

The Eclipse

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The Moment of Totality



Tracking Our Last Eclipse



BRIAN LANKER

An observer at Goldendale, Wash., watches the sun through binoculars covered with metal-coated plastic.

From any given point on earth, the frequency with which the moon will be seen to completely cover the sun is once every 360 years. That is to say, total eclipses of the sun don't come to your town very often. If you want to see one, it's possible almost every year, but you usually have to travel to some remote ocean. On February 26 a total eclipse was seen over the northwestern U.S. and northeastern Canada—the last such phenomenon scheduled for America until

the year 2017. Millions of people lined the “path of totality”—the 170-mile-wide arc that marked the passage of the moon's full shadow—to witness this greatest of celestial road shows. (The rest of the U.S. and Canada saw just a partial eclipse, which is like kissing your sister, only more dangerous.)

Cloudy skies obscured the event through most of Oregon and Washington, where the eclipse came ashore. In western Montana the clouds parted,



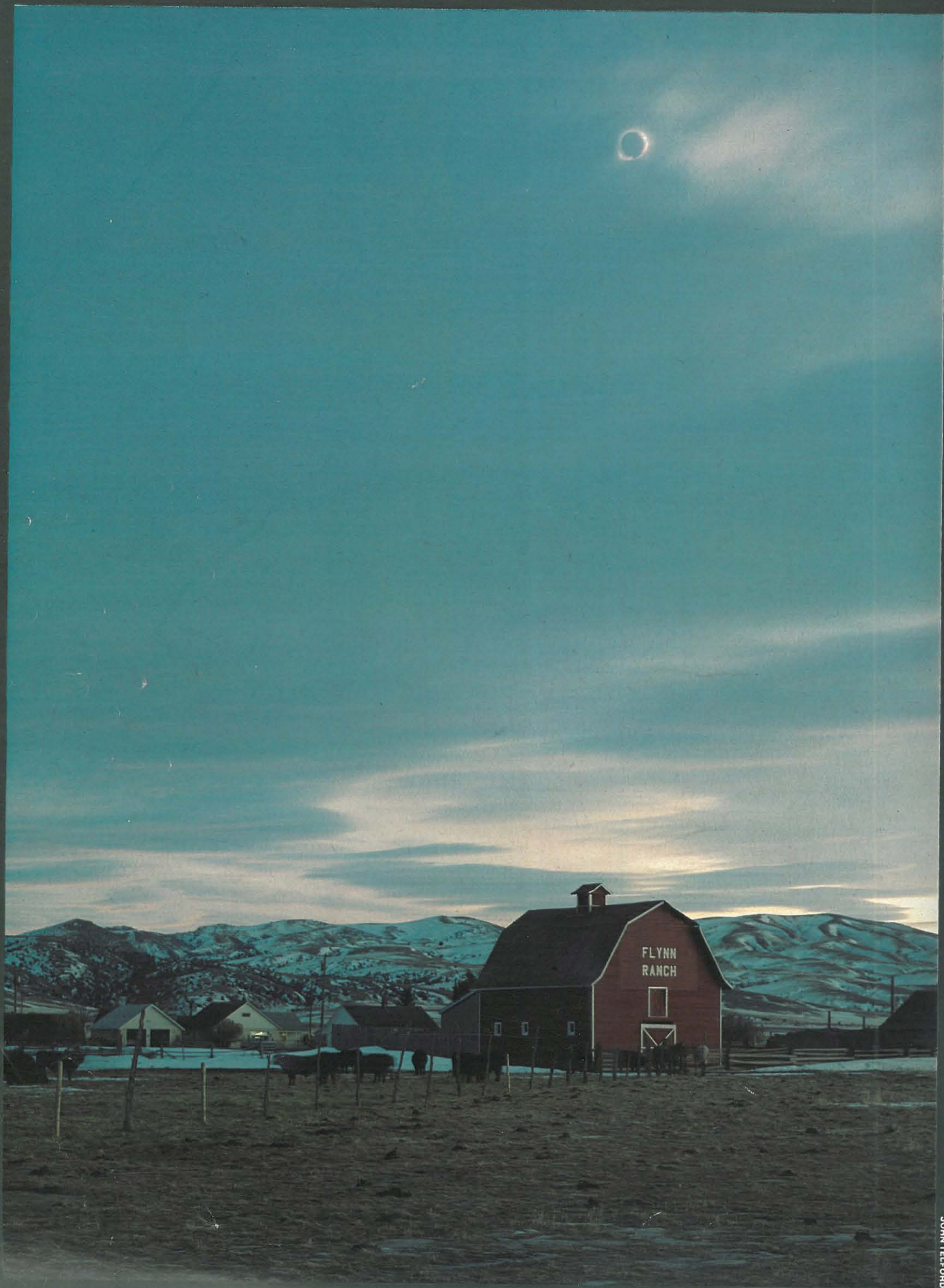
