

SOLVING THE MYSTERY OF THE TRI-STATE SPOOK LIGHT

BY CHARLES W. GRAHAM.
(A Member of The Star's Staff.)

NEOSHO, MO., May 18.—The reader of ghost stories, if he would derive the fullest enjoyment from his reading, should put his mind in a state of temporary belief in the supernatural. The deeper one can sink into the belief, the greater is his enjoyment of the ghosts, but when the story is ended it is time to come back to reality.

Something analogous to that frame of mind possessed me on a recent Sunday night on a lonely road in the Choctaw country of Northeastern Oklahoma. It is rough country, this part of the Tri-State area where the Ozarks drop down to Spring river and nod across it to the plain of Oklahoma.

That night the lights of my car swung round a sharp curve on the Missouri line a few miles west of the hamlet of Hornet, and picked up the red gravel of a lonely road. The grinding noises of the tires on gravel were out of place in that scene. A crescent moon hung in a haze in the western slope of the sky. The forest of jackoaks, growing almost as thick as weeds, crowding the road on either side, was full of mystery. In dips of the road a mist hugged the ground, and the air sparkled with the play of fireflies.

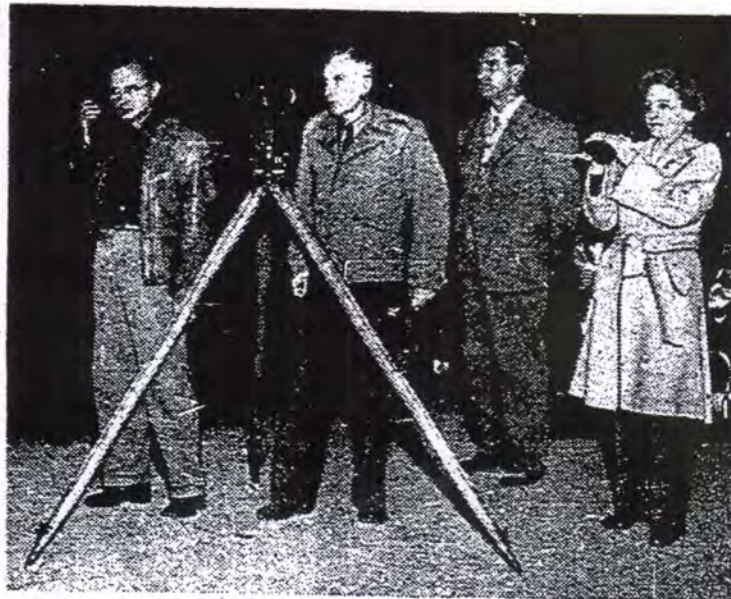
Somewhere on that lonely road, I had been told that I would see a mysterious light. According to authentic witnesses, it would dance and change from brilliance to bright red, then wink out. It would come on at incredible speed and go out just before one's wits were gone from fright. It might stop and hover, or swing from side to side. It could assume the form of a luminous tadpole or of a dancing octopus. It would be seen in the west, wink out, and reappear behind one in the east. It would do incredible things. Its eerie glow had been seen, and pondered over, for years.

Legends Concerning the Mystery.

There came to mind the region's strictly modern version of the headless horseman. Legend had it that an Indian one night rode along that road on his motorcycle. The light appeared and frightened the Indian. He fell off his motorcycle and was killed.

Another report was that an Indian family had moved out in fear because three children had sickened and died.

In my pocket was a short manuscript by C. Paul Spidell of Baxter Springs, Kas., addressed to the



POINT OF OBSERVATION WHERE THE "SPOOK" LIGHT IS SEEN. LESTER FIRESTONE HOLDS A WALKIE-TALKIE. RICHARD Y. JONES IS AT THE TRANSIT. MRS. FIRESTONE HOLDS BINOCULARS AND C. PAUL SPIDELL, BAXTER SPRINGS, KAS., LOOKS ON. THEY ARE WATCHING SIGNALS ABOUT EIGHT MILES DISTANT, MADE IN TESTS TO PROVE THE ORIGIN OF THE LIGHT. THE LOCATION IS POINT NO. 1 ON THE MAP, NEXT PAGE.

