

THE UNIDENTIFIED

Notes Toward
Solving The
UFO Mystery

Jerome Clark &
Loren Coleman

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THE AIRSIGHTS: THE TECHNOLOGICAL IMPULSE

The faint suspicion of a giant mystery, much larger than our current preoccupation with life on other planets, much deeper than housewives' reports of zigzagging lights: Perhaps we can resolve the point by trying to understand what these tales, these myths, these legends are doing to us. What images are they designed to convey? What hidden needs are they fulfilling?

—Jacques Vallee, in *Passport to Magonia: From Folklore to Flying Saucers*

1

March 26, 1880, was a quiet night in tiny Galisteo, New Mexico. The train from Santa Fe had come and gone and the operator, his day's work finished, routinely locked up the depot and set out with a couple of friends on a short walk before retiring.

Suddenly voices cut through the silence—voices which sounded as though they were coming from the sky. At first the listeners thought their source must be persons in the nearby Ortiz Mountains. But when the voices got louder and closer the men on the ground looked up and abruptly changed their minds.

An object, "monstrous in size," was rapidly approaching from the west, flying so low that the observers could see elegantly written characters on the outside of the car. Inside, the occupants, numbering ten or so and apparently of normal appearance, were laughing and shouting in an unknown language, with sounds of music occasionally drifting out into the air. The craft itself was "fish-shaped," i.e., like a cigar with a tail, and was driven by a huge "fan" or propeller.

As it passed overhead a passenger tossed several from the car. The depot agent and his friends recovered one of them almost immediately, a beautiful flower wrapped in a slip of fine silklike paper containing some characters which reminded the men of ones they had seen on Japanese chests.

Soon afterward the aerial machine ascended far into the sky and rapidly sailed away toward the east.

The next morning searchers found a cup which the witnesses had seen thrown out of the craft but been unable to locate in the evening darkness. "It is of very peculiar workmanship," the *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican* reported, "entirely different to anything used in this country." The operator took it and the flower and put them on display.

Before the day was over, however, this physical evidence of the passage of an early unidentified flying object had vanished. In the evening a mysterious gentleman identified only as a "collector of curiosities" appeared in town, examined the finds, suggested that they were of Asian origin, and offered a sum of money so considerable that the owner had no choice but to accept. The "collector" scooped up his purchases and was not seen again.

2

The story of aviation does not begin on December 17, 1903, of course. Long before Orville Wright's famous twelve-second hop at Kitty Hawk, scientists and inventors had struggled to unlock the secrets of powered flight and to build what an 1897 issue of *Scientific American* called the "true flying machine; that is, one which is hundreds of times heavier than the air upon which it rests, by reason of its dynamic impact, and not by the aid of any ballast or gas bag whatsoever."

Since the last part of the eighteenth century adventurers had traveled aloft in balloons, an often dangerous mode of transportation because the aeronaut was at the mercy of the elements. A sudden, unexpected gust of wind could be, and often was, fatal to these pioneers.

In 1851 an engine-powered, egg-shaped craft called a dirigible was tested for the first time; not until 1900, though, could it be maneuvered in the air. The first

country dirigible flight took place in France in 1903, with the craft covering a distance of thirty-nine miles. But dirigibles did not appear in the United States until 1904, when Thomas Scott Baldwin tested his *California Arrow* in August of that year.

But nothing in the early history of flight tells us just what a huge airborne cigar was doing over New Mexico in 1880, especially when it "appeared to be entirely under the control of the occupants, and appeared to be guided by a large fanlike apparatus," and also could ascend with rather startling abruptness. Its "monstrous" size and its propeller clearly indicate that it was something that should have had no business existing: a heavier-than-air flying machine.

Consider the testimony of British authority Charles H. Gibbs-Smith:

Speaking as an aeronautical historian who specializes in the periods before 1910, I can say with certainty that the only airborne vehicles, carrying passengers, which could possibly have been seen anywhere in North America . . . were free-flying spherical balloons, and it is highly unlikely for these to be mistaken for anything else. No form of dirigible (i.e., a gasbag propelled by an airscrew) or heavier-than-air flying machine was flying—or indeed *could* fly—at this time in America.

During the 1850s mysterious "airships" regularly crossed the skies of Germany, saddling the latter nineteenth century with what would prove to be one of its most recurrent, baffling problems.

And it was just before that, around the year 1848, that a remarkable, enigmatic young German named C. A. A. Dellschau immigrated to the United States.

Dellschau's own testimony places him in Sonora, California, a mining town, during the 1850s. Where he might have gone in the decades after that we do not know. We do know, however, that around the turn of the century he took up residence in Houston, Texas, married a widow, and lived in virtual seclusion. He had no friends; by all accounts, his quarrelsome disposition kept other persons at a distance. Dismissed as an eccentric by the few who knew

him, Dellschau spent most of his time in his study, where he devoted hours to the compilation of a series of scrapbooks filled with clippings, drawings, and cryptic notations. He died in 1924 at the age of ninety-two.

Were it not for a chance discovery many years later in Dellschau's life, like most people's would have passed with scarcely a trace. But one day in March 1969 a ufologist named P. G. Navarro happened to stroll by an aviation exhibit at the University of St. Thomas, in Houston. Something caught his eye and he stopped to take a closer look.

What he saw were two large scrapbooks (Dellschau's) which contained old news stories and articles about attempts of various would-be inventors to construct heavier-than-air flying machines. But these were not nearly as interesting as Dellschau's drawings of strange-looking, cumbersome vessels which he claimed *actually had been flown at one time*.

Navarro, his curiosity aroused, eventually located more of Dellschau's scrapbooks and even talked with the man's stepdaughter, by now an old woman. He conducted as detailed an investigation as he possibly could under the circumstances, poring over the books and carefully making sense of Dellschau's notes, penned in English, German, and code. When he was through he had reconstructed an incredible story, which appeared in the winter 1970 issue of *Flying Saucer Digest*.

At least one thing was obvious: Dellschau was of two minds about his project. On one hand he wanted "secrets" known; on the other, he was afraid to speak directly, for reasons we shall get to shortly. So he compromised and wrote in a fashion aimed at discouraging all but the most determined student. Still Dellschau was much unanswered. Actually, in a very real sense, he was *everything* unanswered.

He was writing for an audience—if not one in his own day, then one at some period in the future. He addressed potential readers thus: "You will . . . Wonder We . . . You will unriddle these writings. They are my store of open knowledge. They . . . will end like all others with good intentions but too weak-willed to assign them a put to work."

According to Dellschau's notes, in the 1850s he and

group of associates (about sixty in all) gathered in Sonora, California, where they formed the "Aero Club" and constructed and flew heavier-than-air machines. They performed their experiments, he says, in an open field near Columbia, a small town not far from Sonora. (Today an airstrip covers the field, which is the only spot in the predominantly hilly region where planes can safely take off and land.)

