

The early Nineteen-Fifties were watershed years for anomalous events: UFOs had captured the public imagination and were rapidly elaborating into the complex spectrum of phenomena observed today; sightings of Bigfoot-type entities were beginning to surface, along with even stranger creature encounters; there were green fireballs in Southwestern skies, rumors of captured flying saucers, falls of ice and glowing jelly, the Velikovsky controversy...and there was windshield pitting.

The unexplained breakage of glass—usually in automobile windows—was a widespread and widely publicized phenomenon during those busy years. In 1952 and 1954, there were waves that attained international prominence, as windshields in England, the United States, Canada, and Italy shattered *en masse* for no obvious reason.¹ Although viewed in retrospect as a classic “silly season” media creation, the pitting was, in fact, much more substantial and unequivocal than many well-accepted Fortean phenomena: in some cities scores, even hundreds of automobile windshields would be destroyed in a single night; often whole parking lots of cars would be affected.²

The typical windshield pitting or “phantom sniper” incident appeared to be the result of a small, high-velocity pellet striking the glass producing a cratered entrance hole, with total collapse of the window following (a characteristic of safety plate glass). However, rarely, if at all, were any pellets found, and in at least one incident a witness reputedly saw some kind of droplets strike the glass and eat through it.³

A variety of explanations were offered, none of which were particularly convincing. Fallout from nuclear testing, for instance, was a popular (if unlikely) culprit, while the plate glass industry suggested highway pebbles and de-icing chemicals were responsible.⁴ Media coverage was intense at the height of the waves, elevating the subject to the status of modern folklore; phantom snipers were even used as the basis for a plot in a children’s comic book.⁵

The concentration of the incidents in waves, like that of many Fortean phenomena, was transitory, and so was public awareness. By the latter half of the decade, windshield pitting had been dropped from the media vocabulary, and the subsequent development of serious anomalistics largely bypassed the entire subject. Occasional incidents continue to be reported, and occasional Fortean attention has been turned on them,⁶ but in general, researchers have been content to accept the popular opinion that it was all only another “Fifties” fad. However, the objective reality of mass window breakages is still with us, along with other phantom-sniper events, and in many cases the facts continue to elude easy explanation.

An excellent example of a mini-wave of phan-

BREAKING GLASS IN NEW ENGLAND

tom-sniper incidents occurred in eastern New England over the last three months of 1986 and January 1987. A large number of individual cases were reported, falling into at least three separate and distinct series, defined both chronologically and geographically (other reports or groups of reports may, of course, have escaped media attention). The incidents seem to encompass the whole range of phantom-sniper/windshield-pitting phenomena, with no obvious unifying factor other than the breakage of glass, so it is hardly surprising that each series has been isolated in terms of news coverage and official investigation.

There is reason, though, to consider the possibility of a synchronistic, if not a causative, relationship among all three.

The wave began in New Hampshire, with the first incidents taking place either in the town of Penacook, or the city of Manchester (approximately twenty miles to the south), sometime in early October 1986. As often happens with repetitive phe-

By K. W. Moak

nomena, the initial stages of the wave were reported only poorly, if at all, so it is difficult to determine the precise onset of the two New Hampshire series. A single incident on or about October 12 (there was apparently no news coverage) may qualify Penacook as the starting-point, since there are contradictory statements regarding the chronology of the Manchester series: one dating it from around the first of October, another specifying October 21. For convenience, I will give precedence to the more northerly series, that in Penacook, while acknowledging that it is a somewhat arbitrary decision.

In any case, the early events were only a prelude: there were three more incidents in Penacook, on October 22, while Manchester windows continued to be hit well into November. Then, on December 8, a series of sniper attacks that would eventually reach the national news began in northern Rhode Island, in the area of North Smithfield. So far as I have been able to determine, the Rhode Island incidents continue one month.

