

**The Sky Fell on Alabama**

**By Bill Russo**

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This report is true and fully verifiable. No names have been changed. It is a tale mostly about a woman who to her great regret, and not of her own doing, became perhaps the most unique individual in the history of the world. Parts of the narrative have been dramatized for effect.

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### **Tuesday, November 30 1954: Sylacauga, Alabama**

It started out like any other weekday for Ann Hodges. She fixed breakfast for herself and her husband. After Eugene had left to go to his job as a utility worker for the electric company, she began her housework.

After doing the breakfast dishes, she started her regular housecleaning routine while listening to her favorite programs on her new console radio. It was the latest 1954 model. Much more than just a receiver, it was a decorative mahogany floor model complete with a three speed record player. The set was nearly as big as a four drawer dresser.

In 1954, television was becoming the primary night-time family entertainment medium, but the daylight hours still belonged to radio. Soap Operas filled the airwaves from right after breakfast until dinnertime. At half past noon, like millions of other American women, Ann Hodges listened to 'The Romance of Helen Trent', followed 15 minutes later by 'Our Gal Sunday'.

Shortly after "Sunday" signed off the air, Mrs. Hodges began feeling unwell. She rubbed her forehead hoping a rapidly worsening headache would go away. Dizziness overcame her and forced her to lie down on the living-room couch. Reclining on her soft cushions and warmed by a pretty quilt, she felt a little better. She became drowsy and fell asleep.

After a brief nap, she stirred at 1:45. She knew the exact time because “The Guiding Light” had just begun on the CBS Radio Network. As the announcer said, ‘brought to you by Ivory Soap, the most famous soap in the world’, she happened to look out her window at the marquee of the Comet Drive-in Movie Theater across the street from her house. The theater had a neon sign that showed a comet streaking toward the heavens. The featured movies were advertised underneath the speeding comet.

“War of the Worlds,” she laughed. “That film came out last year and it’s just now getting to the Comet. I heard the movie was kind of silly but the radio show was the scariest thing I ever heard.”

Ann remembered back to Halloween Night 15 years before. She had just turned 19 and was among thousands, maybe millions, of radio listeners who were badly frightened when the CBS Radio Network started broadcasting reports that the Martians had invaded earth.

It turned out that Orson Welles had pranked a nationwide audience with a ‘Trick or Treat’ broadcast of a play based on the book, The War of the Worlds. She remembered how frightened she was until the end of the broadcast when Welles admitted that the program was just his version of putting on a white sheet and going ‘boo’! She smiled at the memory and then fell back to sleep.

Outside, the temperature was 66 degrees, about average for November in the communities around the Birmingham area. The sky was clear. One year after the end of the ‘Korean Conflict’, business in the United States was very good. The Down Jones Average of 30 Industrials hit a new high of 364.

Jimmy Tate Tucker of the Birmingham & Chattanooga Investment firm had left his office early, after celebrating the closing of a deal to handle the nearly one billion dollar portfolio of the South’s largest transportation conglomerate. It was just one of many plums that he had secured for the firm in 1954, by far the company’s most successful year.

After an hour’s drive he was back home in Sylacauga where he had promised to pick up his wife and take her on a two week vacation to Boston and New York.

They would board the Crescent City Special in Birmingham and arrive at the Pennsylvania Station in 23 hours. The plans were to have dinner in their roomette, share a bottle or two of fine wine, a romantic interlude, and then drift off to sleep to the gentle rocking of the train.

Jimmy Tate's plan was about to be changed. As he drove by the Comet Drive-In Theater on Odin's Mill Road, he saw a bright, reddish light streaking through the afternoon sky like a Roman candle trailing smoke. It looked like it was coming straight for him. He pulled hard on the steering wheel and crashed into the sign advertising the drive-in's double feature - "War of the Worlds" starring Gene Barry and "It Came From Outer Space".

The thing did not hit his vehicle; instead, it passed overhead and with a ferocious, thunderous boom, crashed through the roof of a white-frame house across the street from the Comet Drive-In.

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An explosion with a deafening rumble jarred Ann Hodges from her nap. Her eyes were open but she was unable to react to what happened next.

The ceiling above her head disintegrated, as a searing hot object the size of a softball broke through it a blazing speed. It smashed into her beautiful new radio splitting it in two and then bounced off the wreckage and flew at her.

