



The Strange Cloud

Arizona Republic, March 26, 1967. The title of the article was, "The Cloud."

written by Dave Davies

Shortly before sunset Feb. 28, 1963, a strikingly beautiful and mysterious cloud swept northward across Arizona. Some who saw the cloud, estimated to be 30 miles across and 26 miles high, observed that it remained bright 28 minutes after the sun set. Others saw myriad colors in its vapor-like structure.

Within days more than 200 reports poured into the University of Arizona's Institute of Atmospheric Physics in answer to a request by Dr. James McDonald.

The celestial phenomenon left waves of publicity in its wake. Both *The Arizona Republic* and *The Phoenix Gazette* printed stories. *Science Magazine* included it in the April 19, 1963 and *LIFE* carried it in its June 11 edition of the same year.

None of the publications had the answer to what it was, not even Dr. McDonald.

"Tentatively," the Tucson atmospheric center's senior physicist said, "it may be regarded similar to a nacreous (iridescent) cloud. But its unusually great height and unusually low latitude, plus its remarkable shape, suggest that it was a cloud of previously unrecorded type. Many persons said it exhibited iridescence of the sort associated with the stratospheric nacreous clouds in the Arctic.

"It was above the limits of contrail formations," Dr. McDonald wrote in an article in the June 1963 issue of *Weatherwise*, "even those possibly made by a flight of the X-15." Besides, a check revealed there were no X-15 flights that day.

The cloud, then, has continued to baffle everyone in Arizona except 600 in churches in Phoenix, Mesa and Tucson. To them it was a physical manifestation of seven angels appearing near Sunset Mountain 40 miles northeast of Tucson to William Marion Branham, an Indiana-born Christian evangelist.

The purpose of the heavenly visitation, Mr. Branham's followers believe, was to tell him the time was ripe for him to reveal scriptural secrets locked in the book of Revelation for almost 2,000 years, and also to serve as a sign of the "soon-coming" of Jesus Christ to earth.

According to his followers the experience was nothing out of the ordinary to the man who was to die on Christmas Eve two years later. It was just one of many visitations, strange dreams, visions, miracles and powers of healing God bestowed upon him, they say.

Mr. Branham, according to what has been written about him and from personal accounts of those who knew him, was like a Biblical colossus who strode through the world wielding Moses' rod and wearing Elijah's mantle. They see in him a figure like John the Baptist rooting out sin and hypocrisy in the religious world and proclaiming the soon-return of Jesus.

Fred H. Sothman, a 52 year-old Canadian wheat farmer who moved to Tucson in 1962 to be closer to the religious leader, was one of two persons with Mr. Branham that day the cloud appeared. Sothmann's account:

"Reverend Branham and another brother, Gene Norman, and myself were well up into the mountains hunting javelina. I remember it was late in the afternoon, a clear warm day with not a cloud in the sky. The Three of us were spread out in different directions, perhaps about half a mile apart from each other.

Then all of a sudden I heard this tremendous blast like a jet plane breaking the sound barrier, only much louder. Many rocks began to roll down the mountain not far from me. I instinctively looked over in the direction of Brother Branham, but couldn't actually see him for he was behind a knoll. But just above him I saw this strange circular-shaped cloud rise into the air. It was kind of small at first, but the higher it rose the bigger it became."

Startled by the blast and the tumbling rocks, Southmann said he didn't grasp the significance of the cloud then.

"But when Brother Branham and I got together a few minutes later," he said, "he told me that seven angels appeared to him and had instructed him to go home (to Jeffersonville, Ind.) and reveal the meaning of the seven seals of Revelation (chapters 6 through 8)

Sothmann was not surprised by Mr. Branham's explanation.

"Everyone who knew Brother Branham knew that he had these experiences all the time," Sothmann said, "So neither I nor Gene Norman doubted him for a minute."

The following account in Mr. Branham's own recollection of the experience as told by one of his biographers:

"Reverend Branham bent over to pick a few sand burrs from his trouser legs and as he did so a mighty blast came out of the south, rocking the mountains so that the boulders rolled down the slopes. For a moment he was fearful that some hunter had shot him, he was so shocked by it all. Then there came in reality seven might angels like a (inverted) pyramid or the letter V swooping toward him with the speed of light. he seemed caught up in them, and with their awful thunder. Then a voice cried, "Go back East." He knew it was time to go back to Jeffersonville and preach the seven seals and reveal the unwritten mysteries of the thunders in the Book of Revelation."

Within days Mr. Branham returned to Jefferson where in the Branham Tabernacle he expounded for seven nights on the meaning of the seals. he explained to his congregation his interpretation of who were the riders of the red, the white, the black and the pale horses and of the meaning of the great plagues and judgments of the last three seals, relating everything to history and modern times.