Of the three series, that in Penacook was the least impressive; indeed, it may be argued that four incidents hardly constitute a "series" at all. But localization and a common focus for the attacks (school buses), justify the identification of a distinct group.

A short article in the *Concord Monitor*, October 23, 1986, reported that windows of three school buses in Penacook had been broken at about 3:15 the previous afternoon. The school district's assistant superintendent, Redmond Carroll, was quoted: "We think that three buses were shot at with some kind of a pellet gun or something of that nature." Two side windows and a windshield were broken, but whatever struck them "bounced off" the glass, and was not recovered. Although students were aboard the buses, no one was injured.⁷

Also in this article, the only mention of the first (October 12?) event was made: "...A similar incident occurred about 10 days ago when one passenger window was shattered."⁸ Since Asst. Superintendent Carroll was the authority for that statement, I assume a school bus was also targeted then.

The location of the October 22 snipings is interesting; they took place, "near the intersection of Main and Washington Streets,"⁹ which is to say, in the very center of town. Penacook has a compact downtown area, with commercial and office buildings on the corners of that particular intersection, and a convenience store opposite. It would be a singularly ill-chosen spot for sniping, especially in the afternoon.

There are no further reports of damage in Penacook, although in the same issue of the *Monitor*, a probably unrelated item stated that "someone

wearing boots kicked in the windshield" of a new car at a Concord dealership the night of October 22.¹⁰ Concord is four or five miles south of Penacook.

Thus the first segment of the wave ended without much furor; only minor damage had been done, and press coverage was minimal. The Penacook cases appear significant in retrospect, but at the time they passed virtually unnoticed outside the affected community.

In Manchester, a very much larger city in southern New Hampshire, the developing situation was far different. During October and the first week of November, Manchester found itself under siege as window breakages reached epidemic proportions. And at that point, the media began to pay close attention.

As noted, early coverage was sparse (I suspect television news may have carried most of it), and references to the initial incidents were not available. But by November 11, the *Manchester Union Leader* was giving the local wave front-page status. On that day an article titled "Police Ask Public's Help In Catching Vandals" expressed the city's growing sense of alarm when it stated, "The police again wish for vigilance."¹¹ During the previous weekend (Nov. 7-9), there were 58 reports of broken automobile windows in Manchester.¹² By November 12, when two suspects were arrested, the total number of cases was placed at 280, with damage estimated at \$50,000.¹³

In the November 11 *Union Leader* article, Deputy Police Chief Kenneth Murby speculated that "There may be a certain copycat element," insofar as there seemed to be no geographical pattern to the incidents. They had begun in the northeast quadrant of the city, but by then had spread throughout the large metropolitan area.¹⁴

On the night of November 11, police captured two teenage boys in the act of shooting out windows of parked cars.¹⁵ At that time the boys allegedly admitted to breaking "more than 100" windows with BB guns.¹⁶ However, when they were arraigned, the number had dropped to "more than 80", and it was specified that all those had been broken since October 21.¹⁷ It is doubtful that this date represents the beginning of the Manchester wave; the *Union Leader* had earlier referred to the incidents as beginning about six weeks before;¹⁸ that is, around the first of October. I have not yet resolved this discrepancy.

Although the residents and authorities of Manchester were quick to accept teenage vandalism as the cause of their troubles,¹⁹ the data suggest that the balance of the attacks cannot be accounted for so easily. Rather, those familiar with community reactions to such phenomena will suspect that an explanation for some of the events was automatically stretched to cover all of them.

Be that as it may, the wave was officially over and

no one was disposed to raise further questions. The two boys first pleaded innocent,²⁰ but later seem to have changed their pleas to guilty²¹ so no evidence was ever presented in trial. It does appear that the window breakages ended with their arrest, but that is hardly conclusive: if the boys were "copycats" their own acts of vandalism may well have continued beyond the point at which some original agent (or agents) had ceased operation.