The club performed its experiments in secrecy, and its members were not permitted to tell anyone of their work or to use the aircraft for their own purposes. One member who threatened to take his machine to the public in hopes of securing a fortune died in an aerial explosion—the victim, Dellschau hinted, of murder. Another, a "high-educated mechanic" identified as Gustav Freyer, was called to account by the club for withholding new information from them. Apparently this was no ordinary social organization.

The Aero Club was only a branch of a larger secret society whose initials Dellschau lists as "N Y M Z A." Of this society Dellschau wrote very little, except to observe that in 1858 a George Newell was its head in Sonora; otherwise he only alludes to orders from unnamed superiors who were overseeing the club's activities. These superiors were not from the government, for Dellschau wrote that once a government official who somehow knew of their work approached club members and tried to persuade them to sell their inventions for use as weapons of war. They were instructed to refuse the offer.

The group had a number of aircraft at its disposal, including among others August Shoetler's *Aero Dora*, Robert Nixon's *Aero Rondo*, and George Newell's *Aero Newell*. At first appearance it is hard to believe that anything resembling these machines ever could have flown. As Navarro remarks, "The heavy body of the machines seems to be radically out of proportion to the gas bag or balloon which is supposed to lift the contraption. Considering the large amount of gas (usually hydrogen or helium) that is required to lift one of today's dirigibles or even a small blimp, it is inconceivable that the small quantity of gas used in Dellschau's airships would be sufficient to lift it."

That is, if it were an ordinary gas, which this wasn't. According to Dellschau, it was a substance called "NE" which had the capacity to "negate weight." Fantastic as it may seem, our narrator is talking about antigravity.

Dellschau recorded all this in a curiously pessimistic tone. One strange paragraph reads, "We are all together in our graves. We get together in my house. We eat and drink and are joyful. We do mental work, but everybody is forlorn, as they feel they are fighting a losing battle. But little likelihood is there that fate shall bring forth the right man."

Dellschau wrote of the human race, and even the planet Earth, as if he stood apart from them. One peculiar paragraph, written originally in Dellschau's oddly archaic German, says, "Your Christian love reaches for the Wanderplace, and wanders away from Earth. Planets there are enough where Christian love shall be as we say so nicely in the Book Selag." A drawing elsewhere shows the figure of a devil opening up a crack in the fabric of the sky above one of the *Aeros*. The overall impression conveyed to us is of a man who knew secrets that forever would render him an outsider, isolated from the community of mankind.

4

On November 1, 1896, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that in the near future a New York inventor would construct and fly an "aerial torpedo boat." About two weeks later, on November 17, the *Sacramento Bee* reprinted a telegram it had received from a New York man who said he and a couple of friends would board an airship of his invention and fly it to California. But that very night all hell broke loose and the Great Airship Scare of 1896-97 was off to an unbelievable start.

The next day the *Bee* related the following in the first paragraph of a long article:

Last evening between the hours of six and seven o'clock, in the year of our Lord 1896, a most startling exhibition was seen in the sky in this city of Sacramento. People standing on the sidewalks at certain points in the city between the hours

stated, saw coming through the sky over the housetops what appeared to them to be merely an electric arc lamp propelled by some mysterious force. It came out of the east and sailed unevenly toward the southwest, dropping now nearer to the earth, and now suddenly rising into the air again, as if the force that was whirling it through space was sensible of the dangers of collision with objects upon the earth.

There were hundreds of witnesses. Those who got the closest look at the object said that it was huge and cigar-shaped, with four large wings attached to an aluminum body. Some insisted that they heard voices and raucous laughter emanating from the ship. Presumably these people never had heard of Galisteo Junction's merry pranksters. R. L. Lowry and a companion allegedly saw four men driving the craft via a wheel-like apparatus. The observers heard one of the aeronauts say, "We hope to be in San Francisco by tomorrow noon." J. H. Vogel, who was in the vicinity, confirmed the story and added that the vessel was "egg-shaped."

The next afternoon an airship passed over Oak Park, California, leaving a trail of smoke, and before long San Francisco, Oakland, and other cities and towns in the north-central part of the state had their own stories to fill newspaper columns with.

Several persons stepped forward to tell of earlier sightings, one of them a fruit rancher from near Bowman, in Placer County, who said that he and members of his family had watched an airship fly by at 100 mph late in October. Even more incredible was the testimony of William Jordan of San Rafael, who published this letter in the *San Francisco Call* on November 23rd:

The mysterious light mentioned in your valuable paper this morning as seen by several citizens in different parts of the state, and which seem to mystify yourself as well as your readers, is nothing more than an airship, and of this fact I am perfectly cognizant. I think now that I am released of my obligation of secrecy, which I have kept for nearly three months, as the experiment in aerial navigation is a fixed fact and the public, or a few of the public at least, have seen its workings in the air.

In the latter part of last August I was hunting in the

Tamalpais range of mountains, between the high peak and Bolinas Bay. I wounded a deer, and in chasing it I ran into a circular brush pile about ten feet in height [sic] in a part of the mountain seldom visited even by hunters.

I was somewhat astonished, and my curiosity prompted me to approach it, when I encountered a man who sang out: "What are you doing here and what do you want?" I replied that "I had wounded a deer and was chasing it." He said "that they had been camping here for a month or so and had not seen a deer, but if you think your deer is in the neighborhood I will assist you in finding it as we need a little meat in camp."

This man went with me and in less than five hundred yards found my deer. We carried it into the brush corral. And what a sight—a perfect machine shop and an almost completed ship. I was sworn to secrecy and have kept it till this moment. Six men were at work on the "aerial ship." It is this ship that a few people have seen at night on its trial trip. It returns to its home before daylight and will continue to do so until perfected.

The most baffling part of the whole flap, which lasted well into December, was the role played by "E. H. Benjamin," a dentist whose name newspapers sometimes enclosed in quotation marks, as though they had reason to doubt his identity. It was either Benjamin or his uncle who approached the San Francisco lawyer George D. Collins that November and asked him to represent his interests in the patenting of an airship. He told the incredulous Collins that he had come from Maine to California seven years before in order to conduct his experiments without danger of interruption.

Collins told reporters that his client (whom he never identified by name), a very wealthy man, did his experimenting near Oroville, where he had taken Collins to view his invention—an enormous construction 150 feet long. "It is built on the aeroplane system and has two canvas wings eighteen feet wide and a rudder shaped like a bird's tail," the attorney said. "I saw the thing ascend about ninety feet under perfect control."

On the seventeenth, Collins went on, the airship had flown the sixty miles between Oroville and Sacramento in forty-five minutes. But this was not the first flight the in-

ventor had made. For two weeks he had been flying nightly in attempts to perfect the craft's navigational apparatus.

From the *Sacramento Bee*, November 23:

Oroville, Nov 23—The rumor that the airship which is alleged to have passed over Sacramento was constructed near this town, seems to have a grain of truth in it. The parties who could give information if they would are extremely reticent. They give evasive answers, or assert they know absolutely nothing about it.

