
A Look Back at The Point Pleasant Affair

Over the years I have written several articles on the activities at Point Pleasant, WV, and what is widely referred to as the “Mothman” case, made famous by John Keel in his 1975 epic, “The Mothman Prophecies” which was re-released in 2001 prior to the motion picture of the same name. The actual events on which Keel’s book was based happened over a 13 month period in 1966, culminating in the collapse of the Silver Bridge on December 15, 1967 where 47 residents lost their lives.

To begin with, the Keel book, nine years in the making, was not the first about Mothman in West Virginia, that honor falls to another well known UFO writer, Gray Barker, a native of that state, who had a questionable reputation when it came to fact finding for his books. Barker’s “Silver Bridge” preceded the Keel book by five years and Barker introduced the concept of the Men in Black in another book, “They Knew Too Much About Flying Saucers,” which he penned in 1956, ten years before the MIBs reportedly arrived in Point Pleasant.

Barker’s writing career apparently began with a January 1953 article in FATE magazine entitled, “The Monster and the Saucer,” retelling the story of the Flatwoods, Braxton County, West Virginia sighting on September 12, 1952. Braxton County, in the center of the state, is approximately 125 miles from Point Pleasant, which is on the Ohio River to the west. The “monster” in Braxton County was reportedly ten feet tall, with red glowing eyes and short arms, travelled in a red UFO. In addition, Loren Coleman and Jerry Clark co-authored a FATE article in 1972, entitled “Winged Weirdos” chronicling the existence of Mothman type creatures as far back as 1946! All of these articles and books were published prior to the Keel book, although he was involved in covering the emerging Point Pleasant case as it was happening in 1967.

The ASUP’s role in the Mothman affair began in 1978, when we were challenged to apply our investigatory methods to Point Pleasant. It was our contention, after Amityville, that field investigations should be done by trained personnel who were familiar with police standards in criminal cases and suggested that interviewing techniques commonly in practice by journalists would detect problems in old cases, where the witnesses would be more prone to alter their stories or embellish them. Body language would also reflect a witness’s comfort level with his or her story, which might trigger an admission of untruth in the original material. Based on that contention we were invited to undertake a field trip back to the scene to reinterview known witnesses, ten years after the story showed up in the press, and two years after Keel penned his book on the case. That summer we went to Point Pleasant and camped out in the county park, while going about the task of finding and interviewing the remaining eye witnesses to the events of 1967 prior to the Silver Bridge collapse. Our first find of note that while the book suggested a large group of witnesses, there were in actuality less than a dozen.

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It was obvious that the people who wanted us to investigate Mothman were themselves uncomfortable with the provenance of the story, especially Gray Barker's roll early on and his growing reputation for writing things strictly based on profit and not good reporting. Barker was not a journalist, so no one expected him to follow the rules of corroboration and his admission that he only wrote about UFOs because they were popular and therefore profitable, cast a negative shadow on the unbelievable things he wrote. John Keel on the other hand did have a background in journalism and was held in relatively high regard for the level of his writing. This imbalance was one of the mitigating factors in our involvement and all were relatively sure that the outcome would be more like the ASUP's findings on Amityville than anything else. Nevertheless, the team undertook the assignment with an open mind, which was helpful given what they were about to uncover.

The Point Pleasant of 1978 was nothing like the post-Mothman movie version you can see today. In 1978 you had a sleepy little town, pretty much cut off from the rest of the area after the Silver Bridge disaster. The town had approximately 2000 residents, down from about 3,000 when Keel arrived the decade before. The area was under the same economic downturn as the rest of the nation and there was absolutely no tourism factor involved after Mothman. Even though the bridge disaster was 10 years prior, there were still signs of its effect, almost everyone in town lost a relative or close friend when the bridge collapsed and the remnants of the bridge structural supports looming from the middle of the river served as a daily reminder of the loss.

In those days, it did not take a lot of imagination to visualize the bridge and its importance to the community. The road leading up to the bridge was still there, suddenly halted by a flashing red light where the approach once stood and the concrete supports looming mid-river just beyond. From the Ohio side, the scene was less stark; the highway that once emptied onto the bridge was now rerouted, but it was easy enough to find your way to the Ohio approach and just beyond the view of Point Pleasant, with a gaping gash where the bridge once emptied into the center of town. There were no legends of a ghostly presence at that site, but there should have been, the scene was still so obvious, it was almost as if the citizens chose not to obliterate the scene, where a small plaque memorializing the event in few words.