The thing flew across her quilt, slashing it like a hot knife in butter. It struck her left hip, leaving a sephia bruise almost as big as a cat. It also bruised her left hand. She was in shock from being struck by the falling object and at the same time, she was afraid that she had been fatally injured.

Jimmy Tate Tucker and a few neighbors quickly broke down the front door and found Mrs. Hodges in a dazed and uncommunicative state.

An ambulance had been dispatched after a neighbor telephoned the police. The attendants rushed the woman to the hospital where it was determined that amazingly, her injuries were limited to a very bad bruise.

She was treated by Doctor Moody Jacobs, a young physician from nearby Decatur, who was just a year removed from medical school.

Young as he was Doctor Moody Jacobs did enter the record books of the medical profession however, for he was the first medical man to treat a person who was struck by something from outer space.

And as for Mrs. Ann Hodges, she became the first and only person in the history of the world to be struck by a meteor.

Investigators were able to determine not only that the object was a meteor but also they were even able to identify the odd shaped asteroid it came from.



Had this space rock streaked across the sky in the 2000s it would have been photographed by owners of Androids and iPads. Tweeted, and Facebooked, it would be seen by millions within minutes.

As it was, word of mouth was sufficient to draw hundreds of people to the neighborhood. Friends, neighbors, gawkers, and strangers were traipsing all through the home to get a peek at the damage as well as the meteor.

When Mr. Hodges returned from work after being notified of the incident by telephone he quickly shooed out all of the unwelcome spectators, except for Jimmy Tate Tucker, whose car had been wrecked when he crashed into the Drive-In sign.

“It was like a fireball in the sky, Mr. Hodges,” Jimmy Tate told him. “It looked like an arc from a gigantic welding machine. I thought it was going to hit me. I swerved my car to get out of the way and crashed into the Drive-In. Then I saw the fireball hit your roof. There was a tremendous explosion and a massive brown cloud of dust, debris, and smoke.”

“Well what were they saying about Communists and such?” Hodges asked.

“Oh you know, it’s that cold war thing. People are thinking they are seeing Communists under bushes and behind trash cans all over the country. Anytime anything happens, there’s a large group of people who are certain that the ‘Reds’ are behind it.”

“Yes, I guess that’s so,” Hodges allowed, “and I also heard that some people thought that a plane had crashed. I’m going to the hospital now to check on my wife, I’ll drop you at your house on the way.”

By supertime Mrs. Hodges story was on all of the radio newscasts. Many of the fledgling TV stations didn’t have a local newscast until 11 p.m., by then the whole country had gotten the story from the radio networks.

Experts from universities were interviewed by the score. The consensus was that Mrs. Hodges was unique. No one in human history had ever been struck by a space rock. It was especially odd because most meteorites that manage to get



through the atmosphere in solid form, strike Earth's vast, uncharted remote spaces, or fall into the ocean.

An astronomer from Florida State College opined that among the billions of humans and pre-humans that have lived on earth, Mrs. Hodges is the only one who has ever been struck by an object from outer space. "You have a better chance of getting hit by a tornado, a bolt of lightning, and a hurricane all at the same time," he said.

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I've told you that Mrs. Hodges survived and her physical damage was not great. But what about the space rock? What happened to that heavy black chunk of unearthly stone?

When Gene Hodges got back to his house after making sure his wife was okay, he was met by the Police Chief of Sylacauga who said, "I'm sorry Eugene, but I have to confiscate the rock."

"Sheriff that rock fell through our roof and it could have killed my wife. I think it belongs to us. I'm not giving it up!"

"Listen to me Eugene. I have to take that rock. I got orders."

"What are you talking about? You're the sheriff. Who gives you orders?"

"The Air Force," said the sheriff.

"The Air Force?"

"Yup. They heard about the space rock on Paul Harvey's newscast on the radio and they want it. Seems like they think that the Commies might be behind this. They have to examine the rock.

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Eugene drove back to the hospital the next morning and was informed that he could take his wife home that afternoon. She was still tired and fell asleep as soon as she was in her own home, where quick repairs to the roof and ceiling had already been completed.

When she awoke at six p.m. Eugene had dinner ready; Chicken soup with cheese and crackers. While they ate he gave her a rundown of what had happened while she slept.

