

# MORE ON 1897

by Jerome Clark

Our contributor from Minnesota makes a welcome return to the columns of  
FLYING SAUCER REVIEW after a long illness.

THE 1897 UFO wave has been ignored far too long. Until 1965 UFO students had been little more than aware of its existence, relying upon the incomplete and somewhat misleading data of Fort,<sup>1</sup> Keyhoe,<sup>2</sup> and Ruppelt.<sup>3</sup> With the appearance of Jacques Vallée's *Anatomy of a Phenomenon*—which drew attention to the LeRoy incident—interest in the period has grown considerably, and preliminary studies into the “airship” and related matters have already been published in the FLYING SAUCER REVIEW by Vallée, Donald Hanlon, Lucius Farish, and this writer.<sup>4</sup> Gordon Lore of the NICAP staff has written an important new book, to be published this year, that will deal in part with the airship.

It is now evident that the 1897 flap contains within it a number of highly significant clues to the UFO problem, and I suspect that a really thorough search through newspaper morgues, files of state historical societies, etc., would uncover masses of data that might place the general enigma in a new and radically different context. Even today, it seems to me, the “traditional” theories of ufologists are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the new light of the 1897 evidence. The relatively simple picture drawn by Keyhoe, Hall, Lorenzen, Oberth and most other serious investigators may eventually have to be discarded and replaced with—who knows?

## A Photograph

In common with its latter-day counterpart, the “flying saucer,” the airship was photographed. Although to my knowledge none of these photographs has survived, the following account, discovered by Farish, is interesting because of its extreme detail. The photographer and speaker is Mr. C. D. Lawrence, a view artist:

“At 5.15 this morning (April 26) I was awakened by someone who ran into the house, arousing the inmates with the explanation that a large balloon was hovering over Baring Cross, beyond the upper bridge. The house where I was stopping is located near the power house of the street railway company, commanding an excellent view of that portion of the city where the mystery was seen. With other members of the household I hurried out and saw what at first appeared to be a very large balloon moving toward the south at a very rapid rate. It was coming end-on and I soon saw that it was not a balloon but the airship about which we have so long been reading. It approached toward the river, and then suddenly veered towards the east and after proceeding a short distance, turned northward, soon disappearing from sight, after having been visible for at least fifteen minutes. I secured a negative while

it appeared broad-side toward the amazed observers, and as you may see a very good view was secured. The negative shows a large cylindrical body pointed at both ends like a cigar, apparently about forty feet in length, although it was seen at such an altitude that no one could accurately judge of its dimensions. A car, in which the navigators of the vessel resided, depended from the buoyant body, being a large box-like arrangement, from which a heavy anchor depended by means of a long rope.<sup>5</sup> The propeller is arranged at one of the ends of the ship, as is plainly shown in the negative. I could not, of course, definitely give the velocity, but I think I am safe in saying that it could not have been less than fifty miles an hour. The testimony of the large number who witnessed the strange sight would be conclusive evidence of its genuineness, even if I had not been so fortunate as to secure this negative.”

## A Contact

The next story appeared in the Harrisburg, Arkansas, *Modern News* for April 23, 1897. I am, frankly, quite sceptical of this account, mainly because of its suspiciously excessive detail. But several points are significant: for one, we have here probably the first reference to a UFO powered by “anti-gravity”, a feature not to become prominent until the advent of the post-1947 contact claims. Secondly, the aeronaut expresses an interest in terrestrial political problems, especially the plight of the Cuban people under Spanish rule; an April 15 contact near Springfield, Illinois, has the airship's occupants discussing the same topic.<sup>6</sup> Third, as a point of possible corroboration, Mr. Harris's mention of an “old gentleman (who) wore a heavy set of dark, silken whiskers, which hung down near his waist”, is reminiscent of Sumpter and McLemore's “man with a long dark beard”.<sup>7</sup> Harris's airship allegedly contained a crew of, in addition to the old man, two young men and a woman; Sumpter and McLemore reported an elderly man, a young man and a woman. On the minus side, a search through the files of a Dallas daily newspaper did not turn up any reported sightings of an airship shortly after midnight of the morning of April 21.

I am presenting this claim, despite my reservations, for the record. Parts of the story had faded so badly on the newspaper page that they were impossible to read. Where this had happened, I have so indicated with a dash.