We found it relatively easy to locate the remaining eye witnesses mentioned in Keel's book, he had for the most part used their real names and while some had moved away and others had died, the majority were still in town, still doing the jobs they were doing when Mothman appeared among them. They were listed in the local telephone directory, there were no unlisted numbers and when the address given was too vague, the local police department was happy to give directions, the same officers who

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had dealt with Mothman in the deserted TNT area, nightly UFO chases and of course the disaster. They had their stories too, they willingly told us what to expect when visiting witnesses, their overall state of mind in many cases and usually vouched for their reputations and honesty. This was the Point Pleasant in which we quickly did our work; it didn't take long.

The first report of a UFO in Point Pleasant fell to a Mrs. Kelley, who encountered the alien craft while driving outside of town. The first reports of a red eyed creature were reported by Newell Partridge, who lived on the Ohio side of the river within sight of Point Pleasant; Mr. Partridge reported that his dog "Bandit," had gone missing after his encounter. Of course the first up close and personal account of Mothman was made by Linda McDaniel Scarberry to the police after she, her husband and another couple narrowly escaped his attack in the TNT area. Linda was the first person we wanted to talk to about the events of 1966-67 and she was a willing participant, as were all but one of the witnesses we were able to locate. Her memory of the creature was detailed, right down to the squeaking sound it made, like a mouse. It also seemed like all of the witnesses were still close friends.

Possibly the most interesting interview was with one of the only daylight accounts of creature, which involved Mr. Virginia Thomas, who lived in a small house on the edge of the infamous TNT area. While many might think that living next door to a collection of concrete igloos once used to store war munitions might not be appealing, in the time of Mothman it had been renamed the McClintic Wildlife Station and was, if nothing else very quiet. The area has several derelict buildings, now removed, including a giant generator station that was the center of the Mothman activity. The igloos were gigantic and there were also miles of tunnels under the entire complex, once used to safely move high explosives in wartime years.

Mrs. Thomas was happy to tell us about her encounter one afternoon with "Mothy" as my team came to call the creature. She was watching her daily litany of TV soap operas when the TV began to flicker and she became aware of a noise similar to a car with a loose fan belt, emanating from her back yard. She walked out her kitchen door to find herself face to face with a 7 foot winged creature, gray in color with "hypnotic" red glowing eyes. Even before we could ask, she told us that she was not frightened, although in hindsight she knew she should have been terrified. She said she looked at the creature for a minute and then returned to her TV, remembering that she told herself the creature should never be able to fly with such small wings, noting that they never seemed to move. She could not recollect how the creature exited, left, right or vertically, but she could tell us his size in reference to a nearby tree. She was within ten feet of the creature and said it was her impression it was not an animal but some sort of machine.

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On closer examination, based on what was on the TV when she first heard the noise outside and what was now playing when she returned to her set, we theorized that she had a loss of time from between 20 and 40 minutes. The original TV program was over and the next way half done.

We could recount all the interviews here, but the fact is that everyone was sticking to the Keel version of their stories. None showed any signs of embellishment, nor were there any telltale signs of discomfort in their body language. But, what was more important was that with one single exception, every eyewitness placed great emphasis on the creature's red, glowing eyes, several using the term "hypnotic" to describe them. Only firefighter Paul Yoder came forward to reiterate his contention that what he had seen in the TNT area was some sort of huge bird, that flew conventionally from his view.

Beyond the Mothman component of the Keel book, there were two other key factors to deal with, the introduction of the Men in Black and the space traveler Indrid Cold. Looking at Mr. Cold first, it was impossible to follow up on Wood Derenberger's story. It is my assumption that Derenberger is long dead, but have been unable to find mention of him, although there is an alleged interview with him on U-Tube, I have not been able to find his obituary. Derenberger was first contacted by Cold after a UFO sighting, the craft was reported to look like a lantern chimney on its side and Cold emerged to talk to Woody telepathically. He later revisited Woody at his farm near Point Pleasant on the Ohio side of the river and was driving a shiny black VW, even as UFO hunters were camped out within a few yards of the car. Woody maintained that Cold was a time traveler, who would leave saying, "See you in time!"

The Men in Black were another story all together, menacing, but in the abstract almost comical, the MIBs seemed to exist to harass witnesses and warn them against speaking about their encounters. MIBs were wide ranging, finding their way all over the country in time. They were certainly not limited to Point Pleasant or the Mothman experience.

This all brings us to the point where the entire affair becomes personal. After returning home from our trip to Point Pleasant, I had decided that we failed our mission, we were unable to shake any witnesses or find alternatives to the Keel claims. My intent was to say so in a letter to those who had suggested the trip, but before I could, some strange phone calls began to arrive at my home. The kids began to complain of annoying buzzing and chirping on the lines and an incoming caller, who knew us well, reported that a man, who sounded just like me, answered our phone and engaged her in conversation for 10 minutes, discussing topics that would be unknown to anyone else, then abruptly interrupted to announce she was not talking to "Rick" and that the person on the phone was alone in the house with the children. Of course this got a quick response and a search by the police, who found no one in the townhouse but my two daughters and our very large watchdog.