Not a single person that saw or knew of an airship being constructed near here can be found, and yet there is a rumor that some man has been experimenting with different kinds of gas and testing those which are lighter than air. The experiments were made some miles east of the town and no one is able to give any names of the parties, who are evidently strangers and seeking to avoid publicity.

The *San Francisco Call* established that Benjamin, a native of Carmel, Maine, had been seen in the Oroville area, visiting a wealthy uncle and confiding to friends that he had invented something which would "revolutionize the world."

Several days into the controversy, Collins was dropped as the inventor's lawyer because he was talking too much. W. H. H. Hart, a former state attorney general and one of the most respected men in California, took over Collins's job. In subsequent interviews Hart related that *two* airships existed, one in the East and the other in California. "I have been concerned in the Eastern invention for some time personally," he said. "The idea is to consolidate both interests."

The Western craft would be used as a weapon of war. "From what I have seen of it," he said, "I have not the least doubt that it will carry four men and one thousand pounds of dynamite. I am quite convinced that two or three men could destroy the city of Havana in forty-eight hours."

Hart represented both airship inventors, who worked out of California and New Jersey. The former instructed Hart to say "that if the Cubans would give him \$10 million he would wipe out the Spanish stronghold." This was not

the last time airships and Cuba would be spoken of in the same breath, as we shall see later.

One day early in December a stranger appeared at a place of business in Fresno, California, and inquired for a George Jennings. Covered with dust, the man looked as though he had traveled a long distance. No one recognized him until Jennings stepped out of a back room and greeted the visitor like an old friend. The two men engaged in whispered conversation and the dozen persons standing close by were nonplussed to overhear the word *airship* more than once.

Later Jennings talked freely to a reporter for the *Fresno Semi-Weekly Expositor*, balking only at giving his friend's name. The following account appeared in the paper's December 7, 1896, issue:

"It is true the airship is in Fresno County," he said. "Just where I do not know myself. It is also true that the man who was in here a short time ago is one of the inventors. He told me that the trip to this country was involuntary upon the part of the men in the airship. In other words the machine came itself and they couldn't stop it. His statement was that they were flying, as usual, around Contra Costa county hills and rose to a height of about one thousand feet. Suddenly the airship struck a current of air and refused to answer its steering gear. It was borne rapidly southward against all efforts to change its course until suddenly the current of air seemed to lessen and the machine once more became manageable. The men aboard at once descended and flew about, looking for a hiding place, which they at length found.

"My friend has told me that the airship was made principally of aluminum and that the rising and falling was accomplished by improved aeroplanes, while the motive power was electricity. He says the machine is perfect except for the fact that at times it refuses to steer in a given direction and that it will not stand still in the air. He has gone to San Francisco and will return with some material and men probably tonight. He said if the news from Washington* was satisfactory he would bring his

*An important detail. Collins's mysterious inventor informed the lawyer that he either had conducted or planned to conduct

airship over to Fresno and where everyone could see it."

Jennings said he was sure that individuals in the nearby towns of Watertown and Selma must have observed the craft as it limped through the county in search of a hiding place. Sure enough, the day before his encounter with the supposed aeronaut, the *San Francisco Call* had published a letter from five Watertown men who said they had seen an enormous airship nearly collide with a cornice on the city's post office building the evening of November 20. The craft had an "intensely brilliant" light and the witnesses could see human forms aboard the ship.

During the early morning hours of December 2 two fishermen, Giuseppe Valinziano and Luigi Valdivia, watched as an airship descended from the sky and alighted on the ocean waves several hundred yards away. The craft floated easily and its three occupants seemed to be in full control. They directed the ship to the beach. From there they dragged it into the woods.

business with the Patent Office in Washington, D.C. (Our source is not clear on this point.) However, Gordon Lore and Harold Deneault, authors of *Mysteries of the Skies: UFOs in Perspective*, searched carefully through the Patent Office files for 1896-97 and found two "airship" patents.

The first was granted to C. A. Smith of San Francisco on August 11, 1896. Smith surfaced during the airship flap later in the year, saying he had been "experimenting on air machines" for close to fifty years but denying any connection with the sightings then being made. He claimed that he *would* have a ship ready for crosscountry flight by the next April—by which time, oddly enough, a new airship scare arose in the midwestern and eastern states. It is not really very likely, though, that Smith's craft ever actually flew.

Henry Heintz of Elkton, South Dakota, was given the other patent on April 20, 1897, for a canoe structure held by girders to a cylindrical balloon the same length. Attached to the bottom of the hull was a searchlight. Since searchlights figure prominently in many airship reports, Lore and Deneault leave open the question of Heintz's relationship to the mystery, evidently unaware of a 1903 admission from the would-be inventor that "my models Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 . . . did not act as satisfactorily as I had expected" (*Aeronautical World*, Vol. I, Glendale, Ohio, pp. 171-72). He goes on to express more hope for No. 7, which he was building at the time of writing. As Clint Williams concludes, "We must assume that Heintz was more active at the drawing board than in the field of blue."

Excited, the two men drew in their nets and started for shore. But the surf was rough enough to make landing difficult and only after several attempts did they succeed in bringing their boat to land.

Their struggle attracted the attention of the aeronauts. As soon as the fishing vessel had hit the beach, one of the strangers approached and ordered them to be on their way. But Valinziano, who would have none of it, pressed the man for information. In reply the flier spoke evasively; but he was more specific in his threat to use force if the two tried to get off the boat. Finally, unable to intimidate the persistent duo, he walked back into the woods to consult with his companions. Fifteen minutes later he emerged and beckoned Valinziano and Valdivia to follow him.

All three of the aeronauts met them at the edge of the trees. One, whom the others addressed as "captain," did most of the talking.

"I suppose your curiosity has been aroused by our rather unusual method of traveling," he said. "I am not yet ready to make my discovery known to the public, but hope to be able to do so as soon as some slight changes are made in its construction. Until such time I must refuse to allow anyone to make a close inspection. You are welcome to get such view of the ship as you can from a distance, but any attempt at closer inspection will meet with forcible resistance." He refused to say anything about the ship's construction or its intended destination. He stated only that the trip was "experimental."

As he talked, the other two worked busily on repairing the ship. The fishermen noticed that the craft was well stocked with provisions and when it came time to eat they were invited to dine with the crew.

Afterward Valinziano and Valdivia prepared to leave, but the captain urged them to stay, promising them a ride aboard the airship when they had completed repairs. Several hours passed. Finally the captain said that it would be impossible to finish their work in time to fly that night and let them go. By now they had begun to suspect that he had detained them because he wanted to prevent them from alerting others to their presence.

One of the last 1896 stories came out of Camptonville a little town in northern California, where at 9:00 P.M. on

December 7 a young woman's screams notified residents of the appearance of a giant airship which seemed to be descending on Ramm's Hill, two miles away. Five young men who went out to investigate discovered its sole occupant, a bearded individual who acted both deaf and mute.

