

# AIRSHIPS OF THE 1890s

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It is a long time since FSR published anything on the extraordinary UFO Wave over the United States in the years 1896-97. Long ago we devoted a lot of space to those events, but today there must be a great many folk among our newer or younger readers who may not even have heard about the curious phenomenon of the great "airships", carrying very powerful headlights or searchlights, which seem to have visited large regions of the United States in the last century. We shall therefore probably find an opportunity to carry a few recapitulations in the coming months. Meanwhile, two things seem to be quite certain about the UFO Wave of 1896/97 over the U.S.A. *Firstly, there does not appear to have been a single report anywhere in America of a craft of 'saucer' or 'disc' shape during those years (although there had been a notable one at Denison, Texas, in January 1875). And secondly, not a single one of the numerous reports from Americans who claimed to have seen the occupants of landed machines in 1896/97 referred to "small beings" or "big heads", although it is true that at least one account (on the Hamilton ranch at Leroy, Texas), referred to extremely unpleasant-looking creatures. Otherwise the encounter accounts — and there appear to have been quite a number of them — seem to describe very "normal" sorts of individuals resembling Americans in size and features. And every account of the craft seen seems to indicate something large and of the shape of an airship, or what we were later to call a dirigible or a "zeppelin". So, whatever and whoever it was that was examining the United States in 1896/97, it does not seem that they were anything like the small critters with big heads who are plaguing us at present.* EDITOR

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THE sightings started in the Sacramento (California) area, in November of 1896. One of the very first sightings, recorded in the newspaper *Sacramento Bee* of November 18, shows a difference. Voices are heard, but speaking English.

Titled "*Voices in the Sky*", the paper's account states:

"Startled citizens last night living at points of the city along a rough diagonal line, yet far distant from each other, declare that they not only saw the phenomenon, but they also heard voices issuing from it in mid-air — not the whispering of angels, not the sepulchral mutterings of evil spirits, but the intelligible words and the merry laughter of humans.

"At those intervals where the glittering object, as if careless of its obligation to maintain a straightforward course, descended dangerously near the housetops, voices were heard in the sky saying:

*'Lift her up, quick! You are making directly for that steeple.'*

"Then the light in the sky would be seen obeying some mystic touch and ascending to a considerable height (sic), from which it would take up again its southwesterly course."

The article goes on to give some other details, and refers to a man purported to be the inventor of just such an airship, and planning to fly it from New York to California.

Another section of the story relates the tale of one Charles Lusk, cashier of the Central Electrical Street Railway Company, who saw the airship. He, too, heard a voice saying:

*"Well, we ought to get to San Francisco by tomorrow noon."*

Carmen of the tram lines said they saw the airship, which was balloon-shaped. They considered it a balloon.

A Mr. G.C. Snyder, in the same article, claimed the airship was definitely not a meteor.

"I assure you," he is reported to have said, "there is no joke about this matter, so far as I am concerned. Last evening, about ten minutes before 7 o'clock, I saw a light, which was above, approximately, Twenty-seventh and P Streets, sailing in a southwesterly direction. It rose and fell and swayed from right to left as if it were being propelled by some motor power. It was a white light, and was not a star or a meteor, I am certain of that."

That south-westerly direction, mentioned twice, would, of course, take the airship in the general direction of San Francisco.

Two days later the *Sacramento Bee* copied an article published originally in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about the airship reports gaining popular attention in

that city.

Asked the *Chronicle* story:

"Are there up in the sky four jolly and intrepid human travellers, paying their last respects to Mars, singing quartets to Venus, and saluting the planets generally within hailing distance, or are the people of Sacramento affected with the disease known in polite society as "illuminated staggers"?

"That is the question."

Was it, though? Observers of the modern UFO sightings will notice a somewhat nasty turn of events here. The story suggested that the Sacramento witnesses of the airship were drunk. A subtitle of the above article was: "Freemasonry of Liars, Suggests Prof. Davidson."

People who saw the mysterious lights in the sky were accused of drinking too much. Airships were thought to be kites, balloons, the planet Venus, the star Sirius, hoaxes, fakes, or, in another vein, ships from an advanced civilization on Mars.

