

Carlton Rhodes Interview

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Carlton “Sonny” Rhodes was a reporter with the Arkansas Gazette at the time of the Damascus missile explosion in September 1980. He is currently a reporter with the Arkansas Democrat Gazette and an Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. This time we interviewed Mr. Rhodes in person in Little Rock. He answered different questions, so we included both interviews.

Q What were the effects of the explosion on the people at the time?

A Well, I can't remember how long they were dislocated, but it definitely had an effect on dislocating. I think a lot of people were concerned about the effect on the environment and I got to thinking about this. Again, I will see if I can find this, I can't remember is long it was after that, but I kind of think it was the next spring where I did a story where I interviewed people who lived near it. This one woman showed me this leaf of a plant from her garden and it was about three times the size of a normal leaf. I mean, it was like some kind of a vegetable, I forgot what it was, but it was probably three times the size, so she was saying. They say there were no radioactive fallout, but this plant has never grown this big before.

Q Kind of brings up the question about what they did and didn't tell the truth about?

A Uh-huh. And I -- it would take some digging, it would be interesting to know what you can find in the official report. I just can't remember if there were any official findings released or not, or again, if there were any taken. You would think there would be concerns people have about nuclear contamination.

Q Do you have any new insight on the objections or the worries of people before or after the explosion?

A Well, I think they were, afterwards they were definitely much more skeptical with what the government was telling them about the dangers of living near a nuclear missile silo and again,

this one was completely destroyed and never rebuilt. You guys have probably done enough research to know that in the '80s during the Reagan administration they were dismantled. But until then the other 17 missiles were still there in kind of in a line in north central Arkansas from around Morrilton to near Searcy. But some folks were pretty nervous. Before then, I think they kind of just didn't think about them too much. They would see, the Air Force people outside, they would see trucks all the time, they just kind of got to where they didn't think about them.

Q Did they ever try to say it was anything other than a missile silo or did they just --

A They were pretty much mum. They never even acknowledged that there was a -- that it was a nuclear warhead there. They would just say these are just part of the national defense.

Q They never said it was a nuclear warhead? They just said "it?"

A Right, exactly. We found "it." They never even officially acknowledged it. I remember a reporter for AP, there was a big deal that went on on a Sunday morning, this happened on a Friday morning, and then on a Sunday morning there was this big deal where they, the military vehicles came out and there was a flatbed trailer and there was a lot of reporters there and I wasn't there that morning. But Steve Brewer with AP was there and they came through the gate out of Highway 65, he yelled "Is that the warhead?" And somebody just gave him a thumbs up, one of the Air Force people, but I've heard since then that they found the thing that night out there. So I don't know if that thing Sunday morning was just a ruse just for the sake of the TV cameras or what.

Q What is your opinion on the secrecy surrounding the stories of the weapons and nuclear waste?

A I can't see why they would be secretive about it at all. The people who most need to know about it, the Soviets, they have no doubt it is there, so who are they trying to fool? Why be so

secretive? Maybe it was, just like you said, for some sort of domestic threat or just somehow make the people living here feel more secure. The people at the time who were our real enemies, they knew it was there. They didn't have any doubt about it. Who were they trying to fool and why. Who were they trying to keep in the dark and why. Good questions to ask.

Q Kind of makes you wonder if they ever kept an eye on safety or just kept it hidden so no one would question their safety?

A Again, there was a tremendous potential for danger to the public, and yet, something like Damascus could happen. What happened at Damascus could happen, a guy was performing maintenance and granted, it was a big wrench that fell that punctured the gas tank, but you just think about how something like that, a guy dropping a tool can lead to something like that.

Makes you realize how tenuous our safety can be.

Q Would you say that it was improper planning or carelessness that a lot of the, for example, Rocky Flats could be in the worst possible place because of all the ways that it can spread to the public?

A I would say so. There are so many things to weigh, so many different considerations that I would say ultimately yes.

Q It's right beside a city and close to water and the movie tectonics place, everything that could go wrong is right there. It just doesn't make sense.

A Right, absolutely. It makes you think. I don't think any kind of concern about nuclear waste or anything having to do with nuclear energy or nuclear defense, any kind of concern is overblown. I don't think any kind of concern is too much. I think we need to just stop it.