There is also an indication of unrelated sniping incidents prior to the arrests. On October 24, two students at the Wilson elementary school received minor injuries from "heads of 22 caliber bullets...apparently fired by slingshot." A juvenile boy was believed to be responsible, but was not apprehended.²² If the slingshot-wielding boy was only a logical guess this may be a valid phantom-sniper incident, one that obviously does not fit the pattern of the others.

Proper evaluation of windshield pitting events requires physical data not always available. In Manchester, for instance, the newspaper coverage failed to make it clear whether projectiles were recovered in all, some, or only a few of the incidents. Nor are details of the entry holes—size, shape, etc.—usually given. In consequence, even a single report with specifics is welcome, and fortunately, we have such a report.

According to the *Union Leader*, one Manchester resident, Robert Embt, actually witnessed a window breakage, or at least the final stages of it: "I was going out to the car to fix the rear window defrost," Embt said. "When I walked around the car I noticed a hole in the window and the glass was shattering. I could hear the crinkling."²³

I spoke with Mr. Embt and learned several pertinent facts. The incident took place at approximately 6:00 P.M. (date not specified). Mr. Embt had heard "loud cars" about ten minutes earlier, but when he walked the length of South Hall Street he saw no sign of vandals or suspicious vehicles. The window affected was on the driver's door; when he first noticed the damage it bore an entry hole measuring roughly one-half inch by three inches. He found no BB or other pellet.²⁴

Mr. Embt's observations are interesting, to say the least. The entry hole he describes is a slot, nothing like the round, cratered holes produced by BBs or an air rifle. Also, given the mechanics of safety glass, it would seem that the initial breakage must have occurred only a very few minutes before the glass began to crumble. But the car(s) he heard had passed a full ten minutes before. Finally, of course, the apparent absence of a projectile speaks for itself.

One report, however useful, can not be taken as proof of a non-vandalism hypothesis. Glass may break in unusual patterns, and a projectile the size of a BB may easily be overlooked and lost. But alto-

FLASHBACK 1954

What's Causing Pockmarked Windshields?

SEATTLE (AP) — Superbomb, supernatural or superstition, there was no doubt about it today, the one million people in the Puget Sound country were stirred up by the case of the pockmarked windshields.

Some were even blaming H-bombs.

And the mayor of this city of 500,000 was trying to stir up the President of the United States. The mayor, Allan Pomeroy, apparently was among the believers that something, rather than someone, is damaging thousands of automobile windshields with an unknown substance.

The mayor asked the President to "instruct appropriate federal agencies to cooperate with local authorities on an emergency basis."

There are doubters, too, who think an awful lot of people are victims of mass hysteria, suddenly conscious of something that may have happened days, weeks or months ago.

"Tommyrot," exploded Dr. D.M. Ritter, assigned by the chemistry department of the University of Washington to assist authorities seeking an answer to the riddle. "There isn't anything I know of that could be causing unusual breaks in windshields," he said after examining several and the residue found on the cars.

"These people must be dreaming!"

One thing is certain: the claims of damaged windshields are mounting into the thousands. And one thing else appears certain: no other glass objects seem to be suffering, not even side windows of cars.

The description of the damage varies from actual holes to pit marks covering every known shape. Chips, scratches, mars, pits, holes, crumbling, blemishes, blurs, blots and cracks. Some people even claim the damage has happened before their eyes.

Law enforcement officials are convinced that some vandalism was involved in cases reported at Bellingham. Some, but not all, believe the vandalism spread.

Then, this week, other communities south of Bellingham said they had suffered an outbreak of the trouble. Wednesday night it broke out in Seattle. The police switchboard couldn't handle the complaints; neither could the newspapers.

Some police officers said it even happened to them. Others took the Dr. Ritter attitude. A state patrol official, who asked not to be named because "so many high officials appear to have been taken in," said he hadn't found one actual case outside of Bellingham that couldn't be laid to normal travel damage.