Sunday Editor of The Star. I had read it two or three times. In stark incredulity first, then in growing amazement; it came to me that Spidell was not fooling. He was telling an actual experience, and his background did not admit of undue superstition in his make-up. He is a big man, a Harvard graduate, with considerable experience in the realistic occupation of advertising. Here, in part, is what he wrote:

"There was a dull glow. It got brighter, then scampered quickly across the field to a point about a hundred yards directly ahead of us. There it halted and grew in size and intensity. Excited whispers came from the car. The light paled and disappeared, only to repeat its performance, making its entry again in the field to the left. When it got in front of us this time, it started to come toward us in a sort of wavering dance.

"It seemed to be about ten feet up from the ground. As it approached there was a reflection on the hood of my car. Four beams were like pipe-stem arms and legs. About fifty feet away it stopped and decided to climb a tree to our

right where it perched for awhile, losing its brilliance, and turning into a kind of ectoplasmic cloud.

"Whatever it was, it had a restless spirit. It faded and by fission reproduced itself into three bright little lights with waving arms and leg beams. About six feet apart, the trio scurried through a grove of jackoaks and across a field to our right, then converged into one blazing light which halted."

There was more, including a description by Mr. Spidell of a luminous tadpole which wriggled out of sight under a house, and a mansion with lighted windows.

Now that I was on the ground, I looked around for the phantom light. I saw nothing. The darkness was relieved only by the glow of the crescent moon.

There came to mind the evidence of Tom Stewart, a farmer living near the spot where Spidell reported his mysterious light. Mr. Stewart said he first saw the light in early spring, shortly after his family moved there. To him it looked like a very dim flashlight moving slowly over the ground. He wondered what it was, but had no fear of it. These observations were made in March,

before the foliage was out on the trees of the woods all around, and I wondered what effect that might have.

Then, Behold, There Came the Light.

Then, low in the west, the light blazed up! It seemed to be at tree-top level, perhaps a little lower. It turned to red with short flamelike streamers, and winked out. I glanced over my shoulder to the east. There the light loomed sardonically.

"Well," I thought, "I'll be turning into a triple-tailed tadpole myself if this keeps up!"

I reached for my binoculars. They are navy glasses, treated with magnesium fluoride which makes them unusually fine for night vision.

Focusing them on the western horizon, I waited. The light glowed and broke out in full brilliance. Whatever it was, it was too far away for me to be able to distinguish its source. The binoculars only made it brighter and redder. In the east it came on again. This time the binoculars told the truth. The light in the glasses separated into two headlights of a motor car about three miles away. The car apparently had just turned the corner off the state line.

I picked up the dim outline of another car parked on the road. The parked car explained the first lights in the east. Other visitors were coming to see the mysterious lights; it appeared. The lights in the east were explained.

But whence came those lights in the west with their fantastic forms and behavior? The road ended at Spring River and that dead end was no more than two miles away. The lights were not on that road!

In The Star office we have received reports of these "spook" lights for many years. Scientists had visited the area, seeking explanations on the spot, but they failed to locate the source. In 1936 the late A. B. Macdonald of The Star went to see them and found an explanation satisfactory to himself, but he did not obtain a proof. This spring a Kansas City scientist, Dr. George W. Ward of the Midwest Research Institute, had viewed the lights for diversion when on a business trip to Joplin. They intrigued him. After a few preliminary tests he reasoned out a hypothesis that was subject to proof.

With that to start with, I sent a letter to Col. Dennis E. McCunniff, commanding officer of Camp Crowder, three miles from Neosho, and not far from the lonely road. I explained to him the hypothesis, and asked the assistance of the army in seeking proof. Colonel McCunniff invited me to Camp Crowder to talk it over.

When I arrived he said his first thought, on reading the letter, was that someone was having hallucina-



THIS IS A HIGH SPOT ON THE QUAPAW ROAD WHERE THE MYSTERY LIGHT ORIGINATES. THE HEADLIGHTS OF MOTOR CARS DRIVING ALONG THIS SECTION OF ROAD CAUSE WEIRD LIGHTS TO APPEAR, EIGHT TO TEN MILES AWAY, ON A LONELY OZARK ROAD IN NORTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA. INVESTIGATING THE PHENOMENON, LEFT TO RIGHT, ARE W. M. GEIST,

OMAHA; CHARLES W. GRAMAM OF THE STAR'S STAFF; RICHARD Y. JONES AND MAJ. THOMAS E. SHEARD, CAMP CROWDER. THEY ARE SPOTTING THE POINT OF OBSERVATION EIGHT MILES TO THE EAST. THE POINT AT WHICH THIS PICTURE WAS TAKEN IS NO. 4 ON THE MAP OF THE AREA, SHOWN ON NEXT PAGE.

tions. He mentioned it to his secretary; a young woman living in Neosho. She assured him there were some mysterious lights. He talked to others, who told him a few of the tales that surround the lights.

