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New York's 1880 Close Encounter of the Third Kind

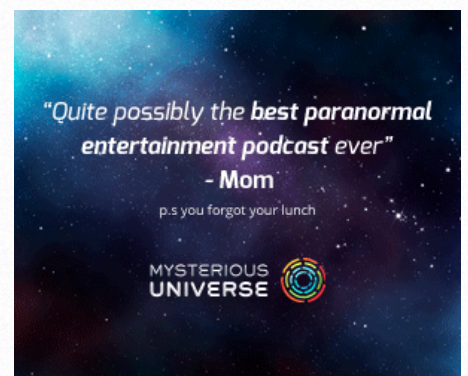
By [Ken Summers](#) on January 31, 2015 @moonspenders



In the remote hills of New York State, there may have been an unreported Close Encounter of the Third Kind (CEIII).^{*} This may seem unremarkable until it's revealed that the event occurred in the latter half of the 19th Century. You read that correctly; this particular incident is said to have happened around 1880—*more than half a century before Roswell and the sci-fi hysteria of little green (or grey) men.*

Passed down through the generations by their younger brother as an unusual family tale, the story is set in the remote hills near Cameron, New York (then known as Cameron Mills), in April of 1880. Two sisters named Elizabeth and Eva were on a long hike to their district's one-room school house one day, accompanied by a few other children. But as the group approached a small bridge crossing a small stream, they noticed something peculiar on the opposite side. Clustered from the bridge down the embankment to the creek were a small group of what they called "little people". The beings motioned for the children to continue across the bridge, but "...their parents had cautioned them to wary of strangers" so instead, the children ran home as fast as they could.

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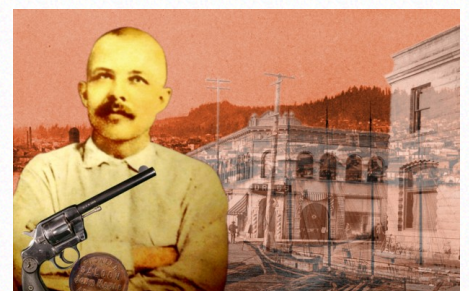
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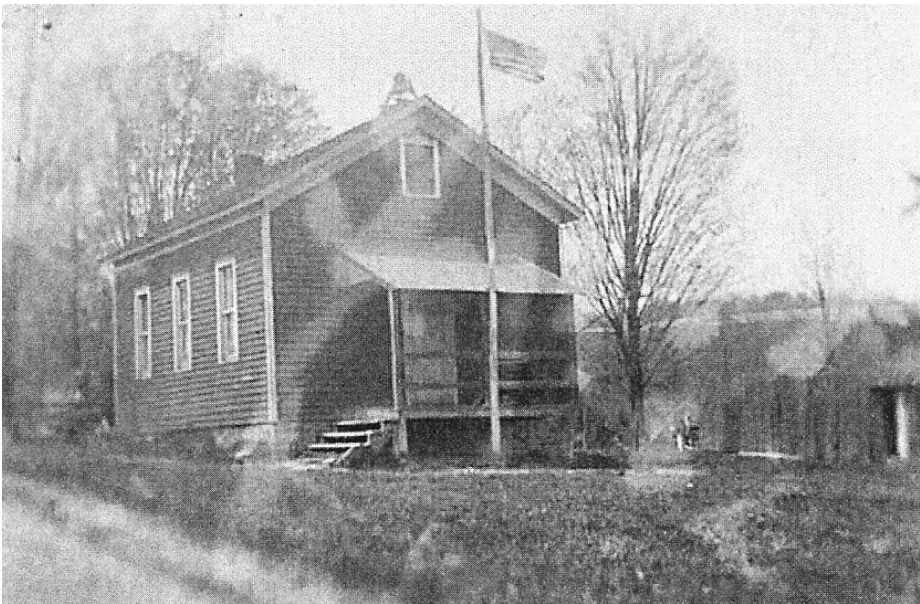
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Ken Summers | February 2, 2015

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A typical 19th century one-room schoolhouse.

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How the children described these beings is very unusual, indeed. They were said to be “small, skinny, and oddly colored” in a greyish tone. They wore skin-tight, metallically shiny clothing (alien Lycra®?) and possessed abnormally long, spindly fingers. In short, they seem to echo the classic modern description of [alien greys](#) found in stories of both Roswell and the Betty & Barney Hill abduction. Yet this story is said to predate even the earliest science fiction stories mentioning grey beings.

Somehow, the children managed to keep this strange tale to themselves, though it’s possible that their parents cautioned them against telling anyone about what they saw for fear of seeming crazy. But these two girls did share the encounter with their younger brother who passed it down through the generations to modern times. One of the descendants then told the story to *Syracuse News Times* reporter [Cheryl Costa](#) who wrote about it last year.

Not content with this minimal information, I decided to do some research.



