

When UFOs, Cryptids and Ghosts Collide

I have been asked more than once why the ASUP, Inc. involves themselves with cases that are clearly not within the normal definition of what might be called a haunting. The question normally arises with a raised eyebrow that suggests the unspoken question, “Don’t you have enough on your plate as it is?” The historic answer is simple. After the ASUP, Inc. debunked Amityville, we were challenged to apply our “new” methods on another equally famous case, the reported Mothman stories in Pt. Pleasant, West Virginia. If in fact the ASUP method worked in Amityville, we should be able to find out the real story behind Pt. Pleasant. We were soon off on a road trip, complete with camping gear to the rural Ohio River Valley! We had no preconceived notions or prejudice, from the onset, Mothman could well be a ghostly apparition we thought.

To fully appreciate the phenomenon, you have to realize that this took place more than 30 years before ASUP became interested in what is now called the Skinwalker Ranch goings on, which in turn was several years before Skinwalker became a household word. Pt. Pleasant, like its later counterparts had all manner of strange goings on, all of which began with mysterious lights in the sky and dare we mention missing livestock. After that there were numerous sightings of otherworldly creatures, ending in the Men in Black. The only difference was the kinds of creatures being reported, and of course, the fact that those guys in vintage black touring cars were now traversing the landscape in black helicopters! In hindsight, this gives a new interpretation to, “What’s past is prelude!”

Beginning in late 1966 and throughout 1967, the village of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, was abuzz with tales of the unexplained. On 15 December 1967, the Silver Bridge that linked West Virginia with Ohio, across the Ohio River, collapsed. These events – which, strangely, ended as abruptly as they began – formed the core of Keel’s investigations and *The Mothman Prophecies*, first published in 1975, records flying creatures, UFOs, animal mutilations, Men in Black and what we now call experiences of ‘missing time’.

Point Pleasant was a congenial little town of about 5,000 people, and still bore the scars of the Silver Bridge collapse when we arrived. The bridge supports still stood in the middle of the Ohio River and a plaque now commemorates those who died there in 1967. It was easy to see that the town had grown up around the bridge as it fed traffic across the Ohio River directly into the centre of town. On that fatal day, inbound rush hour traffic had been halted by a traffic signal a block from the bridge and had backed up traffic across it, putting an unbearable load on the old structure.

Of course, Point Pleasant predated the bridge by several hundred years. Once home to Daniel Boone, it saw a great battle on 10 October 1774 at which the Virginians defeated Native American Indians. My RV and company of colleagues camped at the battle site – Tu-Endie Wei Park. Familiarizing ourselves with some basic history and the lay of the land – including a brief visit to the ‘TNT area’ at the heart of the Mothman story – we settled into the camp-ground to plan our next few days.

We agreed early on that the suggestion of a connection between the phenomenon and a curse by the chief of the defeated Indians was not an issue for us to consider. This was a common formula, used by many writers... when the book is running short, add in some local color. Whether Chief Cornstalk had cursed future residents of the land was immaterial to our investigation, unless we were willing to follow a thread that might tie all UFO phenomena worldwide to ancient curses.

Likewise the Silver Bridge collapse, which so dramatically concluded the phenomenon, was not up for further investigation. Its cause was thoroughly investigated by officials from several state and federal agencies and blamed on a combination of metal wear, structural deterioration, weather, and the weight

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of static traffic on the bridge at the time; we could add nothing to that. We also agreed that the reported cattle mutilations were now 20 years in the past. Thus we focused on the UFO activity, which included the reported sightings of Mothman during the 13 months prior to the bridge collapse and the associated appearance of Men in Black (MIBs).

However, we immediately hit a problem; our foray into the TNT area had an unexpected effect on two team members. Although we went in broad daylight, one said she had a bad feeling about the place; then my usually-analytical research partner admitted that her blood ran cold just driving through the area. I saw that maintaining our objectivity might be difficult and skew the rest of our work. We agreed to leave any further visits to the area to the end of our stay.

