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THE NIGHT THE STARS FELL

Berrien County was not formed until 1856, but certainly what few residents who were living in its parent counties of Irwin and Lowndes would not forget the autumn of 1833, the “night the stars fell”.

In the very early morning hours of November 13, 1833, many occupants of rural Georgia communities were awakened by the light display in the southeast to northwest sky. Hundred of thousands of meteors cascaded toward the Earth, leaving trails of light and color.

The orbits of the Earth and what would become known as the Tempel-Tuttle comet had crossed paths, causing the trailing particles to turn into fire balls as they entered Earth’s atmosphere. This astronomical display lasted from midnight until they faded in the daylight about 5:00 a.m.

The meteor shower was witnessed throughout the western hemisphere, but was most visible in the Deep South; particularly in Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida.

There were no newspapers in the Lowndes or Irwin County, or any of the surrounding counties at that time. In 1830 the population of Lowndes County was 2,455, and Irwin County was just 1,180. The sum population of the parts of those counties that would become Berrien, was likely less than 400 or so.

So it is no wonder that few, if any, have recorded the event in their own journals or diaries. However there were newspaper accounts from Macon, Athens, Milledgeville and Savannah which give us an interesting perspec-



Historical artwork of the spectacular Leonid meteor shower of 13th November 1833 seen over the Niagara Falls, North America. Leonid meteor showers occur annually for about 2 days around mid-November when the Earth crosses the orbit of debris produced by the comet Tempel-Tuttle. There are usually around 5-20 meteors each hour, except once in about every 33 years when thousands can be seen.

tives of how the rural South reacted to this awesome and frightful power of the Creator

In the November 20, 1833 issue of the Milledgeville *Federal Union* newspaper this item reported the event: *Splendid Phenomena—On the morning of Wednesday, the 13th instant, from three o'clock until day light, the firmament appeared to be showering brilliant meteors, resembling those commonly termed shooting stars.*

Their descent seemed to the eye to be perpendicular; becoming visible at first about one thousand feet above the ground, and leaving a train of white light, they exploded without noise and vanished when within about two hundred feet. In general they appeared inferior in size to "shooting stars" and their action less swift, but occasionally some looked as of greater magnitude, emitting corruscations that would have enabled a person to read the smallest print.

Their bearing was from southeast to northwest, but the number of meteors defied computation. The same phenomena were visible at Macon, Columbus, Augusta, Savannah and Charleston; in all of which places they are very rationally attributed to electricity.

While most were caught up in the sublime, and awe inspiring display, the seemingly unnatural event brought fear and horror to

some, as recorded in this Letter to the Editor published in the December 7, 1833 issue of the *Indian Advocate* of New Echota, Georgia: Letter dated 13, November—*An awful phenomenon appeared last night, which no doubt thousands have witnessed, and an account of which it is probable you have already in type for the public. I had retired to my bed at a late hour, and was in a sound sleep; but was suddenly awakened at about 3 o'clock in the morning by the most distressing cries that ever fell on my ears. Shrieks of horror and cries for mercy I could hear from most of the negroes of three plantations, which in all is about six or eight hundred.*

While earnestly listening for the cause, I heard a faint voice near the door calling my name; I rose, and taking my sword, stood at the door. At this mo-



The front piece art depiction of the 1833 Leonid meteor shower, and this detail of ships observing the Leonid meteor shower off the coast of Florida, in the early morning of 14 November 1866, are both by artist Detlev Van Ravenswaay.

ment I hear the same voice beseeching me to rise, and saying "O my God, the world is on fire," I then opened the door; and it was difficult to say which excited me most—the awfulness of the scene, or the distressed cries of the negroes; upwards of one hundred lay prostrate on the ground—some speechless, and some the bitterest cries, but most with their hands raised, imploring God to save the world and them.

