

The Night The Stars Fell

An event that marked the birth of a new astronomy, the astronomy of meteor showers, began around 11:00 pm on November 12, 1833 and lasted until dawn. Although the Leonid meteor storm was visible in Canada and parts of Mexico, people in the southeastern portion of North America received the most spectacular display. Reports of as many as 100,000 to 150,000 meteors per hour lit up the sky and there has never been a larger meteor storm or a more brilliant display in recorded history.

Imagine what the people of Fayette Court House town who had no knowledge of meteors must have thought as they witnessed thousands of stars literally falling from the sky. Terrified observers thinking the end of the world was near spent considerable time making amends with their consciences and swearing to atone for their sins.

A party of young men were playing cards in the courthouse when the “stars began to fall”. Could this be the hand of God, chastising them for their sins? They grabbed their horses’ reins and began to run but there was no escaping the brilliant falling objects. The young men decided they should indeed repent of their sins. A Methodist minister lived a quarter of a mile from Fayette Court House. Having a difficult time controlling the frightened horses, they rode as rapidly as they could to the minister’s house and awakened him. There was a scene of great repentance and they promised the minister they would forever forsake card games if his prayers would save them from destruction on that horrifying night.

After they lived to see the light of the next day and the meteor storm was gone, they laughed at their actions and fears of the night the stars fell.

People everywhere became very excited and emotional. They fell to the ground screaming and praying, many of them crying, “Oh, my god, the world is on fire. Whether being awakened from the brilliant lights or from the noise and pandemonium one is unsure, but people began running from their houses in their nightclothes. One man rushed to the door with his sword drawn. A lady was seen running around with her apron lifted trying to catch the stars as they fell. The meteors leaving trails of fire behind them burned up before reaching the ground.

Although the hour was late, a Fayette County man was returning home from taking his cotton to market. He was anxious to get home to his family but his frightened companion wanted to pray every few hundred yards. The wagon had to be stopped so the man could kneel on the ground.

Afterwards, many professed to not having been afraid. However, for some time after, there was a religious revival and repentance among sinners. The large number of sinners who were seeking repentance and joining churches gratified preachers. Surely, many ministers in late 1833 were thanking their lucky stars.

Lorenzo Dow, an early Methodist preacher in Fayette County, was compelled to arrange his own phenomenon to strike fear into the hearts of his congregation. He gave a small boy a horn and instructed him to climb a tree. When Preacher Dow described the Judgement Day and called for Gabriel to blow his horn, the little boy blew a loud blast. This had the desired effect until a member of the congregation spied the boy in the tree.

The Cherokee Indian elders warned that the “fire panthers” were a sign that the white men in Washington and in areas around the Cherokee villages could not be trusted. The infamous *Trail of Tears* was not far behind.

The fantastic meteor storm created such great excitement across the state that it became part of Alabama folklore. For many years afterward, people marked time and dated events with “before” or “after” the night the stars fell. One hundred years after the storm, it inspired the writing of the song “Stars Fell On Alabama” and in 2002 the state began putting the phrase on automobile license plates.

Some of the information for this article came from the Fayette Co. Historical Society’s Sesquicentennial publication.