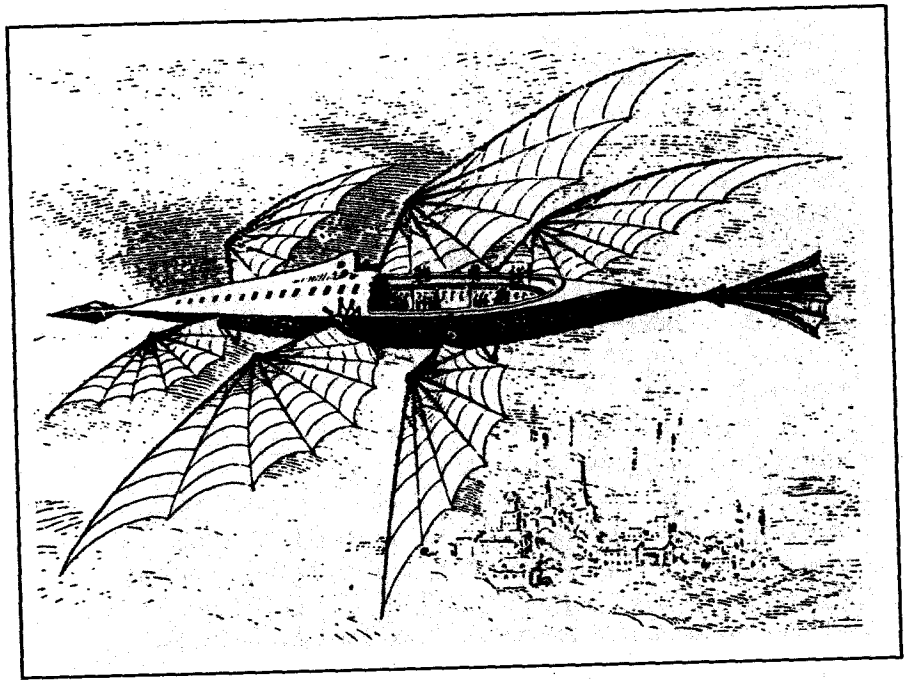
The Airships of 1897

Hoax, UFOs, or cutting-edge technology?



Airship drawing from 1897.

by J. Allan Danelek

Many people regard the Kenneth Arnold sighting of several flying disks over Mount Rainier in 1947 to be the official start of the modern age of ufology, but that would be incorrect. Actually, it all started earlier than that—almost 50 years earlier, in fact—with the airship flap of 1896–97, which to this day remains one of the most controversial elements of the entire UFO debate.

For those unfamiliar with this brief but curious incident (or series of incidents, as the sightings lasted several months), it all started on the evening of November 17, 1896, when a bright light appeared through the dark rainclouds over Sacramento, California, and slowly made its way westward over the capitol building, only to disappear once again into the night leaving hundreds of the cities' residents wondering what they had just witnessed. It was described by various witnesses as "cigar shaped" and reportedly sported oversized propellers and rudders on its undercarriage, all visible due to its low altitude and slow progress. Among those who saw the vessel was an assistant to the Secretary of State, who, along with several friends, watched the vessel for several minutes from the capitol dome. One person even described it as having wheels at its side "like the side wheels on Fulton's old steamboat."

The mysterious object was seen over Sacramento again five days later, this time witnessed by thousands of people, including the city's deputy sheriff and a district attorney. Most agreed it was a cigar-shaped object of some size and that it moved slowly but methodically over the city before disappearing to the southwest. It supposedly appeared later that evening over San Francisco, some 90 miles away, where it was seen by hundreds of people and reportedly cruised over the Pacific Ocean, flashing its spotlight toward the Cliff House, one of San Francisco's most famous landmarks.

The area papers quickly caught "airship fever" and began reporting the mysterious vessel appearing elsewhere over California and as far north as Washington State and Canada. The sightings, however, abated by the end of December, and nothing more was seen of the mysterious "airship" for nearly two months. When it reappeared, it showed up far from California, this time over Hastings, Nebraska, on the evening of February 2, 1897. Soon it was spotted throughout the Midwest, from Texas to Iowa and from Kansas to Missouri. It even supposedly appeared over Chicago on the evening of April 11, where a photograph was reportedly taken (the first UFO photo on record, if authentic) and four days later over Kalamazoo, where it crashed and exploded, according to one local paper. Though reports continued after that, they soon diminished until by summer the airship flap of 1896–97 was over and the world was left with one more mystery to ponder.

Unanswered Questions

To this day, no one is certain what this object (or objects) might have been. Debunkers maintain it was all the product of yellow journalism—the tendency of newspapers to invent stories in an effort to increase sales—mixed with mass hysteria in which people imagined any light in the sky (sometimes speculated to having been an unusually bright Venus) to be the rogue airship. Today many in the UFO community, noting that UFOs are sometimes described as being cigar-shaped, have decided that these were early appearances by extraterrestrials, designed perhaps to test our level of sophistication (and apparently deciding we weren't ready for them yet.) Both explanations, however, leave us with more questions than answers.