“The phone was ringing off the hook. A lot of the calls were from neighbors and such to make sure you are okay. But there were other calls from people wanting to buy the rock.”

“You mean it’s worth something Eugene?”

“Shoot Ann, it’s the only space rock in all of history that ever hit somebody! That makes it worth plenty!”

“Well how much were they offering Eugene?”

“At first nobody got into exact figures, but one old boy said he was prepared to pay in the thousands. Then when I told that to the next guy that called, he said he’d go as high as five thousand!”

“Thousands? Oh Eugene. You know, with big money like that we could buy our own house instead of renting this place. Call that guy back and make the deal. We don’t want the stinking thing anyway. It wrecked our new radio and it almost killed me.”

“There’s a problem Ann. I don’t have the rock. The sheriff took it.”

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At a secret location, possibly in Nevada, government geologists examined the space rock which later came to be called the "Hodges Meteorite". They spent weeks and finally rendered the verdict that the 8.5 pound object was indeed a visitor from outer space and had never been in the hands of, or had any connection with, the Communists.

After finally decreeing that the rock was indeed an E.T., the government spent many months deciding what to do with it. Thanks to people like Jimmy Tate Tucker and others who took up their cause, public opinion was staunchly in favor of giving the rock to the Hodges.

"I feel like the meteorite is mine," Mrs. Hodges said, "I think God intended it for me. After all, it hit me!"

Ultimately after more than a year, the Government returned the space rock to the Hodges. As Eugene and Ann were preparing to test the pricing waters, something bad happened.

"That meteorite rightfully belongs to me and I'm going to court to get it."

This new stumbling block came in the form of recently widowed Birdie Gay, their landlord. She hired a lawyer and was prepared to go to court after being assured by her attorney that since the meteorite fell on her property, she was the lawful owner. In a written statement, Birdie Gay said, "The meteorite fell through my roof and onto my floor. I own it."



Mrs. Hodges on the day after the space rock nearly killed her. The rock is being held in the left hand of the Police Chief.

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The weight of the law was on Birdie Gay's side, but not the weight of public opinion. Once again Jimmy Tate Tucker and the newspapermen of Alabama went to bat for her. Faced with reams of bad publicity and probably more than one obscene phone call, the widow Gay agreed to sell the meteorite to Eugene and Ann for \$500.

The deal was struck and the Hodges soon began to put out feelers to buyers. Sadly, Eugene and Ann found out that the attention span of the American public is weeks, months at most. It had been more than a year since the sensational story

broke and the teeming masses had moved on. Forgotten almost completely was the story of the meteor and the only woman in the history of the world who was hit by a space rock and lived to tell about it.

Plagued by bouts of depression, Ann finally told Eugene to give the rock away. "Get rid of it Eugene. We're only using it for a doorstop anyway and it's so depressing."

Reluctantly, he turned the meteorite over to the Alabama Museum of Natural History in 1956 and got a thank you and zero dollars for it. The rock is on display there, to this very day.

As for Ann, she began to spiral downwards. She suffered a nervous breakdown, was divorced in 1964, and died eight years later of kidney failure. She was 52 years old.

Eugene who survived into the 2000s well past the age of 80, said that he believed the meteorite crash and the long delay by the government before it was released took its toll on his ex-wife. He said "She never did recover".

The director of the museum agreed, saying that she was not at ease with the publicity and attention that the event caused. Sadness as well as physical ills and mental anguish clouded the last 18 years of her life.

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As you have read, things went very badly for poor Mrs. Ann Hodges. Had this unfortunate calamity happened in the 2000s she probably would have made millions from interviews, books, and sales of movie rights. Instead, her life was ruined and cut short far ahead of its time.

Despite those facts, this story does have a very happy ending. No not for Ann Hodges, or Eugene, or Birdie Gay or even Jimmy Tate Tucker.

It has a happy ending for someone you haven't met yet. At the time of the story, he was a 60 year old African American share cropper with a bent back and an empty wallet.

On December first, 1954, Julius McKinney's gnarled hands were wrapped around the handles of a rusted plow being dragged along by a crusty old mule that looked like he'd been in the traces almost as long as his master.

It was a clear, sunny morning with the temperature close about 60, so Julius had decided to make use of the day collecting firewood and turning over some of the soil on the few ragged acres that he had control of. Sharecropping was one of the only ways for poor Southern farmers both black and white, to make a living.