The man who claimed they were from Mars said:

"In my investigations of this subject, it would seem that this visitor is from our neighboring planet Mars. We know, from the evidence of scientists and astronomers, that Mars is millions of years older than the Earth."

Elsewhere in his impassioned letter to the *Sacramento Bee*, he says:

"The speed of our Martian ships is very great, and can be regulated to the rapidity of a thousand miles a second."

Real heady stuff, to say the least. What was this aerial phenomenon that had folk talking for nearly a year, from California to Maine?

It was what modern observers would call "unidentified flying objects", or "UFOs" for short. Back then they were called 'airships'. The above quoted letter was dated November 24, 1896!

'*Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*', dating back to about that period, defines airships as being "balloons".

These airships could not have possibly been balloons. What balloons, especially in the 1890s, could travel at an estimated 200 miles per hour, in one case that's on record?

There are similarities to modern UFO sightings, as one would expect, but there are many differences as well.

Another trend is visible in an article from the newspaper *Sacramento Union* of November 20th. They have started using nonsense humor, perhaps in an effort to downgrade the reports.

"The man who is alleged to have heard the chorus

while the machine was doing the 'Corbett duck', has put his remembering tank to work, and recalls that one line was *Just Tell Them That You Saw Me*, and now goes about mournfully whistling, *It Never Came Back*. Another who heard the music declares the words to have been, *Will You Miss Me When I've Gone?* and the refrain was, *I Gave That Man a Fill!*"

Two paragraphs further down they make a very half-hearted attempt to appease the people of Sacramento by saying:

"There are some of the stories floating about concerning the aerial mystery, and "there are others". Still the citizen pays his money and takes his choice, and, as this is a free country, has a right to his opinion. The lunacy commission is taking a vacation now, so the danger is reduced to a minimum. The question yesterday was not 'What is it?' but 'Have you seen it?'"

The *Sacramento Bee*, on November 19th, reported an investigation of the airships by a Grand Jury. On the same day, in another article, a subtitle declared: "All Men Liars? Looks That Way!"

Newspapers, it seemed, were beginning to take pro and con sides in the great airship debate. Yet it was not always easy to tell who was who.

To give you an idea of the controversy engendered by the airship issue, we quote here from six short reports from newspapers all over California and Nevada. From the *Sacramento Bee*, November 23rd:

"Our Citizens Are All Bright."

(From the *San Francisco Report*):

"Many of Sacramento's best citizens are said to believe they saw a real air ship Wednesday night and heard people in it talking. Never mind, Lady Somerset and Miss Willard are coming, and will of course visit Sacramento."

"What Kind Do You Mean?"

(From the *Fresno Republican*):

"Up in Sacramento some people claim to have seen a mysterious air ship coursing through the air against the wind. Spirits, boys, spirits!"

"No, The Same Old Brand."

"The *Bee* puts a dozen or more witnesses upon the reporter's stand to prove that an air ship passed directly over Sacramento this week. The reporter must have struck a brand which is stronger than his ordinary drink."

"The *Bee's* Assurance Goes."

(From the *Nevada Silver-State*):

"However, whatever it was, or whatever it pretends, it cannot be reasonably denied or doubted that the thing actually occurred as alleged by our frightened neighbors of Sacramento. For we have the assurance of the *Bee* that the whole population of the city was not drunk between 6 and 7 o'clock that evening."

"The Wicked Reporter Man."

(From the *San Jose News*):

"The story doubtless originated in the brain of some ingenious newspaper reporter in Sacramento, who has prepared the narrative with considerable care, going so far as to secure the co-operation of alleged witnesses, a comparatively easy matter, as there are many people who would "stand in" to support an improbable report yarn of that kind, considering it a huge joke."

And finally:

"Oh, Now, You Stop!"

(From the *Woodland Democrat*):

"A toy balloon was turned loose in Washington a night or two ago. It floated over Sacramento and the people were deluded with the idea that it was an air ship."

The reporter of the last dispatch got his facts

wrong. The supposed balloon was not a toy, and its alleged originating city was New York, not Washington. These articles were obviously written long before the age of litigation for libel against newspapers became popular.

The airship, or rather airships, moved east. There were various sightings in such states as Colorado, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Missouri, Arkansas, Iowa and South Dakota, west of the Mississippi River, during the spring and summer of 1897.

