

Hear UR Season Three
 Episode 06
 (The Vision in the Sky)

By
 Lillian Hutton, An Nguyen, Justin Pimentel, and William Benoit

SFX: HEAVY WINDS WITH WAVES

ACTOR (DRAMATIC READING)

"On the entire north sky, as far as the angle or bison, was lifted the blue waters of Lake Ontario – while reflecting from her bosom could be seen the mountains, hills, valleys, bays and rivers on the Canada shore inland for miles."

MUSIC BED IN - MYSTERIOUS AND AWE-INSPIRING BUT CALM

"The coast could be plainly seen over a stretch of fifty miles, and so perfect at one time that the forests could readily be distinguished. The reader can form some idea of its grandeur by knowing that a country separated from Rochester by a lake seventy to one hundred miles in width, was – as if suddenly, by the great hands of its Creator – painted upon the heavens so plain as to be seen from a standing-point one hundred miles distant.

MUSIC BUILDS - DRAMATIC, SWELLING

"The lake looked as though it had, by a great tidal wave...

SFX: WAVE OF WATER RUSHING IN AND HITTING THE SHORE

"...rolled upon Rochester, and covered one entire half of the city, as no building could be seen north of Main street, or any land between the city and the lake."

SFX FADE OUT - MUSIC CONTINUES

HOST

My name is An Nguyen and this is Hear UR:
 Rochester Retold, Episode 6: The Vision in the Sky.

MUSIC FADES OUT

The story you heard at the start of the episode was a first-hand account, published in the Rochester Express almost exactly 150 years ago, in April of 1871. It was a sunny and cloudless Sunday, and Rochesterians at the top of Mt. Hope Cemetery weren't met with their usual vistas of the city. Instead, they saw the Canadian shore in

detail, as though Lake Ontario had washed over all of Rochester north of Main St. and our Canadian neighbors to the north had gotten much closer.

To get a sense of how amazing this was, the Canadian shoreline is usually 400 feet *below* the horizon, so completely impossible to see normally because of the Earth's curvature.

HOST

To see whether there was more we were missing, we spoke to Michael Nighan, a contributor to the Talker of the Town, a local history blog. Nighan wrote an article on the mirage in 2018, one of the most thorough descriptions of the mirage we came across.

During his retirement, Michael has been keeping busy writing history articles in his free time, which is how he came across the story of the mirage.

MICHAEL NIGHAN

I just stumbled over it a few years ago. I got involved with the friends of the Mount Hope Cemetery group and I was digging through some of their old newsletters, and there was a picture of this tower called the Fandango-- it's been gone for many many years in Mount Hope. And I got digging into that and ran across the story about The Mirage in 1871 and then found that it had been--even though oddly enough it got very little coverage in Rochester -- it got a big coverage from at least one of the national periodicals.

MUSIC BED IN: HEATHER BY MIGRATION (SOFT!!)

Really what exists about the Mirage itself-- the fata morgana -- is a couple of lines. And I said in a couple of publications, that's it...

No one ever expanded on it even though the claim is: thousands of people saw this. Well we can't find where anybody wrote about it, we can't find anything other than two quick blurbs in the local papers about it and the national publication and then it just disappears--it falls off the scope. Nobody followed up on it. I'm surprised, there should be more information there for something that unusual that just isn't it. And many times in history things get lost because there's much more important history occurring at the same time.

HOST

Though the site of the mirage today shares little resemblance to the Mt. Hope of the 17th century, we could still imagine how awestruck observers must have been to see such a changed landscape.

MUSIC BED IN - MYSTERIOUS AND QUIET

News of the remarkable phenomenon spread around the town, allegedly drawing crowds of up to thousands to the cemetery. Despite the size of the reported crowd and the grandeur of the mirage...

No other eyewitness accounts - besides the one you heard - exist.

And even that is uncertain - no name is attached to the story, and the original version published in the Rochester Express is lost to time. All that remains are republished accounts in various small papers all across the country, sometimes published a month later, sometimes years later than the original event.

And now, 150 years later, no alternate sources remain to corroborate our eyewitness' florid version of events.

Which leaves us to wonder - what actually happened on that clear, spring day in 1871?

MUSIC BED OUT - SUDDEN STOP (LIKE A PAUSE IN THE FLOW)

Of course, when we heard about this, the first thing we wanted to do was to go see the place where it happened - the site of the Fandango, an observation tower that once stood on the highest hill of the cemetery.