LOS ALAMOS SCIENTIFIC LABORATORY

thanks to the blessing chanted moments before totality by John Woodenlegs, a Cheyenne Indian. Seven miles above the North Dakota–Montana border, a plane-load of scientists rendezvoused with the speeding shadow; they watched coronal streamers arching from the sun (*above*). Traveling now at 1,800 mph, leaving oohs and aahs everywhere in its wake, the shadow traversed the Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Ontario and, bending northward, forded Hudson Bay

on its way to Baffin Island and the Arctic. Even here eclipse watchers lay in wait for their two minutes of dark ecstasy (*page 118*). Somewhere in Greenland the moon's shadow lifted from the earth and disappeared again into space.

Spread all along the path of totality, LIFE photographers did their best to document our last eclipse of the century. Their work is shown on these and the following pages, in geographical and chronological order.

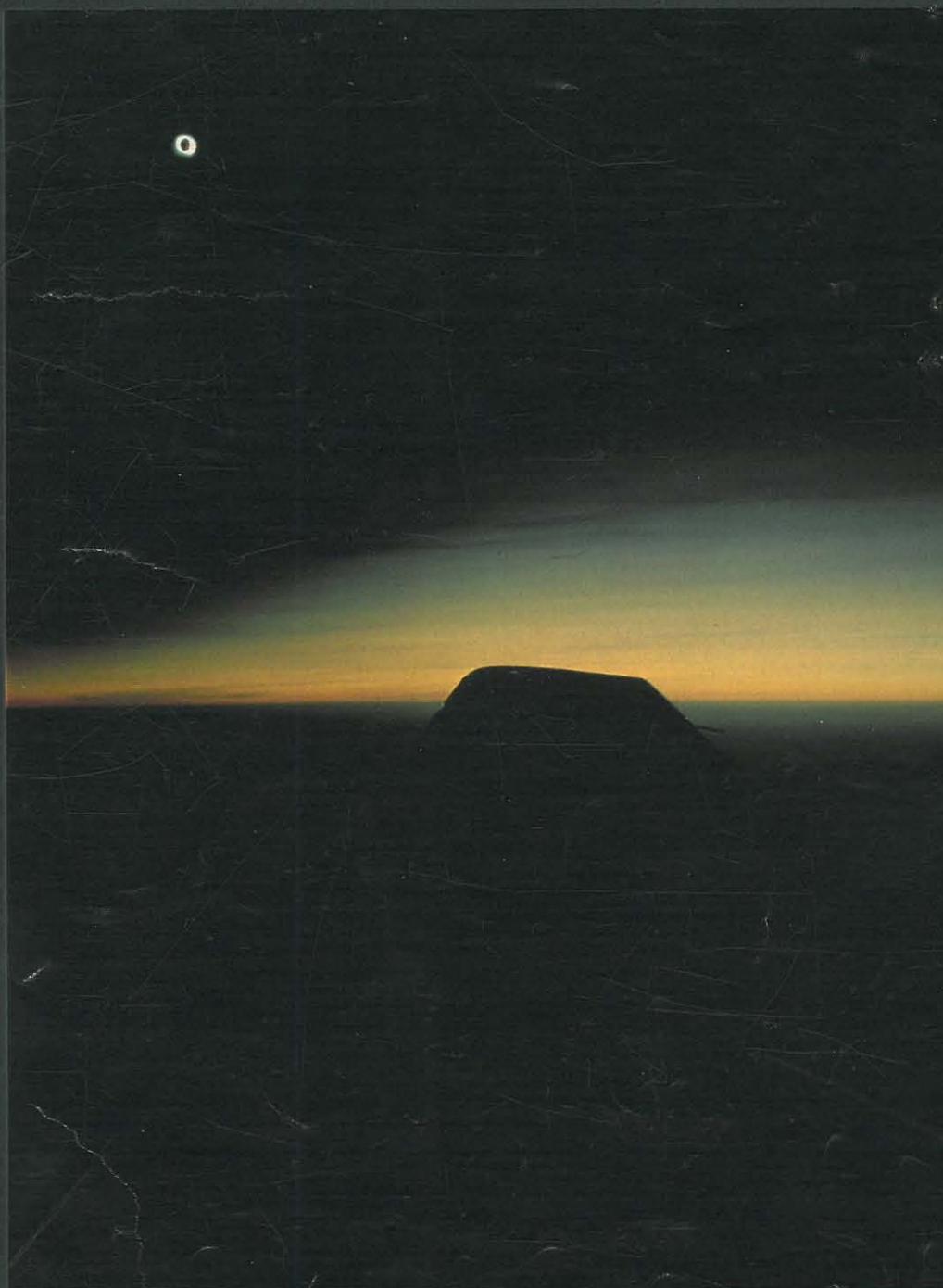
From an aircraft at 40,000 feet, white streamers could be seen shooting from the blocked sun. These are bands of electrically charged particles three million miles long.



