Berkeley Ca
Gazette
Oct 24, 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

A Few Letters

Ball lightning is revived by Mrs. Hattie Britney of Meriden, Conn., who writes me that she saw two balls of lightning during a heavy thunderstorm in 1895. She was sitting by a bedroom window with her two small children, when the two glowing objects seemed to swing right into the room through the open window, directly over the heads of the children. The phenomenon disappeared as it had come, leaving Mrs. Britney very much frightened.

* * *

CHARLES DRISCOLL

Berkeley Ca
Daily Gazette
May 10 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

The Greatest

Speaking of letters, I still receive a good many from persons who have seen ball lightning. And some of my most delightful letters are from persons who formerly lived in Kansas. Learning that I also once lived there, these former Jayhawkers write me their memories and impressions of the romantic prairie land. These letters come from all parts of of the country, and they really ought to be printed in a book as the perfect tribute to a much-loved native state.

* * *

CHARLES DRISCOLL

Massillon Oh
Evening Independent
July 13, 1929

The World and All

By CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

METEORS

The biggest meteor thus far measured and tested is the one that fell at Otjihaene, southwest Africa, some time within the last few months. The astronomers have been looking it over. They find it is 10 by four feet, weighs somewhere between 50 and 70 tons, and is practically all iron, with a small percentage of nickel.

When this meteor hit the earth it was white hot. It happened to strike a solid limestone formation that extended well into the earth, so it was stopped. It buried its nose in the solid stone from three to five feet deep. It had come a long way and must have had a pretty good start.

* * * *

What would have happened if this meteor had hit in the center of your town? How much damage would it have done if it had landed at an acute angle of incidence about half way up on the side of a New York skyscraper tower? How much destruction would have resulted if it had hit the Leviathan at sea? Would the world ever have heard what happened? Would there have been any survivors?

Again, how does it happen that meteors nearly always fall in remote places, where there are few inhabitants, or none?

Does anybody know of a single instance of a meteor's striking in a city street? Has anybody ever been hit by a meteor? I don't know of any such case.

* * * *

I have seen and admired the largest meteor in captivity. It is now in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, and was found in Greenland by Admiral Peary. Greenland and southwest Africa are far away. There is little danger of hitting any important personages in those places. Is it luck, or what is it?

There is an immense bowl in Arizona which scientists say was made by the fall of a meteor that has not yet been discovered. The formation it struck wasn't limestone, but soft earth, and the meteor went right on down, changing the face of the landscape all about. If that meteor ever is found and brought out, it probably will prove to be the biggest one that ever struck the earth.

But that place in Arizona is pretty remote, too. Other specimens I have seen have come from Montana, Colorado and some of the less populous parts of other western states. If any of my readers ever has heard of a meteor that fell in a town, I'd like to learn about the incident.

Berkeley Ca
Daily Gazette
Feb. 28, 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

Letters

Emma Upton Vaughan writes from Leavenworth, Kansas, to know whether rattlesnakes ever climb high into barns, or might be supposed to crawl along a rafter. All the rattlesnakes I ever saw were on the Kansas plains, respectably crawling on the ground, as their remote ancestors had been advised to do. I have heard of their getting into bed with Kansas pioneer families, long ago when sod houses were common in that country. I doubt that any rattlesnake ever crawled along a rafter in a barn.

CHARLES DRISCOLL

* * *

Another citizen of Fort Wayne, Indiana, has seen ball lightning. Dr. W. F. Schrader writes from Fort Wayne that he has seen the phenomenon in Ohio, Indiana and Colorado. On his father's farm, while loading sheaf wheat upon a wagon, balls of lightning, the size of oranges, rolled through the wheat stubble in all directions, exploding with sharp reports. Another lightning ball, at another time, ran along the hay-carrier track in a barn, and dropped through the hay in the mow, without burning anything.