The population size of a state seemed to have no bearing on the number of sightings reported. Nebraska, with a population then of a mere 1,060,000, had dozens of reports.

One of the first reports in Nebraska came from the city of Hastings, when an airship, west of that town, was observed by several people floating 500 feet above the ground, for 30 minutes. That was from the fall of 1896.

When it reappeared in February 1897, it was 800 feet above the ground, and lights were seen on it. This mention of lights is reported on numerous occasions. It then descended 200 feet and "travelled at a most remarkable speed for about three miles. It then stood perfectly still for about five minutes and then descended for about 200 feet, circling as it travelled at a most remarkable speed for about two miles and then, slowing up, it circled for about fully 15 minutes, when it began to lower and disappear as mysteriously as it had made its appearance... A close watch is being kept for its reappearance."

A report from Hastings dated February 12, is a longer article, but has all the earmarks of the above one. The craft was reported to have been seen by a dozen people.

A report from the *Kearney Daily Hub*, of February 22, tells of a sighting there. Something of an editorial paragraph precedes the article itself.

"The *Hub* must admit that it has taken all air ship stories coming out of our sister towns with a grain of salt, and in one or two cases the dose of the saline accompaniment has been doubled. It doesn't believe in air ships, and the writer personally has never seen anything that resembled the much talked of 'light in the sky' more than one of the 'free' arc lights furnished in the past by the Kearney Electric company. Yet any belief should be held subject to revision when confronted by good and sufficient evidence. That evidence appears now to be on top."

They go on to report:

"If Mr. Prescott has seen an air ship he doesn't know it. In fact, if he was to see one he wouldn't be sure of it without it was labelled in large Gothic letters. But Wednesday evening, while walking home, between the hours of nine and ten o'clock, he saw a light in the west, a description of which strongly resembles the stories of the air ship that have come from other towns. The light appeared to be a great distance away, and its size looked to be about the same as the head of an ordinary wooden water bucket. It didn't move around to any great extent, but stayed out in the western atmosphere long enough to be seen distinctly. Whether it was an air ship, or one of the populistic signs of the times forecasting the selection of Sullivan as judge, has yet to be determined."

Besides politics, commercialism played a role in the reporting of the airship phenomenon, especially in Nebraska. The *Wilsonville Review* of April 9, 1897 reported that its editor had heard the craft's inhabitants yell "*Weiver Eht Rof Ebircsbus*". (It sounds like an alien version of Latin, but spells out "*Subscribe for the Review*", backwards.)

*The Wymorean*, published in Wymore, Nebraska,

(March 19) reported:

“That Air Ship Again.

“The air ship passed over this city last night at 15 minutes to 8. It came from the south and disappeared to the NW, moving at a rate of about 15 miles per hour against a strong wind from the east. As near as could be judged by those who saw it, it was about 2000 feet above ground. At times its motion was steady and at other times it would move up or down. Quite a crowd gathered on the street and watched the strange light for at least 10 minutes. Many of them have been skeptical heretofore, but now they are forced to admit that there is something in it.”

Sightings ranged across Nebraska at least until May 1897 in such places as Omaha, Inavale, York Beatrics, Grand Island, Lexington, Odell, Peru, Central City, Table Rock, Norfolk, Fremont and others.

Among the many sightings in Kansas, one at LeRoy, on April 19, stands out. It occurred at 10.30 p.m. One Alexander Hamilton, owner of the farm in LeRoy, stated:

“I arose, thinking that perhaps my bulldog was performing his pranks, but upon going to the door saw to my utter astonishment that an air ship was slowly descending upon my cow lot, about forty rods from the house.”

It was described as being three hundred feet long, cigar shaped, with a carriage beneath. Sounds much like a dirigible would be described.

Sightings also occurred at Topeka, Belleville, Atchison, Holson, Hiawatha, and Everett, Kansas.

