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UFOs IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Nineteenth-century reports of unidentified flying objects in the modern sense of the term are relatively rare until the final decade of the century, though there is no shortage of sightings of anomalous aerial phenomena, sometimes observed in interplanetary space through telescopes (Fort, 1941). At the same time there is no compelling reason, in all but a handful of instances, to conclude these are anything other than conventional, if unusual, meteorological and astronomical phenomena (Corliss, 1977, 1979, 1986). In many cases the reports are fabrications or jokes (*see* **Airship Sightings in the Nineteenth Century; Hoaxes through 1959;** and **Crashes of UFOs in the Nineteenth Century**). Others–such as reports of **flying serpents**–are so bizarre as to seem more at home in ancient times than in relatively modern ones. Certainly there are no UFO-age parallels.

Nor do there seem to be credible **close encounters of the third kind,** at least known ones, though plenty of not-so-credible ones were published. Perhaps the first of these showed up in a California newspaper, the *Stockton Evening Mail,* on November 27, 1896. Correspondent H. G. Shaw said he had encountered three nude, weightless "Martians" who spoke with a "warbling" sound and tried without success to drag him into a nearby airship. In another instance, in April 1897, a Martian was said to have died when his ship crashed in Aurora, Texas.

On the other hand, it can be argued that some reports of a nonhuman, possibly alien entity deserve a measure of serious consideration. In 1837 residents of London reported the depredations of a strange man–tall and thin, with a flowing cloak and fiery eyes–who attacked women, tearing at their clothes but not raping them, and bounded away with enormous leaps. Whoever or whatever "**Springheel Jack**" may or may not have been, no one denies that he existed. Reports of him, or someone very much like him, continued sporadically for decades afterwards. But unless a June 18, 1953, report from Houston, Texas, in which three witnesses reportedly saw a figure comparable to Jack and, immediately afterwards, a luminous "rocket," is of Springheel Jack, there is nothing to link him with UFOs.

Representative nineteenth-century sightings of UFO-like phenomena. Cherbourg, France, January 12, 1836: A glowing, doughnut-shaped body two-thirds the apparent diameter of the moon appeared to rotate on its axis as it flew by (Greg, 1860).

Wilmington, Delaware, July 13, 1860: As a pale blue light lit up the city, citizens looked up to see a 200-foot-long "object"–no further description–at 100 feet altitude. According to a press account, "it moved

in a straight line without any inclination downwards." In front of it was an intensely black "cloud"; behind it at 100-foot intervals were three "very red and glowing balls," joined by a fourth as the main object, "giving off sparkles after the manner of a rocket," then turned southeastward and over the Delaware River. Then it headed straight east and was lost to view. It had been visible for about a minute (*Wilmington Tribune*, July 20, 1860).

Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of West Africa, south of Cape Verde, March 22, 1870: A gray object shaped like a doughnut divided into four connected sections, with a long hooklike device trailing from its center, was seen by the captain and crew of the *Lady of the Lake*. At an altitude considerably lower than that of the clouds above it, it moved against the wind and was in view for half an hour before it disappeared in the gathering darkness (Banner, 1873).

Marseilles, France, August 1, 1871: At 10:43 P.M. an astronomer saw a "meteor" pass rapidly eastward across the sky for one minute. Then suddenly it slowed and maintained this more leisurely pace for the next seven minutes. It stopped and was briefly motionless before changing course toward the north. Seven minutes later it stopped again and headed toward the east once more. After a final short stop it streaked toward the horizon with "vivid scintillations." It had been visible for 18 minutes (Herschel, 1871).

Near Denison, Texas, January 22, 1878: John Martin observed an orange object high in the morning sky. As it got closer and nearly overhead, it "increased considerably in size and appeared to be going through space at a wonderful speed ... about the size of a large saucer and ... evidently at great height" (*Denison Daily News*, January 25, 1878). This is probably the first use of the word "saucer" in connection with the sighting of an anomalous aerial phenomenon.

Oxford and London, England, August 31, 1895: Crossing the Oxford University campus just before 8 P.M., renowned lexicographer and philologist James Augustus Henry Murray spotted a "brilliant luminous body which suddenly emerged over the tops of the trees before me on the left and moved eastward across the sky above and in front of me. Its appearance was, at the first glance, such as to suggest a brilliant meteor, considerably larger than Venus at her greatest brilliancy, but the slowness of the motion ... made one doubt whether it was not some artificial firework.... I watched for a second or two till it neared its culminating point and was about to be hidden from me by the lofty College building, on which I sprang over the corner ... and was enabled to see it through the space between the old and new buildings of the College, as it continued its course toward the eastern horizon. It did not explode, emit any spark, or leave any train or track; but it became rapidly dimmer ... and finally disappeared behind a tree.... The fact that it so perceptibly grew fainter as it receded seems to imply that it had not a very great elevation.... [I]ts course was slower than any meteor['s] I have ever seen" (*London Times*, September 4, 1895). Twenty or 25 minutes later two observers in London followed the eastward passage, over a five-minute period, of a "star" which traversed a "quarter of the heavens" (*London Times*, September 6, 1895).

Airships. Beginning in the fall of 1896, a wave of unidentified "airship" sightings swept across the United States. The wave started in California, but by March 1897 it had rolled eastward into Nebraska and by the next month had swept over much of the Midwest and South. Hardly a newspaper in the country failed to take note of it, though the coverage typically was long on ridicule, exaggeration, or outright invention and short on strict, or at times even approximate, factual accuracy.

While there were occasional UFO reports in the earlier decades of the century, the modern UFO phenomenon emerges clearly in the late 1890s. Though no longer called such, "airships"—nonluminous cigar-shaped objects often said to carry brilliant searchlights—continued to be reported for decades afterwards (*see* **UFOs, 1900-1946**) and even up till the present day. An extended account of the nineteenth-century airship phenomenon appears earlier in this book.

