

AIRSHIP HYSTERIA IN MID-1890s AMERICA

***In 1896–97,
mysterious airships
were reported by
countless eyewitnesses
in cities and towns
from California to the
Midwest and then
the East Coast of
continental USA.
There were even
stories of airship
crashes, aliens and
a kidnapped calf.***

by Steven A. Arts © 2012–13

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All over the United States, people were seeing strange lights and objects in the sky. They were cigar shaped, sometimes travelling fast, and even the occupants could be made out many times. Some people said that they were balloons, the star Alpha Orionis or kites, or that humans had invented a new way to fly. This all started in the winter of 1896, starting in the state of California on the West Coast and ending up in the spring of 1897 in the Midwest. (I could cite dozens of pre-1896 airship sightings, but that would be beyond the scope of this article.)

The sightings were said to have started in California on 17 November 1896, but they actually started about two months before on 20 September. A Professor Swift noticed that there was a point of light in the sky on that date. The light was about the same magnitude as the planet Venus and was seen over the Pacific Ocean. The next day, a Professor Perrins at Lick Observatory near San Jose received a telegram from Swift, claiming the possible discovery of a new comet. Perrins looked for this supposed new comet, but by then it had disappeared.

On 22 October, Mayor Adolph Sutro of San Francisco reported that at 6.15 pm several people saw a light in the sky over the Pacific, heading east, but for only a few minutes. The object was travelling 500 feet [~152 metres] above the water, and was described as having an electric light type of glow to it.

Then, on 17 November, in the state capital of Sacramento, reportedly hundreds of people saw an erratic light, like that of an electric arc lamp. This description is consistent with much of the reporting during this airship era.

The Sacramento *Evening Bee* reported that a man from New York claimed to have invented the airship and was planning on making a trip to California in it soon. The article went on to talk about a cashier at the Central Electric Street Railway Company named Charles Lusk, who was said to have seen an airship while at home. He claimed that a railroad car man where he worked saw one as well. They reported hearing music, and voices saying "Well, we ought to get to San Francisco by tomorrow noon." The object was said to be balloon shaped.

Reports of this type permeate the contemporary newspaper accounts of airship sightings.

At the town of Truckee, hundreds of people reported seeing an airship which supposedly had the word "meteor" emblazoned on its side.

Some of the newspapers at the time took a pro stance in regard to these airship sightings, but many decided to make fun of the people who reported seeing airships. The *San Francisco Chronicle* was one of the latter: "Are there up in the sky four jolly and intrepid travelers, paying their respects to Mars, singing quartets to Venus, and saluting the planets generally within hailing distance, or are the people of Sacramento affected with a disease known in polite society as 'illuminated staggers'?". It thus implied that the people seeing airships were drunk.

Remember, this was a period in American newspaper history that received the name of "yellow journalism".

On 21 November, the people of Oakland thought that they saw an airship. Passengers in a cable car saw an airship at about 5.00 pm. One feature of this airship, which was different from most, was that it reportedly had a powerful light on the bottom, one that shone on the earth like a searchlight.

California and the Cuba Connection

On 22 November, a San Francisco attorney by the name of George D. Collins first came to prominence in the airship story. Collins claimed that he represented a man in Oroville who had invented the airship. Collins was really very clever to make the town of Oroville the home of the so-called human inventor of the airship. If an actual airship were to fly out of Oroville, it would perhaps follow the Feather River south, all the way to Sacramento, on its way to San Francisco.

Actually, this entire airship era was full of stories about men who supposedly had invented an airship which was supposed to be *the* airship, as if one airship could possibly account for the hundreds of sightings—some on the same day, even the approximate same time, hundreds of miles or more away from each other.

Collins made headlines in the newspapers of northern California, and must have got a bunch of new clients for his efforts. It was all free publicity for him.

By now, the airship sightings were in full swing. Reporters went to Oroville, looking for the inventor. Of course, this mystery man never could be found.

There were many sightings of airships over

Sacramento, San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland, Woodland and other places. On 23 November, Samuel Foltz, the advertising manager of the *San Francisco Call*, saw an airship at night. A Colonel W. H. Menton of the Southern Pacific Company saw three lights in the sky. One M. H. Cohen, a cable car conductor, also saw an airship. Many other people in San Francisco were said to have seen airships.

