

# THE NIGHT STARS FELL ON ALABAMA

## *Presentation Notes*

On the night of November 12, 1833, stars fell on Alabama. Actually, a fantastic meteor shower which was seen across the Southeast made it look like stars were falling on Alabama. It created such excitement across the state that it became part of our folklore. Some people even used it as a reference point to date events.

The year 1833 had been a relatively quiet year and there was nothing in the air that would be a cause of concern. But on the night and early morning of November 12-13, 1833, stars started shooting from the sky. Newspapers of that era are filled with reports of people being woken up by crowds in the streets that were loudly announcing that Judgment Day had indeed arrived while some reported that people had been awakened by flashes of light and "loud noises" (probably "sonic booms") associated with the passage of fireballs.

Why does this night matter? Why do historians take an interest in this night? For one thing, the history of this night combines several fascinating elements-- songs, books, folklife, art, legends, and science. We can learn a lot about our history and those who lived here before us by exploring their responses, impressions, and interpretations of this event. How did people think differently from us more than 150 years ago? Let's find out by exploring this event in history. And let's start with the fun part-- the stories and their storytellers.

### STORIES AND THEIR STORYTELLERS

As we know, the way the story is told depends on the person telling the story.

Storyteller Kathryn Tucker Windham offers her own insight into how the night the stars fell left its mark on our state:

*Many of Alabama's finest stories used to begin with a reference to "the night the stars fell," and even now there is an inclination among some residents to divide local history into two segments: before the stars fell and after the stars fell. That would make November 13, 1833, the dividing line.*

*Thousands of Alabamians, thinking the end of the world was at hand when they saw the heavenly spectacle, fell to their knees to plead for mercy and forgiveness. Others promised eternal renunciation of sin (card playing, dancing, whiskey drinking, cursing, and associated vices) if they were spared whatever catastrophes were in the offing. Still others jumped upon horses and tried to outrace the fearful menace they believed was pursuing them.*

*That night, the night the stars fell, may have branded Alabama as a strange land, her people forever set apart by a horoscope of enchantment and turmoil. Some historians,*

*sociologists, romanticisms, astrologists, and conjure women say so. Maybe it did. It was quite a night.*

*Storytelling spots aren't all on front porches: they're any place where storytellers gather. But the best stories are a family's very own tales, stories whose humor and pathos provide nostalgic links with kinfolk who were here awhile ago.*

Does anyone think Ms. Windham was alive during the event? Is she describing something she witnessed or something she has heard about?

Wayne MacDonald, who was a young boy at the time, describes what he saw:

*I was delivering the morning newspapers via bicycle that morning and had noticed a few bright meteors between 4:00 and 5:00 AM. By 5:10 AM the sky was filled with bright meteors (a least magnitude -6 for those that understand the term) from a source that seemed to be about 30<sup>o</sup> ½ above the eastern horizon. The sky was filled with fireballs and at times I could hear a distinct "hissing" or "static" sound. The show continued for the next hour until sunrise began to slowly erase all but the brighter meteors. Even with enough ambient light to read a newspaper the brighter objects were still visible and I have been hooked on astronomy since that morning.*

How did the falling stars affect Mr. MacDonald's life?

A young slave by the name of Amanda Young described the event as seen by her friends and family:

*"Somebody in the quarters started yellin' in the middle of the night to come out and to look up at the sky. We went outside and there they was a fallin' everywhere! Big stars coming down real close to the groun' and just before they hit the ground they would burn up! We was all scared. Some o' the folks was screamin', and some was prayin'. We all made so much noise, the white folks came out to see what was happenin'. They looked up and then they got scared, too.*

*"But then the white folks started callin' all the slaves together, and for no reason, they started tellin' some of the slaves who their mothers and fathers was, and who they'd been sold to and where. The old folks was so glad to hear where their people went. They made sure we all knew what happened.....you see, they thought it was Judgement Day."*

How did the event affect Ms. Young's life?