Nineteenth-century aerial anomalies in twentieth-century UFO literature. UFO-age treatments of the previous century's experience of unusual appearances in the sky leave much to be desired. A particularly striking example of how early reports get distorted when writers seek to link them with a later era's UFO phenomenon follows:

In June 1873 a man living north of Bonham, Texas, saw, according to the *Bonham Enterprise* of a few days later, "an enormous serpent floating in a cloud that was passing over his farm. Several parties of men and boys at work in the fields observed the same thing, and were seriously frightened. It seemed to be as large and as long as a telegraph-pole, was of a yellow striped color, and seemed to float along without any effort. They could see it coil itself up, turn over, and thrust forward its huge head as if striking at something."

This is how the same story is told in **Donald Keyhoe**'s 1950 book *The Flying Saucers Are Real*:

> It was broad daylight when a strange, fast-moving object appeared in the sky, southwest of the town. For a moment, the people of Bonham stared at the thing, not believing their eyes. The only flying device then known was the drifting balloon. But this thing was tremendous, and speeding so fast its outlines were almost a blur. Terrified farmers dived under their wagons. Townspeople fled indoors. Only a few hardy souls remained in the streets. The mysterious object circled Bonham twice, then raced off to the east and vanished. Descriptions of the strange machine varied from round or oval to cigar-shaped.

Keyhoe adds that 24 hours later "a device of the same description appeared at Fort Scott, Kansas. Panic-stricken soldiers fled the parade ground as the thing flashed overhead. In a few seconds it disappeared, circling toward the north."

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> A strange and remarkable phenomenon was observed at sunrise yesterday morning.... When the disc of the sun was about halfway above the horizon, the form of a huge serpent, apparently perfect in form, was plainly seen encircling it and was visible for some moments.

Obviously whatever the Texans and Kansans of 1873 saw, thought they saw, or pretended they saw, it bore no resemblance to a "flying saucer."

In some instances modern accounts add or subtract a crucial fact from the primary source's version. For example, a catalogue of pre-1947 "UFO" reports—most of them clearly of meteors, ball lightning, auroral phenomena, and astronomical events—records the April 1800 crash, in Louisiana, of a "yellow object the size of a house," said to have been observed in northwestward flight for 15 minutes before its demise (Winkler, 1984). The original account, given by no less than Thomas Jefferson, who investigated it in his capacity as president of the American Philosophical Society, says, however, that the object, seen heading toward the north*east*, was visible for "about a quarter of a minute" ("Description," 1804; Rowland, 1930). This time difference turns the phenomenon into an almost certain meteorite.

Nineteenth-century UFOs in memory. Relatively few nineteenth-century UFO witnesses were alive in the mid-twentieth century when flying saucers entered popular consciousness. One such rare account came from an elderly Warren, Ohio, woman who reported that in 1894, when she was an 11-year-old girl living on a farm near the same town, she saw a "huge zeppelin-shaped object"—which presumably would have been referred to as an airship if the sighting had been published then. Lights from it illuminated the ground and spilled into the bedroom where the witness lay. After hovering briefly, the object nosed up and rose silently into the night sky ("Case [1]," 1955).

Of course memory has its limitations, as is evidenced in the testimony of Pearl Chenoweth, who died in 1984. In her last years Mrs. Chenoweth was dictating her memoirs to researchers for the Missouri Historical Society. Her granddaughter Shannon Graham writes: "Everyone who worked with her was amazed at her accurate recall of dates, places and people." Graham was certain that her "account of her 1896 UFO experience is an accurate one" (Chenoweth with Graham, 1985).

As the story has it, one evening in August of that year young Pearl Vickers and her brother Ben, who lived on a farm in Howell County, Missouri, saw a circle of bright lights which whirled around as they descended from the sky, apparently falling in their direction. The children ran to alert their parents, and together the family watched as a "large saucerlike shape" came over the barn and hovered there. "Its lights were

blinding," Pearl Chenoweth would recall. "The whole barn lot lit up like day."

Badly frightened, the Vickerses retreated to their living room and prayed. Eventually the father, Ezra Vickers, went to the kitchen to look outside. The object was gone. But the next day the Vickerses were shocked and sickened to find, near a large patch of burned grass, three dead steers "completely drained of blood. The only marks on them were some dried blood on their throats from two puncture holes in the jugular vein; these looked as if they had been made by a two-tined fork.... Later that week, when the newspapers came from St. Louis ... [t]here were several stories of such incidents all over Missouri that night. People had seen the hovering lights and in each case only three animals were drained of blood no matter how many cattle were in the pasture. Where the saucers had hovered, grass was burned away by the heat of the object" (*ibid.*).

When folklorist Thomas E. Bullard checked, however, he found that no such stories appeared in the St. Louis newspapers of August and September 1896. If the incidents happened as described, evidently they did not happen when Mrs. Chenoweth thought they did. On the other hand, in late April of the next year, papers in Missouri and other states recounted the tale told by Le Roy, Kansas, rancher Alex Hamilton. In a tongue-in-cheek story which fooled countless readers then and later, Hamilton reported seeing the "hideous" occupants of an airship kidnap a calf whose butchered remains were discovered in a field the next day. Another element that may have confused an old woman's memory was the scare, current in the Midwest at the time she was relating her story, involving allegedly mysterious mutilations of cattle by blood-sucking extraterrestrials.

At any rate, another account, this one secondhand and vague in places, is in some ways comparable to Mrs. Chenoweth's and so deserves mention:

> It happened one evening when Grandma was a young girl. (I place it around 1880 to 1890.) She and her family saw a large, lighted (flashing?) object fly over the house [in Oskaloosa, Iowa] and behind a nearby hill. They were frightened and ran to the cyclone cellar (underground cave). And, after a while, her father went out to investigate. She followed him at a safe distance and saw a glow coming from the other side of the hill. When she could see into the pasture, she saw a large, round (she made an arc with her hand that could have meant 20 or 30 ft. radius) machine which was "lit up like a birthday cake." They ran back to the cave where they spent the night. The next day, they went back to the field and saw several burned out places in the grass in a huge circle. I seem to remember Grandma saying that her neighbors also had seen the object in the air and came to see the burned out places in the pasture (Johnston, 1974).