Source: *Palo Alto Times*, 4/16/54
Credit : Trumbull via INFO

gether, Mr. Embt's experience is strongly reminiscent of the classic windshield pitting phenomenon of the 'Fifties.

As Manchester began to relax and savor the discomfiture of its two presumed culprits, a much more serious wave of sniping attacks was about to begin in northern Rhode Island. On December 8, a man sitting in his home in North Smithfield was wounded by a 22-caliber bullet fired through a window, signaling the start of a month-long panic.²⁵ By January 10, 1987, there had been eleven incidents within a five-mile radius of North Smithfield, targeting walls, house windows, one truck windshield, and—perhaps incidentally—three more persons. In several, if not all of the attacks, slugs were recovered and matched to a single gun.²⁶

At the peak of the wave, national news media took notice²⁷ and local law-enforcement authorities were mobilized to the fullest. But although the State Police, for instance, placed more than a dozen undercover detectives in the area no arrests were made.²⁸ At last, after the eleventh incident (in which a man was seriously wounded),²⁹ the wave apparently ended.

Clearly this third series was an altogether different matter than either of those in New Hampshire. In Rhode Island there was obviously a human sniper at work, firing unremarkable 22-caliber bullets. FBI psychologists even composed a profile for the sort of individual likely to be responsible, characterizing him as a "young, militant loner" with "Rambo-type fantasies."³⁰

Nonetheless, there are intriguing aspects to this series of events. For one thing, the incidents bracketed the winter solstice, a period of time recognized as having more than its share of anomalous phenomena. For another, there was evidently a bizarre focus on the trappings of the holidays: several of the attacks seemed to be directed at Christmas trees!³¹

Despite this "strangeness factor," however, the Rhode Island snipings would not warrant inclusion with the other series were it not for a remarkable geographic coincidence. While there is little or no functional similarity between them and the northern events, there is a definite spatial relationship: plotted on a map, the three centers of wave activity appear to fall almost exactly on a line running approximately five degrees west of north. The second point, Manchester, is offset very slightly to the east, a discrepancy that might conceivably be the result of map distortion. Furthermore, if the Penacook series did in fact initiate the wave then there is also a chronological progression southwards. For what it may be worth (nothing, I suspect), the distance ratio between the centers north to south is approximately 1:15 (20 miles: 75 miles).

Is there any Fortean significance to these incidents? On the surface, it does not seem likely. Tempting as it

is to discover anomalies, there is no compelling reason to postulate anything more exotic than human vandalism as a cause. True, the Penacook series, and the Embt report from Manchester do suggest a less mundane agency, but the suggestions are no more than that, and against them we have common-sense logic and the fact that arrests were made for at least a sizable fraction of the events.

However, anomalies can be manifest in subtle ways; even the actions of human malefactors raise interesting questions insofar as they conform to an unconscious pattern. In the cases under consideration, the geographic relationship, the possibility of a chronological progression, and the common factor of glass breakage do imply a synchronistic ordering. With that in mind, I feel that it may be important to note any other peculiar incidents occurring proximate in space and time.

From November on there were several cases of "mystery gassing" at schools in southern New Hampshire. On November 18, the *Union Leader* interviewed two teachers who had been more-or-less severely affected by fumes in West High School.³² The symptoms, which were by no means confined to those individuals, included headaches and upset stomachs, and were attributed to "concrete sealer" being applied to the outer walls of the building.³³ A similar incident at another school was also blamed on sealer.³⁴ Later, an elementary school in Nashua, a few miles south of Manchester, was hit with similar symptoms, this time blamed on cleaners (chlorine-based?) used to remove mold from inside walls. Students there described an odor "like perfume;" uncharacteristic of strong cleaning fluids, but very typical of mystery gassing phenomena.³⁵

Mystery-gassings are conceptually related to phantom snipings, in terms of an unknown agent, and so are unexplained wildlife kills. On November 25, the *Union Leader* reported on an investigation of ten Canada geese found dead at Beaver Lake in Derry, a nearby community. A scientist involved said that no toxin had been identified and probably would not be. He suggested that the geese may have been poisoned at some other locality, and died only after arriving in Beaver Lake.³⁶

On October 26-27 there were five car windows broken in Deerfield, about ten miles northeast of Manchester. However, two men were observed, and their car described, so this is hardly mysterious.³⁷ There was also, in early December, a rash of thefts from Christmas creches in the area,³⁸ but since there had been widely-publicized litigation over public creches, this was almost certainly common vandalism.