Frustrated at first by the failure of normal communication, the party decided to write their questions on a sheet of paper. In reply the aeronaut took an "alphabet" from his pocket and spelled out his answers. He said he had flown from the Montezuma Mountains, where his wife and two children lived. He would answer no other inquiries.

The young men left. The aeronaut remained until four o'clock the next afternoon, when he sailed away, leaving not a trace behind.

Soon after that the airships disappeared from California, the "inventors" were heard from no more, and everything returned to normal—but not for long. The most astounding part was yet to come.

5

"The airship as a practical invention is believed to be so nearly ripe that a story of its appearance in the sky is not necessarily to be received with disrespect," *Harper's Weekly* commented in its issue for April 24, 1897.

Not in any case unless one chose to assume that thousands of Americans had lost their senses, a disquieting notion some scientists, editors, and professional skeptics seemed to have no trouble embracing. Professor George Hough, an astronomer from Northwestern University, spent a good share of his time assuring people that the "airship" was nothing more than the star Alpha Orionis as perceived by drunks, fools, and hysterics. Most newspapers ridiculed reports until they finally were forced to desist for fear of offending the growing numbers of readers who had seen the craft themselves.

California's airship was the first to receive widespread publicity but that same month, November 1896, an unidentified flying object passed through central Nebraska and sightings in the state continued into the next May. Delaware farmers saw airships as early as January 1897.

It took a sighting in Omaha involving hundreds of wit-

nesses to put the airships back into the headlines, however. The object, a large, bright light "too big for balloon," appeared on the night of March 29, 1897, flew low, and was visible for over half an hour.

From then on America was inundated with airships. The reports came primarily though not exclusively from midwestern states, and descriptions of the ships varied. To cite several random examples:

Everest, Kansas, April 1: "The basket or car seemed to be twenty-five to thirty feet long, shaped like an Indian canoe. Four light wings extended from the car; two wings were triangular. A large dark hulk was discernible immediately above the car and was generally supposed by the watchers to be an inflated gas bag" (*Kansas City Times*).

Chicago, April 11: "The lower portion of the airship was thin, and made of some light white metal like aluminum. The upper portion was dark and long like a big cigar, pointed in front and with some kind of arrangement in the rear to which cables are attached" (*Chicago Times-Herald*).

Texas, April 16: ". . . shaped like a Mexican cigar, large in the middle, and small at both ends, with great wings, resembling those of an enormous butterfly. It was brilliantly illuminated by the rays of two great searchlights, and was sailing in a southeasterly direction, with the velocity of wind, presenting a magnificent appearance" (*New York Sun*).

(The brilliant searchlights so often reported in airship sightings by themselves suggest that we are dealing with something far out of the ordinary. Though the arc light had been invented in the nineteenth century, searchlights which used it were encumbered with many heavy batteries or a large steam- or gasoline-powered generator. The aircraft of the period could not possibly have carried anything so heavy. The other available lights were dim incandescent ones which would not have produced the blinding glare witnesses saw. It was not until the mid-1960s that military and commercial airplanes regularly carried powerful strobe lights and the newer, more brilliant landing lights.)

There were numerous reports of occupants, usually of normal-looking men and women glimpsed inside the ship as they sailed by. One of the most interesting was made

by M. G. Sisson, postmaster at Greenfield, Illinois, on the afternoon of April 19. While walking his dog through the woods he allegedly spotted an airship 150 feet above him—a phenomenon he found less unsettling than the sight of a woman who stood on a deck in front of the craft, catching pigeons with a net. When she saw him she quickly stepped inside and the craft flew away.

Later that day Thomas Bradburg of Hagaman, about nine miles east of Greenfield, supposedly discovered a partly written letter which appeared to have been dropped from the airship. Under a printed letterhead reading "Airship Co., Oakland, Cal.,"* it went:

We are having a delightful time and plenty to eat. Mollie's scheme for running down birds and catching them with a net works excellently; we feast daily upon pigeon pie.

Since starting out we have greatly increased the velocity of the ship. The following figures will give some idea of the speed which we are now able to make: St. Louis, April 15, 8:30 P.M.; Chicago, same evening, 9:33; Kansas City, one hour and forty minutes later.

This was only one of many such "messages" supposedly released from airships. Although at this late date there really is no way to tell for certain, it is likely that the vast majority were hoaxes. We mention the Hagaman document only because of its possible tie-in with Sisson's sighting (of course the one relevant question—had Bradburg heard Sisson's story before he "found" the letter?—is unanswerable) and because its mention of Oakland, California, as the inventor's place of residence takes us back to the controversies of November 1896.

But the events of 1896, incredible as they were, are relatively uncomplicated compared to what happened in 1897. California's celebrated controversy concerned only one

*Curiously, around 1897 the "National Airship Company" of San Francisco sold 250,000 shares of stock in itself in an attempt to raise a million dollars to fund the construction of a 1,000-foot airship. The airship was supposed to carry five hundred passengers on regular flights from New York to London. Neither the airship nor the scheme got off the ground, however.

alleged inventor, but April 1897 produced a rash of conflicting claims about a host of different men. Obviously someone was lying. Sometimes it was the "witnesses." Sometimes it was the newspapers. And sometimes it may have been the airship occupants themselves.

Let us first examine a number of contact claims of the period:

Springfield, Illinois, April 15: Adolph Winkle and John Hulle, farmhands, allegedly saw an airship land two miles outside the city and talked with its occupants, two men and a woman, who said they would "make a report to the government when Cuba is declared free."

Harrisburg, Arkansas, April 21: At 1:00 A.M. a strange noise roused "ex-Senator Harris" from sleep and through his bedroom window he saw an airship descending to the ground. The occupants, two young men, a woman, and an elderly man with a dark waist-length beard, got out and helped themselves to a supply of fresh well water. Overcome by curiosity, Harris went outside and engaged the old man in a long conversation, during which the latter claimed he had inherited the secret of antigravity from his late uncle. "Weight is no object to me," he said. "I suspend all gravity by placing a small wire around an object. . . ."

"I was making preparations to go over to Cuba and kill off the Spanish army if hostilities had not ceased," he continued, "but now my plans are changed and I may go to the aid of the Armenians." He would accomplish all this with a gun which would fire, he said, "sixty-three thousand times per minute." (!)

He offered Harris a ride, which the ex-senator refused, and then the crew reentered their craft and disappeared into the night.

Conroe, Texas, April 22-23: Around midnight four men, one of them proprietor G. L. Witherspoon, were playing dominoes in the restaurant section of the town hotel when three strangers came upon the scene. They said they had landed their airship not far away and come into town for supper "by way of a change," then went on to report that they had flown from San Francisco en route to Cuba. Witherspoon and his friends declined an offer to examine the ship, suspecting that they were the victims of a practical joke. But about an hour later, after the visitors

had left, a brilliantly lighted airship passed over Conroe.