SFX: [Footsteps crunch the leaves below. Cars pass in the distant background. The wind howls.]

TRANSCRIBED AUDIO OF MT. HOPE TRIP

COLE

So, I think this is the hill.

AN

This one?

COLE

Yeah

LILLIAN

I think it's the same

AN

Me too- yeah, I think it's the exact same. It's just cause there's trees blocking it so we can't see it.

LILLIAN

Shall we?

AN

We shall.

COLE

I want to see if you could see any part of the city from over here

LILLIAN

Part of what?

COLE

Any part of the city

LILLIAN

Oh any part of literally--

COLE

Just literally anything.. It seems like no

LILLIAN

I can't even see the other side of Mt. Hope.

COLE

I mean you can't--yeah no.

HOST

At this point it was clear that we could not see anything but trees from where we were standing. So, our Researcher, Lilly, decided to climb a nearby tree to get a better vantage point.

LILLIAN

So, I'm up here in this tree right now.

JUSTIN

What can you see?

LILLIAN

I can see a lot more I definitely think if you were on top of this tree which I'd imagine is almost the top of the tower you could definitely see...

JUSTIN

A lot more right?

LILLIAN

A lot more

HOST

The mirage soon disappeared, but the Fandango endured, at least for a few more years. Although there are references to remains of the Fandango still being visible in one of the cemetery's ravines, in reality all traces have long since vanished.

The Fandango's site on the heights of Mount Hope is now simply a flat, grassy, open space bordered by the graves of the Bowens, the Simpsons, the Redfields, and perhaps most appropriately, that of Gideon Cobb, who gave his name to the only taller hill in the city.

With the help of these descriptions from Michael's article, we had a general idea of where to set out.

LILLIAN

He also said it was here , so it should be right around here but-

AN

It should be.

COLE

Makes sense, I mean- my guess is this is where the tower would've been

LILLIAN

Yeah.

HOST

Could something like that actually happen? Like within science and reason? Or was this just some hallucination or hoax magnified by time and the media?

RESEARCHER

So mirages are real, explainable phenomena.

HOST

This is Lillian Hutton, our lead researcher.

MUSIC BED IN: ICE TUMBLER BY VERMOUTH - NO STRINGS VERSION

During normal atmospheric conditions, light doesn't bend towards the earth and instead heads straight, either hitting the ground or going off into space, and it becomes obvious that there is no way for that light to reach anyone who is below the horizon. However, if light were to curve, or say, be refracted down towards the earth, then it can travel much further around Earth's curvature, and reach even the eyes of people below the horizon.

Close your eyes and imagine, it's a bright spring day over Lake Ontario.

SFX: Birds and calm water

Warmer air from the shores moves over the cold lake, and the air layer closest to the water's surface is cooled.

Light bends into colder air, so it will bend away from the warm air at the top and towards the cold air at the bottom. Thus, light is bent downwards, towards the earth, and travels in a curved path, around the round Earth.

Thus, on April 16, 1871, the light that reflected off the shore of Canada could have been bent downwards, traveling across the lake, all the way to the top of an observation tower on the highest hill in Mt. Hope Cemetery.

So, this means that the mirage could have theoretically happened, but we still don't definitively know that it did, or what impact it had on the people who saw it.

As Michael points out, historical researchers are often left putting together a puzzle with multiple missing pieces.

It is important to note that this event took place during a tumultuous time in American history, and at a point locally that centered around industrial success and modernization in Rochester, so perhaps the mirage did get lost in the abundance of newsworthy events at the time, as Michael suggests.

MUSIC BED OUT

To get at this, we talked with Dr. Camden Burd, Assistant Professor of History at Eastern Illinois University and expert on 19th-century Rochester.

CAMDEN BURD

"Really from the late 1830s to the early 20th century, which perhaps in your research you found, I believe is a bit of a blind spot in the history of Rochester, NY."

"Most city histories tend to focus on industrial pasts, and so I think much of nineteenth century Rochester history tends to get completely demolished once you get to the age of Kodak. I think that completely reset the meaning of the

city and for many people today it is still sort of a fixture of how they relate to the past, right. You have pre-Kodak and you have post-Kodak."

MUSIC BED IN: ICE TUMBLER BY VERMOUTH - NO STRINGS

"I think Kodak's ability to transform not only the city itself, but also to transform the way people construe reality and construct memory. If you have visual documentation, it becomes stronger evidence than other forms of senses."