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Pascagoula, Mississippi, August 13, 1874: Around 11 p.m., following a thunderstorm, a huge "luminous electric cloud" sailed in from the northwest, heading on a southeasterly path, and flew over the western edge of town. It emitted heat so intense that some witnesses thought they or their houses were about to ignite. The object illuminated the ground and buildings underneath it. When last seen, over the Gulf of Mexico, it rendered the spars and rigging of a ship at anchor "distinctly visible." Possibly this was a dramatic manifestation of ball lightning, but the large size of the phenomenon (half a mile long in one surely exaggerated estimate) seems to make this identification an unlikely one.

Oxford and London, England, August 30, 1895: Crossing the Oxford University campus just before 8 p.m., renowned lexicographer and philologist James Augustus Henry Murray spotted a "brilliant luminous body which suddenly emerged over the tops of the trees before me on the left and moved eastward across the sky above and in front of me. Its appearance was, at the first glance, such as to suggest a brilliant meteor, considerably larger than Venus at her greatest brilliancy, but the slowness of the motion . . . made one doubt whether it was not some artificial firework. . . . I watched for a second or two till it neared its culminating point and was about to be hidden from me by the lofty College building, on which I sprang over the corner . . . and was enabled to see it through the space between the old and new buildings of the College, as it continued its course toward the eastern horizon. It did not explode, emit any spark, or leave any train or track; but it became rapidly dimmer . . . and finally disappeared behind a tree. . . . The fact that it so perceptibly grew fainter as it receded seems to imply that it had not a very great elevation. . . . [I]ts course was slower than any meteor['s] I have ever seen" (*London Times*, September 4, 1895). Twenty or 25 minutes later two observers in

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In June 1873 a man living north of Bonham, Texas, saw, according to the *Bonham Enterprise* of a few days later,

> an enormous serpent floating in a cloud that was passing over his farm. Several parties of men and boys at work in the fields observed the same thing, and were seriously frightened. It seemed to be as large and as long as a telegraph-pole, was of a yellow striped color, and seemed to float along without any effort. They could see it coil itself up, turn over, and thrust forward its huge head as if striking at something.

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UFOs, 1900-1946

Around three o'clock one morning in the summer of 1900, as he was returning from a dance in a rural area near Reedsburg, Wisconsin, 14-year-old P. A. McGilvra stopped his horse atop a small hill. The animal seemed to be disturbed by something in the densely wooded area, and as McGilvra searched for the cause, he happened to look up into a cloudless sky brilliant with stars. There he saw the outline of an enormous dark, dirigible-shaped vehicle.

mentable and not so easily dismissable as the product of overheated imaginations (though those surely have played a large role in the evolution of UFO legends). UFOs show up on radar, leave traces on the ground, and get sighted by eminently qualified observers. Even so, when a panel of conservative scientists suggested in late June 1998 that maybe it's time their colleagues reconsider their reflexive skepticism and start paying attention, some responded with the sort of incredulity one would have anticipated from a proposal that flat-Earth geology be given another chance.

Eventually, of course, science will have to deal with UFOs, and when the children or grandchildren of its current generation do so, no doubt they will spend a good part of their time shaking their heads. How in the world, they will wonder, could twentieth-century scientists have neglected the most important scientific question of their time? Perhaps that will be seen as a mystery as great as the one surrounding UFOs themselves.

Airships

The first known printed reference to a mysterious "airship" was in the March 29, 1880, issue of the *Santa Fe Weekly New Mexican.* The newspaper reported that late on the evening of the twenty-sixth, observers in the village of Galisteo Junction had observed the passage of a "large balloon" and heard the merry shouts of its passengers. From the craft were dropped a cup of "very peculiar workmanship" and a "magnificent flower, with a slip of exceedingly fine silk-like paper, on which were some characters resembling those on Japanese tea chests." The next evening a Chinese American visitor said he recognized the paper as a message from his girlfriend, a passenger on the ship, which he said was on its way to New York City.

Like many other airship tales reported in the late-nineteenth-century American press, this one is almost certainly wholly fictional, but in the years ahead more credible reports would be made in the United States and other countries. Though American papers in particular tended to treat such sightings as jokes – and were themselves responsible for many hoaxes – there seems no doubt that such "airships," had they been seen in the later decades of the twentieth century, would have passed as unidentified flying objects. In fact, sightings of airship-like objects – cigar-shaped objects with multicolored lights along the sides and flashing searchlights – continue to the present.

An outbreak of airship reports occurred along the border of Germany and Russian Poland in early 1892. As would be the case with later airship scares, the Germans were thought to have developed advanced aircraft that could fly against the wind (unlike balloons) and hover for extended periods of time. No such aircraft existed at the time, nor had any been developed (despite numerous contemporary rumors to the contrary) by 1896, when the great American airship scare erupted in California.

