night was a good one. Our campfire chat covered a wide range, from people we knew to ghostly stories we had heard about the Red Bluff area. Our friend Jeff was an extremely emotional fellow and was glad when the latter stories were done. Eventually we lapsed into long periods of silence and merely sat drowsing.

It was then that we began to feel some disquietude about our safety. Although we knew that very few animals remained which would threaten a human, some large cats were seen in the area from time to time. Jeff didn't have to explain his reasons when he suggested we sit in the car. We then moved to the car, intending to stay until our anxieties were quelled. I was talking about something when a light from outside the car struck my eye. Smitty and Jeff turned to the light, and one of them raised his hand in a hush sign. The light rapidly grew brighter, and what we saw when we craned our necks out the windows was incredible! A fiery, multicolored object with a long train of green light trailing it streaked across the sky. So bright was the object that the environs of Red Bluff were illuminated as if by day. It appeared to descend in the woods a few hundred yards from us, but there was no way to tell if it was a hundred yards or a hundred miles since we had no knowledge of the objects size or elevation. Jeff, fidgeting in the back, became hysterical and began gnawing his hands and the back of the front seat. His sobs became so frantic that I was more disturbed about him than what we had seen. He fought me for the keys to the car. Knowing he would be in no condition to drive, I shook him hard and told him I would drive. I was in no mood to remain there

myself, but when I started to get our camping gear, both Smitty and Jeff overruled me and demanded that we leave right then.

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I hopped back under the steering wheel and sped away. As soon as we were moving Jeff calmed down, and we began to discuss what we had seen. We began by imagining the worst: Our nation's efforts to get into space antagonized an alien race and they were sending a message soon after the president spoke. Then we considered it may have been a meteor, but it was so bright and coincidence with recent announcements about space made it seem unlikely. We also speculated that it was an unusual flare or rocket of some type fired by bootleggers to frighten us away from a cache of liquor. Even this did not seem quite plausible, for we could not imagine that they would store liquor so close to a place frequented by daytime explorers. We came to no firm conclusions, but just talking about the night's event calmed us enough that we decided to return for our camping gear. I turned the car around and went back up to our Red Bluff campsite. Nothing at all seemed unusual then. To have light for our endeavors, we build up the fire again. So warming and reassuring was the fire that we abandoned thoughts of leaving before morning. We fried some potatoes and bacon, and drank soft drinks from the ice chest. Before long, we were confident, affable, and quite drowsy again.

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The next day we returned to Columbia and stopped by the local police station. We found out that President Eisenhower's earlier appearance on TV showed a scale model of the Jupiter missile nosecone which had been launched and recovered from space in August. This was an early step in satellite launching and space exploration. We also learned that a meteor of unusual brightness did indeed streak across the sky in our area. It impacted over a hundred and fifty miles away into the swampy area of Marsh Island off the coast of Louisiana. The shock wave

from its impact shattered windows and tremors were reported for a radius of 30 miles. The meteor flame was clearly seen from Alabama to Texas. It was rumored that the light was even seen as far away as California.

Understandably, Red Bluff is a place of teen adventure in my memory, and on occasions I still dream about climbing down and around its convolutions while the sun warms my back.

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