Stephensville, Texas, late April: Alerted by "prominent farmer" C. L. McIlhane that an airship had alighted in a field on his farm three miles from town, a large delegation of Stephensville's leading citizens—our source lists all their names—set out to see for themselves. They found a sixty-foot cigar-shaped craft and its two occupants, who gave their names as S. E. Tillman and A. E. Dolbear. The pair explained that they were making an experimental trip to test the ship for certain New York financiers. Turning down requests from onlookers who wanted to examine the craft, the aeronauts boarded the machine and sailed off.

Chattanooga, Tennessee, late April: Several Chattanooga citizens reportedly encountered a landed airship "in the exact shape of a shad, minus head and tail," resting on a mountainside near the city. Its two occupants were at work repairing it. One, who identified himself as "Professor Charles Davidson," said that they had left Sacramento a month before and had spent the time touring the country.

Jenny Lind, Arkansas, May 4: At 7:30 that evening an airship passed over town and three men leaped on their bicycles and pursued it until it landed by a spring next to a mountain. Its pilots, who introduced themselves as George Autzerlitz and Joseph Eddleman, talked with the three for a while, saying they subsisted on birds which they would overtake in flight and capture. Before leaving the aeronauts offered any one of them a free ride and ended up taking James Davis to Huntington, fifteen miles away.

(This story appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in the form of a letter from two Jenny Lind residents, who urged the paper to contact R. M. McDowell, general manager of the Western Coal and Mining Company in St. Louis. McDowell told the *Post-Dispatch*, "Yes, I know all those persons. I have extensive works at Jenny Lind. I don't understand the letter, though. It is very strange.")

Hot Springs, Arkansas, May 6: John J. Sumpter, Jr., and John McLemore, police officers, testified in an affidavit that they had seen a sixty-foot airship land that dark, rainy night. There were three occupants, a young man and woman and an older man with a long dark beard. The latter approached the lawmen, carrying a lantern, while the

young man filled a large sack with water, and the woman stayed in the shadows, apparently not wishing to be observed. The old man said that they would stop off at Nashville after traveling the country. The officers turned down an offer for a ride and then left on other business. When they returned forty minutes later, the ship was gone.

(The *Fort Smith Daily News Record* noted that while Sumpter and McLemore were subjected to a great deal of ridicule, "they, however, most seriously maintain that it is absolutely true, and their earnestness is puzzling many, who, while unable to accept the story as a fact, yet see that the men are not jesting.")

Are these stories to be taken seriously? If they are hoaxes, at least they are not obvious ones, and there certainly were plenty of obvious ones in circulation during the three months of the 1897 airship scare. What makes the incidents, or alleged incidents, detailed above so fascinating is that they do have a certain consistency. Three of them note the presence of a lone young woman with one or two young men; two of them, including the suspicious-sounding Harrisburg contact, have an elderly man sporting a long dark beard. (Our source for the Springfield, Illinois, case does not tell us what the aeronauts looked like but it is possible that this landing is related to those at Harrisburg and Hot Springs, Arkansas.)

In two other accounts the occupants point to Sacramento and San Francisco as their place of origin. Another mentions New York. All these cities figure prominently in the November-December 1896 affair as locations either where the craft were seen or where they supposedly had been constructed. And then there is the business of the birds (the Jenny Lind report), reminiscent of M. G. Sisson's sighting.

As we have said before, however, *somebody* has to be lying. The extravagant claims and predictions the occupants allegedly made are clearly phony and often contradictory—just as they usually are even in apparently authentic claims of contact with "space brothers" in our own age. If it is not our claimants who are doing the lying, then it is the enigmatic people they conversed with, whose

loquaciousness was designed not to elucidate but to obfuscate.

Even if every one of these stories is no more than the work of a prankster's imagination, though, that does not alter the fact that for the most part (the lesser part we shall examine shortly) the craft were piloted and probably built by human beings, as opposed to the hairy humanoids and golden-maned Venusians of modern flying saucer lore. But just who were they? And what ever happened to their marvelous inventions?

6

While 1897 newspapers printed reams of speculation about the supposed identity of the inventor, very little of this material seems based on anything more substantial than rumor and hearsay. Amid all the nonsense, however, are several bits and pieces which cause us to wonder just what was going on in those days and who knew what about it. For examples:

About 11:00 P.M. on April 19, in the Beaumont, Texas, area, farmer J. R. Ligon and his son Charley sighted a landed airship in an adjacent pasture. Investigating, they found four men moving around the machine and one of them, who said his name was Wilson, asked for and received a supply of water from the farmer's house.

Twenty-three hours later, at Uvalde, Texas, Sheriff H. W. Baylor spoke briefly with the three-man crew of an airship which had alighted outside the town. One of them gave his name as Wilson and identified himself as a native of Goshen, New York. Then he asked about a Captain Akers, whom he said he had known in Fort Worth in 1877 and who he understood lived in the area. After getting water from Baylor's pump the aeronauts reentered their craft and took off.

The *Galveston Daily News* located Captain Akers, who told them, "I can say that while living in Fort Worth in '76 and '77 I was well acquainted with a man by the name of Wilson from New York State and was on very friendly terms with him. He was of a mechanical turn of mind and was then working on aerial navigation and something that would astonish the world. He was a finely educated man,

then about twenty-four years of age, and seemed to have money with which to prosecute his investigations, devoting his whole time to them. From conversations we had while in Fort Worth, I think that Mr. Wilson, having succeeded in constructing a practical airship, would probably hunt me up to show me that he was not so wild in his claims as I then supposed. I will say further that I have known Sheriff Baylor many years and know that any statement he may make can be relied on as exactly correct." (*Galveston Daily News*, April 28, 1897)

Another candidate whose nomination for airship inventor we shall have to consider carefully is described in the *Omaha Globe-Democrat* for April 10:

The indications are that John O. Preast of this county is the author of the mysterious machine. Preast is a unique character, spending his time at his country residence near Omaha in experimenting with airships, constructing models, and studying all the subjects incidental to the theories of applied mechanics along the line of providing a vessel that will propel itself through the air. He has consumed the past ten years in this way, and the walls of his home are covered with drawings of queer-shaped things, some resembling giant birds, while others look like a big cigar, all of which he says represent models of airships. He is a man of superior education. He came to Omaha from Germany twenty years ago, and has lived the life of a recluse. Mr. Preast refuses to admit that the ship reported in different sections of the state is his invention, but some time since he told several persons that he would surprise the world with a working model in 1897. . . . The two times in the past week that the light has been seen at Omaha it disappeared near Preast's home, hovering over the place and then appearing to go out.

A November 1896 *San Francisco Call* informs us that the airship "closely resembles a bird." But what interests us more about this Mr. Preast is how much he reminds us of someone else: the equally mysterious C. A. A. Dellschau, whom we already have discussed. Both men were recluses, German immigrants, compulsive students of aviation who spent untold hours making drawings of odd-looking aircraft.