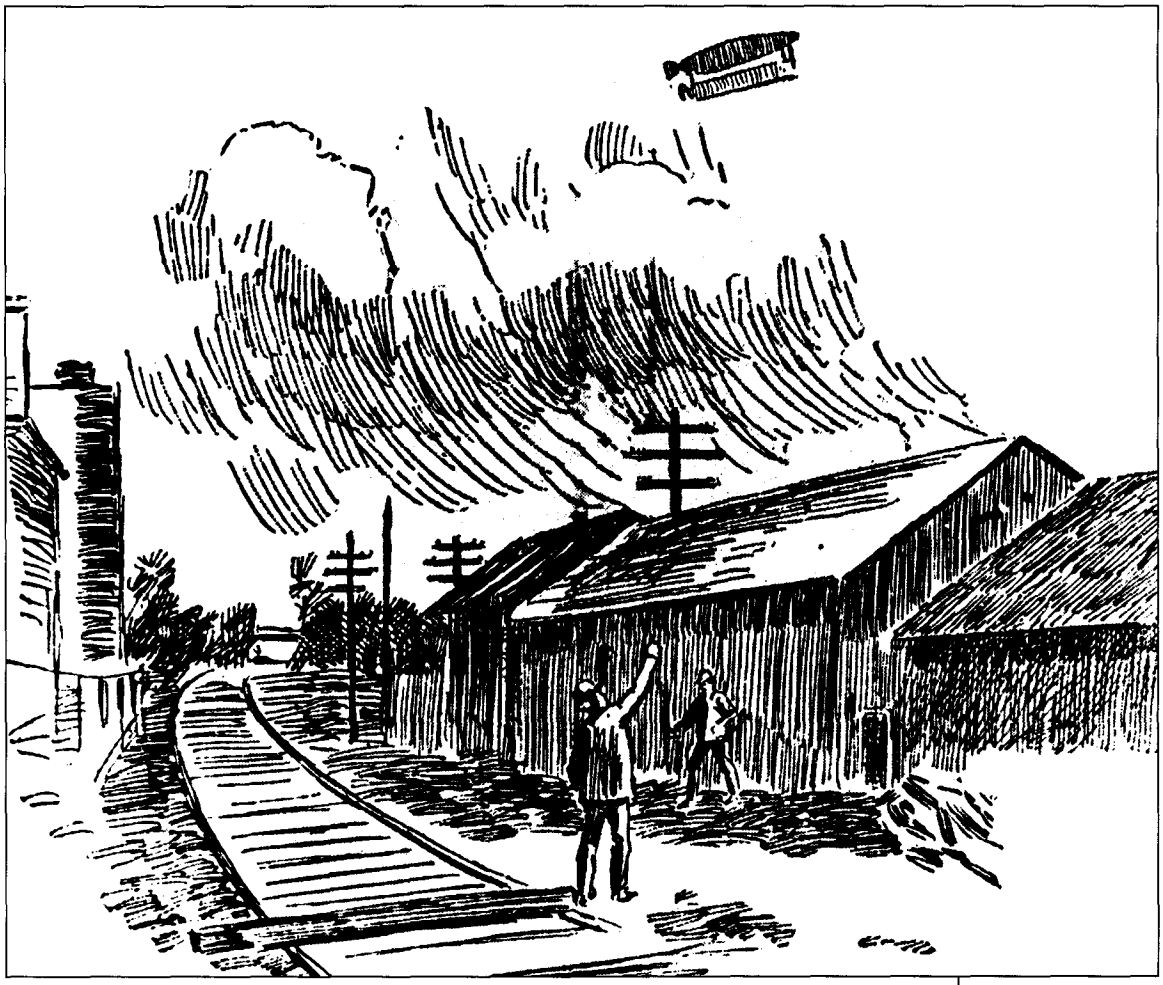
Shapes in the Sky

The Roman historian Livy recorded this curious event said to have occurred in 214 B.C.: "At Hadria an altar appeared in the sky with men in white robes standing around it." One hundred ten years earlier, according to Julius Obsequens, "At Ariminum . . . weapons in the sky seemed to join in battle . . . from east to west; those from the west appeared to suffer defeat."

Though stories like these – chosen at random from many hundreds of pickable examples – probably have nothing to do with the modern UFO phenomenon, they show that people have been seeing curious shapes in the sky for a long time. As relatively recently as March 12, 1890, residents of Ashland, Ohio, swore that a ghostly city had appeared above their town. The religiously inclined took it to be a "vision of the new Jerusalem," while a physicist tried to explain it as a mirage of Sandusky, some sixty miles away. All this led Charles Fort to split the difference. As he remarked in his book *New Lands* (1923), the apparition "may have been a revelation of heaven, and for all I know heaven may resemble Sandusky, and those of us who have no desire to go to Sandusky may ponder that point."

It may be that UFOs are the least weird things people believe they have seen in the sky. The people of Crawfordsville, Indiana, a year and a half after the "new Jerusalem" mystified the good people of Ashland, swore that a grotesque oblong creature emitted a "wheezing, plaintive sound" as it flew over their town. On the Nebraska frontier in the 1850s, pioneers attested to the presence of fire-breathing serpents writhing overhead. You would have thought it was a thousand years or so earlier, in A.D. 793, when (according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) "fiery dragons were seen flying in the air."

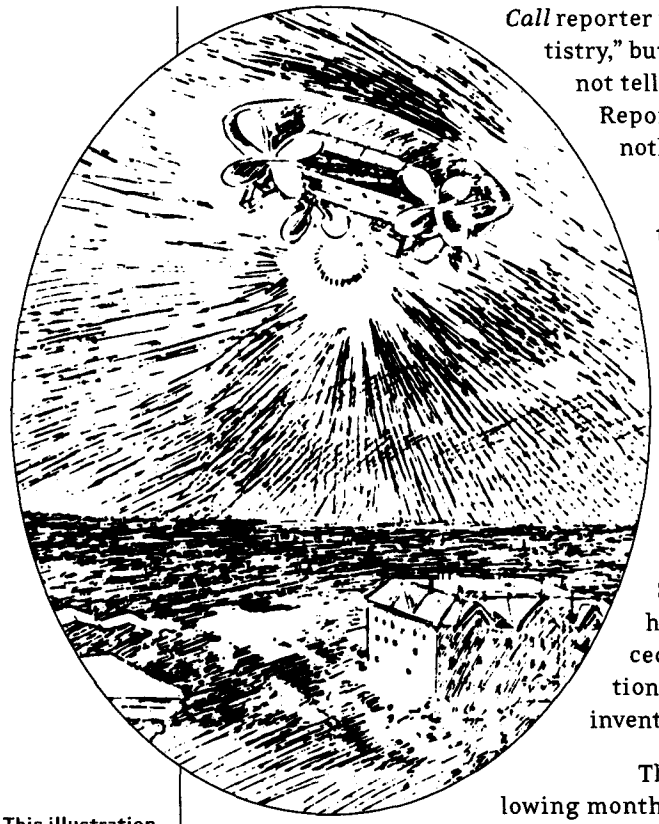
Unlike aerial altars, cities, and monsters, the modern UFO phenomenon – approximately two centuries old, from all appearances – is docu-