The scene was truly awful; for never did rain fall much thicker than the meteors fell the earth. East, West, North and South, it was the same—except that the meteors were larger in the East; one was of enormous size—this was nearly extinguished when I opened the door. I endeavored by all possible means to compose the people, supposed it to be the stars falling.

In 1885, a 57-year-old gentleman living in Blackshear, recalled the event as he viewed it as a five year old boy in Matthews Bluff, 65 miles up river from Savannah:

At some hour before daylight, Uncle Fred came to my bed and took me in his arms to the front piazza where he stood me to witness the rain of apparent liquid fire. It was a rain of fire, not stars. The stars, or sparks, only occurred at the end of the lines of fire. Imagine a rain of molten iron striking the earth, each drop bursting into sparks.

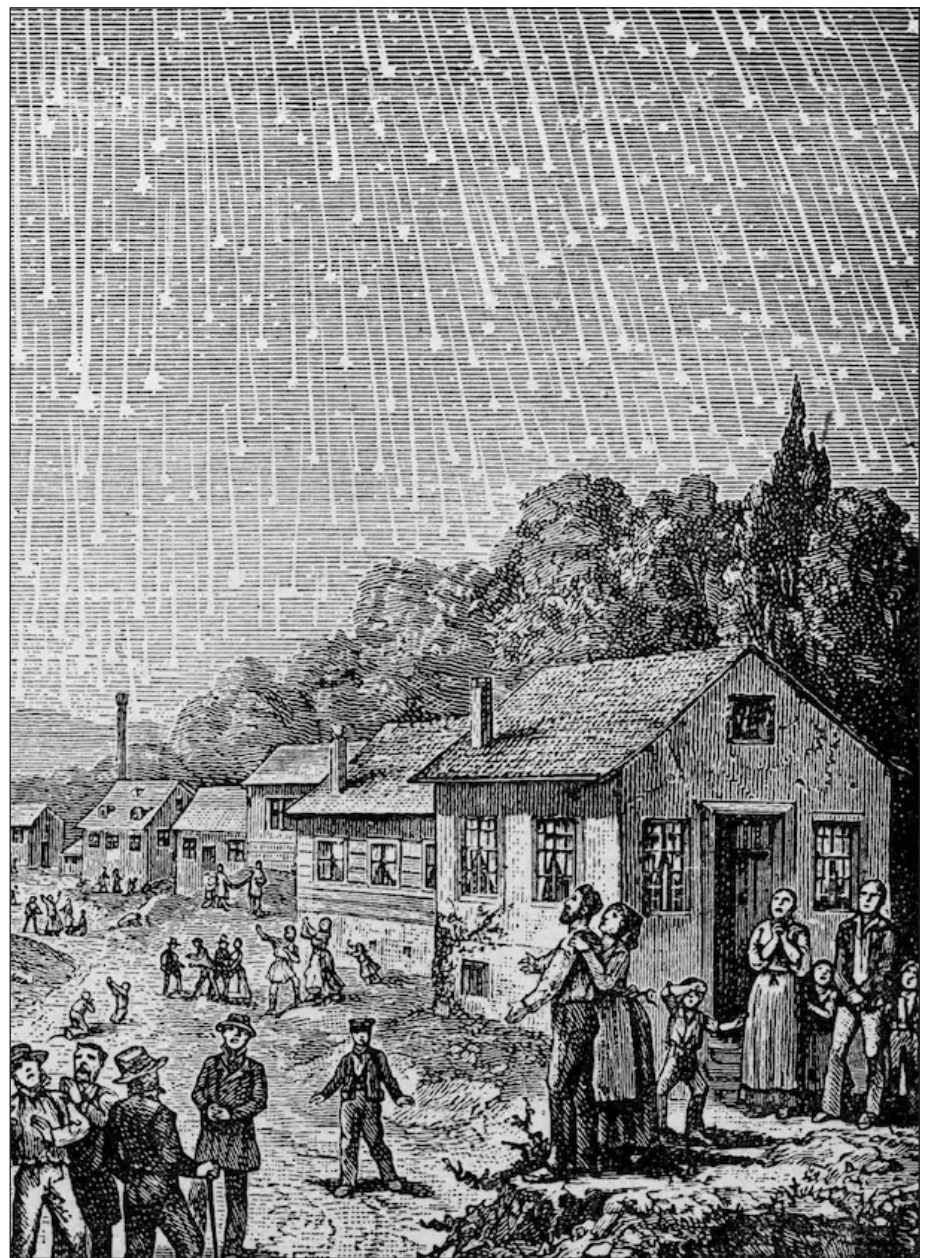
The strangest features to me was, no such sparks or stars appeared except at the end of the line of fire rain which stopped about five feet from the earth.