Historian Kenneth R. Johnson gives the following account, in which he summarizes and interprets various legends about that night:

*On the night of Nov. 12-13, 1833, most people in the Muscle Shoals area went to bed as usual. A few who went to bed about midnight might have noticed an unusual number*

*of shooting stars streaking across the sky. By 3 o'clock in the morning, the number of meteors or shooting stars had increased to tens of thousands. They entered the earth's atmosphere traveling about 10 miles per second, leaving a long trail of burning material behind.*

*The light given off by the burning meteors was constant -- so much light that many people thought morning had come early and the sun was rising. Even the roosters started crowing to greet the dawn. Other livestock thought it was morning. Cows headed for the pasture, and chickens left their roosts in search of food. The people who were awake soon had their families up looking at "the great fireworks display in the sky."*

*One person in Huntsville wrote that everyone was up at 3 o'clock looking at the "streaming meteors." The shooting stars seemed to come out of the Southwest and traveled in a northeasterly direction. Some seemed to be falling, but so far as is known, none actually hit the ground. This great meteor shower covered all the eastern part of the United States from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada. But Alabama seems to have been affected by the display of heavenly fireworks more than other parts of the country. The light from the shooting stars continued until the sun rose, hiding the stars with its brightness.*

*Human reactions to this startling phenomenon were as strange as the event itself. A few people were impressed. But many were terrified. Some believed a horrible catastrophe was about to happen. A large number of people thought the world was coming to an end and tried to get right with God. Some knelt and prayed, often confessing sins that startled their earthly hearers. Numerous travelers hurriedly packed their bags and started home to be with their families "during the final hours."*

*The Tennessee Conference of the Methodist Church was meeting in Pulaski, Tenn., at the time. Several dozen ministers were present. Some, especially the younger ministers, believed the meteor shower was announcing the second coming of Jesus. Many conference participants prayed, while others, believing the world was coming to an end, prepared to return to their homes. One of the conference leaders, Dr. Robert Paine, president, teacher and minister at LaGrange College in Franklin County, had been born 30 years earlier in the midst of a similar meteor shower. This timely arrival led him to study astronomy. He was thus able to relieve many fears and bring order out of the chaos among the Methodist ministers.*

*At that time in history, even the best-educated men did not really understand what was going on. Newspapers had a field day offering explanations. One theory was that the shooting stars were caused by "sulphureous vapours" exhaled from the bowels of the earth. Another related theory claimed the shooting stars were "combustion of inflammable air, kindled by electricity."*

How do the accounts differ?

Are any of these accounts primary sources?

Which ones are secondary sources?

## HISTORIC CONTEXT

One of the reasons the meteor shower was mistaken for the end of the world is because those living in 1833 didn't have access to all the special tools we use today. For example, in 1833, the camera and the telephone were not yet invented. The next time the Leonids made their spectacular appearance in the year of 1966, many people took photos and recorded the event with video cameras.

Showers of meteors have been known since ancient times. The shower that appeared over Alabama was a recently formed stream, the Leonids, which reappears every 33 or 34 years but seldom with the brightness of 1833. The Leonid meteors are associated with their parent comet, Temple-Tuttle.

## THE BOOK AND THE SONG

More than 100 years later, the legends about the night stars fell on Alabama were still popular enough to inspire a song and a book. In 1934, Carl Carmer wrote a popular book titled "Stars Fell on Alabama", about the people of Alabama and their way of life. In this book, Carmer suggests that Alabamians live under a "spell" or "enchantment" that dates back to the meteor shower of 1833.

