

THE 1897 STORY Part 2

By Jerome Clark and Lucius Farish

ON the morning of April 15, 1897, citizens of Linn Grove, Iowa, saw a large construction moving northward slowly, and several of them—identified as James Evans, F. G. Ellis, Ben Buland, David Evans and Joe Croskey—followed it out into the country, thinking that it might land. About four miles from town, it did. But when its pursuers got within 700 yards of it, the craft spread out its four monstrous wings and flew away. As it rose, its occupants tossed out two boulders “of unknown composition.”

Concerning the beings aboard the machine, a news account mentions “two queer-looking persons . . . who made desperate efforts to conceal themselves.” The observers said the entities had the longest beards they had ever seen in their lives. (Airship occupants with very long beards figure in two Arkansas contact claims of the period.)

A large dark balloon passed over Shelby, Michigan, at 9 that evening. Viewers described it as having two lights, one white and one green. At Middleville at exactly the same time, “moving and changing lights” coloured red, blue and green appeared in the southwest sky as they travelled northward and downward. An hour and a half later, another object rose out of the east and floated southwestward. This one was shaped like a large balloon with an attached car which possessed coloured lights and which scattered smoke. At 11, college students in Olivet saw three red lights moving rapidly and at great altitude.

To the local paper several Hudson residents gave their impressions of the airship that overflowed their city late at night:

Gene Knapp: “It’s no hoax about that airship. We had just drove [*sic*] down to the depot when some of the boys called my attention to the bright red light which seemed to be sailing into town from the west. It looked like a shooting star at first, but when it got down opposite us, on West Main street, we saw a green light about 25 feet from it, and sure, right there before our eyes. We saw the outline of a dark object against the sky, and some of ’em thought they could see several men aboard. It looked as if one of ’em was trying to wave his hat at us.”

Charlie Lane: “This is no mariner’s yarn. As sure as I live, I saw the airship last night. How high was it? About 400 feet from the ground I should say. Shape? Cigar-shaped and covered with a canvas canopy. It sailed right along rapidly and easily against the wind, which did not seem to have any effect on it.”

Sid Lawrence: “It was certainly 25 feet long, had a rudder, was quite a curiosity.”

Professor George J. Tripp, asked his opinion, said, “How do I account for it? I don’t try to”—then tried to. “I think it was a star the people saw. I would like to have trained my telescope on it, anyway, that would have settled it. Of course, I didn’t see it at all, but how

do I account for its moving so fast? Hallucination, some men’s minds move swifter than others.” So much for the scientific approach.

Mentioning a sighting made by many persons at Charlotte the night before, the April 16 *Detroit Evening News* noted, “Charlotte is a dry town.” So much, too, for the perceptiveness of journalists.

After an airship passage the previous night, pressmen at the office of the *Battle Creek Daily Moon* found a large sailor’s needle at the door; attached to it was a letter, purportedly from the airship’s crew, relating that the craft had flown from San Francisco to the Great Lakes in one day and was now on the return trip.

“Driven by steam”

Saginaw hosted mysterious aerial phenomena in the early morning hours of the 16th. Shortly after midnight, a cloud-like object, dimly lighted, came out of the southwest and kept on a northbound course “at a terrific rate of speed.” At 2.45, as they patrolled on the corner of Astor and Jefferson, Roundsman Halsey and Patrolman Foley of the police force heard what sounded like the rattle of a drum. Looking up, they sighted a cigar-shaped machine and something hanging about 10 feet below the main body, carrying a red and yellow light that appeared to be shining through canvas. The airship travelled at approximately 25 miles per hour, by the policemen’s estimate. A telephone workman, Thomas S. Prentice, claimed to have seen the object from the west side of the river.

“According to late reports from different parts of the country,” stated a local newspaper later in the day, “the strange messenger is a real airship, operated by some of its inventors, who are simply making a trial trip and who have already made applications for patents. The principle on which it is constructed is that of the parallel plane and it is operated by steam.”

