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GROUND ZERO*

by WILLIAM R. NEWCOTT

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One lightning bolt and one 65-foot sycamore tree make a convincing argument against taking refuge under branches during a thunderstorm. Considered by experts one of the best pictures ever made of a lightning strike, the image on the following page was taken in 1984 by Johnny Autery of Dixons Mills, Alabama, from his pickup truck.

A remarkable detail in the photograph is a pair of upward discharges: one from atop the sycamore to the left of the main bolt and the other reaching from the television antenna of the farmhouse at left. Such discharges occur only in the area of a downward stroke.



“That little bolt took out one of the family’s TV sets,” reports Autery. “I guess if the big one had hit there, a lot worse would’ve happened.”



Most trees survive direct hits with little damage as the current passes over their surface to the ground. After a decade, this sycamore still stands.

Golfers are prime targets for lightning—they tend to either stand in open grassy areas or huddle under trees. A scorched pattern on the fifth green at Phalen Park Golf Course in St. Paul, Minnesota (above), defined ground zero where four golfers were injured—one fatally—by a June 1991 strike.



When lightning tunnels into sandy soil, the heat often fuses it into the shape of the electricity's path. Called fulgurites after the Latin word for lightning, the formations can measure longer than 15 feet. This sample, from the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson, was dug up by a witness who saw lightning strike the ground in Arizona's Avra Valley.

THE EVENT

PETRIFIED LIGHTNING FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA

A PROJECT BY ALLAN MCCOLLUM

CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM
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