The Army Joins the Quest.

"They have my curiosity aroused," the colonel said. "I should like to know what they are. We shall be glad to co-operate."

Maj. Thomas E. Sheard, post signal officer, listened more or less stolidly to our conversation. He is a somewhat stocky man, under middle age, with mild brown eyes and coloring to go with them. His civilian occupation had to do with telephones and the hard realities of communications. I could hardly blame him for assuming the attitude of one who humors another possessed of a mild aberration.

The major took charge for the army. We needed maps, and called at the office of the post engineer, where we were shown to the office of Richard Y. Jones, chief of the civil engineering department. Jones had a quizzical look on his face when we told him what we wanted. He is a graying, middle-aged engi-

neer, lean and competent, with a passion for detail and for accuracy. He was born and reared in Neosho and knew all about the light.

"It's been solved," he said, grinning.

There was silence for a moment. "Well," I blurted, "if it has been solved, why hasn't the solution been published?"

"Why, we thought it would be more fun just to let people go on believing in the mystery," he said.

The major took a turn around the room. "Whom do you mean by 'we'?"

"I don't think I can tell you," Jones said. "Another man and I worked out the solution years ago. We started to write it up for The Star, but people got so much fun out of going to see the light and making up stories about it that we agreed to keep our findings to ourselves. I've never told anyone before."

We questioned him for half an hour without denting his reticence. He declined even to name the other man who worked with him. Major Sheard suggested that since the commanding officer had assigned him to find out what caused the

light, we proposed to do so if it took a month, and that Jones could save us a lot of work.

A Promise to Yield the Secret.

In the end Jones agreed to call his partner in the secret, who turned out to be Joe Duck of Springfield. Duck is district supervisor of vocational agriculture for Southwestern Missouri. When the situation was explained to him he agreed to the revelation of the secret.

Jones and Duck made their first investigation in 1930, but at that time did not set out to prove their theory. In February, 1936, after Macdonald's story of the lights appeared in The Sunday Star, the two men, with the assistance of friends, set about proving their case and succeeded in "controlling" the lights for the benefit of onlookers. The proof checked with the hypothesis offered by Dr. Ward, and checked with that of A. B. Macdonald.

Jones had misplaced the maps and figures which he and Duck had worked out. There was nothing to do but work out the proof again.

Major Sheard took walkie-talkie sets and an engineer's transit, and we went to the lonely road. Driving

to its dead end in a preliminary examination of it, we found a small cottage where a woman was working in her garden. She said her name was Mrs. Sadie Carpenter and she had lived there twelve years.

She smiled when I mentioned the light.

"People come down here at night to ask about that light," she said. "Sometimes I can't get my sleep because of them. Only once have I seen a light that I couldn't explain."

"When was that?" I asked.

The Light Disturbed Her.

"I was coming home late one night from helping at the home of a sick neighbor. I saw it then, but never before or after."

"Have you ever gone up the road to look for it?"

She said she hadn't, and that she didn't want to see it.

"I wouldn't want to talk about it," she said. "There is a light up there; that's all I know."

Obviously, it was all she wanted to know, having seen it once.

We drove back along the road to the point from which I had seen the lights the night before. I explained

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MYSTERY OF THE SPOOK LIGHT

(Continued From Preceding Page.)

what had happened and that my binoculars had revealed the light in the east to be from a motor car, but that in the west it was too far away. We set up the transit. Its telescope revealed four power poles rising in a line over a hill in the distance. Foliage of trees obscured the ground there, but we glimpsed what appeared to be a roadway. Nearer, by a mile or two, there was a slot in the woods along the rim of a bench of ground bordering the bottom lands of Spring river. In the slot we saw red gravel. It looked like a steep road climbing up out of the river bottom. We could not see the town of Quapaw, which lay in that direction, but did see in the far distance a great mound of yellow chat from a lead mine.

