

THE VIEWING OF HALLEY'S COMET: 1910 - 1986
A PERSONAL REMEMBRANCE BY JULIA SQUIRES FENDERSON
AS TOLD TO CHARLES ARTERBURN

My father, Walter P. Squires, took me to view Halley's comet in 1910 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, when I was five years old. It was a brief episode in my life of 81 years, long since forgotten until just recently. I was amazed at the vividness of my recollection. From out of the far distant reaches of inner space came this little vignette complete with sights and sounds and smells so familiar, like a long-lost friend. Memory is such a marvel!

We traveled that day in a canopied carriage with one seat, pulled by dad's favorite little horse named, "Prince". He was young and feisty, and would climb a telephone pole if not kept under rein, dad would say with admiring humor. As Prince strained and throttled in his harness up the New Mexico hills, the odor of horse and leather commingled in my nose, as pungent now as then!

Soon we arrived in the courtyard of a Catholic mission, and priests in their distinctive robes came out to greet us. We were invited inside and seated at a large plank table. My father was treated to a special grape wine from the priests' own vineyard. I was given lemonade. While the men talked, I was allowed to explore the grounds. The sweet and delicate fragrance of flowers filled the cool of evening air.

After dark, we went out to view the comet. Though the priests had a telescope, I could clearly see it, a large ball of light with an almost arm's length of streaming tail. For a moment I was frightened. As I was lifted to the telescope I reached out for dad's hand and murmured, "Is it coming down here?" Dad quickly reassured me that we were safe and had nothing to fear.

The opportunity to see Halley's comet for a second time was made possible by two very kind gentlemen: Charles Arterburn and Duane Faw. Duane knew of my keen

interest in the comet and also that I had previously seen it. His advance preparation made me feel that I had a personal observatory at my disposal. For several nights in a row Duane carefully checked the sky for optimal visibility at just the right time, and twice he called to report the comet was obscured by clouds. On Tuesday, April 15, came the good news! The curtain was up, and Halley's was on stage!

Charles and I together with camera and binoculars made off for Malibu. Duane and Lucile Faw's beautiful home sits high atop the Santa Monica mountains by the ocean, and surveys a spectacular view of the night sky with twinkling lights of coastal cities nestled below. As we sped along in our "horseless carriage" I amused myself with thoughts of the contrast between then and now. To think that this four-cylindereed mechanical contrivance made on the other side of the world in Japan and exploding along on fossil fuel was still measured in "horsepower"!

The narrow street was dark and seemed to wind forever upward through the canyon. A gray fox streaked across our path, then blended into the night. Finally we leveled off and swinging around to the south, found ourselves on Duane and Lucile's doorstep.

We were greeted with open arms, and quickly discovered more friendly faces! Pat, Sandy, Nick, Duane and Lucile, Charles and I trailed back and forth to the patio where Duane had assembled a mounted telescope and binoculars. We watched our steps with care; below the edge of the unguarded patio was a sheer precipice!

I felt an exhilaration as I stepped to the eyepiece, as though I were looking back into time. I had prepared myself for this moment. Again and again I had recalled my memory of that day in Albuquerque, 76 years ago. For weeks I had collected and read everything I could find about the comet. I was even treated to a viewing of the Halley's comet special at Santa Monica College Planetarium, where Jonathan Hodge, the Director, was so very generous in providing guidance and reference materials.

Now as I squinted at the small circle of dimly lit sky, the blazing orb with

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with its long train that I remembered wasn't there! Instead, a fuzzy, faint white ball about the size of the moon hung there barely in view, as if with the slightest puff it would dissolve away!

As I stared at that soft blur of light, surrounded by the starry dome, a feeling of reverence came over me. Out there, I felt, was the past and the future, and Halley's comet was just one little snowflake of a reminder, a shining beacon in our sky that comes around every 76 years to invite our pause, to lift our gaze, and renew within us feelings of wonder and appreciation. The immensity and beauty of it drew back curtains on a familiar but ever more fascinating vista of mind. Stars, planets, galaxies, friendly faces, exciting travels, an eternity of surprises, and at its very heart--joyous surprise--the biggest heart of all and in all, the smiling face of our Creator Father. I felt once again the comforting reassurance that there really is nothing throughout the wide universe to fear.

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