Airship illustration from the *Chicago Times-Herald*, April 12, 1897. *(Courtesy Fortean Picture Library.)*

Beginning in mid-November 1896, numerous witnesses in both urban and rural portions of the state reported seeing fast-moving or stationary nocturnal lights assumed to be connected to airships. Daylight sightings typically were of a device that "somewhat resembled a balloon traveling end on . . . and with what appeared to be wings both before and behind the [bottom] light," as the *San Francisco Call* of November 22 put it, or of a "great black cigar with a fishlike tail . . . at least 100 feet long" with a surface that "looked as if it were made of aluminum," as the *Oakland Tribune* of December 1 had it. In some cases, observers reported seeing propellers.

All the while much press attention was paid to the claims of San Francisco attorney George D. Collins, who swore on his "word of honor" (though he later denied it) that he not only represented the airship inventor but had seen the marvelous invention himself. The inventor was rumored to be one E. H. Benjamin, a dentist and Maine native who was known to be a habitual tinkerer. Benjamin told a



This illustration of an airship over Oakland, California, appeared in the *San Francisco Call* in November 1896. *(Courtesy Fortean Picture Library.)*

Call reporter that his "inventions have to do with dentistry," but harassed by those who suspected he was not telling the entire truth, he went into hiding. Reporters who broke into his office found nothing but copper dental fillings.

By November 24, 1896, according to an article in the *Oakland Tribune,* former California attorney general W. H. H. Hart had claimed the role of the inventor's legal representative, Collins having been fired for talking too much. Hart, however, was if anything more gabby. He said two airships existed – the second had been built in an eastern state – and his job was to "consolidate both interests." The airships would be used to bomb the Spanish fort in Havana, Cuba. Subsequently Hart, like Collins before him, did some backtracking and soon conceded he had not personally seen the invention, only met someone "who claims to be the inventor."

The California airship scare receded the following month. In February 1897 Nebraska newspapers began noting reports from rural districts of nocturnal lights moving at "most remarkable speed." On February 4, witnesses at Inavale got a close-up view of the object to which the lights were attached. It was cone-shaped, thirty to forty feet long, and had "two sets of wings on a side, with a large fan-shaped rudder" (*Omaha Daily Bee,* February 6). Over the following weeks a wave of sightings struck Nebraska and then neighboring Kansas. By early April airships were moving east, north, and south, and all that month's newspaper columns were full of sightings, rumors, and tall tales.

Many of the dubious stories focused, as they had in California, on allegations about secret inventors. Some press accounts even alleged that airships had landed and their occupants, ordinary Americans, had confided their identities and plans to witnesses. The "conversations" with these aeronauts were recounted verbatim in newspaper stories, usually (though not invariably) presented as serious news but always invented out of whole cloth.

Other hoaxes reflected an undercurrent of speculation about extraterrestrial visitors. A rancher from Le Roy, Kansas, swore in an affidavit that he, his son, and his hired man had seen strange-looking beings in an airship lasso and steal a calf from a corral outside his house. Though the tale attracted wide publicity (and was rediscovered and widely published in the UFO literature of the 1960s), it turned out to be a prank played by the rancher and fellow members of a local liars'

Daniel Cohen

Born on Chicago's South Side in 1936, Daniel Cohen was educated in journalism at the University of Illinois. In the 1960s he worked as an editor of *Science Digest* before moving with his wife, writer Susan Cohen, to upstate New York. Over the next two and a half decades, he would write dozens of books on a wide variety of subjects, most of them intended for a juvenile or young-adult audience. A number of these books deal with anomalous and paranormal phenomena.

Though nearly as prolific as occult/New Age book factory Brad Steiger, Cohen does not share Steiger's view that UFOs, "monsters," ghosts, and ESP exist outside the imagination. Unlike committed disbelievers, however, he prefers a kinder, gentler skepticism that eschews dogmatic denial. His moderation in this area led him in 1981 to resign from the militantly debunking Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP).

Though engagingly written, Cohen's books, which mostly recycle familiar material to younger readers who are coming to it for the first time, tend to be of little interest to serious students of anomalies and the paranormal. One exception is *The Great Airship Mystery* (1981), an entertaining and informative look at the famous turn-of-the-century UFO wave.

club. At Aurora in north Texas an airship crashed, and its sole occupant, a Martian, was buried in the local cemetery, or so reported the *Dallas Morning News* of April 19, 1897. This tale, invented by an Aurora man as a joke, was rediscovered in the 1960s and 1970s and brought spade-bearing searchers to the tiny, fading village.

Amid all the hoaxes, however, were apparently authentic reports of cigar-shaped structures with or without wings as well as sightings of nocturnal lights variously described as pear-, egg-, ball-, or V-shaped – suggesting that beneath all the hoopla and silliness, the first great modern UFO wave, with the full variety of UFO types, was in progress. Though by the end of May the wave had run its course, sightings continued without interruption into the next century. For example, in the summer of 1900 two young Reedsburg, Wisconsin, men saw an enormous dirigible-shaped structure hovering in the night sky. As it passed over a grove of trees, the trees bent as if blown by a strong wind, though the night was still. The March 15, 1901, issue of New Mexico's *Silver City Enterprise* even reported that a local physician had taken a clear photograph of an airship. Unfortunately the photograph has not survived.