NICHOLAS FOSTER KEN SHERMAN/SANDY SOEHNINGEN



Crouched on a balcony at the University of Brandon in Manitoba, Canada, Dr. Jay Pasachoff, an American astronomer, photographed the eclipse. The electronic equipment in the foreground recorded data for Pasachoff's studies of the solar corona, the white halo that becomes visible only at this peak moment.



At 9:25 a.m. night fell over a ranch near Townsend, Mont. (left). The eclipsed sun showed through thin clouds. At the end of totality the sky lit pink as at dawn, and for the second time that morning the ranch rooster crowed.

Seven thousand feet over central Manitoba, the horizon viewed from an airplane window showed a rich sunset at the height of the eclipse. At least 1,000 planes were in the air along the path of totality; some airports were so jammed that a number of eclipse viewers never got off the ground in time.





All the phases of the eclipse were recorded in this multiple-exposure photograph of the skyline of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Totality in southern Manitoba lasted for almost three minutes – longer than anywhere else in North America. Because Winnipeg was also supposed to have had the best chance of clear weather, this prairie city of half a million was packed with eclipse watchers. On the appointed day a cloud cover threatened constantly, but the visitors were not denied their spectacle.

HENRY GROSINSKY





At the edge of the Arctic Circle, above the steaming chimneys of the Eskimo settlement of Pagnirtung, the advancing moon takes its first bite from the sun. To reveal this early phase of the eclipse, a strong filter was used to darken the sky. (The sun is actually 10,000 times brighter than the landscape.) As this picture was taken, watchers in Winnipeg—far to the south and west—were experiencing totality.

MARVINE NEWMAN

A Last Look from Baffin Island

Pangnirtung—an overwhelmingly Eskimo community of 900 situated on the east coast of Baffin Island in Canada's Northwest Territories—took the eclipse in stride. As the picture on the previous page indicates, 45 minutes before totality there was nobody on the frozen fjord in front of the settlement to see that the event had already begun. Nobody, that is, but a couple of errant New Yorkers in rented snowsuits, standing beside their rented yellow-and-green tent, with their bank of mounted cameras pointed like popguns at the Arctic sun.

Perhaps the -30°F temperature had something to do with Pangnirtung's seeming lack of interest. Even the Inuit, as the Eskimos call themselves, stay indoors when it's cold. Still, if photographer Marvin Newman and I hadn't attracted the town's curiosity, Pangnirtung might not have noticed the eclipse until it got dark.