Besides Collins, another Californian started to become prominent among the airship reports. W. H. H. Hart somehow took over as attorney for Collins's mysterious Oroville airship inventor.

Hart added a new, and completely unexpected, idea about the airship question. Hart claimed that the airship would be used to bomb Havana, the capital of Spanish-held Cuba, from the air!

Again on 23 November there were airship sightings in Berkeley, Chico and Red Bluff. Some 50 people in Red Bluff saw an airship at a reported height of 2,000 feet [~610 metres], heading towards

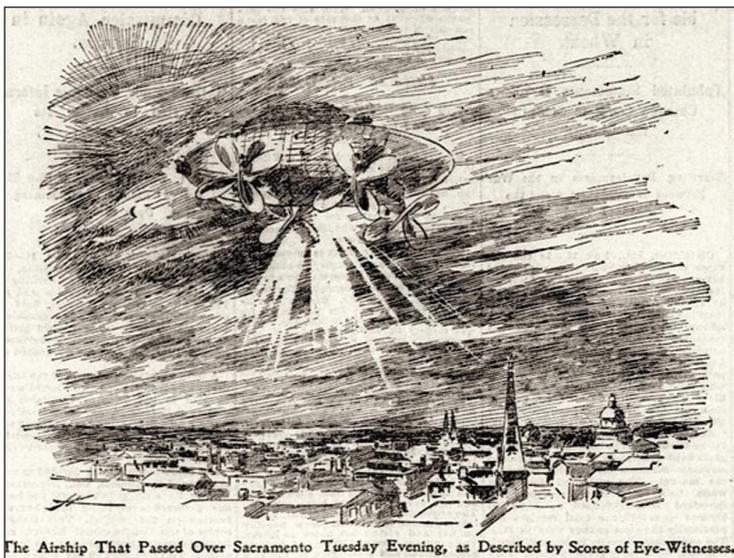
Eureka in the far northwest of California. Another airship was seen cruising over the city of Oakland for two hours. In San Francisco, it was speculated that some balloons had been sent up, supposedly explaining a sighting there. This was not the only such speculation during this era. So-called "airship fever" continued in California during this month. Several people in Auburn saw an airship, but some claimed it was Venus that they were seeing. A light was seen over Fresno, near the central part of the state. People in such towns as Vallejo were actively trying to spot airships, but many of them failed. The newspaper reports were seeming to produce "airship sighting anticipation" in some locales.

Cuba kept being caught up in this airship fever. The *Examiner* newspaper titled the airship "Thunderbird" and reported that it would throw eggs at General Weyler, the Spanish Governor of Cuba at this time. Cubans were staging a revolt against Spanish colonial rule.

Airships and Cuba kind of go hand in hand. This was less than a decade before the Wright brothers perfected flight, and only a couple of years before the Spanish-American War of 1898, in which Cuba gained its freedom. During this airship period, Cubans were hoping to involve America in their revolt against the Spanish. America was still in its imperial stage, trying to expand its frontiers, and so many people were sympathetic to the Cubans' quest for liberty.

Meanwhile, hundreds of people in Oakland and Alameda were said to have seen airships, and they

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The Airship That Passed Over Sacramento Tuesday Evening, as Described by Scores of Eye-Witnesses.

were even talking about "flocks of airships".

On 26 November it was claimed that nearly every person in the town of Petaluma, north of San Francisco, saw an airship, which was seen as a light in the sky. Two businessmen in Alameda were said to be charging people admission to view an airship with their telescope.

Another form that these sightings took were kites. One A. H. Babcock of Oakland was said to have sent a monster kite aloft in the afternoon, which many people mistook for an airship. John Griser of Oakland was said to have destroyed an airship he was working on because he thought someone else had already invented the thing.

The reports continued during November, with airship sightings at such California towns as Eureka, Redwood City, Woodland, Hayward and Redding, among many others.

Every newspaper, or so it seems, thought that certain articles they published would finally bring the airship controversy to a grinding halt, but events during the coming months would prove otherwise.

Now, airship sightings reached down into the southern part of the state. The *Bakersfield Californian* on 29 November reported a sighting there. A Professor Burckhalter of the Chabot Observatory claimed that the airship sightings were merely mistaken observations of Mars or Venus. University professors also appear somewhat prominently throughout the airship era.

