

Gaia's Sabre Dance

By Pete Clark

A series of crushing rumbles and claps, akin to the deafening noise of a rock band in an enclosed area, drove me from a sound sleep to instant alertness. Darkness skittered in and out of my bedroom as a gigantic strobe flashed through the panes of my windows. After the ringing in my ears subsided I could hear the rain futilely trying to beat its way into my attic and knew the world still existed. I drifted back to sleep while rueing the loss of the ability to sleep through anything, such as when a house in Shoshoni, two blocks from our home, blew up one night due to a gas leak. The lightning strike that night, on Lansing Street, split a forty-year-old cottonwood tree down the middle, half of it falling into the street.

During the 1960's I paid a visit to an older couple who were friends. The husband worked for Public Service Company and had been transferred from Grand Junction to Denver. After we were caught up and I was ready to leave a thunderstorm came up. The lady would not allow me to leave until the thunderstorm ended. I insisted it would be safe for me to leave. Then she told me her story:

One afternoon when they were living in Grand Junction she was cooking dinner on an electric stove when a thunderstorm began. She ignored the weather and continued with her chores until lightning struck the house and the stove exploded with her standing next to it. She was not seriously injured but the incident left her in terror of thunder and lightning. I stayed until the storm was over.

A Tension Rig is a machine designed to pull the conductors of a power transmission line, under construction, through the travelers, which are large pulleys, and create the sag in the wire so it has enough length not to break due to contraction in extreme cold, nor hang too low due to expansion in intense heat. On a construction job west of Casper, Wyoming in the early 1970's an operator was mounting his Tension Rig and had one foot on the ground and one foot on the rig when lightning struck a structure a few miles down the line. The conductors were energized and high voltage sped to the Tension Rig at a rate just below the speed of light. The arc knocked the man's body fifteen feet. He never knew what hit him.

Watching prairie thunderstorms at night from a higher elevation is beautiful, awe inspiring and can be a bit unnerving. Clouds seem to compete with each other to see who can do the best Sabre Dance with their in-cloud, cloud-to-cloud, and cloud-to-ground jagged streaks of white hot light. When the hot atmospheric molecules cool and crash into each other as they fill the temporary vacuum created by the lightning bolt, their self-congratulatory, thunderous applause is created.