Could he be the "Wilson" of

"Tosh Wilson and Co." (crew?) to whom Dellschau refers cryptically in one of the scrapbooks he compiled in his home in Texas around the time of the airship flap?

A wild guess, perhaps. Nonetheless we have some other puzzles to ponder. Germany is pivotal to the airship question because that is where the objects first appeared in the 1850s. Unfortunately we do not have access to these German reports, which might well answer a lot of questions for us; but how odd it is the number of German names that crop up in Dellschau's list of men allegedly involved with the Aero Club: Gustav Freyer, August Schoetler, Jacob Mischer, Ernest Krause, Julius Koch, A. B. Kahn, and many others. Note also the many German names (like Tillman, Dolbear, Autzerlitz, Eddleman, etc.) that crop up in connection with 1897 airship incidents.

We have the testimony of lawyer W. H. H. Hart, among others, that airships had been invented in California. As we have observed already, Hart claimed to have seen the airships and known the men who built them, and there is no reason to doubt the word of this former attorney general, especially since airships made their first major appearances in the Golden State—in the same general area, in fact, where Dellschau's supposed flying club had tested its *Aeros* some years before. Moreover, indications are that there was an Eastern airship, as Hart also asserted, though usually it is New York, not New Jersey, that our sources cite as its home state. "Wilson" may have been affiliated with the Eastern airship people.

Whatever the truth or untruth of Dellschau's story, very probably some kind of secret society or organization of aeronauts lived and worked in the United States and possibly Germany as well during the nineteenth century. The mysterious "collector of curiosities" who showed up in Galisteo Junction, New Mexico, in 1880 the day after an airship had flown over and who stole away with the evidence it had left behind may have been associated with the organization. Certainly the Californians George Collins and W. H. H. Hart dealt with must have been.

Just how many airships took part in the 1896-97 flaps is of course impossible to estimate, but it would have taken several dozen aeronauts to pilot the various craft reported in different parts of the country. All of them presumably

would have been involved with the society and sworn to secrecy, since no one ever stepped forward to answer satisfactorily the many questions raised by the sudden appearances of airships. When aeronauts did volunteer information, they mouthed mostly drivel, although some slight strains of truth may have run through their stories. "Wilson," for example, seems to have been who he said he was, but he does not tell us much else. The airship's occupants, one gathers, did not want us to know who they were or what they were up to.

For instance, no one got a straight answer from them about the airship's source of power. The words *gas* and *electricity* dot a number of accounts and once, as noted earlier, *antigravity* crops up. Most airships carried both large gas bags and powerful searchlights, but at the same time the craft look so unwieldy that one wonders how they flew, particularly when they could also hover and move straight up and down. Maybe Dellschau's antigravity gas "NB" is as good an explanation as any other we're likely to find.

7

Now let us examine a story an entirely different from those we have been studying. This one was published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for April 19, in the form of a letter from W. H. Hopkins, a St. Louis resident whose job as general traveling agent for the Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company had taken him out of town that week. The incident in question supposedly occurred on April 16:

. . . I was wandering through hills east of Springfield, Missouri, and coming to the brow of a hill overlooking a small clearing in the valley a short distance below me I saw a sight that rooted me to the spot with amazement for some time. I could not believe my eyes at first, and shook myself to see if I was not dreaming. There in the clearing rested a vessel similar in outline to the airship shown in the *Post-Dispatch* of a few days ago, and said to have been taken in Illinois. . . .

Near the vessel was the most beautiful being I ever beheld. She was rather under medium size, but of the most exquisite

form and features such as would put to shame the forms as sculptured by the ancient Greeks. She was dressed in nature's garb and her golden hair, wavy and glossy, hung to her waist, unconfined excepting by a band of glistening jewels that bound it back from her forehead. The jewels threw out rays of light as she moved her head. She was plucking the little flowers that were just blossoming from the sod, with exclamations of delight and in a language I could not understand. Her voice was like low, silvery bells and her laughter rang out like their chimes. In one hand she carried a fan of curious design that she fanned herself vigorously with, though to me the air was not warm and I wore an overcoat.

In the shade of the vessel lay a man of noble proportions and majestic countenance. His hair of dark auburn fell to his shoulders in wavy masses and his full beard, of the same color but lighter in shade, reached to his breast. He also was fanning himself with a curious fan as if the heat oppressed him. . . .

After gazing for a while I moved forward, and the woman, hearing the rustle of leaves, looked around. A moment she stood looking at me with wonder and astonishment in her beautiful blue eyes, then, with a shriek of fear, she rushed to the man, who sprang to his feet, threw his arm around her, and glared at me in a threatening manner.

I stopped and, taking my handkerchief from my pocket, waved it in the air. A few minutes we stood. I then spoke some words of apology for intruding, but he seemed not to understand, and replied in a threatening tone and words which I could not make out. I tried by signs to make him understand, and finally he left her, trembling and trying to hold him back, and came toward me. I extended my hand. He looked at it for a moment, astonishment depicted in his dark brown eyes, and finally he extended his own and touched mine. I took his and carried it to my lips. I tried by signs to make them understand I meant no harm. Finally his face lighted up with pleasure, and he turned and spoke to the woman. She came hesitatingly forward, her form undulating with exquisite grace. I took her hand and kissed it fervently. The color rose to her cheeks and she drew it hastily away.

I asked them by signs where they came from, but it was difficult to make them understand. Finally they seemed to do so and smiling they gazed upwards for a moment, as if looking for some particular point, and then pointed upwards, pro-

nouncing a word which, to my imagination, sounded like "Mars."

I pointed to the ship and expressed my wonder in my countenance. He took me by the hand and led me towards it. In the side was a small door. I looked in. There was a luxurious couch covered with robes of the most beautiful stuff and texture, such as I had never seen before. From the ceiling was suspended a curious ball, from which extended a strip of metal, which he struck to make it vibrate. Instantly the ball was illuminated with a soft, white light, which lit up the whole interior. It was most beautifully decorated with scenes such as I had never seen before.

At the stern was another large ball of metal, supported in a strong framework, and connected to the shaft of the propeller at the stern was a similar mechanism attached to each propeller and smaller balls attached to a point of metal that extended from each side of the vessel and from the prow. And connected to each ball was a thin strip of metal similar to the lamp. He struck each one and when they vibrated the balls commenced to revolve with intense rapidity, and did not cease till he stopped them with a kind of brake. As they revolved intense lights, stronger than any arlight I ever saw, shone out from the points at the sides and at the prow, but they were of different colors. The one at the prow was an intense white light. On one side was green and the other red.

The two had been examining me with the greatest curiosity in the meantime. They felt of my clothing, looked at my gray hair with surprise, and examined my watch with the greatest wonder. Signs are poor medium to exchange ideas and therefore we could express but little.