Packing the equipment, we started a hunt for the four power poles, but failed to find them that afternoon. We ate dinner and drove to Hornet, where we had agreed to meet Jones for a look at the light that night through the telescope of the transit.

The night was cloudy and pitch black. When we arrived at the point of observation other cars were there. Occupants of some were looking for the light while others were engaged in pursuit of romance.

"Listen," Major Sheard said, "this thing is getting interesting. If you don't show me a light tonight I'm going to leave you out here in the woods."

The lonely road is reached from the Missouri side by driving a quarter of a mile south of Hornet on Missouri state highway No. 43 and turning west on a gravel road. Drive as far west as you can. It is about four miles. There the road forms a T-junction with the state line road. Turn north for about two blocks, then west again. That is the road. You drive only about half a mile to the first point from which the mysterious light can be seen. That was where we set up the transit.

Major Sheard parked his car about thirty yards down the road ahead. There was no light visible at the moment and the clouds and misty atmosphere had caused most of the fireflies to seek cover.

When Jones set up the transit a few people gathered around us. A woman spoke: "There it is; right over there in the trees." She pointed ahead and to the right. I had seen what looked like a firefly, but kept discreet silence.

One Light Becomes a Prisoner.

The woman spoke again. "There it is, right under that car." She pointed excitedly to the major's car. Under it a tiny light winked.

"That's a firefly," I said. "Oh, don't blow your top so soon!" she snapped.

Major Sheard looked around. "I'm going down there and bring that light back to you," he said.

He stalked away in the darkness and in a few minutes returned, carrying a firefly in his hand.

"It was under the car," he said. The silence was profound.

We waited a few minutes. Then a real light began to appear, first as a luminous glow in the distance, then breaking into a full round ball.

There were exclamations from a few of the onlookers who had come to see and believe. For my part, I couldn't recapture the mood of spookiness I had enjoyed the night before. The light looked far, far away. Others thought they saw it approach. Apparently the major did not see it that way.

"Is that what people come out here to see?" he asked incredulously. He looked through the transit, but could see only one light at a distance. If it was an automobile it was too far away for the transit's telescope to separate the headlights.

"Major," I said, "both your boss and mine want to know where that light comes from. The best way to locate it is to fly over the country, locate this road and follow it westward until we pick up those power poles. There ought to be a road there."

"It would save a lot of time," he replied. "Suppose you do that tomorrow. I'll be busy in my office."

The Scientists Go to Work.

Next day Paul Shields, a Neosho pilot, took me in his plane to Hornet. From there we located the lonely road and flew west over it at about 1,000 feet. Looking ahead, in the distance we saw another road beginning at a dead end near Spring River, directly opposite the dead end of the lonely road, and running for miles to the west. The two roads obviously formed a section line which was broken at Spring River. Neither was in direct view of the other from the ground because of trees and foliage. We located the power poles seen through the transit. As we flew over it I sketched a rough map of crossroads and other section lines, and located Quapaw. The road formed the north boundary of that town. Returning along it, Shields dropped down to 500 feet or lower and we found the slot in the trees along the bench of land bordering the river bottom. In the slot was the red gravel undersoil of a steep wash or gully. It had looked like a steep road in the transit's telescope. Satisfied, we returned to Camp Crowder, where Sheard and Jones and I made plans for the test to be made the following night.

Jones took charge, having performed a similar test before. We had tested the walkie-talkie equipment and found static too noisy at night for its use at distance greater than a mile. The maps showed he had to cover a minimum distance of eight miles, and perhaps as many as twenty, for a complete check.

Next day we all went to Quapaw and, driving east about three miles on the road we had located, found that it ended opposite the end of the lonely road across the river. The country there was treeless, typical of the Oklahoma lead mining district. At two points we found high spots from which, through the glasses, we could clearly see in the brilliant sunlight the points on the lonely road where the "mystery" light was seen most often. (See map)

We now were ready for the tests. Jones worked out a system of signals and we synchronized our watches. We agreed exactly on the tests to be performed and worked out a time schedule. Major Sheard, W. M. Geist, signal engineer from

the 7th service command, Omaha; Carl E. Judkins and George L. Matthews, civilians in the Camp Crowder engineer office, were assigned with two cars to the Quapaw road.