The hoax/mass hysteria theory, for ex-


Strange "thing" seen in sky over Goodland

Yes, Virginia! There are Unidentified Flying Objects

The Goodland Daily News

10c The Mountain Climate Capital Of Kansas The Voice Of Western Kansas 10

School board here junks two-school proposa

Will seek approval for $660,000 1-school pl

Goodland Daily News with Tom Dreiling's article.

stopped there, up in the air, hovering ... I couldn't figure out why it was staying there so long.

"Then it raised up, and just went!" The object had headed back east and quickly vanished. She didn't hear a sound, coming or going.

Phyllis didn't know what to think about it all, but her lights came back on, the radio came back on, and she was able to once again start her car and head back down the highway.

And she didn't tell anybody about it for a long time. Not even her dad. She'd heard stories about other people telling about what they'd seen. "People made so much fun of them...saying they were nuts." She also didn't want her dad to worry about her taking the long trip and driving at night.

Today, Phyllis, affectionately dubbed "Foo Foo" by her grandchildren, lives in Hill City, Kansas, and looks at it as just something that happened in the past. "I don't know what it was, why it was, it was just there."

The one thing that the people here all share is that the more they tell their own story, the more they hear about others who have experienced similar encounters. And while they still don't have answers to what they saw, the more they hear these other stories, the more they believe in their own.

***Sunell Koerner** is a free-lance writer, commercial and corporate video producer, entrepreneur, and former City Commissioner and Mayor of Hays, Kansas.*

ample, fails to account for the initial sightings over California; newspapers didn't report on the object until after it had been seen by supposedly thousands of witnesses, while the mass hysteria theory fails to explain how such a thing can occur in a generally geographic straight line (moving from California through Nebraska and Iowa and finishing in Michigan.)

Even if we assume that the majority of reports were spurious or mistaken, it is curious how mass hysteria is capable of affecting only people along a particular path. Further, it is uncertain how many Midwesterners would have been aware of the earlier California sightings and so be inclined to imagine that the mysterious airship was headed their way; newspapers rarely picked up general interest stories from other places in the country, preferring instead to stick with national headlines and stories of local interest.

Media coverage of the sightings tended to follow the appearances, not precede them as would be expected if the media was simply priming the country for more stories. Finally, the modern theory of extraterrestrials also seems unlikely, especially in view of the descriptions given by many witnesses that described propellers, wings, rudders, and undercarriages on the vessel—all appendages unlikely to be seen on an interplanetary vehicle.

So what was the thing that crossed the countryside that winter of 1896–97 to cause such a stir?

Interestingly, at the time most thought the vehicle neither imaginary nor extraterrestrial, but evidence of cutting-edge technology. They saw it as a very man-made machine being put through its paces by some intrepid inventor intent on bringing lighter-than-air flight to humanity. They thought it was a powered balloon or, more accurately, a dirigible.

Most dismiss this explanation, however, as being inconsistent with the capability of the time. The world was still in its technological infancy at this stage; although the lightbulb and the telephone had both been introduced, most people still used kerosene lamps and the U.S. mail to communicate. The Wright brothers were five years away from putting their tiny airplane into the air, and a practical automobile was still under development. The idea that anyone in that era could construct a working dirigible was beyond reason or, at least, so it seemed.

But can we really be so certain that the technology to build an airship was truly beyond the inventors of the late 19th century? A quick look into the history books will demonstrate how presumptuous this statement is.

Early History of Airships

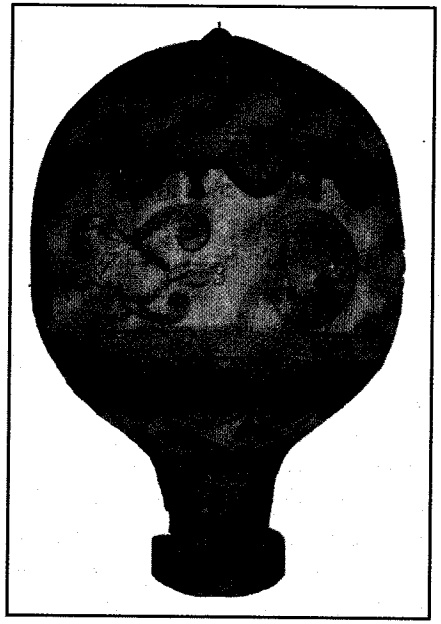
Ever since the Montgolfier Brothers first flew their hot-air balloon over Paris in 1789, humans had been used to the idea of artificial flight.