Then, on 30 November, an airship was seen over the city of Los Angeles, which then had a population of only 53,000 people. There, people saw three lights in the sky which were said to conform to airship sightings reported in the *Call*. A certain Charles Fuller Gates, who was said to be an expert on bicycles, claimed that the airships were really just toy balloons used with reflectors. Gates said that he suspected university students to have created this hoax. Of this incident, the *Los Angeles Times* said that people had mistaken the airships for either Mars or Venus. Yet in another long story, this same newspaper claimed that a Los Angeles man had invented the airship!

During this time, there were many more airship sightings in California and other western states, one of the last ones around 17 December. Fifty people in Biggs saw an airship. A local train stopped just outside of town in order to get a view of it.

By 16 January 1897, the *Call* was still quoting Hart. There was a final airship reported as being seen at Lodi.

Airship Fever Spreads East

As airship fever on the West Coast petered out slowly, sightings on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains started to show up, as if the airships, if they existed, were travelling eastward. Most people of the time thought that the airships were travelling toward New York City.

Strangely enough, one of the first of these reports happened far to the east at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on 25 January. "Many Harrisburgers have been interested to the point of excitement over the evening star the last few days and not a few residents have become indignant when told it is not an electric light sent high in the clouds for experimental purposes," wrote a reporter for the *Harrisburg Patriot*.

It seems as if some people in that city thought that someone was going to send aloft a balloon, complete with electric lights, from the city of Pittsburgh to their west. It was a sure sign that people in the East and Midwest knew about the West Coast airship reports and were actually anticipating seeing some of these mysterious flying vehicles.

This idea of balloons being set up with powerful electric lights appears to be related to the airship sightings. There are stories of powerful electric arc-like airship sightings over such places as the upper peninsula of Michigan.

Then there are the stories on the East Coast saying that powerful lights in the sky were the work of inventor Thomas Alva Edison. Several newspapers reported this, trying to convince people that it was the planet Venus that they saw. No one seemed to want to believe it. Edison sometimes denied the rumours of his involvement and at other times was silent on the whole matter.

Speaking of Thomas Edison, it's very funny that he should ever have been tied in to the reports of airships in the sky. Edison went on the record as a firm disbeliever in airships. He even said that such an invention as the airship, were it actually to be built, would not be a financially viable endeavour. Little did he know the true possibilities of manned flight.

The first true airship sighting east of the Rocky Mountains occurred on 1 February 1897 at Hastings, Nebraska. This story had the inevitable human agency in it. It was thought that a man west of that city was experimenting with an airship. From the context of the article in question, it's obvious that the Hastings airship had actually been spotted in the fall of 1896.

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South of Hastings came another airship sighting, this one at a place called Inavale. On 6 February, some 12 people going home after a church prayer meeting saw an airship. It was said to have a bright headlight, to be 30 to 40 feet [~9.14 to 12.19 metres] in length and conical in shape, and to have six smaller lights attached. Some of the people even reported hearing voices coming from the craft, and heard a man's voice just before it disappeared into the night sky.

Lights in the sky were reported at York and Big Springs and were witnessed by three men in North Platte, according to the *Kearney Hub*. The light was said to be the size of a barrel (this analogy shows up later on in a variation on a Kearney airship sighting), and it was seen to descend from 300 feet [~91.4 metres] in a shower of sparks. The night was described as being clear and bright, with the Moon shining.

The big city of Omaha saw its first airship on 16 February. There was a party going on at 26th and H. Streets, and a young girl spotted a strange object in the sky. The girl hurried back to the party and told everyone to "come out and see the funny thing in the sky". Thomas Hazel claimed that the airship was no more than 400 to 500 feet [~122 to 152 metres] in the air. A couple of dozen witnesses reported seeing the lights that night.

One of the best-known airship sightings of this kind happened in Kearney, involving the then city clerk Charley Prescott. The *Kearney Hub*, which reported the sighting, claimed to disbelieve all the airship hubbub. Prescott was said to have been a disbeliever prior to this sighting. The airship was described as being the size of a water bucket, no doubt seen in perspective from afar. It was said not to have moved much, but local politics stuck its ugly head in here. The airship was described as "forecasting the selection of Sullivan for judge".