In 1909 a worldwide wave of airship sightings occurred in Great Britain, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia. In Britain the sightings, which began in March, were mostly of torpedo-shaped vessels moving at a "tremendous pace," and of flashing lights and searchlights; they revived fears, first expressed fifteen years ear-

lier in eastern Europe and still unfounded, of high-flying German spies. In America secret inventors were the suspects, with most of the speculation directed toward a Worcester, Massachusetts, man named Wallace E. Tillinghast, even though there was no real reason, then or now, to link him with the objects New Englanders and others were reporting. The New Zealand wave began in July at the southern end of the South Island, then moved northward. As with other airship scares, some witnesses claimed to have seen humanlike figures in passing craft. In one instance, said to have taken place on August 3, a Waipawa man said an airship occupant had shouted at him in an unknown language, and in another, "missiles" were fired from an airship and hit the water. The witness, a man in a boat, thought he was being attacked. Australia experienced a handful of sightings in August that year.

Another airship wave erupted in the fall of 1912, and reports were made all across Europe. The objects were typically described as large and cigar-shaped, with brilliant searchlights. Few if any reports mention wings. As before, the airships reportedly were capable of hovering and moving at great speeds, even against the wind. The wave had run its course by April, but the sightings continued periodically in Europe and elsewhere. On October 10, 1914, for example, a Manchester, England, man said he saw an "absolutely black, spindle-shaped object" cross the face of the sun.

In the United States, dock workers on Lake Superior observed what one called a "big machine . . . 50 feet wide and 100 feet long" pass rapidly overhead at 4:30 a.m. on February 29, 1916. It had three lights, "one on each end and one in the middle," and carried "a long rope or cable trailing below it with a large object or block attached to it." Inside it three "men" were visible. The sighting took place in the midst of a small UFO wave occurring in Minnesota and Wisconsin. A cigar-shaped object at least 100 feet long flew over Rich Field, Waco, Texas, one evening in early 1918, leaving witnesses with, in the words of one, "the weirdest feeling of our lives." In the summer of 1927 an airship that one observer compared (as had some in 1896 and 1897) to a "perfectly shaped, huge fish, with big fins extended outward near the front and small, short ones near the rear," was seen over Wolfe County, Kentucky.

Though after the 1920s unidentified cigar-shaped objects were seldom called "airships," they continued to be reported. On October 9, 1946, observers in San Diego, California, saw an airshiplike object that they compared to a "huge bat with wings." A similar object was seen over Havana, Cuba, the following February. A Pittsburg, Kansas, radio musician driving to work at 5:50 a.m. on August 25, 1952, said he came upon a 75-foot-long object with windows, through which the head and shoulders of a human figure were visible. Along the UFO's outer edges, according to investigators from the Air Force's Project Blue Book, "were a series of propellers about six inches to eight inches in diameter, spaced closely together." Driving between Deming and Las Cruces, New Mexico, on the morning of February 6, 1967, Ruth Ford sighted two fast-moving "cigar-shaped craft," each with two small propellers on it and a row of windows. She could see no one inside.

In September 1994 a Taos, New Mexico, man who had gone outside to lock his cars for the night spotted a "huge" blimplike object with a "belly . . . like fish are

when they are pregnant" and a tail. It had thirteen or fourteen lights underneath it and was flying slowly from east to west. It entered a cloud, which then lit up. "It was like nothing I've ever seen," he said. "It was right on top of me, maybe 400 or 500 feet up there.... It made a noise, but it didn't make a noise of any other aircraft I've heard. It was like a rush of wind more than anything else."

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Area 51

Area 51 is located at a corner of the Nevada Test Site, just north of the dry-bed Groom Lake, where highly classified national-security projects have been developed since the mid-1950s, including spy planes such as the U-2 and the SR-71, the Stealth aircraft, and the technology associated with the Strategic Defense Initiative (popularly known as "Star Wars"). The area is also known as "Dreamland." According to a 1998 analysis of U.S. Office of Personnel Management payrolls, conducted by Scripps Howard News Service, it employs 1,851 civilian workers.

According, however, to the alleged personal experience of one Robert Lazar, Area 51 is something infinitely stranger: a place where scientists, engineers, and technicians strive to unlock the secrets of extraterrestrial technology. Lazar surfaced in November 1989 with a fantastic story broadcast on Las Vegas' KLAS-TV and reported by respected investigative journalist George Knapp.

Lazar claimed to be a physicist hired in late 1988 to work at Area 51. When he showed up, he was driven in a bus with blackened windows to a location known as S-4, at Papoose Lake south of Groom Lake. After undergoing a physical examination, he was placed in a room alone to read briefing documents. But before his eyes fell on the print on the desk in front of him, he noticed a peculiar poster on the wall. It showed a flying saucer hovering over a dry lake bed over the caption *THEY'RE HERE.*

As he would soon learn, S-4 housed nine different kinds of saucer-shaped extraterrestrial spacecraft. A gravity-wave generator powered them, and an amplifier directed the waves. Lazar himself would discover that the fuel was a heretofore unknown element, 115, which came in the form of reddish orange discs the size of half dollars. Within the saucers Lazar saw small bucket seats that suggested diminutive pilots. On one occasion he glimpsed what he thought was a humanoid being in the company of two lab-suited men.

Lazar's story comes out of a body of persistent folklore that holds not only that UFO crash/retrievals have occurred but that the secrets of unearthly technology have been unlocked and incorporated into extraordinary and highly classified aircraft being flown and tested out of Dreamland. In the 1990s such stories were a staple of American popular culture, figuring prominently, for example, in the 1995 blockbuster movie *Independence Day.*

If there is any whisper of truth, however faint, to such tales, no one so far has succeeded in demonstrating as much. One could argue, of course, that this is because the secrets are well kept and the proof kept well away from would-be whistleblowers. On the other hand, Lazar's interesting, well-told tales are not, alas, to be believed. Investigators found that his claims about his educational background could not be verified; they also determined that Lazar was never a physicist – or any sort of scientist, for that matter. Real physicists say that Lazar's use of scientific language is without sense or coherence.

Still, such speculations have given rise to a bizarre science-fictional folklore of government-extraterrestrial contacts. One man claims to have worked at

HOAXES

UFO hoaxes have a long history. They were being perpetrated long before the terms "flying saucers" and "unidentified flying objects" entered the English language.