* * *

Arthur S. Howard, 640 Lenox Street, Milwaukee, writes advice on sleeping. He says no one position should be retained all night, but he finds most restful sleep by changing position many times during the night. Several persons have written me, calling attention to an article on proper posture for sleep, published in Physical Culture in December. I have not yet read the article.

* * *

Everett Seibert, Tiffin, Ohio, writes of seeing ball lightning about five years ago. The ball, two feet in diameter, exploded four or five feet above the roadway, and about three hundred feet from where the young man was standing.

* * *

I seldom use anonymous letters, but M. A. B. writes such a good one from Aberdeen, S. D., that I must quote from it. She was sitting, holding a baby, in the kitchen of her home, when a ball of lightning went through the house, doing some damage and scaring the baby. At another time "a bad storm came up and we had a hired man working for us, and he was very frightened as a ball of lightning came down through the room. He cried out to the Lord to save him this time and he would always be a good boy, and he would never use tobacco any more or drink or swear, and he threw his tobacco and a ten-cent piece with it out of the door. But when the storm was over he forgot all his promises and he went out to find his tobacco again, and it was just as good as ever."

Isn't that great? I haven't the slightest doubt that the story is true in every detail. I was reared among farm hands pretty much, and I am sure that's an authentic instance of how one farm hand behaved when the mysterious ball lightning floated through his room, scaring him into hasty but impermanent penitence. That's a human story, and I don't see why M. A. B. didn't sign her full name to it.

Massillon Oh
Evening Independent
Oct 15 1929

The World and All

By CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

METEORS AND THINGS

T. D. Boyce, Chicago, writes to me about meteors. He says an item in a magazine called The Scrapbook, discontinued some years since, related how a meteor killed a man in a Cleveland street on a clear afternoon. This was prior to 1907.

Mr. Boyce's letter is in answer to my query, made some weeks ago, as to whether a meteor ever fell in a city, or close enough to any living person that the actual impact of the meteor with the earth could be observed.

I have never before heard of the man who was killed in Cleveland by a meteor. I once lived in Cleveland, and associated with newspapermen and old residents there, and nobody ever happened to mention this incident. It seems to me that such an occurrence would have made such an impression upon some of the old-time reporters that they would have mentioned it among their big stories. I'd like to hear verification of this before putting it down as an authentic instance.

* * * *

When I was a boy on a Kansas farm a meteor passed over one night so close that the light of it illuminated the whole countryside like a camera flashlight for a period of perhaps three to five seconds. The noise of it was quite different from thunder, with more of a ripping quality. This was in the middle of summer, on a hot, clear night. Thousands of people saw it and remember it, and the people for many miles about were excited for days. Nobody ever found the meteor, or was able to prove that it actually alighted in any specific area.

I believe several oil well fires have been attributed to meteors that fell in slush ponds full of oil. I have heard such fires discussed as matters of well authenticated record in the mid-continent oil region. But I do not know whether the cause in such cases was ever absolutely verified. I doubt that the meteor was ever found.

* * * *

Meteors irritate me by their habit of falling in remote places, such as Iceland, the uninhabited parts of the southwest, and in the forests of Labrador. It would seem "good theater" for a first-class meteor to fall in a big town, before a large audience, some fine evening. Just calculating by the laws of chance, you'd think such a thing might happen once in a century or two,

Berkeley Ca
Daily Gazette
January 28, 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

More Ball Lightning

George Miller, St. Charles, Minnesota, writes:

"About twenty years ago, during a thunderstorm, I stood inside, watching the storm. I had a clear view of the telephone wires. There was a loud crash, and I saw two balls of fire rolling along the top wire, a foot apart, and at about the speed of a ball being rolled by a boy along a sidewalk.

"These fire balls were about the size of baseballs. They rolled along the wire for about twenty feet, and then struck the telephone pole near the house, exploding with a sharp report like a handclap. No harm was done."