Airships showed up in Nebraska at Lincoln, McCool Junction, McCook, and many other cities and small towns across the Midwest.

Crashes, Aliens and Cownapping

By far the busiest month for airship reports was April 1897. Sightings started in Texas, Nebraska, Kansas and Iowa, and stretched east to Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and other states. It was a countrywide phenomenon. Here, a highlight of only a few airship sightings will have to suffice.

Among the many reports there were even a few airship

crashes and a cownapping. One of the airship crashes supposedly happened in the small town of Jefferson, Iowa. This story has remained within the dusty annals of newspaper history for far too long.

The *Jefferson Bee* on 15 April 1897 contained a report that an airship supposedly crashed near the town in a farmer's field. According to the story, most of the residents of Jefferson gathered around the gaping, smoking hole in the ground. However, nothing was done that day to investigate. The next day, some intrepid citizens sent a man down below on a rope to check it out. He reportedly took a Volapük dictionary with him. (Volapük is an artificial language, similar to today's Esperanto.) Once down the hole, the man entered the airship. From his subsequent description, everything seemed amazingly neat and clean, despite the violent crash.

In the same issue of the *Bee*, other airship crashes and "captures" were reported in surrounding Greene County communities such as Churdan. Various alien creatures were described.

One of the best-known airship crashes of this era occurred in the small town of Aurora, Texas, around 17 April, when an airship came flamingly out of the sky and crashed near the town. Many UFO researchers today consider this report to have been a hoax, since there were many airship crashes reported during this short period.

A local character named S. E. Hughes sold an article about the airship crash to the *Dallas Morning News*. Some scholars say that Hughes was a town promoter, trying to bring the railroad to Aurora. The craft itself was said

to have been 300 feet long by 50 feet wide [~91.4 by 15.2 metres], and one T. J. Weems, allegedly of the US Army Signal Corps, claimed that the airship pilot was a Martian!

After the incident was rediscovered in the 1970s, it was found out that Weems had never existed but there had been a blacksmith in town at that time named Jeff Weems. Hieroglyph-like symbols were said to have been found, and the dead Martian was given a Christian burial in the local cemetery. When rediscovered, all of this information led to an incredible amount of interest by modern airship and UFO researchers. However, no body was ever found.

In southern Missouri came a report of an incident that is one of the most imaginative of the era. It reportedly

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happened on a lonely stretch of road near the city of Springfield, and happened to a travelling salesman by the name of William Hopkins, who lived in St Louis. The article relates that Hopkins was driving a wagon in some hills near the city when he saw an airship sitting on the ground, with two nude aliens standing nearby. Hopkins lovingly described the nude female alien, saying that she was "dressed in nature's garb". He described the male as a super-Grecian Adonis.

In a letter that Hopkins wrote to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Hopkins betrayed a penchant for kissing hands, having kissed both of the aliens, which they perhaps considered a bit odd. Perhaps this was an American custom of the day, as it had been in Europe for a very long time. According to his letter, Hopkins tried further to communicate with the aliens and was apparently successful in the attempt. They subsequently invited Hopkins aboard their airship, which, from his description, didn't seem to be too 19th century in appearance. After a fairly thorough look over, the aliens started the airship, which began to rise off of the ground. Hopkins panicked and jumped off before it lifted too far off of the ground.

Perhaps the most talked-about incident of the airship era happened in late April 1897 near the town of LeRoy, Kansas. This case involved a farmer named Alexander Hamilton, his son Wallace and a hired hand named Heslip. After Hamilton's dog began barking one night, the three men went to investigate. They saw an airship floating above them, 300 feet long, with a carriage beneath it. The occupants were described as being two men, a woman and three children, all of whom were considered to be strange-looking.

The witnesses saw a rope descend from the hovering craft, which then latched onto a calf. The animal panicked and began bawling and jumping. The airship carried the calf away. Hamilton gave chase on one of his horses, but couldn't catch the airship.

Lank Thomas, another farmer who lived some miles away, was said to have found the calf's hide, legs and head in his field. Afterwards, 11 men, including the town's postmaster, sheriff and justice of the peace, signed an affidavit testifying to Hamilton's truthfulness. Modern-day researchers have since found evidence that Hamilton belonged to a local Liar's Club and probably made up the whole story.