Posted on the lonely road to observe their signals were Jones and myself, with Mr. and Mrs. Lester Firestone of Neosho at one point of observation, and Sgt. John E. Muller and Pfc. Charles Weber, both from Major Sheard's office, at another point. Both points of observation were equipped with transits and walkie-talkies, as were those in the major's party. The walkie-talkies were blanked out by static, however.

The time schedule, with the signals, was as follows:

9:45 p. m.—Major Sheard to signal with three flashes of his headlights. We to answer with same signal.

9:46—Sheard's lights on full for two minutes. We to answer with three flashes if we saw the light, two if we failed to see it.

9:50—Two cars to be parked side by side on opposite shoulders of the road, with lights on.

9:55—Sheard's cars to be placed on a slope of Quapaw road so lights of one would be above and behind the other.

10:00—Lights of one car to be covered with orange, the other with red cellophane.

10:10—Sheard's cars to be separated by about one mile, one ahead of the other, on two high points, with lights on.

10:15—Cars' headlights to be covered with orange and red cellophane, as in previous test, after which Sheard was to drive one car about five miles to the west on the Quapaw road, and turn around.

10:30—Sheard to drive eastward toward us, flashing his lights at intervals of about one second.

All through the test we were to signal with five flashes if we saw any light on the Quapaw road which appeared not to belong to the test cars. Major Sheard to locate such lights.

We were barely in position on the lonely road, with transits set up, when we caught the three flashes of the major's opening signal. Unquestionably the major and his party were in the area where the "spook" light originated. Among a few bystanders there were exclamations before we answered. After that there was silence.

The other prearranged signals were sent by the major, and clearly perceived by us at the exact moments worked out. At the time when the major was to place the cars side by side on opposite shoulders, the light blazed brilliantly. With the unaided eye, only one light appeared, but through the glasses two lights could be seen. At the time when he was to place the cars on a slope, one above the other, the light looked as if it had suddenly broken in two. That was a common phenomenon reported by witnesses. We demonstrated merely what actually took place when two cars traveled along that road in line.

At one time we signaled with five flashes that we saw a light which did not belong in the test. Major Sheard turned out his lights. The third light remained for a few seconds, then winked out. The major later reported the light came from a third car that moved along the road and dropped out of sight down a slope.

The closing test was crucial, for we wanted to learn if a car could be seen at any point on the Quapaw road, which was about twelve miles long. The major covered nearly half its distance, driving toward us

with his lights flashing. We saw every flash and demonstrated that any car on that road for at least half its length was fully visible except, perhaps, when it dropped into dips.

That was what Dr. Ward had reasoned out from his brief observation. It was what A. B. Macdonald had guessed in 1936 and what Jones and Duck had demonstrated shortly after Macdonald's story was published. Now it had been proved again, more conclusively than ever.

We packed up the transits. A car occupied by two couples drove up and stopped. The driver asked:

"Did you see the lights?"

Sergeant Muller answered, "Sure."

"What was it?"

"It was a car on another road eight or ten miles west of here," Muller replied.

"Well, if that's true," the caller said, "why did it go out when you turned on your lights? It did that every time."

"We were signaling," Muller said, starting to explain. "You see—"

"For heaven's sake," one of the young women in the car exclaimed, "don't tell us what it is; we want to believe it's a mystery."

Mr. Spidell from Baxter Springs, who had watched the tests with us, said he was fully satisfied as to the origin of the lights seen from the point where we were located. However, he said the test did not show where his luminous tadpole and animated figure with the pipe-stem arms and legs came from. Those lights, he explained, occurred in a low area, and not from high points. He asked us to view them with him. We agreed to do so.

Two nights later we met him at the agreed spot. He said that what he saw looked more like a dim light inside a large frosted globe, except that the globe took on fantastic forms. None of us had seen such lights on any of our trips to the lonely road. We speculated on fox fire, will o' the wisp, ball lightning, and other strange things. In two hours of waiting, no such phenomenon appeared. It was the first time, Spidell said, that it had failed when he was on the road. In the end we agreed that perhaps the tadpole and the animated octopus appeared only for believers. We had become hardened skeptics during our investigation.

We who studied the "mystery" light and found its origin are inclined to believe that Mr. Spidell and his friends actually saw an after-image and thought it was some other phenomenon. They probably had been looking at one of the bright lights and, when they turned their eyes away, saw the image of it, mistaking the image for some other light.