* * *

Mrs. M. E. Carpenter, Fort Wayne Indiana, writes:

"During the summer of 1925, driving in a rain in Terre Haute, I saw a ball of lightning, apparently twice the size of a basketball, giving forth a soft glow, falling in a perpendicular line from the clouds to the earth. I lost sight of it as it disappeared behind buildings. It seemed to be three to five blocks away. I was thrilled, but not frightened."

* * * *

C. W. Van Orden, Emporia, Kansas, writes that he saw ball lightning in 1903, on a farm ten miles southeast of Emporia. He was driving in a spring wagon with his son, F. W., then four years old, now a resident of Wichita.

There was a shower. A ball of fire floated earthward from a cloud. Ten feet from the ground the ball dropped quickly. There was a loud report and a shower of sparks that stunned the young son and scared the horses. Mr. Van Orden found that an old Osage hedge tree, opposite his farm, had been struck and destroyed.

* * * *

Berkeley, Ca.
Daily Gazette
March 17 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

Letters

Miss Frances McCullough, Lexington, Ky., sends a copy of "The Sampler," quoted from memory. Miss McCullough has quoted the old poem with remarkable accuracy, but has omitted one or two stanzas which she has forgotten. This correspondent is good enough to say that she likes to read "The World and All," and adds that she especially likes one of these little essays that appeared under the title "Amo." It helps the writer to know what the readers like and dislike.

CHARLES DRISCOLL

* * *

Oscar Stanley, East St. Louis, Ill., writes that he thinks ball lightning is an optical illusion. He thinks that all my correspondents who have reported seeing ball lightning were simply witnessing ordinary lightning flashes, and that the bright flash gave the illusion of bright balls of fire because of the effect of the great brightness upon the eyes. I confess that this does not seem a reasonable explanation to me.

* * *

Mrs. L. Pearl Smity, Rialto, Calif., writes that her grandfather used to tell how he and his brother-in-law saw a ball of light, as big as a pumpkin, rolling through the woods in front of them, one dark night in Indiana. The old gentleman never did know what the phenomenon was.

* * *

Another California correspondent, signing himself "U," endorses my faith in Dr. Frederick Cook as the discoverer of the North Pole. He met Dr. Cook once on a train, and had a long talk with him. This correspondent adds that he has never believed Dr. Cook guilty of fraud. Well, neither have I. But I think anyone with such unpopular ideas ought to have the courage of his convictions that would permit him to sign his full name and address.

* * *

I would like to ask all of my correspondents to give their correct names and addresses on their letters. Many write their names so illegibly that I can make nothing of the writing. If any correspondent specifically wishes that his name be not mentioned in this column, he should say so in a postscript, and I will respect his wishes. But you have no idea how one dislikes anonymous letters, even when they are friendly and helpful. There's something about them that is as uncomfortable as a masked dinner partner.

Berkeley Ca
Daily Gazette
April 25 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

A Letter

C. C. HIRONS of East San Diego, California, writes me a very interesting letter. While I can't reproduce it here, since it covers eleven pages of closely-written correspondence paper, I must extract some of the meat of it for my readers. It's the kind of letter one likes to read.

CHARLES DRISCOLL

Mr. Hirons was once a resident of Sumner County, Kansas, and later was superintendent of the Gold Standard Mine, in the Pike's Peak region of Colorado. He relates most interestingly an incident that I will have to give you in much condensed form.

There was a large steel ventilation shaft running through a tunnel in which men were working, and there were steel rails along the floor of the tunnel. While Hirons and a friend were standing in the tunnel and while workers were busy at the head of the same tunnel, two balls of fire, evidently ball lightning that had descended through an opening that led to the surface of the ground, ran along the top of the ventilating pipe, past the watchers, up to the tunnel head where the men were working, and then dropped to the steel rails and started a return trip.

When just about opposite the two watchers, the balls of fire, about the size of oranges, left the track and appeared to dive straight into the opposite wall.

* * *

Mr. Hirons had then, and still has, the idea that there is affinity between electricity and gold. He took the sudden jump of the electric spheres as an indication that there was a big vein of gold in the wall at that point. He had the spot excavated for sixty feet inward, and found only a very thin vein of gold.

