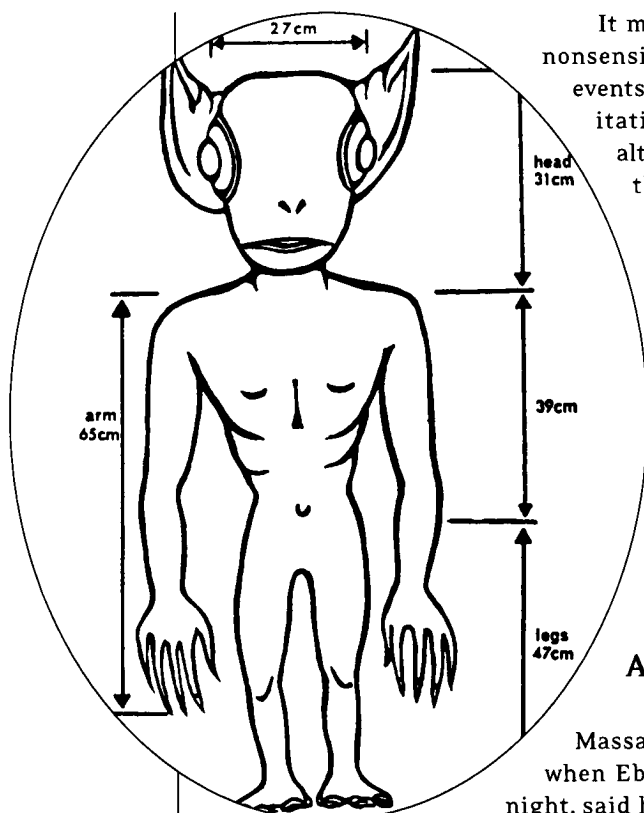


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## Phantom Attackers

The best known of the world's phantom attackers was the "mad gasser of Mattoon," a figure so elusive that eventually law-enforcement authorities in the small central Illinois town declared him nonexistent. That explanation was ratified the next year, in 1945, by a social scientist who wrote that the gasser was the creation of mass hysteria.

Though acknowledging the undeniable role of hysteria, some observers have argued that it alone is insufficient to account for every aspect of the affair. Clouded with ambiguities that are unlikely ever to be cleared up, the episode by its very nature ensures that any conclusion drawn from it can only be tentative. Particularly interesting in this regard, however, is an obscure and nearly identical series of events that occurred in Botetourt County, Virginia, between December 1933 and January 1934; according to all available evidence, Mattoonites had never heard of these incidents.



Sketch of a UFO entity seen in 1955 at Kelly, Kentucky. (Courtesy Fortean Picture Library.)

It must also be said that the irrational, even nonsensical nature of the Mattoon and Botetourt events leads us to conclude that whatever its limitations, the hysteria solution seems the only alternative to the far more extraordinary one, that the “mad gassers” stepped out of the Goblin Universe. Which is not to say there is no Goblin Universe, only that if there is one, we can reasonably demand of its residents that they provide us with more robust indications of their existence. In all but a scattering of instances, individuals believed to be responsible for the gassings were only briefly glimpsed, and even here ordinary prowlers or transients may have been mistaken for strangers from the twilight zone.

### An army of apparitions

In the summer of 1692, at Cape Ann, Massachusetts, an odd series of events began when Ebenezer Babson, returning home late one night, said he saw two men step out of his house and dash into a cornfield. When he ran inside to check on his family’s welfare, his wife and children were nonplussed by his questions; no intruders had entered the house, they insisted.

Babson grabbed a gun and went outside, where he spotted the two men bolting up from behind a log. As they escaped to a nearby swamp, one was overheard saying to the other, “The man of the house is now come; else we might have taken the house.”

The family repaired to a military garrison not far away, and Babson then sneaked outside, where he encountered the two men again. The following day he came upon them a third time, and they chased him into the garrison. Over the next week or two Babson, sometimes alone, sometimes in the company of others, had further encounters with mysterious strangers, suspected to be French-Canadian scouts in league with hostile Indians.

On July 14 the entire garrison watched half a dozen of the strangers. A pursuit party, with Babson in the lead, got within gunshot range. Babson fired on them, and three fell to the ground, only to rise to their feet with no apparent signs of injury. As they fled, one turned to fire on Babson; the bullet narrowly missed him and lodged in a tree, from which its intended victim subsequently retrieved it. A few minutes later the garrison group trapped one of the strangers. Babson shot