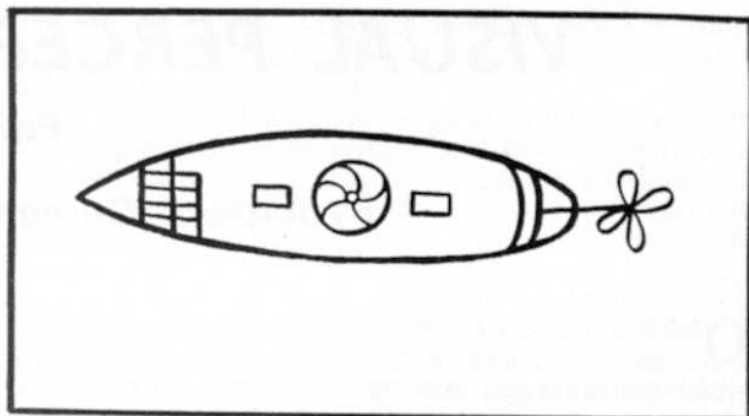
“The airship of which we have read so much of late has caused considerable comment but no one ever dreamed that it would ever be anchored in Harrisburg. Wednesday night (April 21) Ex-Senator Harris was

awakened about 1 o'clock by an unfamiliar noise, and upon taking a peep out he spied a peculiar looking object in the west. Instantly he thought of the wonderful airship which had so mystified the people of the west during the past few weeks, and hurriedly dressing he took his field glass and went out in the yard where he could get a good view. The first sight through the glass satisfied him that it was a wonderful airship. As the object came nearer he could discern the shape, but in a few seconds it came so near he threw down his glass. The mysterious flyer paused and gradually descended to within a few feet of the ground and only a short distance from Mr. Harris's yard. Mr. Harris says there was an elderly man, a woman and two young men on board. The old gentleman wore a heavy set of dark, silken whiskers, which hung down near his waist. He had jet black eyes and a deep, firm expression. Mr. Harris said he walked out a little nearer and hailed the old gentleman. The old man seemed a little surprised when he spoke, not expecting to see any one out at that hour of night, but he spoke pleasantly, and after taking on a supply of fresh well water, he said:

"Well, you seem to be a very clever man, and if you will promise not to divulge my secret in a way to do me harm, I will tell you the whole story, except how the effect is produced."

"After receiving satisfactory assurance, he continued:

"(—) you remember about 26 years (ago?), what is now called the *St. Louis Republic* was then the *St. (—)*. It changed to (—) and later to the (—), about 26 years ago (—) was, the *St. Louis Times* (—) exclusively, an account of a scientific invention made by a gentleman, whose name I will not mention, by which the laws of gravitation were entirely and completely suspended. He was offered big sums of money for it by several syndicates in this country, and also had large offers from parties at Paris, London and many other places. During the time he was considering these offers he was taken violently ill, and after lingering a few weeks died, leaving his invention in the vault. This man was my uncle and he had partially confided the secret to me, but not sufficiently for me to do anything without the original invention. After the lapse of about 19 years I managed to secure the original, and having plenty of money at my disposal and having devoted my time and talent during the past seven years to experimenting, I have an airship which is almost perfection, but I am not quite through experimenting, and so I continue to travel at night to keep from being detected. I will make an attempt to visit the planet Mars before I put the airship on public exhibition. Weight is no object to me. I suspend all gravitation by placing a small wire around an object. You see I have a 4-ton improved Hotchkiss gun on board, besides



A newspaper reporter's sketch of an airship which passed over Nashville, Arkansas, late in April 1897.

about ten tons of ammunition. I was making preparations to go over to Cuba and kill out the Spanish army if hostilities had not ceased, but now my plans are changed and I may go to the aid of the Armenians. To this improved gun we only have to pour the cartridges into a hopper and press a button and it fires 63,000 times per minute. No, gravitation is not in my way. I place my wire around this 4-ton gun and hold it out with one hand and take aim. Oh, I could place my anti-gravitation wire around the national capital building and take it by the dome and bring it over and set it down in Harrisburg as easy as I could an ink stand. Distance is almost overcome; why, we came over the suburbs of Dallas at 12.10, less than an hour ago, and we have travelled very slowly. I could take breakfast here, do my shopping in Paris and be back here for dinner without inconvenience, as soon as I get my new propellers completed."

"He said he must be off before anyone else was disturbed and invited Mr. Harris to take a ride with him, but he kindly declined the offer. He bade Mr. Harris adieu and floated up and drifted away to a place among the stars and in a few seconds was hid beyond the darkness of the night."

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> Charles Fort, *New Lands*, 1923.
- <sup>2</sup> Donald E. Keyhoe, *The Flying Saucers Are Real*, 1950.
- <sup>3</sup> Edward J. Ruppelt, *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, 1956.
- <sup>4</sup> Donald B. Hanlon and Jacques Vallée, *Airships over Texas*: FSR, January/February 1967.  
Hanlon, *Texas Odyssey of 1897*: FSR, September/October 1966.  
Lucius Farish, *An 1880 UFO*: FSR, May/June 1965.  
Jerome Clark, *A Contact Claim*: FSR, January/February 1965.  
Clark, *The Strange Case of the 1897 Airship*: FSR, July/August 1966.
- <sup>5</sup> See the Sioux City, Iowa, and Merkel, Texas, reports. (*Strange Case . . .* p. 10, and *Texas Odyssey . . .* p.10, respectively.)
- <sup>6</sup> *A Contact Claim*, p.31.
- <sup>7</sup> *Strange Case . . .* p.15.