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The phone calls ended when I returned home one morning, after returning from an overnight assignment and then driving my daughters to school. I locked the house and went to bed, the watchdog “Merlin” at my side. I was awakened by a phone call and a man told me not to pursue the Pt. Pleasant case further. When I questioned who he was, there was a laugh, almost mechanical in nature and a question, “Where is your badge?” The room was totally dark, I rolled over to turn on the nightstand lamp and immediately knew that the badge case was not where I had left it on the nightstand. I asked where it was and the caller said curtly, “Look under the bed!” He then hung up. I reached under the bed, finding my shoes, in one was my badge case, in the other my loaded off duty revolver. Merlyn, all 120 plus pounds of him, was sound asleep inches away.

The phone calls never returned, after I did a show with Joel Martin on WBAB radio and told the entire story. But Joel had also had a visitor, two MIBs who he said looked like they were, “Right out of central casting.” I had learned from Mark Lane that the best defense when you think there is a personal threat is to go public with your evidence, and at least this time it worked for all concerned.

While that ended my personal Mothman intrigue, it did not explain what was going on and I spent the next twenty years considering the alternatives. Following the old Sherlock Holmes rule, “Once you have eliminated all the possible conclusions, what you are left with, no matter how impractical, is the truth.” I therefore have come to the following conclusions.

First, my personal intrigue with the badge, while interesting was impractical given what most folks would suggest that it was a visitation by the MIBs themselves. While you may get past the locks and alarms, no one ever got past Merlyn. I have to accept that this was some kind of mind control experiment that was triggered electronically through the telephone system. Once a post hypnotic suggestion was placed, it had to have been my subconscious self that placed the badge and gun in the shoes. That is not a comfortable conclusion, but the only one that works.

As for the MIBs, Mothman and even the illusive Mr. Cold, I think we are looking at an elaborate experiment in mass mind control. By whom or why, I can’t honestly say, except to note that in the same year at several Ivy League colleges there were similar projects, which have been widely written about and admitted. In the case of Point Pleasant, the experiments ended with the unconnected bridge disaster; it would simply be too dangerous to continue such a study with all that added hysteria. But before the bridge collapse, Point Pleasant was the perfect incubator for such a study, a small controlled environment of similar people and backgrounds, it was perfect. You do not have to stray much further than the infamous Woodrow Derenberger to see how open a mind can be; once he accepted the existence of Indred Cold, that character, or those behind him, could convince Woody of anything, right

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down to the name of Cold's wife and children. In an of itself, the characterization of Cold was in such depth that Derenberger could tell you the most minute detail of his UFO contactor.

This only leads however to the obvious last question. Who was doing the experimenting? That obviously is the most important question of all, and frankly I have no answer. While it was easy in those days to dump such a mess at the feet of some out of control government entity, I have no proof of that conclusion. For all we know, it was time travelers experimenting with the citizens of Point Pleasant. No one knows, no one will probably ever know, but Point Pleasant is nevertheless one of the most complicated stories from that period and well worth a mention in the paranormal history books.

It is particularly of interest in another way. UFO encounters are jealously guarded by those who study them. Rarely do you see the UFO community entering into dialogue with other researchers. Likewise, in the Mothman case, you might as well be talking about Bigfoot as far as the Cryptid hunters are concerned. You do not see much of a cross over in these kinds of cases, except in the rare instances where someone like Loren Coleman teams up with another expert to consider such a "cross" between the disciplines.

It is ironic that for instance, that there are several sidebar stories associated with the Mothman "flap" that suggest poltergeist activity after a visitation by what Keel called "Ultraterrestrials," but no legitimate paranormal group has ever undertaken a study of them to test the veracity of these claims. Likewise, there are incidents in this period around the area that would be considered "Vampire like," but Keel steered away from them because that was just too unbelievable. Nevertheless, secondary references mention in great detail the presence of cattle mutilations during the Mothman visitation, and there were no similar cases prior to 1966 or after 1967.

For that reason, I believe that the Mothman Prophecies only opened a door to a much wider range of paranormal events, but given the involvement of Gray Barker, Jim Moseley and of course John Keel himself, the story only centers on the UFO relationship and little else. It is a classic case of the right hand not really knowing what the left is doing and the body not knowing in what direction they are walking. Either Mothman was the greatest work of combined fiction ever concocted, the creation of a dozen or more conspirators working together to create a complex story line, complete with a knee jerk mass hysteria that effected everyone that came in contact with it, or it was truly the best paranormal case of the 20th century and we failed to do it justice. Either way, it certainly is worth inclusion in any serious study of the unexplained.