Nineteenth-century tales. As early as 1864 a French newspaper recounted the discovery, by American scientists, of a fossilized spaceship containing the mummified body of a diminutive alien being. In 1877 an Argentine paper picked up the same story but set it near the Carcarana River in that country. The following year one "A. Seraro, Chemist," wrote from Peru to report that he had found an extraterrestrial inside an object that looked from the exterior like a stony meteorite.

The first known "UFO" hoax set in North America was chronicled in the March 29, 1880, issue of the *Santa Fe Weekly New Mexican*. The newspaper reported that late one evening a large fish-shaped balloon passed over Galisteo Junction, New Mexico, and onlookers on the ground could hear its merry occupants. They tossed several items overboard. One item, immediately recovered, was a "magnificent flower, with a slip of exceedingly fine silk-like paper, on which were some characters resembling those on Japanese tea chests." The next morning searchers found a peculiar cup. The evening of the following day a young Chinese man showed up in town, examined the writing on the silk paper, and recognized it as a message from his fiancée, a passenger on an airship that had flown from China on a maiden voyage to America (*New Mexican*, April 7).

No such voyage between China and America occurred, or could have occurred, in 1880. The story anticipated the yarns that would fill newspapers between November 1896 and May 1897, during the first great American UFO wave (*see* **Airship Sightings in the Nineteenth Century**). Though some of the reports, especially those involving overflights of cylindrical objects, seem genuinely puzzling, the press tended to treat the entire affair as a huge joke and printed some outrageous yarns about encounters with airship crews both terrestrial and extraterrestrial. One was featured in the *Stockton Evening Mail* of November 27, 1896. A publicist for the Stockton, California, Commercial Association wrote that he and an associate had encountered naked, seven-foot-tall beings who tried to carry them into a nearby airship but failed to do so because the aliens were weightless.

The most successful airship hoaxes, in that they were revived decades later and believed by some, were both published in April 1897. One came out of Aurora, Texas, where an airship allegedly crashed and killed its Martian pilot, and another originated in Le Roy, Kansas, where monstrous creatures in an airship were said to have stolen a calf.

Hoaxing enters the UFO age. Many hoaxes in the years after the Kenneth **Arnold sighting** of 1947 can more accurately be characterized as pranks. On frequent occa-

planets; why the Washington officials will not reveal the facts about the UFO; why [electrical genius Nikola] Tesla's works have been hidden for half a century ...; how the OTC free-energy devices actually work; how free energy will give man freedom and abundance; and how present science and physics books will have to be re-written when the real facts of universal law are brought out by actual exploration of other planets" ("Carr and Aho," 1958).

Aho, along with Carr and others, ended up getting indicted in Oklahoma City for illegally selling stock in an "aircraft" that could not fly. Carr was convicted and fined $5000, but eventually charges against Aho, who seemed more like an innocent dupe than a willing participant in a con operation, were dropped.

He suffered further misfortune, however, on a lecture tour in New York in March 1961, when he was committed to mental wards at Bellevue Hospital and in Central Islip, Long Island. Later he intimated that Communist agents had drugged and abducted him, an interpretation enthusiastically endorsed by Norbert F. Gariety, whose bulletin *S.P.A.C.E.*, ostensibly a UFO periodical, served as a sounding board for the political beliefs of its editor, a member of the John Birch Society. "A favorite way to get rid of those who oppose the 'termites' [subversives] at work is to harass them into nervous breakdowns or troubles," he wrote, "have them examined psychiatrically, and then railroaded into mental hospitals for the rest of their days" ("Wayne Aho Falls Victim," 1961).

Aho's stay, however, was not to be for the rest of his days. A few weeks later he returned to the Pacific Northwest and continued to pursue his cosmic mission through lectures, pamphlets, and flying-saucer conventions. In 1965 he started the New Age Foundation and in 1975 initiated the Cathedral of the Stars, Church of the New Age. Never more than a minor figure on the contactee scene, he sponsors or shows up at an occasional metaphysical or saucer conclave and quietly recites the interplanetary gospel.

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AIRSHIP SIGHTINGS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

On March 29, 1880, the *Santa Fe Weekly New Mexican* reported an odd incident said to have occurred three days before in the tiny town of Galisteo Junction (now Lamy), New Mexico. According to the account, three men on a late-evening walk heard loud voices which they quickly learned emanated from a "large balloon" rapidly approaching from the west. As it got closer, the voices got louder, as if the speakers were shouting to attract attention. But their message was lost to the listeners, who heard a language they did not recognize. A party of sorts seemed to be going on, judging from the laughter and music emanating from the aircraft.

"The construction of the balloon was entirely different to [sic] anything of the kind ever seen by any of the party, being in the shape of a fish," the *New Mexican* related, "and at one time was so low that fanciful characters on the outside of the car, which appeared to be very elegant, were plainly seen. The air machine appeared to be entirely under the control of the occupants, and appeared to be guided by a large fanlike apparatus.... The balloon was monstrous in size, and the car, as near as could be judged, contained eight or 10 persons."

As the object passed overhead, several items were tossed overboard. One, recovered almost immediately, proved to be a "magnificent flower, with a slip of exceedingly fine silk-like paper, on which were some characters resembling those on Japanese tea chests."

After a rapid ascent the craft disappeared in the eastern sky.

The next morning searchers found a cup of "very peculiar workmanship." It, along with the flower, was put on display at the local railroad depot (whose agent was one of the three witnesses). Later in the day an unnamed curiosity collector, a man who had been doing archaeological excavations at an old church in the area, purchased the items. The following evening, according to an April 5 article in the *New Mexican*, a party of tourists arrived in town to visit the church site. In the group was a wealthy young Chinese man who immediately recognized the writing on the silk slip as a message from his fiancé. The young man declared that the airship was from China, on a vanguard voyage to America; soon such traffic would be commonplace. His girl friend, a passenger on the ship, was on her way to New York, where a sister lived. Knowing he would be visiting Galisteo Junction, she had left a small present for him. "The gentleman left on last night's train for New York carrying the love token with him," the newspaper said, "and confidently expects to find his love in New York where they will be married."