This correspondent also says he has seen many trees in the Colorado forests that have been struck more than once each by lightning. Of course, there is no truth in the saying that lightning never strikes twice in one place, any more than there is truth in the saying that a tornado never crosses a river. I remember a house that I used to pass fearfully when a boy. Two children had been killed in their beds in the front room upstairs by lightning, which struck exactly where another bolt had struck a few years previously. And I have seen three tornadoes cross rivers.

I'll have to quote more from this interesting letter another day.

Berkeley Ca
Daily Gazette
March 12 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

Correspondence

There is no dateline on this letter, and I have lost the envelope, but I think it comes from Wisconsin. It is signed "A Reader." Very poor signature, that. If it had been signed with the writer's real name it might be of some value in my efforts to assemble first-hand testimony on ball lightning. Next time a scientific personage offers to laugh at ball lightning, I am going to spring a handsome collections of letters from my readers on him. But he will very properly throw out this one because it has no name or address. However, I can't forbear printing a short extract:

CHARLES DRISCOLL

"It was at a boarding house in Bozeman, Montana. College professors, two doctors, a judge, an author, a Yogi, office workers, clerks, and a coal-heaver, were all there. Walker, the shoe clerk, said:

"Did you ever see a wandering fire? I did, once, when I was eight, back in Wisconsin. My parents were away from home. As we four children played outdoors, in the end of a summer shower, one boy yelled and pointed to a bog about a mile away. There we saw a ball of fire about as large as my head eight feet from the ground. It stood still, then made straight for us. We dashed into the woodhouse and slammed the door just as it reached us. It banged on the door, and through the cracks we saw it go around the building, and then disappear.'

"There was a ribald silence, then chairs scraped suddenly, as everyone laughed and left. Above the noise of departure, Creasy, the coal-heaver, piped, 'Didn't you see no tracks?' And that was the only response poor Walker ever got.

"I am sure now that he had seen ball lightning. I wish I had always had an open mind!"

* * *

This unknown writer-in should send me his name and address. But I am not so sure as he that the shoe clerk, so cruelly laughed at by the doubting boarders, had seen ball lightning.

The appearance of the strange light over the bog leads one to believe that it may have been ignis fatuus, sometimes called will-o'-the-wisp or jack-o'-lantern. This ghostly light, which scares beholders unfamiliar with it, usually appears over marshes and bogs, and is said to be caused by ignition of gases formed by decomposing vegetable matter.

Berkeley Ca
Daily Gazette
Dec 13, 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

Neglected Correspondence

Digging through piled-up material on my desk, I find much neglected correspondence. Letters from readers, many of them months old, and unanswered.

For instance, Dr. Jacob Glahn writes me from Owensboro, Ky., a long letter about some problem in physics. I don't know enough about physics to appreciate the letter. There is no use submitting inventions and mathematical problems to me, because I have no understanding of machinery or numbers.

CHARLES DRISCOLL

Mrs. H. I. Greene of Winona, Minn., writes about ball lightning. In the summer of 1915 she and her sister, Mrs. L. A. Barrett, saw a ball of fire, about six inches in diameter, strike the foot of the iron bed in which they were sleeping, and bounce off to the opposite side of the room, where it exploded. A hole was torn in the wall, plaster was scattered over the room, and the place was filled with a strong odor of gas. This is one of the best first-hand stories of ball lightning I have received.

Berkeley Ca
Daily Gazette
Oct 13, 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

Comments of Readers

Tom Hughes of Banning, Calif., contributes an experience to the ball lightning literature. He writes me that he saw a ball of orange-colored fire bouncing along a street car track in Kansas City, Kan., during a storm in 1895. The ball bounded about four feet upward and twenty feet forward at a time, and finally exploded with a sharp report, not very loud.

Did any of my readers see any ball lightning during the summer season just closing?