Several residents of Bay City saw what at first resembled a “flying cloud” as they walked home at 12.30 a.m. from a lodge meeting. When the object got closer, it revealed itself as a material construction passing through an overcast sky. Flying slowly over Center Street, it seemed not more than 50 feet high. There was a red light at each end, and the craft itself shone with a dull red glow, as if there were lights on the other side. Conical in shape, it was from 50 to 75 feet in length, perhaps one-third that in width. The observers could see nothing that offered a clue to the object’s method of propulsion.

The ship crossed into nearby Essexville and then seemed to land. No one ventured out to see if it had.

Sky-“swimmer”?

Mount Vernon, Illinois, recorded what must surely rank as one of the weirdest reports of the 1897 period. The *Saginaw Courier-Herald* recounted the bare details

(our italics): "What is thought to have been the mysterious airship was seen [at Mount Vernon] by more than a hundred persons. It was first observed about 8.30 o'clock and continued in sight for half an hour. Mayor Wells, who had an excellent view of the mysterious visitor from the observatory attached to his residence, says it resembled *the body of a huge man swimming through the air with an electric light at his back.*"†

Airships appeared at Pittsford, Clayton, and Ann Arbor (all in Michigan) the same evening. At Cadmus, one excitable soul shot at the object, thinking it was a flying dragon.

Three night men employed by the Wallin Leather Company in Grand Rapids reported seeing a bright white light in the western sky. They watched it at intervals over a three-and-a-half hour period, until it disappeared in the north at 3 a.m. on the 17th.

An 1897 "message"

Later in the morning, at 6.15, on his way to work, Mr. C. T. Smith stumbled upon something on the sidewalk. Upon examination it proved to be an envelope on which someone had written "From the Airship Travellers." Inside was a letter, "written," related a news story, "on note paper with a purple indellible [*sic*] pencil, . . . attached to a piece of stiff wire about five inches long, at the other end of which was fastened, as a weight, one of the iron combination stoppers and bottle openers commonly used to open beer bottles."

The message read:

To whoever finds this. 2,500 feet above the level of the sea, headed north at this writing, testing the airship. afraid we are lost. we are unable to control our engine. please notify our people. think we are somewhere over Michigan.

Arthur B. Coats, Laurel, Miss.
C. C. Harris, Gulport, Miss.
C. W. Rich, Richburg, Miss.

April 16th, '97. 9 p.m.

An unidentified flying object flew over Three Rivers that night.

In another incident involving airships and railroads, persons at Grant Station in Bailey reported watching a

huge object, about 200 feet in length, flying above the northbound evening train. The phenomenon seemed to be about a mile above the earth.

The next afternoon, a strange explosion rocked the village of Saline. Upon hearing the sound, workers just north of town had their attention attracted to a large dark object moving rapidly westward against a strong wind.

Between 8 and 9 p.m. an airship passed over Saginaw at a fast rate of speed, heading in a northerly direction. At Manistique, citizens viewed the craft travelling westward. C. R. Orr, a witness, estimated its speed at 1,000 m.p.h.—which certainly sounds extravagant, considering the relatively slow speeds other observers in other cases had reported. At any rate, the construction resembled, the Sault Ste. Marie *News* said, "a Washington cigar with a bright light in the centre of it."

Shortly after midnight, a railroad fireman named Widosky left the village of Wakefield and began walking back to his home in Thomaston. He happened to be looking down as he stepped over a mud puddle—and there he saw reflected the swaying lights of something above him. Glancing upward, he caught sight of three lights—red, green, and white—soaring across the sky with an odd undulating motion. The next morning, when he told friends, they laughingly suggested he had taken his first drink. (Mr. Widosky did not indulge.) To back up his story, he saw to it that the next night he had six potential witnesses with him, and, just after midnight, they all observed lights identical to those Widosky had seen 24 hours earlier.

An airship with a light at each end flew over Jackson on the evening of the 21st. The following night, at 11, two men of Hemlock watched an aircraft sailing southward "at a fearful rate of speed."

[This article will be concluded in our next issue]

NOTE

† "I'd like to know what Mr. W. H. Smith saw, Sept. 18, 1877, in the sky, moving over the city of Brooklyn. It looked like a winged human form (*New York Sun*, Sept. 21, 1877)." Charles Fort, *Lo!* Ch. 12.

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