We came here because, according to our detailed map of the path of totality, Pangnirtung was the most distant point of human habitation that was still in the center of the path. (Our map didn't show anybody living in western Greenland, farther along the path, but I later learned that a few hardy denizens did see the eclipse.) It turns out that Pangnirtung has a regularly scheduled air service, but you have to match the schedule with the days when the airport is not closed by blizzards or ice fog or high winds. Our flight to Pang on the Friday before Monday's eclipse was the first to get in in two weeks.



The sun reappears after totality.

It is a strikingly beautiful place. About three miles wide and 20 miles long, Pangnirtung Fjord plunges like a narwhal's tusk into the flank of Baffin Island. Set on either side are blunt rock faces that rise 2,000 feet nearly straight up from the water. From any distance at all the settlement seems but a smidgen on this wild Arctic scene. When we arrived, the temperature was a windless 35 degrees below zero. Pearly smoke was rising from the tiny boxlike houses, and thin puffs of fog hung low on the fjord. The fading afternoon light had the effect of a hazy blue filter on the white landscape; it was as if Jules Verne had constructed a lunar fantasy out of Styrofoam. The only activity was that of the Inuit snowmobiles, which skittered back and forth through the town's two streets like water bugs. The Inuit still hunt and fish as they always have, but they amuse themselves by riding their snowmobiles and watching television. Yes, even in Pangnirtung—especially in Pangnirtung—it is possible to watch hour after hour of disco dance shows, thanks to a satellite hookup with a TV station in Toronto.

On Saturday and Sunday it stormed. In

the wind-whipped whiteout conditions the visibility for walking was near zero, let alone the visibility for photographing an eclipse. Worse than the prospect of missing the spectacle was the prospect of being stranded in Pang for days afterward. When we weren't watching disco, we watched big black ravens sail on the winds outside the lodge windows.

Yet Monday morning was bright, still and clear. The local outfitter helped us into our gear: on top of all the warm clothing we brought, we found we had to add still another layer. Stepping outside to our waiting snowmobile, squinting up nervously at the sun, we felt like gladiators, girded and on our way to the arena. It was 10:30 a.m., Pang time. Two hours to totality.

By the time we set up the cameras, the eclipse had begun. Through our protective filters we could see first a sliver, then a slice, then a whole chunk disappear from the sun. The cameras were functioning well in spite of the cold; now and then we warmed them in the tent. Fifteen minutes before totality, people began to come out onto the fjord in twos and threes. The sunlight gradually yielded. We worked faster, priming the cameras for the oncoming darkness. Now there were three dozen Inuit around the tent, talking and laughing quietly. In my haste I stepped on a puppy's tail and sent it yelping. Suddenly the snow turned purple, and when I looked up, the sky was dark and there it was. The corona blazed into view, and up and down the fjord there was a collective gasp.

Although there have been no clinical studies of the psychological impact of totality, one journal reports that "temporary hysteria" often occurs. Some people seem to react by "screaming their heads off." (The roar from the people who gathered on a hill at Goldendale, Wash. [left], could be heard two miles away.) In my case, I know that at some point I began to yell, because I heard myself, and that at another point I began to jump up and down, because afterward my toes were tingling. And I'm sure I didn't feel the temperature drop 10 degrees, as it did within the course of those few minutes, to -40° .

But the best was for last. At the end of totality there is an effect modestly known as "the diamond ring"—when the first sparkle of renewed sun breaks through the valleys on the lunar rim. What I saw was no "diamond ring"! It was a spot of true light that began as a pinpoint and continued to expand, like a magnificent surge of electricity, wider and brighter as it shot down through space, until it pierced my narrowed pupils and burst onto my retinas. Our last eclipse of the century did not leave me with eye damage, no. It left me with a temporarily frostbitten nose and a permanently dazzled brain.

—Jeff Wheelwright

A large crowd follows the eclipse from Observatory Hill in Goldendale, Wash.