What differentiated an airship from a mere balloon, however, was the ability to make it steerable, rather than being subject

to the vagaries of air currents and wind. The first experiments to this effect were carried out by Britain's "father of aviation" Sir George Cayley in the 1830s. Unfortunately, Cayley lacked the means to effectively power such a ship and he gave up. Others, however, picked up on his ideas and further developed them until by 1850 a Frenchman, Pierre Jullien of Villejuif, demonstrated a model for a steerable airship. It was up to another Frenchman, Henri Giffard, however, to build and actually fly the first true airship in 1852. At 44 meters in length (almost 150 feet) and powered by a 2.2-kilowatt steam engine, he was able to travel the nearly 27 kilometers between Paris and Trappes, France, without incident, all at the remarkable speed of ten kilometers per hour.

Further development of the airship was made in the 1880s when Charles Renard and Arthur Krebs built an electric-powered model named the *France* that was able to maneuver under its own power. German designer David Schwarz built the first true dirigible (the earlier vehicles being essentially limp, cigar-shaped balloons tethered to a rigid undercarriage) and tested it at Templehoff airfield in Berlin on November 3, 1897. Three short years later German general Ferdinand von Zeppelin would build his first airship, the LZ-1, and the age of LTA (lighter-than-air) travel was born.

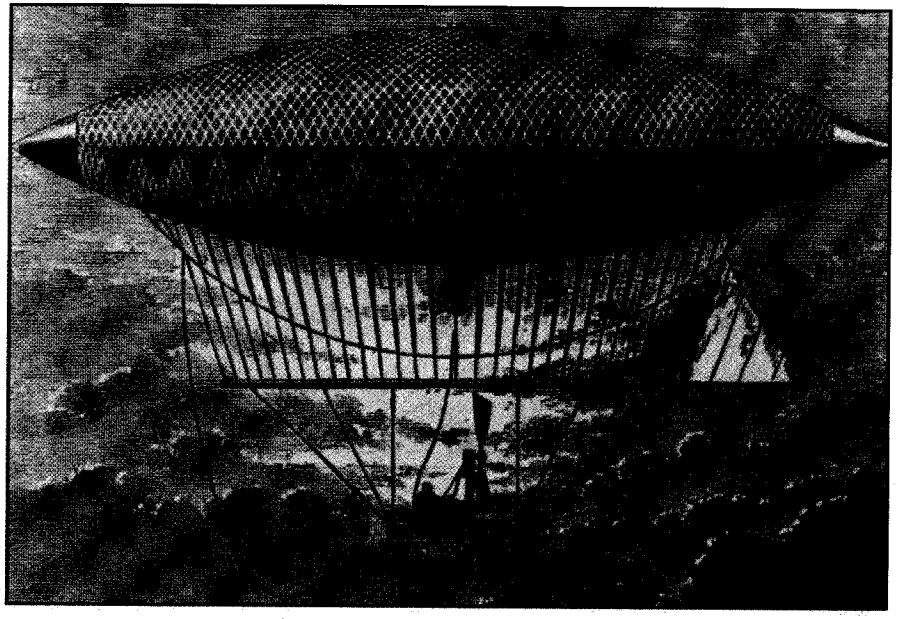
Considering that airships had been under development in Europe prior to the airship flap of 1896–97, what are the chances that an American might have succeeded in creating the first practical and long-range example, the product of which would become the source of six months of sensationalism and rumor? Let's consider the possibilities.



The Montgolfier balloon.

Overcoming the Technological Hurdle

The chief complaint made by many is that the materials and technology needed to construct a working airship were unavailable in 1896. We have already seen that such is not only untrue, but that proof of the concept had been demonstrated almost 50 years earlier. Connecting a series of hydrogen-filled balloons and enclosing



Henri Giffard's 1852 powered airship.

lionaires of any city west of the Mississippi in 1897. It isn't difficult to imagine that a reclusive and possibly even eccentric inventor was able to not only find the required investment capital to build and operate an airship, but could construct the facilities necessary to maintain it (probably somewhere in the San Fernando Valley) in complete secrecy.

Of course, it would require considerable capital to make this work as well as a well-outfitted workshop (and the men needed to operate it), but would that be any more difficult to accomplish than it was for Bell or Edison, contemporaries of the era? The necessary equipment could easily be shipped from the East Coast to San Francisco, assembled in privacy, and be up and running in short order, all hidden from the general public and the media among the barren hills of Southern California.