I recollect distinctly observing the scene around the yard and the road lead directly from the gate and wondering why none of the fire or sparks reached the earth. It was not as light as day, but a lurid light greater than I have ever seen since.

The spiritual implications of the celestial wonderment was embraced by the rural white folks as well. In the December 25, 1833 issue of the *Georgia Journal* of Milledgeville, a reader reports this:

The extraordinary Meteoric Phenomenon on the 13th ulto, occasioned no small alarm in the neighborhood in which I have been. Stories are in circulation of numerous gamblers, drunkards and voluptuaries, who, under the excitement of the occasion, promised entire reformation. I heard of one man who fainted and never recovered. To add to the general panic in several places, trumpets were blown to awaken persons to witness the sight; and were taken by many, to be the last that ever will be sounded. One family forgot the common business of eating for two days. One man read the Bible two days to find a key to interpret what the affair might indicate, etc. I find great diversity of opinion prevailing among men of science, as to the true cause; and when doctors disagree, who shall determine the matter?

Also from the *Georgia Journal*, December 11, 1833:—*The late "Meteoric Phenomena" seems to have extended*



Engraving of the 1833 Leonid meteor shower by artist Karl Jauslin that was based on a first-person account from a minister traveling from Florida to New Orleans. Hundreds of thousands of meteors per hour were seen..

*all over the Union; at least as far as we have heard from; and as might have been expected, has produced all sorts of sensations. Among others we have heard of the following good 'uns: *

A fellow near Georgetown, D.C. having robbed a hen-roost, was so frightened by what he had no doubt was the day of judgment, while carrying off his booty, that he ran back and was caught in the act of replacing it.

At Port Carbon, Pa. a woman strongly urged her husband to collect forty dollars immediately, on a debt which was due him, or he never would

get it—as the day of judgment had arrived.

Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was ecstatic at the sight, believing that Armageddon was imminent. He wrote at that moment:

"I arose, and to my great joy, beheld the stars fall from the heaven like a shower of hail stones; a literal fulfillment of the word of God as recorded in the holy scriptures as a sure sign the coming of Christ is close at hand."

Smith is believed by some to have prophesied the meteor shower. In the fall of 1833, the Mormon leader was speaking in Ohio, when he encountered a skeptic. In response, Smith is said to have uttered: *“Forty days shall not pass, and the stars shall fall from heaven.”* According to church elder Parley P. Pratt, that revelation came true on the 40th day, November, 13.