Finally, on December 7 there was a case of cemetery vandalism in Manchester. Forty-two gravestones were overturned, and some broken, in the

Valley Street Cemetery between 2:00 and 3:15 P.M. that Sunday.³⁹ "Tombstone toppling" is a well-known and puzzling phenomenon. Although invariably attributed to vandals, the logistics involved are often formidable. In this case, for instance, more than forty stones, amounting to perhaps ten tons of rock, had to be uprooted from permanent footings, in little more than an hour.

No claim is made for a direct connection between the above events and the phantom-sniper incidents, but experience has shown that anomalies of all sorts tend to cluster, and so even manifestly irrelevant data should at least be noted. And while it is unlikely that New England's broken windows represent anything more extraordinary than the whims of vandals and lunatics, it is nonetheless important to record the evidence, and remind ourselves that dismissing a phenomenon as being too absurd for consideration does not make it go away.

Windshield pitting is still a problem for police and car owners, and it is still an intriguing mystery for Fort-eans.

Sources

1. Brad Steiger, *Mysteries of Time and Space*, Dell, 1976, pp. 98-104.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Walter Lantz's *New Funnies*, March, 1955.
6. For instance, Jan-Ove Sundberg, "Phantom Snipers of Sweden," *INFO Journal*, Vol. VI, Nos. 4 and 5.
7. "Windows Shattered On Three School Buses," *Concord Monitor*, October 23, 1986.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Untitled paragraph, *Concord Monitor*, October 23, 1986.
11. "Police Ask Public's Help In Catching Vandals," *Manchester Union Leader*, November 11, 1986, p. 1.
12. Ibid.
13. "Two Teens Arrested In BB Shooting Spree," *Manchester Union Leader*, November 12, 1986, p. 1.
14. "Police Ask Public's Help..." op. cit.
15. "Two Teens Arrested..." op. cit.
16. Ibid.
17. "Two Plead Innocent In BB Spree," *Manchester Union Leader*, November 13, 1986, p. 1.
18. "Police Ask Public's Help..." op. cit.
19. "Arrests In BB Shootings Bring Relief To Queen City," *Manchester Union Leader*, November 12, 1986, p. 16.
20. "Two Plead Innocent..." op. cit.
21. WMUR Channel 9 Television News, date uncertain, late December?
22. *Manchester Union Leader*, October 25, 1986, p. 11.
23. "Arrests In BB shootings Bring Relief..." op. cit.
24. Personal communication with Robert Embt, April 4, 1987.
25. "Sniper wounds R.I. man in 9th shooting in a month," *The Boston Globe*, January 9, 1987, p. 44.
26. "Fear rules communities hit by sniper," *The Boston Globe*,

January 11, 1987.

27. ABC Evening News, various dates.
28. "Fear rules communities..." op. cit.
29. "Sniper wounds..." op. cit.
30. "Fear rules communities..." op. cit.
31. Ibid.
32. *Manchester Union Leader*, November 18, 1986, p. M
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. I am relying on memory for this item. It was carried the WMUR evening news, sometime in late December 1986, or early 1987.
36. *Manchester Union Leader*, November 25, 1986, p. 5.
37. *Manchester Union Leader*, October 29, 1986, p. 36.
38. *Manchester Union Leader*, Various dates in December, 1986.
39. "Vandals Overturn 42 Gravestones," *Manchester Union Leader*, December 9, 1986, p. 3.



