

PHENOMENON STIRRED MAN'S

Were they meteors - those

Editor's note: The recent eclipse served to focus attention of Canadians on the heavens in a way which was perhaps even more dramatic than the exploits of United States and Russian space probes.

Today when Soviet cosmonauts and U. S. astronauts draw world-wide attention to space, the appearance of orbiting satellites or haphazardly wandering "space junk" is soon checked out through highly efficient tracking stations.

Fifty years ago, such was not the case. The horse, facing eventual wide unemployment through development of automobiles, was still regarded as the most reliable mode of transport in those communities not serviced by rail. Aeroplanes were little more than power-driven kites. Dirigibles were expensive and largely unsatisfactory experiments.

Though many writers had elaborated on fanciful trips to the moon or the planets, H. G. Wells had reversed, the trend with his celebrated account of a Martian invasion of earth, few took such possibilities seriously.

Still, there were events on record that seemed to lend credence to the wildest tales of Jules Verne and other protagonists of science fiction.

By DAVID GREEN

If you were outdoors in Southern Saskatchewan on the frosty night of Feb. 9, 1913, chances are you were witness to one of the most impressive heavenly visitations of recorded history.

For on that night hundreds of persons from Mortlach in the west, to Bermuda in the east, watched in awe as clusters of luminous objects swept by overhead, leaving a thunderous rumble in their wake.

Among the first to see the extraordinary spectacle was J. R. Smith of Mortlach, who wrote:

"The time was somewhere between 7:06 and 7:15 p.m. (Mountain Time) I did not attempt to count them, but I imagine there must have been hundreds of them. They did not appear to me to be on a downward course, but on more of a straight line from west to east. I could not say how long they were visible, as I probably did not see the first of them. What impressed me more than anything else was that very few resembled shooting stars, only

larger than the full moon. Others stated they did not believe these bright "meteors" to be more than 1-15 the moon's diameter.

But what is most intriguing about the display, was the large number of reports from eyewitnesses who likened the passing objects to "airships," fleets and "lighted trains."

James H. Bolton, of Bolton, Ont., reported:

"When I saw the first meteor it was a little west of north-west from here and travelling nearly towards me. I took it for an airplane with both headlights lit and as it came nearer, the sparks falling behind it made it appear still more like one. However, after a minute or a minute and a half, I could see it was a meteor, and the tail seemed to cover about half the sky distance when it

was passing. It was very low, apparently just above the hills, and by this time I noticed about 12 or 15 more following it."

From Cobourg, Ont., J. E. Skidmore wrote:

"They glided along so leisurely and did not seem to be falling as meteors usually do, but kept a straight course about 45 degrees, or a little more, above the horizon. Our first impression was that a fleet of illuminated air-ships of monstrous size was passing. The incandescent fragments themselves formed, what to us, looked like the illuminations, while the tails seemed to make the frame of the machine."

Walter L. Haight, of Parry Sound, who, from his report, appears to have had a particu-

larly good look at the phenomenon, stated in part:

"I likened them at the time, and the resemblance seems yet apt and appropriate, to a large battleship moving ahead with attendant squadrons of torpedo-destroyers and torpedo boats. Never have I seen bodies in the heavens move at such a slow, stately and measured pace. That remains the most outstanding and remarkable feature of a most entrancing spectacle."

Rev. W. E. Hassard, observing from Peterborough, remarked: "The appearance was like that of an express train lighted up at night."

E. Kirby, who viewed the event from Toronto's Yonge St reported:

"There were from 12 to 15 bodies, and they appeared to be travelling from west towards the east. They had the appearance of rockets, on account of the fiery tail. Duration, two or three minutes; after which there seemed to be two peals of thunder."

E. McGill, also of Toronto, stated: "There would be a number of bodies in a line with a light streak between them; and the last was one large ball by itself. The display lasted fully three minutes. While we were gazing with awe on the brilliant display far above us in the clear sky, a voice from a group of men was heard to say: 'Oh, boys, I'll tell you what it is — an aeroplane race.'"

Needless to say, not all observers likened the objects to aeroplanes, dirigibles or trains. Many stated that they were reminded of "sky rockets," others termed the celestial visitors "meteors" or "fireballs." An edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, printed some years after the events, said it was perhaps the most unusual meteoric display in history. Only one similar display was thought

OBSERVANCE

G. and B. Spring Rice of Pense, when sending a report to the agent of the meteorological service at Moose Jaw, made reference to the events as follows:

"I would call your attention to a curious phenomenon observed on the night of Feb. 9 (Sunday). It was observed at about 7 o'clock (Mountain Time) in the evening, and I have called it a procession of stars. The first two stars were followed by a long tail, much like a falling star, but moved comparatively slowly in the sky, directly overhead, in a direction from west to east. These were followed by a number of other stars, sometimes singly and sometimes in groups, all of which moved across the sky at the same deliberate pace and on the same course. The procession must have lasted about two minutes. I have never seen anything like it before."

From Mortlach to Bermuda, the extreme points at which the bodies were seen, the distance is 2,437 miles.

NO DESCENT

It is interesting to note that no witness along the entire route saw any of the objects descend toward earth.

C. A. Chant, from whose report the eye-witness accounts have been taken, calculated that an extension of the course would have carried the bodies over the south Atlantic ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope at a distance of about 600 miles from it, through the Indian Ocean and at least over Western Australia.

"Of course," Prof. Chant concluded, "one cannot say that the bodies ever arrived there, though I would not be surpris-

Chant calculated, from the scanty azimuth readings available to him, that the height of the objects were about 25 or 26 miles. He estimated their speed to be greater than five but less than 10 miles per second. (It is possibly significant that Soviet and U.S. space-men have attained such speeds in their orbits of the earth.)

EARTH SHAKEN

In some localities the passage of the objects was accompanied, or immediately followed by, a shaking of the earth or of buildings.

William Anderson, of Kelowna, Ont., likened the effect to a slight earthquake. At Niagara-on-the-Lake windows rattled and hundreds heard rumblings like distant thunder or "a carriage passing over a wooden bridge."

As to the size of the objects,

to have occurred over Egypt, in 1200 A.D.

Probably the most comprehensive account of the phenomenon given is that of Chant himself:

"At about 9:05 on the morning in question there appeared in the northern sky a fiery red body, quickly grew larger as it neared, and which was seen to be followed by a tail. Some observers stated the body was single, some it was composed of two parts and others that there were three parts, all travelling together and each followed long tail."

"The front portion of body appears to have been what brighter than the rest, the general color was a