I pointed to the balls attached to the propellers. He gave each of the strips of metal a rap, those attached to the propellers under the vessel first. The balls began to revolve rapidly, and I felt the vessel begin to rise, and I sprang out, and none too soon, for the vessel rose as lightly as a bird, and shot away like an arrow, and in a few minutes was out of sight. The two stood laughing and waving their hands to me, she a vision of loveliness and he of manly vigor.

Incredible? Certainly. A skeptical *Post-Dispatch* reporter brought the letter to Hopkins's employer, C. C. Gardner, who read it carefully and then said, "This is wonderful. That is Mr. Hopkins's handwriting and he is now in their

territory. He was also at Springfield on the day named. He is a traveling agent for the company."

Asked if he believed Hopkins's story, Gardner nodded vigorously. "Indeed I do," he said. "Strange as it seems, I am compelled to believe it. Mr. Hopkins is not a romancer. He never courts notoriety. What he writes he has seen and he believes it is his duty to make the facts public. He does not drink a drop. He has been connected with this company for a long time and is most reliable. What he writes you can publish as being absolutely true."

Other employees at the firm also spoke highly of Hopkins.

The reporter also searched out Hopkins's wife and two daughters. "It's the truth if he wrote it," Mrs. Hopkins affirmed, "and I believe every word." So did the girls.

Mrs. Hopkins rejected out of hand the possibility of a hoax. "What, a man fifty years of age writing such a letter without it being true! No, sir, every line of it is true. Mr. Hopkins is a member of the Maple Avenue Methodist Evangelical Church and has many friends in the West End. He undoubtedly wishes to acquaint his friends with the marvel he has seen and so uses the *Post-Dispatch* as the medium of communication.

"Mr. Hopkins left home a week ago. Before he left he ridiculed the idea of an airship having been seen. But now I suppose he is convinced it is not a myth. Truly, it is wonderful."

Even if we do not prefer to interpret literally the suggestion that the Springfield aeronauts hailed from the planet Mars, we can hardly deny the incident's otherworldly overtones. Actually the whole affair is more reminiscent of many post-World War II UFO contact claims than of most of the other 1897 landing reports. Just what does it mean?

For one thing, it is a curious blending of scientific and magical elements. The airship links the story to the late nineteenth-century Industrial Age concerns which we see reflected in most other parts of the airship saga. Otherwise Hopkins's tale resembles a visionary experience of fairy-folk who have forsaken supernatural modes of transportation for mechanical ones. Since, as folklore attests, fairies imitate the human society around them (to the extent of

using horsecars and other such contrivances) perhaps we should not begrudge them airships.

Seriously, however, the archetypal foundation of the story is clear. The "Martians" are in fact the primeval couple of world mythology; to us their most prominent representatives are Adam and Eve. Traditionally the couple are depicted as physically beautiful, innocent, and immortal children of nature, living in a timeless paradisaical realm sometimes reputed to be located in the sky. (Of this realm, Sir James G. Frazer wrote in *Folklore in the Old Testament*, it "stands for that original state of bliss to which, in this vale of tears, man longingly looks back, and which he hopes eventually to regain. It thus symbolizes both the remote memory and the distant hope of the human race.")

Hopkins is most specific on the subject of the couple's attractiveness, and their nudity and general demeanor certainly mark them as "innocent." Their immortality is implied in the way, as the account has it, they "looked at my gray hair with surprise." We are led to believe that their home in the sky is timeless (as heaven and fairyland are reported to be) because they "examined my watch with the greatest wonder," apparently with no idea of what it might be.

Surely this ranks as one of the first modern UFO contact cases, and inevitably it recalls John Rimmer's contention that the UFO functions as an "antiscientific symbol." The Springfield case also stands in sharp contrast to the other, more mundane 1896-97 landing reports, in which we hear much bloodthirsty talk of decimating whatever foreign elements the American public happened currently to hold in disfavor. We see here the first hints of the psychic revulsion against technology; put another way we can interpret it as an early attempt of the unconscious to resist the growing domination of the conscious mind—to restore the balance, as it were, between the mysterious and the mechanical.

Other accounts connect the airships with today's UFOs.

On April 16, at Mount Vernon, Illinois, the city's mayor focused his telescope on the "airship." What he saw was something that resembled, in the words of the *Saginaw Courier-Herald*, "the body of a huge man swimming

through the air with an electric light at his back." It goes without saying that no theory which assumes that terrestrial inventors were solely responsible for airship manifestations is going to explain a sighting like this one.

Nor, as far as that goes, one like the now famous "calf-napping" at LeRoy, Kansas, on April 19, first reported in the *Yates Center [Kansas] Farmers' Advocate* for April 23, 1897, and since then widely reprinted in modern books on UFOs. Chief witness Alexander Hamilton related that the airship was "occupied by six of the strangest beings I ever saw. . . . They were jabbering together but we could not understand a syllable they said." As soon as they were discovered they sailed away, with Hamilton's calf in tow.

"I went home," Hamilton said, "but every time I would drop to sleep, I would see the cursed thing with its big lights and hideous people. I don't know whether they are devils or angels or what . . . I don't want any more to do with them."

Quite a contrast to Mr. Hopkins's attractive young couple. We are reminded of the various types of UFO beings reported in our own time—unpleasant-looking creatures that flee from sight as well as strikingly handsome "men" and beautiful "women" who usually behave in friendly fashion toward human beings who approach them.

On April 25 the *Daily Texarkanian* (Texarkana, Arkansas) published the testimony of Judge Lawrence A. Byrne:

I was down on McKinney bayou Friday [April 23] looking after the surveying of a tract of land and, in passing through a thicket to an open space, saw a strange-looking object anchored to the ground. On approaching I found it to be the airship I have read so much about of late. It was manned by three men who spoke a foreign language, but judging from their looks, would take them to be Japs. They saw my astonishment and beckoned me to follow them, and on complying, I was shown through the ship.

Judge Byrne said that the machine was made of aluminum and "the gas to raise and lower the monster was pumped into an aluminum tank when the ship was to be raised and let out when to be lowered."

That is pretty much the sum total of his account, whose interest for us lies in his mention of "Japs"—evidently short men with Oriental features. Beings fitting this description figure in more than a few modern accounts, most notably the famous Barney and Betty Hill UFO abduction, which was the subject of John G. Fuller's *The Interrupted Journey*.

Our last case is by far the eeriest of all. From the *Houston Daily Post* of April 28:

Merkel, Texas, April 26—Some parties returning from church last night noticed a heavy object dragging along with a 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 ten 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 ropes below him and sailed off in a northeast direction. The anchor is now on exhibition at the blacksmith shop of Elliott and Miller and is attracting the attention of hundreds of people.