A front page LA Times article of 4/20/54 shows Gordon Mills looking at the remains of his car's rear window. Mills reported that tiny pits formed on the window in the morning and by nightfall the entire window was covered with holes. Cracking sounds could be heard. Later the window fell in.

In *Strange Magazine* Issue 3 there will be a window pitting featurette devoted to the 50s pitting wave.

Periodically there is an epidemic of shattered windows. In the 1950's thousands of automobile windshields across the country were mysteriously smashed simultaneously. Researcher Ronald Dobbins has located the following items.

New York Times, April 24, 1921;2;1;4

London, April 23- The mysterious band of men which has caused great damage by cutting and otherwise damaging plate glass windows in London, causing a large financial loss, has intensified its campaign, which has spread to many places in England.

The plate glass windows ruined in the London area now total more than 2500. The band has been most daring in its operations, but no arrests thus far have been made.

The Arizona Republic
28 O Sunday, Jan. 7, 1973

Vandals crack car windows

More than 60 reports of vandals smashing car windows were called in to one police district Friday night.

Sgt. Don Toms of briefing station 3 at 1450 S. 24th St., said the reports came from the area of Willetta Street to South Mountain Avenue between Central and 7th Street.

All the reports pointed out that car windows facing the streets had been broken, he said.

"We didn't find any evidence as to who did the damage," he said. "It was evidently done with a pellet gun, but no one was seen."

Windshields Stolen

Nov 23, 1972
LOS ANGELES TIMES

NAPLES, Italy (UPI)— Forty motorists showed up at police headquarters Tuesday to report their windshields stolen overnight from parked cars.

Astronaut Says UFOs Possible

By JOHN L. CARPENTER

U.S. astronaut Ronald Evans says UFOs (unidentified flying objects) may be real after all.

He told a news conference at Arizona State University today there is "a distinct possibility" that UFOs exist.

But he hasn't seen any around earth or the moon, unless you mean all kinds of particles that are flying around through space.

EVANS SAID when his craft went behind the moon and he left the radios on, even though earth was silent, he heard "a little sound — whooooo."

Evans and the two other Apollo 17 astronauts, geologist Jack Schmitt and Navy Capt. Eugene A. Cernan, were at ASU today, telling about their moon mission.

THE COURIER 20 JULY 1973
CHAMPAIGN-URBANA, ILL.

5-TON WRECKER BALL VANISHES FROM CRANE

Indianapolis, Ind. (AP)

When workers returned to a demolition site Tuesday morning, they found that the company's five-ton wrecking ball was missing.

It had been suspended about 200 feet up on a crane's cable, said Loran Dowling of Dowling Construction Co.

Mar 29 1973

BRIDE (DISAPPEARS

CAIRO (UPI) — Under the headline "A Strange Incident," the Middle East News Agency Tuesday carried the following story:

"A 20-year-old bride Mrs. Miriat Ahmed Shihata was walking with her husband, Anwar Said, in an Alexandria Street around midnight last night.

"The couple was returning

from a visit to friends when the land suddenly opened up under the woman and swallowed her in an awful moment that sent the husband into a state of shock for which he was hospitalized.

"A rescue squad immediately arrived on the scene. Although they dug to a depth of 10 yards she failed to find the woman. She had been married four months."

Crude Oil Theft Causes Wonder

RUSSELL, Kan. (AP) — Someone in Russell County apparently is starting his own backyard refinery.

The Russell County Sheriff's office received a report earlier this week from the John O. Farmer Oil Co. that 80 barrels of crude oil had been stolen from a storage tank near here.

The theft was discovered during one of two routine daily readings of gauges on the tank.

Officers said it would take two trucks to haul away that much oil and were more or less at a loss to explain why anyone would want the crude oil.

Dec 6, 1972
PHOENIX GAZETTE
(Green Edition)

A, No 10