

The David Lightfoot "red spray" case. Dr. James McDonald investigates. (See pages 20-24.)

March 5, 1970

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Dear Ted:

This will be primarily a summary of a telephone interview with David Lightfoot, now of Dallas.

Maybe I'm slowly developing better instincts for suspecting which are the cases likely to be worth the telephone toll. I had trepidations about hunting down Lightfoot, somehow; and my conversation with him on 2/28 pretty much confirmed them.

I happened to notice Olsen's report on Lightfoot, and, seeing that it referenced the *APRO Bulletin* for January 1963, I dug out that issue and found the fairly long press story reproduced there from the local Amarillo papers (copy enclosed for your files). As you will note, David's parents are identified by initials there, and I found that they are still listed on Bluebonnet Drive. The call there netted his present Dallas telephone number, and I finally talked with him.

Although forty minutes of telephone conversation did leave me with the impression that David and Charles Lightfoot probably saw something come over their heads and move along at low altitude before continuing on its way, I got so many corrections and revisions to the story, and even a few internal contradictions within the telephone discussion, that I would be obliged to relegate this sighting to a very low status, at present.

D. L. (David Lightfoot) said that yes, he remembered the incident quite well. However, he allowed that there "probably" had been quite a few exaggerations and embellishments in that account, due to his being at "an excitable age" back in 1950. I met all such initial remarks with enough cordial understanding that he slowly let down his hair quite a bit. He never came to the point of admitting that the whole thing had been embellished beyond all reason, but that's about what it came to.

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He pointed out what is, I believe, an extenuating circumstance for the boyish embellishments: He wasn't going to say anything about it to anybody. However, his younger cousin, Charles Lightfoot, told about it back at home, whence C. L.'s mother called the paper, in order to net a "\$5 news tip," for her efforts. It came out that the *Amarillo News-Globe* had a standing policy of paying \$5 to anyone who phoned in a usable tip, and she was right in thinking that she had one. When the newsmen came around, D. L. evidently felt cornered, with an obligation to tell the newsmen a fancier tale (by reading between the lines).

Without giving too lengthy an account of a case that probably doesn't warrant it, I'll just list, in summary form, some of the salient points that emerged as we pushed the topic back and forth over the phone:

- 1) The object did not sail "only a few feet over the boys," but moved along the middle of the river at what D. L. estimated to be an altitude of about 20 yards above the river. (Mind you, D. L. did not have his original account before him, and hence was at the slight disadvantage of being unable to shade all of his present story to fit the original press version. Not having any desire to embarrass him, I did not, for many of these points, come back with a rejoinder that they were significant exaggerations. By not coercing him on these points, even though they were immediately apparent to me, I probably got far more net information from him than I would have, if I had begun to jump him on these matters.)
- 2) The object was never on the ground! At one point in our conversation, he said that it came within "3-4 yards off the ground." A little later, perhaps recalling the way he told it in 1950, he said that maybe it was "1-2 feet off the ground."
- 3) He not only never touched the object (1), he told me, but would judge that he never got closer than about 20 yards from it, after chasing it for some time.

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- 4) Evidently recalling, midway through our conversation, that he had told the newsmen in 1950 that he found it on the ground and grabbed it and had described it as smooth, he made some very vague allusion to the "tactile sensations" that he had mentioned and equated them, almost meaninglessly, to something about the ridge over which he had "jumped" just before spotting it. Don't expect me to straighten out that *non sequitur*; it was a bit too embarrassing to ask him any questions about such a gross lie.
- 5) He volunteered no comment about having seen anything like a "plate on top" held by "some sort of screw or something in the middle." I didn't ask him about that one either.
- 6) I queried him about the welts and irritation on his arms. He said that "maybe", in their haste to get back home from the incident, they might have run through some nettles or other weeds that caused the irritation!
- 7) When I then asked him if there was, in fact, any "spray or flame", he was again very vague, but said that maybe when he came up over the ridge, his foot might have kicked up some dust that was caught in the sun and gave him the illusion of spray in the region. (I guess I'd better enlarge on that, to the extent of remarking that, as he told it, he must have run from the flood plain of the creek or river for a short distance and then climbed up over a very short erosional cliff, which was topped by what he called a plateau, but which I presume was some higher erosional surface. He referred more than once to "leaping over the ridge", in context that implied nothing more than clambering over the top of this little clay cliff. I'm afraid we shall have to agree that process, even if executed by an energetic 12-year-old, just isn't going to kick up much dust. My strong suspicion is that there was nothing even remotely resembling spray or flame.)
- 8) Further weakening his credibility, he rather contradicted himself near the end of the long conversation in the following manner: He indicated more than a casual interest in UFOs, after we had discussed this for some time.