The Sharecropping era was nearly at an end in the 1950s. Mr. McKinney knew that before long, some corporation would come along and buy up all the land in the area and that would end it for him and the other farmers. He had no idea of what he'd do then, or where he'd live.

Instead of ideas and knowledge gained from books or schooling, the only real education Julius had was behind a plow or picking cotton – and yet he was innately an intelligent, taciturn man. He knew when to speak and when to hold his tongue. It was a skill that had gotten him more respect in the community at large than most African Americans had in the segregated South of the 1950s.

When he spotted a bizarre hunk of black rock about the size of a baseball, just lying on top of the dirt his mule was about to turn; he picked it up, examined it, put it in his lunch sack and finished out his work for the day.

During the afternoon, his usually empty field had been visited by policemen, firefighters, Air Force people, and a throng of curious local residents.

Asking Julius if he had seen anything, he asked them instead, "Just what are you fellas looking for?"

“We’re not sure,” replied one of the firefighters. “There might have been a plane crash around here. I guess you heard that yesterday afternoon something fell through the roof at Mr. Hodges’ house. We’re just trying to find something to explain the mysterious sight in the sky.”

“If you see anything at all out of the ordinary you call us immediately,” ordered one of the Air Force officers. Handing Julius a business card, he said gruffly, “You call me right away if you spot anything. You understand me?”

“Yes sir Captain, I’ll call you directly,” said Julius, “then whatever I see, you can come and take it away like you took the rock that fell on Mrs. Hodges. Is that right sir?”

“Exactly. You make sure you do it now. Hear?”

“Sir, yes Sir!” said Julius with an internal smile on his face that Mr. Air Force couldn’t have seen if he had been wearing 14 pairs of glasses all at once.

“I can’t tell them what I found, cause if I do they will take it, Mama,” said Julius to his wife at supper that night. “I got a notion that this thing is worth some money. Maybe a big chunk of it.”

“When I was over at the mercantile this afternoon, I did hear talk that Mr. Hodges was offered five thousand dollars for his rock,” she reported.

“He won’t get a penny Mama, cause they took his rock. They’ll take ours too, if they find out about it.”

Julius didn’t actually have any friends among the white community, but there was one man he regularly spoke with on a friendly first name basis – Jim Dave Halpin, the postman.

At the mail box, the next afternoon he shared his predicament with Jim Dave and Halpin proved to be a great friend after all, by contacting a lawyer who arranged a secret sale of the meteorite to the Smithsonian Institute.

Julius and his wife lived a long, happy life and never revealed how much money they got for the space rock. With a smile Julius would tell close friends, "I got enough. Enough to give my friend Jim Dave a bit of a reward for helping me."

"I also had enough to pay cash for a house and to buy a new car. There was also some left over to put in the bank," he said with his internal smile now fully displayed on the outside.

The sad part, as it relates to Ann Hodges, is that the rock that Julius found was only 3.5 pounds. The one that almost killed her was more than twice as big and certainly would have brought in at least \$5,000 if she had been able to sell when the market was eager for it.

After both pieces were safely housed in their respective museums, the scientists studied them and confirmed that Julius' smaller rock was a part of the Hodges meteorite that apparently split off as it entered the earth's atmosphere.

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#### **post script:**

Among the hundreds of people who saw the meteor streak across the Alabama sky that last day of November in 1954 was five year old Billy Field. Sixty years later his memory of the incident was still as vivid as the afternoon it happened.

In a 2014 interview he stated:

"I was standing in the back yard with my mother, who was at the clothesline. I remember this object shooting across the sky with a white trail that I pointed out to my mother. There was a loud boom and black smoke."



Perhaps inspired by that seminal moment, Billy Field grew up to be a film producer. He researched the meteor story and interviewed the Hodges, Mr. McKinney, and other people.

He put together a script and sold it to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Today, it sits moldering in some forgotten corner of an office somewhere in Hollywood gathering dust. Just one more script that was purchased but never made it to step two - casting and filming.

There may never be a movie made of the Hodges Meteorite, but Billy Fields, now in his late 60s, hopes there is.

Either way, Field, who is retired in the city of Tuscaloosa, says

"It was the biggest thing to literally ever hit the town of Sylacauga, Alabama."

The end

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