There were sightings at Canton and Deadwood, South Dakota. But a report from the *Sioux Valley News* (S. Dakota) says of a report in Minnesota, dated April 16:

“The air ship has come and gone. It was the same air ship that has been seen floating above the Western states for the last three weeks. It is not a fake, but a genuine aeronautical conveyance. A square-shaped reddish light that looked half as large as the moon was seen by a number of persons from the Guaranty Loan restaurant windows at 9.25 o'clock last night. It was first seen in the direction of Hopkins, the crowd in the restaurant being congregated by J. J. Barrett, the St. Louis dispatch agent on the eleventh floor, whose attention was called to it by the operator at Hopkins, who saw it moving west. Jasper Gibbs, proprietor of the restaurant, saw the light first; it was then blazing red, but it gradually lost its redness, and suddenly again brightened again like a flash of light. It was moving in a diagonal line away from Minneapolis; and slowly commenced to sink over the horizon until 9.35, when it became invisible.”

Next we move to Texas, where there were literally dozens of sightings. On April 17, 1897, one was spotted near the town of Aurora. This sighting will be quoted in whole, since it was different from its predecessors.

“About 6 o'clock this morning, the early risers of Aurora were astonished at the sudden appearance of the airship which has been sailing throughout the country.

“It was travelling due north and much nearer the earth than before. Evidently some of the machinery was out of order, for it was making a speed of only 10 or 12 miles an hour and gradually settling toward the earth.

“It sailed directly over the public square, and when it reached the north part of town collided with the tower of Judge Proctor's windmill and went to pieces with a terrific explosion, scattering debris over several acres of ground, wrecking the windmill and water tank and destroying the judge's flower garden.

“The pilot of the ship is supposed to have been the only person aboard, and while his remains are badly disfigured, enough of the original has been picked up to show that he was not an inhabitant of this world.

“Mr. T.J. Weems, the U.S. Signal Service officer at this place and an authority on astronomy, gives it as his opinion that he (the pilot) was a native of the planet Mars.

“Papers found on his person — evidently the records of his travels — are written in some unknown hieroglyphics and cannot be deciphered.

“This ship was too badly wrecked to form any conclusion as to its construction or motive power.

“It was built of an unknown metal, resembling somewhat a mixture of aluminium and silver and it must have weighed several tons.

“The town is full of people today who are viewing the wreck and gathering specimens of strange metal from the debris. The pilot's funeral will take place at noon tomorrow.”

The pilot's funeral? Subsequent investigation has offered no proof of the above crash, let alone burial. It has been termed a hoax.

Though definitely different from the bulk of reports from this era, it does not qualify as the first report of a crashed airship.

In Dundy County, Nebraska, in 1884, an airship supposedly crashed some 35 miles north-west of the town of Benklemen, on a ranch. A cowboy named Williamson had his face blistered by the intense heat. This story, from the *Holdrege Nugget* (Nebraska), has not been verified from other sources.

A report from Merkel, Texas of April 26, says:

“Some parties returning from church last night noticed a heavy object dragging along with a large rope attached.

“They followed it until in crossing the railroad it caught on a rail. On looking up they saw what they supposed was the airship.

“It was not near enough to get an idea of the dimensions. A light could be seen protruding from several windows; one bright light in front like the headlight of a locomotive.

“After some 10 minutes, a man was seen descending the rope, he came near enough to be plainly seen; he wore a light blue sailor suit, was small in size.

“He stopped when he discovered parties at the anchor and cut the rope below him and sailed off in a north-east direction.

“The anchor is now on exhibition at the blacksmith shop of Elliot & Miller and is attracting the attention of hundreds of people.”

This report, and many others of that era, bring to mind the old television series “*Wild, Wild West*”, where American spies thwart the plans of evil men in the old West, trying to take over the nation.

A report from Waterloo, Iowa and another from Burlington were purportedly hoaxes (April 10, 1897). Other sightings in Iowa were reported at Ottumwa, Des Moines, Belle Plaine, Fontanelle and others.

Then the sightings went into a wide number of states east of the Mississippi River.

One of the main ways in which the 1890s reports differed from modern ones was that these people, for the most part, considered the airships to be guided by *human, earthbound agencies*. There are, of course, a few exceptions, already cited. Among the supposed human inventors claimed to be hovering above American cities were: Hiram Maxim, Octave Chanute (an aviator), an unnamed associate of Thomas Edison, and many relative unknowns.

To give you an idea, here is a quote from the *Sioux Valley News*, South Dakota (May 14, 1897).