However, just because a witness in this

one case may have lied, we shouldn't consider every airship sighting of that era to have been hoaxed. There were far too many witnesses who saw too many airships in too many places for them all to have been hallucinating. Many people would not have risked so much ridicule, especially during an era that didn't have many legal constraints in that direction.

Little Men from Mars and Other Theories

In the early 1890s, Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli claimed to have seen *canali* on the surface of Mars. This term was rapidly translated into English as the word "canal", which gave it a man-made meaning, instead of "channel" which has a natural definition to it and which should have been the translation.

Add to that the work of the famous American astronomer Percival Lowell, who saw these striations on the surface of Mars and came up with an elaborate theory of Martian civilisation. He claimed that the so-called canals on Mars were the work of intelligent beings. This was the start of the "little men from

Mars" stories.

From Lowell's wild ideas indirectly sprang the *John Carter of Mars* books, written by Edgar Rice Burroughs of Tarzan fame. H. G. Wells in *The War of the Worlds* was also influenced by Lowell's observations and writings.

There were many aspects of these airship sightings that differed from modern UFO reports. One that the researcher comes across time and again are the reports of supposedly human inventors of the airships. This era was just a few years before the actual conquest of flight in the early part of the 20th century.

At the time, there actually were men who were experimenting with the idea of heavier-than-air craft.

The witnesses saw a rope descend from the hovering craft, which then latched onto a calf. The animal panicked... The airship carried the calf away...



One such inventor was Samuel Pierpont Langley, who was the then secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. There were others, such as Hiram Maxim.

Another way in which airship reports differed from their modern counterparts is that reporters at that time had relatively few restraints put upon them. They could, and very often did, falsely report things. This was usual then because it was the so-called era of "yellow journalism", which included war-mongering in the name of patriotism.

At Rogers Park in Chicago, one Walter McCann allegedly took a photograph of an airship, but the actual photo was never found. All that this researcher has found are illustrations drawn from the so-called photograph. Newspapers at the time normally used wood carvings instead of photographs; the technology for printing photographs in newspapers wouldn't exist for a number of years.

Another theory from modern researchers about airship sightings of this era involves the telegrapher's hoax. Daniel Cohen, in his book *The Great Airship Mystery*, speculates that airship sightings were spread by railroad telegraphers, since many sightings occurred on trains or involved train and railroad crewmen.

Of greater import, however, might be the theory of a newspaper hoax. As many modern researchers have found out, newspaper hoaxes during this time were very common, especially by newspapers whose editors or proprietors believed in the sightings or perhaps felt that they had something to gain financially from airship sightings articles. Even the famous American writer Edgar Allan Poe was the author of a journalistic hoax half a century before this era.

If any conspiracy were actually going on at the time, perhaps newspapers are the most likely culprits to have been involved. Newspapers at that time had no compulsion against totally fabricating stories of airships, kites, balloons, airship inventors, airship crashes and such. Many newspapers, especially those in smaller towns which hadn't yet had any airship sightings reported, published articles on airships in other locales and often bemoaned the fact that their town hadn't yet been blessed with a sighting. This is what I call "airship anticipation". People in these towns and cities were hearing about airship sightings elsewhere and were anxious to see them with their very own eyes. In many cases, there were airship sightings in those very same towns and cities.

All of the participants in these airship sightings are, of course, long dead. So, no one who was alive at that time can ever be interviewed now. These are what forensic

investigators term "cold cases", but in such cases at least some of the people involved in a murder might still be alive. These should be termed "frozen cases".

Whatever these people saw during the 1896–1897 period, we may never know. Yet it is interesting to research these historical cases because they shed light on American popular culture of the time, if nothing else. Not only that, they can be very entertaining! ∞

About the Author:

Steven A. Arts has been researching airships since 1979, and his book *Mystery Airships in the Sky* was published in 2002 by PublishAmerica. Mr Arts has had many articles on the subject of airships published, including in *UFO Magazine*, *Kanhistique*, *Sagebrush Journal*, *UFO Universe*, *Capper's*, *Old California Gazette* and *Rural Electric Nebraskan* as well as in many newspapers.

Mr Arts also had his book and airship research used for a 2005 episode of the *Wild West Tech* show for the *History* channel.

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