A postcard depiction of downtown Woodhull, New York, (south of Cameron) as it appeared in the



New York's 1880 Close Encounter of the Third Kind



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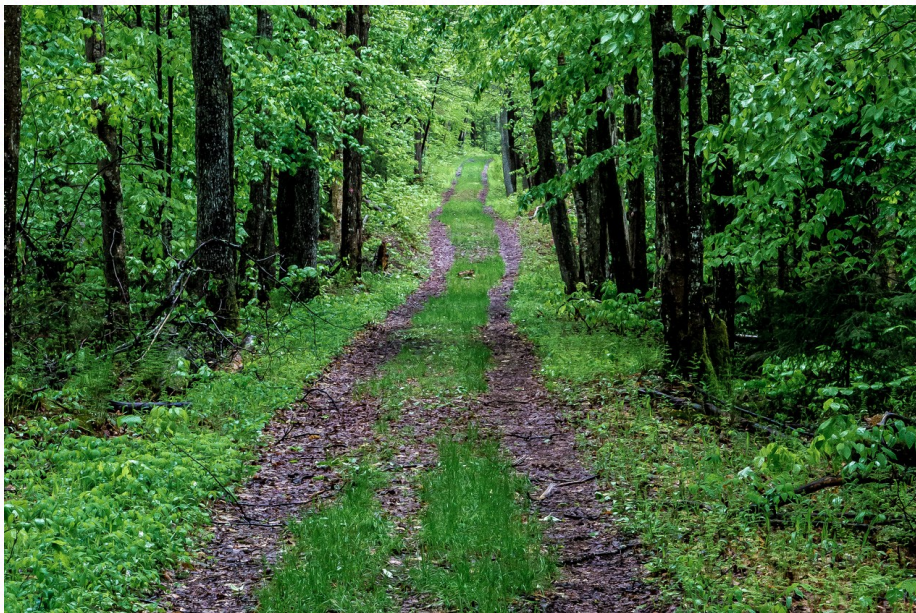


late 1800s.

According to records taken by the US Census Bureau in 1880, only two families in all of Steuben County had daughters named Elizabeth and Eva at the time of the incident. Elizabeth and Eva Coburn, aged 9 and 14 years respectively, lived near Wheeler (about 4 miles north of Bath, NY); Elizabeth (20) and Eva (16) Collins lived near the tiny hamlet of Woodhull southeast of Cameron by approximately 10 miles. Given their distances from Cameron, it's more likely that Elizabeth and Eva

Collins may have been the women involved (though Elizabeth died in 1897 and was a post office clerk, not a teacher, as was her daughter Bessie). They also had a younger brother named John who was 13 at the time of the incident. Given the number of hills and streams in the area south of Cameron, it's quite feasible for someone to take a long walk to the nearest schoolhouse crossing at least one bridge.

I spoke with Cheryl by email in an attempt to gather more information and mentioned what I had found. She stated that it occurred "between 1880 and 1884" (even though [a second article pinpointed it to April 1880](#)). According to her, she uses aliases in her articles, adding, "I discussed your letter with [the] family member who I interviewed and at her request, I respectfully ask that you not try and identify the girls further." Both girls went on to become schoolteachers in New York State, but no further information or responses were given.



Old dirt roads like this one south of Cameron show how isolated parts of this area still are.

Whether I accidentally identified the girls correctly or came too close to people indirectly involved is anyone's guess; as for why after at least 130 years identifying the exact location and names of the two girls is still verboten is an even more puzzling enigma. Surely, a century is long enough time for the identities of these women to safe from ridicule. While "grandma saw an alien" might not be someone's idea of the best claim to fame, the sheer lack of detail and specifics detracts from the story on a damaging level. If someone were to come forward with an exact name, exact location, and any additional pertinent information, it would elevate the incident from an amusing family folk tale to a verifiable incident. Worthy of a [MUFON](#) file this story at face value is not.

Exactly what happened, if anything, in Steuben County that spring day? Without further explanation and more details, no one might ever know. But we can always hope that someone who knows something—or relatives of another such witness—might be brave enough not to care what someone might say about one of their late relatives and at least release some facts which can be historically verified to give a bit of credence to their family tale.

**More specifically, a CEIII Subtype E—An entity is observed, but no UFOs are seen and no UFO activity has been reported in the area at that time—according to [Ted Bloecher's addition to the Hynek Classification System](#).*



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Ken Summers

Ken Summers is a historical researcher, author of the book *Queer Hauntings*, and contributor/resident ghost geek for Who Forted? who started poking around northeast Ohio for spooks just before GHI was born. After too much paradrama, he went solo with his website [Moonspenders](#), leaving the super-serious "investigating" to the most staunch believers. Ken finds himself lost somewhere between "too smart to believe everything" and optimistic curiosity mixed with wishful thinking. He's had a handful of strange experiences that certainly fall under the category of "unexplained". Secretly, he wants to marry a werewolf and build a fully-functioning TARDIS.

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