

Space Rocket hits Hamlet, Indiana - 1954

All Richard Jensen wanted to do was create a little excitement in the sleepy town of Hamlet. It turned out that he created a little more excitement than he expected; boy, did he ever.

It was October of 1954 and Richard was a high school student who worked part-time at the local Shell Oil gas station. Because he liked mechanics and building things, he came up with an idea of building a fake space rocket. Every night, after the gas station had closed, he secretly worked on his project. He started with a 6-foot long aluminum tube, installed old car parts and a gas line to give the appearance of jet propulsion, added push rods and old car radio tubes to make it appear as if it were radio-controlled, and fashioned air intakes and fins to the exterior. To add even more realism, he heated and darkened the outside of the rocket to make it look like it had actually traveled through space.

The completed rocket was transported late at night to the local golf course. Richard used a tire iron to beat the side of a tree, impaled chunks of aluminum into the tree trunk, dug a trench in the ground, and placed the rocket at the end of the trench. The stage was set with the rocket appearing to strike the tree before hitting the ground.

Upon discovering the rocket the next day, Clem Hall, the owner of the Hamlet Golf Course, loaded it into the trunk of his car and started to show it to everyone in town. It wasn't long before someone suggested to Clem that he might want to contact the local Kingsbury Ordnance Plant to determine whether or not the rocket was dangerous. Officials at the ordnance plant gave instructions that the rocket was not to be touched, and they further said that they would send a team of technicians to make an inspection. Clem hurriedly returned the rocket to the location on the golf course where it had been found.

Kingsbury Ordnance Plant officials arrived to inspect and take pictures of the rocket and then released the pictures and story to the news media. News stories immediately began to appear, not only in newspapers across Indiana, but also around the Midwest, and then around the country. The 5th Army Headquarters, located in Chicago, reprimanded the ordnance plant officials for releasing the pictures and story of the rocket, because they thought it might be some sort of secret missile. The FBI was called in to make an investigation and the rocket was sent to the U.S. Air Force for evaluation.

New stories about the rocket continued to multiply. A Chicago Daily News reporter, who just happened to be vacationing at the nearby Town of Koontz Lake when the rocket was discovered, stated that he had seen it fly over the lake the previous night heading in the direction of Hamlet. Mrs. Ossler, a resident of Hamlet, said that her TV went blank at about 10:00 p.m. on the night the rocket landed. And every time a new story about the rocket came out in the paper, the trench made by its impact became deeper and deeper.

Richard nervously followed all the new stories, thought for sure that he would go to jail if the truth came out, and was too afraid to admit that he was the one who built the rocket. It wasn't long, however, before an FBI agent showed up at the Shell Station to question him. It seemed that a late-night gas station customer, who had accidentally discovered Richard working on the rocket some time before had reported that fact to officials. The FBI agent questioned Richard and obtained his full confession. To his relief, the FBI agent told Richard that he was not in trouble and that he had done a pretty good job of placing Hamlet on the map. The following February, officials from the Air Force returned to Hamlet and gave Richard two shoe boxes filled with the pieces of his rocket. Every piece had been placed into a labeled envelope, indicating that they had all been individually and meticulously inspected.

It was almost exactly five years later, in October of 1959 that a small meteorite struck a house in Hamlet. Ironically, the house belonged to Clem Hall, the owner of the Hamlet Golf Course. It took quite some time for many people in town to be convinced that the meteorite was real, because Richard now worked only a block away from Clem's house, at the local lumber yard, and they thought for sure that it was another one of his pranks. The meteorite was, in fact, determined to be real and, to this day, it is still on display at the Field Museum in Chicago.

Richard has never taken up the game of golf. Written by Dewey Christoph Dodgeville, Wi., formerly of Hamlet.

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