And in an ancient, obscure Irish manuscript, *Speculum Regali*, we read of an incident that supposedly occurred in the year 956:

There happened in the borough of Cloera, one Sunday while people were at mass, a marvel. In this town there is a church to the memory of St. Kinarus. It befell that a metal anchor was dropped from the sky, with a rope attached to it, and one of the sharp flukes caught in the wooden arch above the church door. The people rushed out of the church and saw in the sky a ship with men on board, floating at the end of the anchor cable, and they saw a man leap overboard and pull himself down the cable to the anchor as if to unhook it. He appeared as if he were swimming in water. The folk rushed up and tried to seize him; but the bishop forbade the people to hold the man for fear it might kill him. The man was freed and hurried up the cable to the ship, where the

crew cut the rope and the ship rose and sailed away out of sight. But the anchor is in the church as a testimony to this singular occurrence.

As if that is not enough, around the year 1200 an anchor plummeted out of the sky, trailing a rope, and got caught in a mound of stones near a church in Bristol, England. As a mob of churchgoers congregated at the scene, a "sailor" came skitting down the rope to free it. According to Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia*, the crowd seized the intruder and "he suffocated by the mist of our moist atmosphere and expired." His unseen comrades cut the rope and departed.

We do not pretend to understand why an incident of this nature should continually recur, but its occurrence amid the 1897 airship flap should prove conclusively that we are dealing with phenomena whose full implications boggle the mind. Something virtually incomprehensible was taking place in nineteenth-century America, and whatever conclusions we draw from it are bound to be not only fantastic but tentative, for the gaps in the story are often greater than the substance. With that necessary warning we proceed to consider a couple of possibilities.

8

As we have seen, most of the events of the 1896-97 period do not seem to possess the paranormal overtones we have come to associate with strange flying objects and related phenomena. While UFOs, as the next chapter will show, are at best only quasiphysical, the airships, on the other hand, appear to have been built of conventional materials. The airship pilots—most of them, anyway—were undeniably human. They gave no evidence of supernormal powers. In their contacts with witnesses they did not (with, of course, the exceptions noted above) follow the unmistakable *modus operandi* familiar to students of what has come to be called the Phenomenon. These incidents seem to break with the past (as manifested in fairy and religious phenomena) while at the same time they do not connect with the future (UFOs). Perhaps the one obvious similarity is in the fact that many of the aeronauts possessed,

speaking euphemistically, a rather casual regard for the truth. Still, logic and the mass of evidence compel us to accept that they most likely were human scientists and inventors.

But the world of the nineteenth century had neither the knowledge nor the means to successfully fly heavier-than-air machines. Of that much we are certain. We are equally certain, conversely, that somebody was doing just that. Even if we reject Dellschau's claims as senile ravings, we still must confront the twin "impossible" facts of airships and human occupants.

Throughout history innumerable groups and societies, secret and otherwise, have banded together in acceptance of the idea that they were in one way or another in contact with "higher beings" who taught them things and oversaw their lives. Virtually all religions assume that their adherents were and are guided in this manner. So do cults of black and white magicians, spiritualists, flying saucer contactees, and many, many others. Some gifted scientists and inventors privately have believed that nonhuman entities helped them in their work.

Suppose that both in Germany and in the United States (specifically in California and New York) a secret cult of brilliant scientists, engineers, and inventors believed that it had established contact (perhaps through occult means—spiritualism, for example, was coming into prominence in the middle years of the nineteenth century) with paranormal forces which "told" them how to construct aerial vessels, ordering the group to keep its work under wraps. Presumably the German and American branches were in communication with one another, and around 1848 some of the Germans migrated in order to pool their efforts with those of their American cohorts. Setting up shop near Sonora, California, the group proceeded to conduct some incredible experiments.

Eventually there must have developed a degree of dissonance and dissatisfaction in the ranks as members of the group came to realize that they might never be allowed to give their *Aeros* to the world. They may have hoped that someone—Dellschau calls him the "right man"—would arrive to find a way to defy the "superiors" and make the airship public property (not all that public, of course

since the group stood to collect an enormous fortune for their enterprise).

The Germans who stayed in their own country could have been responsible for that first 1850s airship flap. In the years after that, however, they, too, might have come to America, which now was the center of aviation action. One of them might have been John O. Preast.

While airships appeared over America from time to time in the years leading up to 1896, it was during that year the group chose to conduct widespread, sustained flights for whatever inscrutable reason. In order to maintain secrecy at a period when airships would for the first time be widely observed, the society agreed to plant a series of conflicting, confusing claims to mislead outsiders. The ploy worked brilliantly, of course.

Members of the organization, believing themselves to be under the domination of forces which apparently did possess some kind of at least shadowy reality, may have come to consider themselves pawns in a cosmic game, much in the fashion of modern contactees who have had their lives directed and sometimes destroyed by UFO beings. They may have actually thought that their purpose was to distract attention from the activities of their "superiors" (who must be viewed as late-nineteenth-century members of that psychic continuum to which fairies and today's ufonauts also belong).

If Dellschau was lying, which of course is certainly possible, then we must revise our theory only to exclude the German and Sonora angles. The existence of a secret society in contact with a paranormal agency can be inferred from a wide range of other evidence we have studied.

But to pursue our initial hypothesis to its conclusion, let us suppose that Dellschau retired to Houston late in the nineteenth century (as in fact he did), depressed and discouraged because it looked as though the whole amazing business forever would remain a secret. Still intimidated by the "superiors" and afraid to speak too directly, nonetheless he determined to leave the world a series of clues in hopes that one day a "Wonder Weaver" would find them and sew together the entire dazzling fabric.

Or let us consider an auxiliary theory:

suppose that our secret group, failing to comprehend the real nature of the Phenomenon, never understood what it had unleashed on the world. Certainly its members knew that they were in the grip of a powerful force. But they did not know, to begin with, that this force is reflective, that it returns what it receives. As with other percipients alone were privy to the secrets of the Phenomenon, they alone were privy to the secrets of the Phenomenon, and fed back to them.

In other words, it is quite possible that the information in which the group constructed its airships (if in fact it came not so much from "higher intelligence," as inventors apparently thought, but from the collective knowledge to do so latently.

C. G. Jung's (in *Man and His Contents*) may not have consciously have never yet been converted to the experiences and the chemist discoveries when the un-

sects. Few Americans directly at any time saw the craft and something about it would be no safety anywhere, notwithstanding in the extreme. Moreover, the Phenomenon, always reflective, violated; men had tainted even the ships whose occupants were creatures from nightmare, archetypal forms out of the primeval of the collective unconscious. W. H. Hopkins found Martian Adam and Eve in the Missouri hills. Alex Haley but he did know that they were "devils or angels or what" — sky. For there was no more home on the earth, now that she had given up her greatest secrets, for a realm of wonder, of magical enchantment or supernatural horror. Outer space, however . . .

From the mystery to the machine—so it had begun when the aeronauts' secret society probed the Phenomenon for technical information. It had ended when the machine assumed their ancient place in the sky. The stage was set for the coming of Unidentified Flying Objects.