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Mind you, I never interjected any embarrassing charges concerning all of this, with the net effect that he never had to retreat completely from his 1950 story, a maneuver that was obviously not in his mind as we talked. After I expressed some brief comments to the effect that I felt there might be something to the UFO subject, out came a rather well developed space-animal discussion that I could scarcely choke off, despite my concern for the rising telephone toll. That closing discourse on his part is relevant here, in that he tied it in to the belief that this spherical thing that sailed over their fishing spot might have been a space-animal which reacted in fright to his chasing it and emitted some kind of material that would be irritating to the skin. That is probably a revealing indicator of how thoroughly adrift he was at that point, with respect to what was truth, what was imagination, and what was embellishment in 1950. But since he had suggested nettle welts at one juncture and had talked about kicking dust in the air at another, you can see why I was eager to get off the phone about that time.

- 9) He described the spherical object as yellowish or buff to me, whereas it was blue-gray back in 1950. This is of some significance because pilot balloons are typically a tan color, and the size and description that he gave me fit very closely the pilot balloon. I mentioned that to him, and he rebutted by saying that it didn't have any box hanging from it, as such balloons always do. I explained to him, without making too big a point of it, since this was early in the conversation, that radiosonde balloons have boxes but pilot balloons do not.
- 10) He volunteered no remarks about any whirling motion or any whistling sound.
- 11) In the version that he gave me, the object had already whisked away to a trestle about a half mile distant, by the time that Pudgy (Charles) caught up with him, topped the small cliff, and was in a position to look at the departing object. That means that one really has virtually no confirmation from C. L. I certainly am not going to waste any money on trying to locate C. L. at this juncture.

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Although the above tergiversations on the part of D. L. are sufficient to warrant suspicion that they might not have seen any object at all, I'm just a bit inclined to the view that they may have seen something. I can't spell that out very clearly, but I think it is at least conceivable, following the press attention to UFOs in March 1950, that a 12-year-old boy could see something like a pibal, mistake it, blow it up in his comments to his young cousin that it was something much more significant, and then be stuck with a bad story when the cousin's mother picks up five bucks by turning in a UFO news tip. In any event, I took a few minutes of time to query D. L. as to the relative location of the fishing site and the Amarillo airport. As I understood it, they were at a site that was northwest of the airport. The airport was east of the city about a dozen miles, whereas they lived northeast of the city by about six miles. He stated to me that the object, when first sighted, came in out of the southeast, in a direction that would have been consistent with a balloon from the airport. As he told it to me, in fair agreement with his 1950 version, it changed direction near his location, and disappeared off into the northeast.

This was evidently somewhere near noon, if the 1950 press account is correct. Back in 1950, radiosondes were released at 0900 and 2100 CST, but my records indicate that Amarillo was not a RAOB station, at least not in 1952. However, it released four pibals a day. But the release-times closest to noon were 0900 and 1500 CST. Presumably then, only the 0900 release could have been implicated, if the boys did see a balloon. A three-hour lag between release-time and sighting of a wayward pibal is not very reasonable. Furthermore, checking such wind data as we have at hand, I find indication that the balloon would have headed out to the northeast at lower altitudes and then veered almost due eastward. There would be little chance for it to get back to a point that lay a half dozen miles northeast of the airport, consequently. Finally, it would be rather unlikely in any event, for a pibal to develop just enough leak to come back down to ground and still have buoyancy enough to scoot along a short distance above the ground in a nearly horizontal path. D. L. made that observation himself, and it is, of course, reasonable.

Hence, the "pibal explanation" really does not fit very well here. One can write off the whole sighting as untrustworthy, or he might speculate that the boys saw some unconventional object that excited them, that they didn't understand, and that they built it into a story that contained so many exaggerations and lies that the whole thing must be

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forgotten.

Either way, I think that it will be advisable to remove the Lightfoot case from the category of seemingly significant UFO reports. (xx.)

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(xx.) McDonald papers. University of Arizona at Tucson. David Lightfoot folder.