The First Flights

The first sightings over Sacramento and San Francisco may have been early test flights of cutting-edge airship technology, a technology easily a decade or more ahead of its time. Clearly, such is not an unreasonable hypothesis, considering that all the elements required to construct and operate a small dirigible (rubber air bags, girder material, steering gear, even various power plants) were all available by the mid-

them within a light but rigid frame of aluminum or wood was well within the capabilities of an 1896 inventor, given adequate resources and a building large enough to house the object. The problem would be finding a powerful enough engine to operate it. Diesel and gasoline-powered engines were still in their earliest stages of development in 1896, so it would have been difficult to make use of either of these two power sources. However, steam engines and electric motors were well known at the time (and, further, Giffard had demonstrated on his airship that a steam engine could be used successfully as a power source.) Other possible power plants include the electric motor, but this would have likely been hugely underpowered, requiring the use of several motors and a considerable number of heavy batteries to extend the range. But this might still be feasible if a person was able to find a way of combining an electric motor with kinetic energy; that is, several men pedaling a generator to charge the battery pack while in flight, thereby extending the range without having to carry too many batteries.

But what if we go beyond these traditional methods? What if, in fact, we are dealing with someone who might be years ahead of the competition, both in terms of airship design and the power needed to run them? Rudolf Diesel had just introduced his revolutionary new power-plant just three years earlier; could someone have gotten hold of one of his early designs and improved upon it? There's also the chance that either the diesel or the gasoline engine could have been co-developed by more than one person at a time. Is it possible our mysterious inventor successfully developed his engine first and modified it for flight rather than for ground vehicles?

If this is what happened, why did this man not come forward with his invention for all to see? To answer this, we have to understand the mindset of the time.

The Need for Privacy

The last half of the 19th century was a time of remarkable technological advances and tremendous competition among inventors. It wasn't easy being an inventor in 19th-century America; the drive to be the first to the patent office was cut-throat in nature, with stolen ideas and even sabotage fairly common. They had to deal with pressure from investors eager to see a quick and handsome return on their money and, finally, they had the press (who could always be counted on to prematurely proclaim each new gadget a success or failure) to deal with. Considering that a single failure could easily scare away the capital needed to continue working, it is possible that a man would want to work in secret, away from the eyes of the media or potential competitors.

If that were the case with our mystery inventor, California would have been the perfect place to work. It was still remote enough to guarantee privacy and yet it was near enough to a major seaport and sources of capital to make it ideal. San Francisco had the largest number of mil-

One-man "airship" of 1897.

1890s. They awaited only a visionary with the brilliance, vision, and determination to bring it all together.

But if this mysterious inventor wished to work in secret, why fly over two of the largest cities in California and appear to thousands of witnesses, thereby announcing your presence? Simple: the design was nearing perfection and not only needed to be flown over long distances, making the avoidance of multiple witnesses difficult, but to send a message to the vessel's investor(s) that the ship was coming along quite nicely. Clearly, at some point the vessel was going to need to be unveiled to the general public; perhaps the sightings of November and December 1896 were just a sneak preview.

It's interesting that there was a two-month break between the California sightings in 1896 and the sightings in the Midwest in February through April 1897. This suggests that after initial test flights were completed, the inventor was ready to unveil his new airship by over-flying America, the one way guaranteed to bring the most attention. By overflying the country, he was telegraphing his new device to the world in the most spectacular manner imaginable, perhaps with the goal of eventually landing on the East Coast in front of a stunned media.

But something happened that prevented him from completing that goal, something unexpected, sudden, and probably tragic.

A Fiery End or an Icy Grave?

Newspapers reported an explosion in the night skies near Kalamazoo in April 1897, after which the airship sightings petered out and eventually ended. Could the still largely untested airship have exploded over Michigan or crashed into Lake Erie and sunk, abruptly and tragically ending its maiden flight?

Skeptics will point out that no wreckage was ever found. If it exploded (it was, after all, a hydrogen balloon) and fell into a dense forest somewhere in the North-

1897

east, would there really be much left to recover? How much more so were it to have ended its flight in the frigid waters of Lake Erie.

The loss of the only airship and its brilliant inventor would have been irreplaceable; investors would have been unwilling to start from scratch and so pulled the plug, and even the workshops would have been dismantled, the equipment and tools sold in an effort to recoup losses. Perhaps out of fear of ridicule or possible legal actions, the inventor would have been quickly forgotten and the mysterious airship and its crew left to legend, where they could never be either proven nor disproven. It would have been a terrible tragedy, of course, and an incalculatable loss to science, but such would have been the inevitable result of a noble but ill-fated experiment.

But what of the blueprints and engineering drawings such an undertaking would have produced? It is likely they were destroyed or otherwise lost. Perhaps one day they will be discovered and serve to tell the world that, just as the Anikythera computer demonstrated that technological genius existed 2,000 years ago, so too did we once have our own Archimedes of the skies under our very noses—or, in this case, over our very heads. We just failed to notice him until it was too late. ☙

***J. Allan Danelek** is a professional graphic artist and illustrator living in Denver, Colorado.*