Early the next morning, I hit the streets, first stopping at a coffee shop in town and then visiting both the police station and the local newspaper office. My colleagues phoned around, trying to locate people mentioned in the book and set up interviews with them. Bringing up the topic of Mothman in the coffee shop had an interesting result; nearly everyone I spoke to remembered 'the year of the UFOs' and had a theory about it. Most seemed to know someone directly connected to the phenomenon and were willing to vouch for their veracity. Most residents had seen something, whether it was strange lights in the sky or 'abnormal' activity on the outskirts of town during that period. Even the more spectacular claims, they said, were made by people who were not otherwise prone to telling tall tales.

We got a similar reaction at the police station and newspaper office; not one person took the claims lightly, but vouched for the sincerity of those people who told of their 'close encounters' with the phenomenon. I was used to skepticism from public officials and professional journalists and finding its opposite was quite unexpected. Even more intriguing was the fact that many people had other stories to tell, ones which were not included in Keel's book.

I was hoping to find a witness who might further embellish their testimony as reported in the book, or even recant. In my experience, the passage of time allowed witnesses to relax and, as years passed, they were more likely to admit it if they were wrong. Several of Keel's original witnesses had either moved from the area or had died; but of those we were able to contact by telephone, only one person refused to speak to us.

First, we interviewed those who had witnessed Mothman at close proximity, then those involved with the MIB visits; not one witness swerved from their original account. Statistically, this had to be some sort of record. The deeper our questions got, the more we were convinced that the witness had indeed seen or interacted with something. Their speech and body language suggested that they were telling the truth.

One particularly memorable subject, who was up-front about what she had seen, was an older woman who said she had encountered Mothman in her backyard. Her property was close to the boundaries of the TNT area and, hearing a buzzing or humming sound coming from the back of her home, she went out to investigate. It was mid-afternoon, one of the only daylight sightings and when she opened the back door she found herself face to face with Mothman, hovering about 10 feet in front of her. Her description was detailed, suggesting something more like a machine than an animal. She had no conscious memory of communicating with the visitor; to the best of her recollection, she simply backed up into the house and closed the door.

This woman was not frightened by what she had seen, in fact she was astonished at her own calmness. On returning to her living room she noticed that the TV show she had been watching prior to hearing the noise in the backyard had ended and the next program was about two-thirds through. More than 25 minutes of time was 'missing'. She returned to the back door and looked out through the window, but the visitor had gone. Her testimony seemed to rule out any kind of nocturnal creature.

Most of the other encounters, however, took place well after sunset. As suggested in Keel's book, the

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TNT area had become the place for teenagers to go for 'biological experimentation'. In the very first sighting, the terrified witnesses, surprised while parked there, fled back to town at high speed with the Mothman in hot pursuit. Somehow, the creature was able to keep up with the car at nearly 100 mph, according to the witnesses, whose statement to the police is now part of the public record. One older officer, when asked about that report, said that he knew the officer who had written it and swore that he was not the kind of man to put anything in the record that he did not believe happened.

Other witnesses mentioned in the book told of glowing red eyes and a buzzing or humming sound. UFO sightings were even more routine during this period, so common in fact that the local newspaper stopped reporting them on a regular basis. The entire community became desensitized to the phenomenon and spoke matter-of-factly about nightly sightings of UFOs or the latest news on the creature.

You might expect that frightened residents would avoid the TNT area; the opposite happened. Saturday night in Point Pleasant now had a diversion far superior to the local movie house. Dozens of cars flocked to the site nightly in hopes of catching a glimpse of the red-eyed 'monster from outer space'. If anything, this attests to the widely-held local belief that whatever the UFO was, it was not dangerous. One officer told us that, at times, there were so many sightseers that police officers turned out to direct traffic.