CHARLES DRISCOLL

Berkeley Ca
Daily Gazette
January 4 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

Advices From the Front

Mrs. E. C. HAMILL, 1316 Elizabeth Street, Brownsville, Texas, writes of an extraordinary instance of ball lightning display in Nevada, a few years ago. Two men were in charge of a power station, half a mile from the town of Rhyolite.

"One was looking after the machinery," says Mrs. Hamill, "and the other was at a typewriter. Suddenly they saw a ball of lightning rolling toward the power house on a power wire. When the ball reached the power house it blew the whole works to bits, and fire, following the explosion, did $60,000 damage. The ball of lightning was seen to travel along the cable, before the explosion, all the way from Carrara Marble Mines, 24 miles from Rhyolite, which is 60 miles south of Goldfields."

* * *

BALL OF LIGHT BOUNCED

John E. Hinshaw, route 10, Emporia, Kansas, writes that he had an experience with ball lightning about 51 years ago, when he was a boy, near Emporia. He was running toward a barn for shelter from a sudden shower, when a ball of light, about the size of a hen's egg, dropped straight down in front of the barn door, and arose again before touching the ground. There was no noise and no damage, but a colt that was standing near was badly frightened, as was young John, who had been within a dozen feet of the ball of fire. Mr. Hinshaw adds that he has seldom mentioned the incident, because he had never heard of another like it. I suppose he has been afraid that people might think him queer for seeing such strange things.

* * *

HIT TELEPHONE

Miss M. B. Stewart, Hotel Majestic, Chicago, writes that she saw ball lightning a good many years ago. During a thunderstorm a ball of fire passed through a room, from a window to a telephone. There was a report like a pistol shot when the ball reached the telephone.

All of these experiences add to our store of data about ball lightning, which is growing large. I am immensely interested in the variety of testimony. Hardly any two experiences were alike in all essential points. The size of the ball of fire has varied from marble-size to the proportions of a large pumpkin. There's room for a few more testimonials in this scientific experience meeting.

Berkeley Ca
Daily Gazette
January 18 1928

The World And All

BY CHARLES B. DRISCOLL

He Saw Ball Lightning

Here's a letter from Fort Wayne, Indiana, that is even better than most of the letters I have had about ball lightning, and I have had some good ones. This is from C. O. Miller, a lawyer. I'll quote the best of the letter:

"About fifteen years ago I spent the summer on my grandfather's farm in Whitley County, this state, and on a beautiful day in June, about six o'clock in the evening a severe storm had started. About thirty seconds after I had started to run towards the house, there suddenly appeared before me, about twenty feet away, a red ball of fire, about the size and shape of an ordinary basketball. The outer edge was light pink or yellow in color, and the center a deep red. It seemed to be suspended about two feet from the ground. The ball moved through the barn door, into the barn. It disappeared with a loud explosion.

"I have related this incident to people, especially during severe storms, and my listeners usually have turned away with sardonic smiles."

* * *

A good many of those who have written to me about ball lightning have mentioned the incredulity of persons to whom they have told the story of their experiences with this strange phenomenon. Several have said that they have been afraid to repeat the story, because they feared that no one would believe it, and that they would gain reputations as liars.

Natural phenomena are often so strange that it is difficult for anyone to believe true tales about them. I have had more than ordinary experience with tornadoes myself, and I know that I have had to quit telling about them here in the East, where I now live, because I found that my friends nearly always thought I was just lying entertainingly in order to make the company feel jolly, whenever I have related certain true tales of tornadoes.

* * *

My parents, with several of my brothers and sisters, lived on a farm in Butler County, Kansas, before I was born. A tornado swept across the county, doing much damage to my parents' house, as well as to those of several of the neighbors. Mr. and Mrs. David Long, with their infant son, lived in a three-room house that was lifted off its foundation and set down, nicely balanced, on top of a rain-barrel. Neither the house nor any of its contents was harmed, and my father helped to lower the house from its unseemly perch that night. Believe it or not, there are fifty people living in Kansas today who have personal knowledge of that incredible incident.