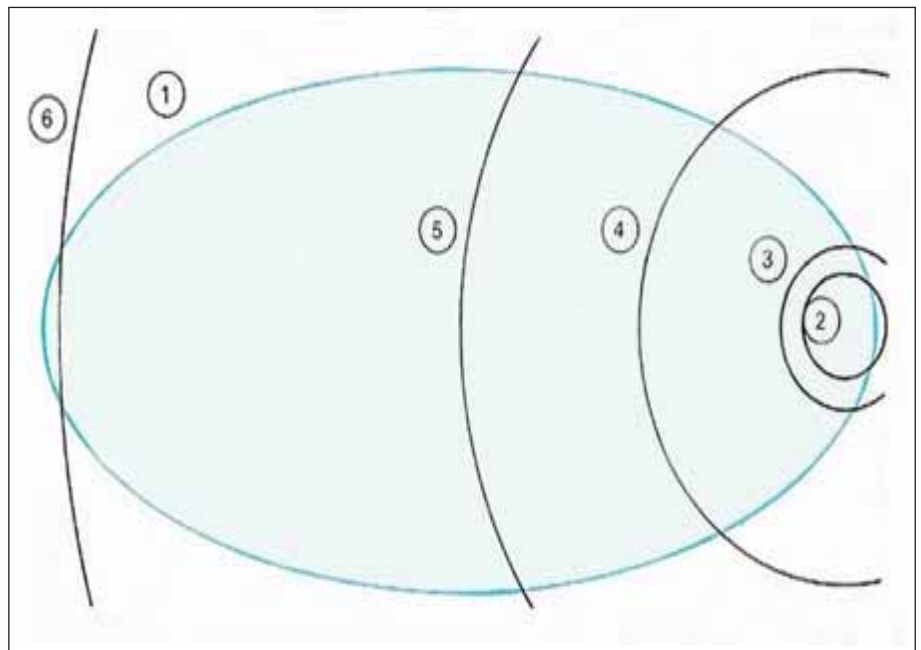
Although the end of times never arrived, the Leonid meteor shower gave rise to the birth of modern astronomy. Scientists studied the 1833 event to understand its cause. Yale professor Denison Olmsted researched it extensively, even using newspapers to request observations from the public. In 1834, he published his findings in the American Journal of Science and Arts, hypothesizing that meteors came from beyond the Earth’s atmosphere.

When the storm occurred again in 1866—although not at the same intensity—scientists began to speculate that a comet could be the cause. The responsible comet had actually been discovered the year before by two scientists, William Tempel of the Marseille Observatory in France, and Horace Tuttle of Harvard College Observatory.

Tempel discovered his comet on the evening of December 19, 1865. Word of his discovery was widespread in Europe, but the news had not yet reached the United States, when Tuttle made his discovery 17 days later, on the evening of January 5, 1866. Because his discovery was independent of Tempel’s, Tuttle’s name was added to the comet. The official name of the comet is 55P/Tempel-Tuttle.

Based upon the measurements during this visit of the comet, scientists calculated an orbit of 33.17 years. Astronomers quickly realized that the meteor storms and showers which occurred in mid-November of each year were the result of Earth’s orbit passing through the Tempel-Tuttle comet’s residue from the 1833 orbit.

One would think that there would be great interest in observing the comet as it came back to the earth’s vicinity in 1899. Everyone expected to see a me-



The orbit of the Leonid meteor stream (1) in blue, intersects the orbits of Earth (2), Mars (3), Jupiter (4), Saturn (5) and Uranus (6). Because the meteors are not distributed evenly, major meteor showers appear only occasionally and with less vibrance. The average interval was once just over 33 years, but the expected showers of 1899 and 1933 were missed because the shower orbit had suffered planetary disturbances. There is hope that the 2033 meteor shower may prove to be as remarkable as the 1833 event.

eteor storm, but the great meteor shower was missing that year.

Though scientists expected the next return in 1932, the observatories, using photographic plates with narrow field-of-view telescopes, missed it then too. And again, a major meteor shower did not materialize.

In 1965 the comet was finally viewable, but only with very large telescopes. The meteor storm followed but not viewable without larger telescopes. On its next return in 1998, the comet was viewable with binoculars, with some impressive showers in 1999 to 2001. Quite often, a filament left behind by the comet hundreds of years ago will intersect the earth and produce a fabulous shower.

With scientists getting more accurate in their predictions, anticipation is high once again for the next passing of the Leonid comet in 2031 to 2033. Perhaps two hundred years later, the Berrien decedents of those pioneers of 1833 will witness another super meteor storm. And we will all be able to document “The Night the Stars Fell.”

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