The reaction of residents to the mysterious visitors that followed was not so laid back. The Men in Black were seen and are remembered as truly malevolent individuals, despite their sometimes amusing quirks. More than 10 years after their last visitation, those who had invited the MIBs into their homes still remembered the very real feeling of danger in their presence. Of course, MIBs were not unique to Point Pleasant; they had been well documented in earlier UFO lore and were being researched. Unlike Mothman, the MIBs sent a shockwave of fear through their contactees. As chronicled by Keel, they arrived in shiny black cars which, like their equally shiny shoes, seemed impervious to the weather.

As the MIBs passed themselves off as 'officials' involved in the UFO investigation, their aura of menace was combined with an absurd fascination for quite mundane objects. Keel's most memorable example is that when offered Jell-O, an MIB saved a sample in a paper napkin, tucking it into his coat. They asked questions about common food items and their speech seemed somehow odd and disjointed. Most importantly, witnesses noticed the MIB had no ears, or seemed to talk without moving their lips. You'd think the witnesses would be terrified, having seen such obvious warning signs, but a strange calm prevailed until after the visitors left; only then did people realize how odd, even horrifying, their visitors were.

Were the MIBs just an interesting sideshow to the Mothman tales? Our team conducted interviews, looked for deviations from the original stories and then departed. One witness told us, as we were leaving her home, that she believed the MIBs' veiled threats were very real and that anyone looking seriously into the phenomenon was placing themselves in harm's way. There was little question in my mind that someone or something had toyed with anyone who had directly encountered a UFO.

Eventually, it was time to go back to the TNT area. In fact we made two visits that day, one in daylight and the second late at night. Even in daylight the place was quite surreal. Its domed containment buildings (used for storing the TNT) were stark, looking like rows of igloos. The landscape was criss-crossed by deteriorated roads, their paving broken up by clumps of grass. There were several larger buildings – including a power plant that looks much like Dracula's castle – and other outbuildings, now gutted and crumbling.

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Back at camp, we considered several alternatives. Was Mothman a government experiment, a test of the common man's reaction to things otherworldly? Maybe, but in 10 years one might expect to see some of that technology surface in the real world. There were other problems with this scenario, such as where such technology was housed and where the support system could be for such a project. It simply did not seem an appropriate theory in this case; Point Pleasant wasn't Groom Lake! Perhaps Mothman and his dark kin were mental projections; a mind control experiment of some sort? Theoretically, this kind of project wouldn't require a large support base. Could it be that those visited by MIBs were actually visited by normal humans who then, somehow, planted the image of earless, non-verbal investigators with shiny black shoes in their stead?

As our campfire debate went on under the stars, the group concluded that this was just too far-fetched. We began, slowly, to consider the reality of UFO activity, an area none of us had ever thought likely before coming to Point Pleasant, and with that possibility came a new idea about the reality of the MIBs. That evening, we went back to take a last look at the TNT area, now a black landscape. We waited two hours; nothing happened – no flashing red lights from radio towers or buzzing noises from nearby transformers. Nothing!

One team member recalled the old quote from Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of Four*: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." As a group, we were well versed in paranormal activity, but this was not just another ghost story and, try as we might, we could not fit the UFO pegs into any of the paranormal holes we were familiar with. If our goal had been to find the common threads between ghosts, apparitions and UFOs, we had failed. If it had been to find another supposedly 'true story' woven from strands of fiction, that too had failed.

It was not until we returned to New York that we realized we had, indeed, learned something. As the time came to tell our colleagues at PRF that we had failed to find a chink in the Mothman armour, two occurrences convinced us that we could no longer sit on the fence in this case. It was never our intention to speak out publicly about Mothman, but the first of the two occurrences caused me to change my mind. Only two days after returning to New York, my children began to complain that there was something wrong with our telephones. In fact, the next time I went to use one of them, the classic clicks and whirs of a phone tap were evident. Next, the kids reported that they were picking up the phone to hear conversations in progress... and the topic was our family. Of course, this was long before Caller ID or even three way calling, but it wasn't a party line either, so there was some concern.