HOST

Perhaps if Kodak had popularized camera's just a bit earlier, even just a decade earlier, we would have had more of a record of the mirage, and the event would have made a more permanent mark.

CAMDEN BURD

"It's just sort of an interesting history, that is this moment of weird climactic nuance, meets this quick moment in time and all of a sudden it's gone... It's this ephemeral vision from the top of Mt. Hope."

INTERVIEWER

How do you think the mirage impacted Rochester society?

CAMDEN BURD

"I think it would have led to this larger culture of curiosity--the second half of the nineteenth century, it's an era of tremendous change."

MUSIC BED OUT

HOST

At the start of our research, we had considered: what if the mirage never actually happened? What if it was all just a hoax? When we posed this question to Michael:

MICHAEL NIGHAN

"I don't think it's possible it's a complete fake--is it possible that it's exaggerated which might explain why the local newspapers didn't give them much coverage."

HOST

While our hope for new information didn't materialize, there was still more to be said about the mirage, not through history, but through historical fiction.

PRINCE

"My name is Prince Gomovilas. I am a playwright who's also working in television."

HOST

In 2018, the LA-based playwright wrote a play commissioned by the Geva Theater Center, titled *Panorama*. It takes place in Rochester in 1871, with the mirage a focal point of the play.

PRINCE

"I use this event as a way of looking at the lives of several people in Rochester, including a black cemetery groundskeeper, a new employee who's Chinese, a queer woman who's the talk of the town, and ultimately the play is really about the importance of storytelling, and preserving history, especially history that's outside the mainstream."

AN

When the play was commissioned as part of the Geva Theater's "Rochester Stories" program, Prince's only directive was to dig into and write about Rochester history.

MUSIC BED IN: HEATHER BY MIGRATION

PRINCE

"As you know, there's not a lot of information about the event, I had to dig deeper into Rochester[...]And since this event happened just six years after the Civil War, to me, I knew that had to be a part of it somehow."

"And that's when I really started to uncover, you know what I call these hidden histories and uncover particularly war stories that I never knew about."

"But it also gets me thinking about how these pieces of history, that- if not for- so yeah, I think that ultimately, the Rochester mirage served as the foundation, but wasn't the whole story. The documentation is completely gone forever. You know what I mean?"

HOST

One of the reasons we wanted to talk to Prince was because we were grappling with a moment in history that was largely inaccessible to us, because of time, and because of lost or never existent records. So we wondered..*

What is history anyway? How do you represent a time that is so far removed, and even if you have

primary sources, would that even be a good representation of what it was really like?

Maybe fiction is a better way to represent history.

MUSIC BED OUT

PRINCE

"I think what fiction can do, is capture the spirit, and emotion, and the feeling of the time, in ways that a dry, kind of historical textbook necessarily can't. So, if you look at the one article on the Rochester mirage, it's just the recounting of facts, and it says nothing to the way that it could have affected people's understanding of reality, you know because when you're faced with something that seems so out of the ordinary, how does that affect you?"

"Uh-When you were asking about capturing history, and capturing history through fiction, you know there's a part in the play towards the end where Althea is talking about the editor of the Rochester Daily Union, and she talks about how there is no objective history, like all history and all news is subjective. But she says that it's not only that - it's not just in the way that you tell a story or tell history or tell news, but it's also what news or what history or what stories choose to be told, what people choose to tell about it. That actually probably has more influence than the way you tell a story, it's what story you choose to tell."

SFX: SOUNDS CALLING TO MIND A STAGE? APPLAUSE? THE VOICES SHOULD SOUND PROJECTED FROM ON STAGE.

ALTHEA (PLAY CHARACTER)

The news, he said, is about being objective, about dispassionately reporting the facts.

KETCH (PLAY CHARACTER)

Oh, Althea.

ALTHEA (PLAY CHARACTER)

You know what I said to him?

MASON (PLAY CHARACTER)

What?

ALTHEA (PLAY CHARACTER)

I said: "Ha!"

KETCH and MASON laugh.

ALTHEA (PLAY CHARACTER)

I stood before him like a priest behind a pulpit, like I was delivering the most glorious homily a congregation had ever heard! I declared: "What you choose to report, sir, the facts you elect to print, the stories you decide to tell: there's no objectivity in that at all! What we know as history isn't made by looking at what is and telling people about it. History is made by *choosing* what to look at. And because you have the power of choice, because you have the power of directing people's attention, history is shaped through *your* eyes. And is that not the very definition of the *subjective*?!"