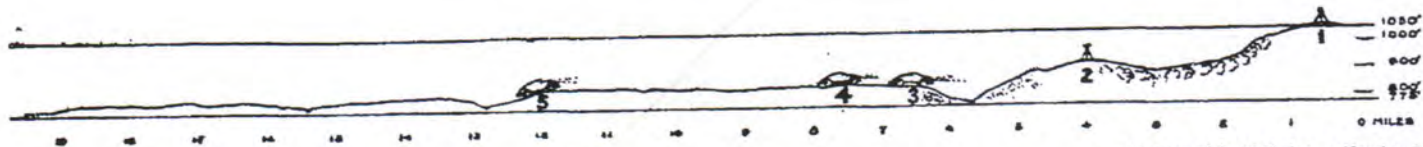
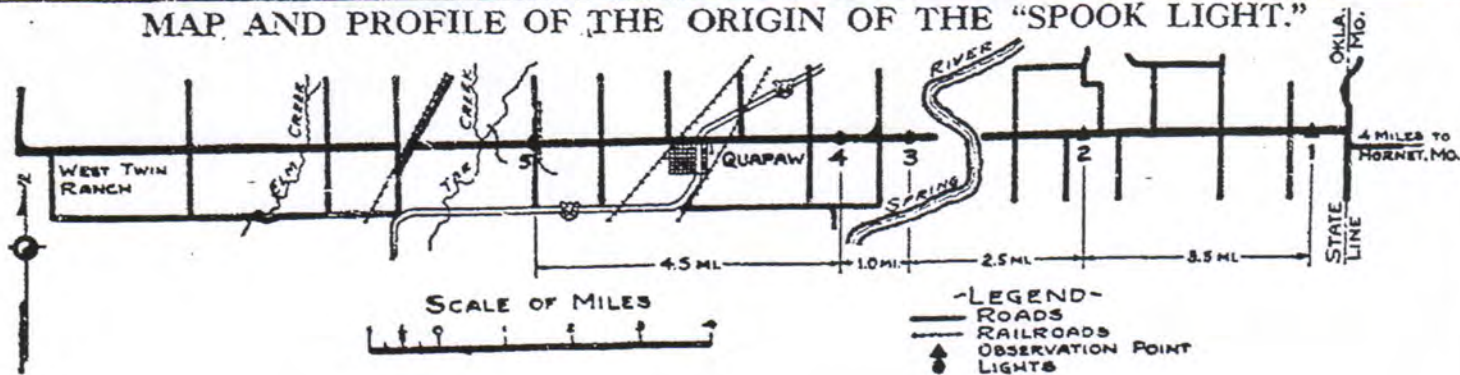
The solution of the "mystery" light probably will not satisfy some persons who have seen it. We have no desire to insist upon the solution and we certainly don't want to rob anyone of the enjoyment of a good ghost. We should like to point out only that the light is brighter, vis-

ible for longer periods, and seen more frequently in winter than in summer, as many observers have testified. The reason is because the trees, being denuded of foliage in

winter, form less obstruction than in summer.

In any event, the phenomenon of optical illusion enters into all of it, for it has been demonstrated many times that lights at night often appear much closer than they actually are. For what it may be worth, that is the opinion of the men who conducted the tests.

MAP AND PROFILE OF THE ORIGIN OF THE "SPOOK LIGHT."



—Map by Richard Y. Jones, Neosho, Mo.

Twelve miles southwest of Joplin is a lonely road of Northeastern Oklahoma where the famous "spook light" is seen. As this map shows, the lonely road is in direct line with another road bordering the north side of Quapaw, Ok. Experiments were conducted to prove a theory that the mystery light had its origin in the lights of motor cars on the Quapaw road, far ahead. Observations were made on the lonely road at points 1 and 2 on the map. Controlled test lights were flashed on the Quapaw road from points 3 and 4. From point 5, a motor car was driven east, its headlights flashing. All of the flashes

in the test were seen at points 1 and 2, in the spots where the "mystery light" occurs.

Profile below the map shows that points 1 and 2, where the lights are seen, are from 200 to 250 feet higher than points 3 and 4 on the Quapaw road. Elevation at point No. 1, where the spook light is seen, is 1,050 feet. The highest point on the Quapaw road, where the light originates, is only about 800 feet. Thus from point 1, an observer looks down upon the Quapaw road.

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