While this was interesting, I was not overly concerned until a close friend told me the following story. She had phoned and, according to her account, began having a conversation with me. She swore that it was my voice and that the conversation touched upon things that only she and a few colleagues would have known. After about 10 minutes, the voice at the other end stopped her and began to laugh "demonically" as she put it. Then it paused and said in a totally different tone, "Oh, you wanted to talk to Rick. Sorry, he's not here. I'm here all alone with the children." Whoever it was hung up and my friend's follow-up call got a busy signal. This was a near impossibility, given that the house had four lines, including one reserved for my personal use only; the system would roll over a call if any of the lines being called were busy. The children were indeed at home, alone, and said they had not been using any of the phones. The police were called, searched the house and found the kids were indeed at home, and very much alone!

A week after this, I was expected to be on Joel Martin's talk show at WBAB on Long Island. The topic for the evening had nothing to do with UFOs or haunted houses and certainly not Point Pleasant. The day before the show I had worked the overnight and returned home to take the kids to school. I then returned home, locked the door and went to my second floor bedroom, closed the blinds, pulled the drapes closed and went to bed. Some time later, the phone rang. The person on the other end sounded as if his voice was being mechanically altered and he asked simply, "Where is your wallet?"

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My routine was simple, my ID case and badge was always placed in the nightstand draw. I reached over, still in the dark, but didn't feel either. I turned on the light and looked carefully, neither my wallet or off duty revolver were where I put them. I went back on the phone, demanding that the caller identify himself! He laughed and then said quietly, "Forget Point Pleasant." Then he added, "Look in your shoes," and hung up. I reached under the bed and my missing items were neatly shoved in each shoe. Throughout the entire affair, my dog, Merlyn who weighed in at over 100 lbs. continued to slumber by the bedside. There was no way in, no way out. I picked up the phone again and called Joel Martin, advising him we were changing the topic for the evening's program, but did not offer any explanation.

Before the show, Joel met me in the lobby of the station, which was unusual. Usually, his producer would be on hand to get me settled in, with Joel busy up to airtime. But this time, Joel was sitting in the hall with his producer and even before he exchanged the usual greetings, his producer asked if I was playing a trick on him. Then he asked me what I knew about MIBs. He told me that he had been visited by a classic MIB that afternoon, who cautioned him about doing shows about UFOs. Joel had known about my trip to Point Pleasant and the Mothman story, but I never told him the topic for that evening show, or what had led up to it. After some momentary conversation, we agreed that it was time to go public. Whenever a journalist feels he is in danger, the best advice is to put everything he knows before the public in the hope that, once it is public knowledge, there is no reason to threaten the source.

That program went off without a hitch and to the best of my knowledge neither Joel, nor any member of my family, were contacted again. The experience was, however, an eye-opener. Having spent a good part of my life reporting about crime and criminals, including covering the mob families of New York, I had never received any threat to my family apart from this incident. The world of UFOs, I had thought, up to that point, was harmless; just part of the wide range of things that go bump in the night. Now, my mind had been changed. I also came to believe that The Mothman Prophecies was based on very real events and while I still can't buy the tie-in to either Chief Cornstalk or the Silver Bridge disaster, I do think that the reports of UFOs, Mothman and the MIBs were based on truthful accounts by honest people.

So, what do I think really happened in Point Pleasant over those 13 months? I think that someone or something was involved in a complex human experiment. Whether this project originated with the government or an otherworldly source, I cannot say. The UFOs, the cattle mutilations, Mothman and the MIBs were all an orchestrated experience. I think that those experiments continue to this day, thinking about Skinwalker Ranch as a prime example. Allowing for the variables of hysteria, I know that cattle are mutilated, cryptids show up in the most unlikely places from the Catskills to the Rockies; and the sightings of lights in the sky, little grey men and any number of other figures, sometimes glowing and other times only in shadow, are common among us.

Are they all connected? I have no idea, but I can tell you that there is a body of evidence that suggests multiple kinds of phenomenon can and do exist in the same time and space. Seeking the connection is what our job is all about!