His congregation here and abroad listened and believed, because they see in him a man whose powers exceed those of ordinary men, the last of the major prophets before the Second Coming. He is to them the messenger, or angel, promised in the Book of Malachi (chapter 4, verses 5 and 6) to the Laodicean Church Age, the last of seven which began with the Apostle Paul and including Martin Luther and John Wesley.

The Figure 7 was important in Mr. Branham's life. he was 7 years old, for example, when he received the word, according to his biographers. And seven was the number of a series of continuous visions he received in June 1933.

The first visions were the invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini and the dictator's death at the hands of his own people, the rise of Hitler and the holocaust that followed it and the rise of the three isms and how the first two (Nazism and fascism) would be swallowed up by the third-- "Watch Russia, watch Russia," a voice admonished him, "Keep your eye on the King of the North." (Also, Rome will play an important part.)

The fourth vision as the great advance in science and technology after World War II and both the fifth and sixth concerned women, the part they have played in the moral decay of the United States and then the rise of a beautiful but cruel woman to power (He assumes part of Harlot Woman of Rev. 17) either by religious means or perhaps by popular vote dominated by women.

"The seventh and last vision was wherein I heard a most terrible explosion. As I turned to look I saw nothing but debris, craters and smoke over the land of America."

Using these seven visions as a base, Mr. Branham predicted Christ would return to earth around 1977 to claim his bride, that is, the elect or hard core of Christian believers.

"I am convinced," the Rev. Roy Carpenter, pastor of the Pentecostal Church of Mesa, said, "that William Branham is that Elijah-like spirit which Malachi prophesied would precede the Second Coming of the Lord." But as church history has borne out, there will only be a relatively few people who will receive God's message and God's messenger.

"In the days of Noah, we are told that only eight people in the whole world were saved at the time of the flood, even though Noah preached about the flood for 120 years. In Sodom, only Lot and his two daughters were saved. And when the other six messengers, Paul, Irenias, Martin, Columbus, Luther and Wesley--were giving forth their messages, comparatively few in numbers believed them."

Sothmann, one of the three trustees of the William Branham Evangelistic Association, recalled that after the incident of the cloud he was on another hunting trip with Mr. Branham near Sunset Mountain. On that occasion, he said, Mr. Branham predicted judgment in the form of three earthquakes would strike the West Coast. And he mentioned Alaska, Seattle and Los Angeles. On Good Friday of the same year (1964) Anchorage was hit and on Good Friday a year later a milder earthquake shook Seattle.

"Fishes and sharks will be swimming over where we are standing," Mr. Branham is quoted as saying when later he and Sothmann visited Los Angeles. A large portion of California, Mr. Branham predicted would slip into the sea.

Who was this man who while he was predicting doom was offering salvation? Was he a charlatan, an egomaniac, a glory seeker or just a well-meaning preacher out of step with the established doctrines of the day? Or was he a man set apart?

His followers, of course, believe the last and use the incidents which occurred during his life as the basis for their belief.

His life which ended on Dec. 24, 1965, when a drunken driver killed him on a Texas highway, began in Indiana. When he was a boy of 7 on his father's farm in Kentucky a sudden strong wind rustled the leaves of the tree against which was resting. Out of the wind, which was

localized in his vicinity, a voice spoke. "Never drink, smoke or defile your body in any way," the voice admonished, "for I have work for you to do when you get older."

Later Mr. Branham told his followers that in his early years he tried to take a drink or smoke a cigarette but each time he was repelled by the recurrence of the wind. In June 1933 while he was baptizing a large group in the Ohio River near Jeffersonville "a blazing, whirling star appeared out of the heavens with the sound of rushing wind" and a voice spoke to him saying "as John the Baptist was the forerunner of the First Coming of Christ, so your message is the forerunner of the Second Coming of Christ."

It was after that Mr. Branham secluded himself in a lonely cabin in Kentucky praying until he was exhausted. It was then he said an angel appeared--who was said to minister beside him all his life--and granted him two powers, that of being able to heal and that of being able to read men's hearts and thoughts. Both powers, his followers say, were demonstrated throughout the world.

He was an easy man to talk to, his followers say, but often secluded in prayer, usually in behalf of someone who had asked him to, for as long as eight hours at a time. His experiences with his divinity were private, however. The 4,000 persons at the river in 1933, for example, heard the wind but none except him heard the voice.

The Rev. Pearry Green, pastor of the 400-member Tucson Tabernacle, points out that in the scriptures clouds have always played a prominent role, and they are either identified with the presence of God or the presence of heavenly witnesses, in other words, angels.

"God Himself appeared in the form of a pillar of cloud when He led the Israelites out of Egypt into Canaan," he said. "And God came down from heaven in a cloud and talked with Moses. God also spoke of times; Jesus was taken up into heaven in Clouds at His times; Jesus was taken up into heaven in clouds at His ascension; and the Bible says that when Jesus comes again, He'll come in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.