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The Solar Eclipse of 1869 as seen in Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky

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Introduction
The Solar Eclipse of August 7, 1869, was the first recorded total eclipse of the Sun to pass over the United States. What was the public reaction to this phenomenon? Following the eclipse through some of the Midwest down to Kentucky showed differing results, as it had got later in the day of viewing. This magnificent and rare event of the nineteenth century fortunately was well documented.

Methodology
I selected the towns to investigate in each state based on two factors: placement on the eclipse path and population. Searching for the words “[Town name] Eclipse of 1869” on the web narrowed the search to include helpful resources. Contacting historical societies, libraries and museums aided with the search. Local colleges were an additional resource. These institutions, sometimes, were able to provide information from primary sources, or referrals to sources that might be found elsewhere.

Results
Were people aware of the total solar eclipse ahead of time? Is there any documentation suggesting those aware were planning to see it?

Were there reports of people traveling to see the total eclipse of the Sun?

How did the average person view the eclipse with the naked eye?

Many reports found that some viewers had not been aware that a total eclipse would occur or had not planned to see it. Though newspapers were telling people to come watch. (Photo of news clip Greencastle Banner 08/05/1869)

Thousands of people traveled to see the total solar eclipse occur. The viewership ranged from scientists and professors to curious individuals from higher populated areas. (Photo taken on 08/07/1869)

The most common way that the average person viewed the partial phases of the solar eclipse was to dim it through (the ineffectual filter of) smoked glass. (Photo of new paper clip Evansville Journal 08/08/1869)

Short answer, yes. (Photo of news paper clip from Bloomington Daily Leader 08/10/1869)

Conclusion
The public’s overall response was that the 1869 total eclipse of the Sun was the most spectacular natural event to happen during the 19th century up to that time. Some were frightened, however, for most it was a positive experience. In a time when life was hard and monotonous, it was a beautiful and memorable sight to see.