SFX: SOUND SIGNALING END OF PLAY SCENE (APPLAUSE IN THEATER)

RESEARCHER

In his book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot discusses the process of historical production.

Trouillot posits that silences are created at four points during historical production: when the instance occurred, when information about it is archived, when the narratives about it are created, and when its retrospective significance is determined.

In the case of the mirage, "silences" were created when the mirage first appeared in the sky, when the event was documented in newspapers, when this information was retrieved to retell the story, and now as we create this podcast and we try to retroactively determine the mirage's significance to us. "Silences" are inevitable, yet it is how we address them that is important.

MUSIC BED IN: ICE TUMBLER BY VERMOUTH WITH STRINGS VERSION

Just like with the mirage, each episode in this season grapples with the silences surrounding the events. In our first episode about the Milk Bureau, the mystery of what was making children sick in Rochester eventually led to debates about Germ theory and infection. Raw milk was a central cause to many of the sicknesses, but this knowledge is left out of earlier histories.

RESEARCHER

For our prohibition and POW episodes, the locations are known, but no traces of them remain. How can such significant parts of the city's history completely vanish from the physical realm?

And the Lady in White, an urban myth, is treated as just a fun ghost story to tell on Halloween, but in disregarding its historical significance we overlook the cultural history of family trauma and social anxiety in Cold War-Era middle class Rochester.

And lastly, Rochester's abandoned subway system, and the graffiti scene that flourishes there, reminds some of a more prosperous time, while others see it as a new beginning. How can a marginal, overlooked space serve both as a symbol of failure and rebirth?

These are all just snippets of a much bigger story, one that weaves throughout generations, through war and triumph, with well-known voices and hidden histories. We have chosen to highlight these stories, but there are hundreds more that could have taken their place.

CAMDEN

"So, some people might see the "Great Mirage" as this weird moment, this odd trajectory in an otherwise like long history of a city, but I think it gives us insight into the lived experiences of those individuals who had the opportunity to see this, who talked about it to their friends, their family members-- who tried to make meaning out of this because they likely didn't understand the atmospheric science behind what was happening."

MUSIC BED OUT: FADING AWAY SLOWLY UNTIL END OF CAMDEN'S QUOTE

"How do people of the past understand their world? In that sense, I don't know that there is such a thing as uncommon history because at the end of the day we're trying to explore and understand the past and all of its varied meanings-- that's historical empathy, right?"

HOST

As we've been thinking about what this episode and this season as a whole represents, something we've thought about is that this podcast is our alternative narrative.

It doesn't seek to be comprehensive, it doesn't seek to be anything more than just snapshots from history that provide - almost a retelling of Rochester and Monroe County - fully embracing the fact that what we're doing is simply what we choose to do.

Like Althea says, it's not objective at all, it's very subjective - it's the stories that we find

interesting, the ones that call to us or resonate with us, and how we see these events

And many of these stories have already faced this same subjective curation of history, except that the first time, they were lost, forgotten, or silenced.

For Prince, these stories can tell us more than we think about the past.

PRINCE

"I like to think of history as a hologram. So you know how if you break a holographic plate apart, every piece of the holographic plate will actually contain the whole hologram. So I think that every piece of history, every small piece of history, could potentially tell us far more than we think about-about history."

HOST

Each story in our season is only an infinitesimal sliver of the past, but perhaps through listening to each story, we can access just a bit more of our lost history. Like our mirage, history only lingers in the air for a second, and then it's gone forever, except in the minds of those who choose to remember and those who choose to tell the story - the fragmented holograms of the past.

MUSIC BED IN: UPLIFTING, CALM BEAT

NARRATOR

HEAR UR is a podcast created by students at the University of Rochester. This episode was produced by An Nguyen, Lilly Hutton, Justin Pimentel, and Cole Benoit. Our engineer was Cole Benoit. The music used on this episode was performed by Cole Case, Migration, and Vermouth. We'd also like to thank Michael Nighan, Camden Burd, and Prince Gomolvilas for their interviews. HEAR UR is created using Faders, a collaborative online audio production workstation. It offers browser-based audio recording and editing, all within an easy-to-use interface - all for free! Go check it out at Faders dot I O. The coordinating producer for this season of HearUR is Celia Konowe. The executive producers are Thomas Fleischman and Stephen Roessner. And, be sure to check out the other episodes of HearUR Season Four: Rochester Retold at HearUR.com

MUSIC BED OUT