Let's see how Mr. Carmer describes this spell. I'm going to share an excerpt from the "Foreward" to this book. The foreward is used by authors to explain why he or she chose to write the book. Here is what Mr. Carmer says:

*Alabama felt a magic descending, spreading, long ago. Since then it has been a land with a spell on it-- not a good spell, always. Moons, red with the dust of barren hills, thin pine trunks barring horizons, festering swamps, restless yellow rivers, are all part of a feeling-- a strange certainty that above and around them hovers enchantment-- an emanation of malevolence that threatens to destroy men through dark ways of its own. It is difficult to translate this feeling into words, yet almost every visitor to this land has known it and felt in some degree what I felt with increasing wonder during the six years I lived there....*

*What the strange influence is or when it began is a matter for debate. It is a legend that the great chief Tush-ka-lusa, upon the accidental death of his son at the hands of one of DeSoto's men, drew himself up to his seven-foot height and, standing over his dead boy's body, called down upon all white invaders of this land the vengeance of the Great Spirit. And it is pointed out as one of many proofs of the power of his curse that from that day to this no year has passed in which the Black Warrior River (named for the giant redskin) has not claimed at least one victim.*

*Others say that the enchantment began in the year that two squaws in a Cherokee tribe, whose teepees were pitched near what is now the town of Oxford, Alabama, bore on day sons that were spotted as the leopard. The mothers were tried for witchcraft and*

*sentenced to be burned-- but when the flames licked about their bound feet the earth yawned and took them and all the tribe into itself. They lie now beneath the bottomless pit that is filled by the clear waters of the Blue Pond. So the witch-mothers triumphed and they still rule Alabama.*

*But those who really know, the black conjure women in their weathered cabins along the Tombigbee, tell a different story. They say that on the memories of the oldest slaves their fathers knew there was one indelible imprint of an awful event-- a shower of stars over Alabama. Many an Alabamian to this day reckons dates from "the year the stars fell"-- though he and his neighbor frequently disagree as to what year of our Lord may be so designated. All are sure, however, that once upon a time, stars fell on Alabama, changing the land's destiny. What had been written in eternal symbols was thus erased-- an the region has existed ever since, unreal and fated, bound by a horoscope such as controls no other country.*

*Let those who scorn such irrationalities explain this state-that-is-another-land in ways they prefer. They may find causes economic and sociological quite as incredible as these fables and much less interesting. But few of those who know this ground and those who live on it will deny that the curious traveler will find his journey amply repaid here. The Congo is not more different from Massachusetts or Kansas or California. So I have chosen to write of Alabama not as a state which is part of a nation, but as a strange country in which I once lived and from which I have now returned.*

Carl Carmer spent 7 years teaching at the University of Alabama. During this time, he became fascinated by local history and folklore. His interests eventually led him to write this book, a fictional novel which many claim is based on fact.

What do you think about Carmer's explanation for the events?

Carmer loved "folk-say", or the talk and tales of ordinary people explaining their past. Folk-say often includes legends, like this one.

But perhaps there are other explanations for the night the stars fell.

## THE SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION

The scientists tell us that the Leonid Meteor Shower, which happens every year, just so happened to take place in a way which allowed us to fully appreciate its magnificence. Meteor showers occur when the Earth crosses the orbital path of a comet and encounters the dust particles and other solids that were dislodged when the comet's outer surface began to melt it as it neared the Sun.

This meteor shower is named for the constellation Leo (the Lion) and represents material left behind by comet Temple-Tuttle. Temple-Tuttle is a member of the class of comets known as periodic comets, meaning that they cross Earth's orbit on a regular,

predictable schedule. For Temple-Tuttle, this period is 33 years and its last visit was in the year 2000.

I remember going outside to watch the stars fall in November of 2000, and I bet that someone in your family remembers that night as well. When you go home tonight, ask your parents, grandparents, or relatives if they remember seeing any shooting stars in November 2000? Make sure to write down anything they tell you in your journal so you can share it with us tomorrow.

#### HOW THIS AFFECTS US NOW

You might be surprised to know that you saw a reminded of the night stars fell on Alabama on your way over here this morning. Does anyone know what that reminded might have been?

In 2002 the phrase "Stars Fell on Alabama" began to appear on license plates on Alabama license plates. When you leave today, take a look at the license plate on your mom's car and see for yourself. Now you have a story to tell to anyone who ever wonders why our license plates say "Stars Fell on Alabama".