NOTE: The author wishes to thank Mr. Lucius Farish of Plumerville, Arkansas, one of the real pioneers of 1897 research, for the information used in this article.

# VISUAL PERCEPTION OF UFOs

## Part II

by Anthony Durham and Keith Watkins

OVER a period of years psychologists have managed to gain some idea of the perceptual mechanisms by which the brain can interpret the retinal signals. These ideas are in the form of "black box" theories; that is, the logic involved in various operations has been investigated, but the details of the operations in terms of nerve cells and connections are not known. Basically, the brain digests the incoming information and then builds a perception from its own experience. This perception is "tested" against the incoming data to see if it fits. If it fits, all is well; if not, a new perception is tried.

Everyone must have experienced suddenly seeing something in a different way, or temporarily seeing an object in some pattern which is not really there. This is evidence of the brain trying out its perceptions. Experiments have been carried out on the way the data is used, the kinds of data picked out as visual cues, the relative importance of these cues, and the way the brain works under anomalous conditions. Also, the effects of previous experience, learning and subconscious attitudes have been investigated. These are important since we now know that incoming data is modified by experience and may even be neglected if it is too unusual. The problems of perception presented to the brain are interrelated and are difficult to consider separately. However, here we will break up the subject into the perception of distance and depth, of size, of colour, and of movement.

For all these topics the first problem is the limited information handling capacity of the brain. The brain tends to arrange visual data into labelled chunks, reducing the amount of information in the display. If one looks at a regular display of dots, one sees somewhat labile groupings of the dots into columns and squares. This shows the active organising power of the brain; it is always looking for ways of grouping information. Also, perception is not instantaneous, but normally requires time for eye movements and multiple fixations upon various objects, each fixation providing a batch of information to be analysed and incorporated into the overall perception. When you look hard at one small area, such as a TV set, everything else begins to fade and blur until you cannot see it any longer. A constant flow of information is needed to maintain a sharp picture.

The specific cues used in distance and depth perception are as follows:—

1. **Accommodation/convergence cues.** These are really physiological cues and relate to the focusing of the eye and the amount of convergence or "cross-eyedness" being used to see the object. These cues are only useful over a few inches.
2. **Binocular disparity.** Because of the separation

between the eyes, the retinas receive different images, with small differences in the positions of objects in the field. One can verify this by shutting first one eye then the other and observing the difference. These images are fused by the brain and the difference used to give depth. Because of the short baseline between the eyes this effect is of little importance at distances over, say, 50 feet. However, over such short distances it is quite good. Unfortunately, with a self-luminous object against a homogeneous background, the mechanism does not work very well and can occasionally be deceiving. For example a small nearby UFO could be mistaken for a larger one further away.

3. **Motion parallax.** If one moves around, the relative positions of objects change according to their distance.
4. **Interposition.** This is when an object covers or blocks off part of another object. This cue is an extremely powerful one and in experimental conditions can override an opposing stereoscopic cue.

5. **Linear and detail perspective.** Linear perspective is due to the geometry of the situation, e.g., railway lines appear to converge towards the horizon. Detail perspective is partly due to the finite resolving power of the eye—that is, less detail can be seen on distant objects.

6. **Aerial perspective.** Distant objects look bluer and mistier. Paintings by Leonardo da Vinci used this device particularly effectively. This effect is very much conditioned by environment: in the clear air of deserts and mountain ranges town-bred people can make large errors in distance judgements. Try standing on top of Snowdon and estimating the distances to the nearest peaks: then find their actual distances from a map! However, this is the only mechanism applicable over any distance in a blank visual field.

7. **Light and shade effects.** These are more concerned with the depth of individual objects and their shape, rather than their actual distance. Normally, light comes from above, and shadows give information about which parts of the objects stick out and which in, i.e., the 3D shape. In summary, to put it bluntly; there is no reliable way of estimating the distance of an unknown object (especially a featureless one) more than a few hundred feet away in a blank visual field.

The cues used for size are the distance of the object (estimated as above) and subjective ideas of its real size. The retinal image (which is what corresponds to the actual angular size) is modified and displayed as a perception of the object apparently much closer. For example, look at one hand at arm's length and the other at half this distance: they look very nearly the same size, providing the images do not overlap. As soon as the hands are lined up, the difference in size becomes marked, and the perceived images approximate to the relative sizes of the retinal images, in this