A few months later, on July 29, an equally unusual story appeared in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. Early the previous evening, it was said, two Louisville men gazed out over the Ohio River to see, at some altitude, what looked to be a man surrounded by machinery which he was working with his hands and feet. At times the contraption would descend; then the man would move faster and the object would rise. At one point he changed direction, from the southwest to the southeast. Soon the strange device flew out of sight. That evening, but an hour or two later, according to an August 6 *Courier-Journal* account, the Royster family of Madisonville, Kentucky (southwest of Louisville), observed a "circular form [which] changed to an oval.... [T]here seemed to be a ball at each end of the thing." It was half a mile away, low in the sky, and passed out of sight going straight south.

In September the New York press took note of local reports of a "flying machine operated by a man" (*New York World*, September 3) and of a "man with bat's wings and improved frog's legs ... at least a thousand feet in the air ... flying toward the New Jersey coast ... [with] a cruel and determined expression" (*New York Times*, September 12).

In March 1892 accounts in the *New York Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and other newspapers detailed a furious controversy raging on the border of Russian Poland and Germany, scene of numerous sightings of mysterious "balloons." The objects, usually seen coming from the west, were thought to be carrying German spies. Observers said the vehicles appeared fully maneuverable—in other words, not subject to the vagaries of the wind, as with conventional balloons—and even able to hover for as long as 40 minutes at a time. They also carried brilliant searchlights.

These curious, and apparently isolated, stories would serve as a small preview of a much greater epic to come, one that would occupy newspapers all over the United States for six months between November 1896 and April 1897. They also exemplify the many problems a modern researcher faces in trying to make sense of early press accounts of UFO-like events. The alleged witnesses are long dead, and there is no way to determine their sincerity or the accuracy of their testimony. We do not even know in many cases if the tales are anything other than journalistic inventions.

If the European reports seem to have an air of credibility (if nothing to do with what is known of the aviation or weapons technology of the period), the New Mexico report is absurd on its face. Vehicles of the sort described in the newspaper account were not flying, or even could fly, in the America of the late nineteenth century, or even of the early twentieth (Cohen, 1981; Lore and Deneault, 1968). Air traffic between China and the United States was a technological impossibility. To all appearances the story is someone's idea of a joke; if so, however, it would be a joke often repeated in the years ahead.

The American publication of Jules Verne's popular *Robur the Conqueror*, a sort of airborne version of his earlier *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) in which a marvelous airship takes the place of Capt. Nemo's wondrous submarine, was seven years away when the Galisteo Junction story saw print, but by 1880 there was no shortage of popular speculation about heavier-than-air flight, which figured promi-

nently in science-fictional adventure tales (Moskowitz, 1959; Miller, 1987). In 1862 aviation enthusiasts in France formed a society to promote research and experiments in this area, and the following year Verne became its recording secretary. In the United States inventors published designs for rigid dirigibles and powered aircraft, but what flights there were consisted of little more than short hops. In 1869, for example, Frederick Marriott of California managed to keep a winged, steam-powered dirigible aloft for one mile. In 1872 German engineer Paul Haenlein used a four-cylinder internal-combustion engine (which ran on coal gas from a supporting bag) to power a semi-rigid-frame dirigible. The following year the *New York Daily Graphic* sponsored an attempt to send a 400,000-cubic-foot balloon, with attached lifeboat, across the Atlantic Ocean, but the bag tore open as it was being inflated. On November 13, 1897, the first metal dirigible was flown successfully from Berlin, but leaking gas caused it to crash after several miles in flight. No history of aviation reports flights of large, piloted dirigibles and other aircraft over the western United States at any time in the nineteenth century, the dreams and schemes of would-be inventors notwithstanding (Berliner, 1978).

In the summer of 1896 a man looking out the door of a mail car on a train moving through Iowa saw a strange sight. He reported the incident to the *Monthly Weather Review*:

> The darkness was intense; not a ray of light was visible from any point, except from the train. When a few miles out from Princeton, and while traveling almost due north, I observed a peculiar light low down on the western horizon. It appeared to be perfectly round and about a foot in diameter, of a dull rose color, or, possibly, like a piece of live coal. When first observed it seemed to be floating within a hundred feet of the earth, but soon rose to a height about midway between the horizon and the zenith. For a time it floated very steadily, but soon began to oscillate up and down, at times even dropping out of sight behind hills. The wind was quite strong from the east, but the light traveled in an almost due north course. Its speed varied, sometimes seeming to outrun the train considerably, and at others it would fall behind, but never far enough to be lost to sight. Most of the time it appeared to be nearly abreast of the train and apparently from half a mile to a mile distant. Soon after it was first observed by me, my companion arose, and we both watched it closely until the town of Lineville, Iowa, was reached. There it passed out of sight behind the depot, and we saw it no more (Corliss, 1982).

If this sighting had occurred a few months later—and in fact many similar sightings would be made from moving trains—the observer would probably have reported that he had seen the light of an airship.

The California saga. The great American airship scare begins in California in the fall of 1896. On the evening of November 17, between six and seven o'clock, according to the next day's *Sacramento Evening Bee*, a light resembling an "electric arc lamp propelled by some mysterious force" passed over the city and was seen by hundreds of persons as it traveled at low altitude and, as if intelligently controlled, took evasive action as it approached buildings and hills. Some observers claimed to have gotten a good look at the object and to have heard voices. Accounts differed as to whether they were arguing about the course they were to take or "singing in a chorus, a rattling song, which gradually died away in the distance" (*San Francisco Call*, November 18). Residents of Oak Park, a Sacramento suburb, told reporters that the day before, an aerial object had circled the town at a high altitude and left a trail of smoke.

The incident sparked enormous excitement and much press comment. Rumors spread that an airship had been secretly developed in Oak Park or that one had flown in from the East Coast. There was also, however, great skepticism. The *San Francisco Chronicle* called the Sacramento airship "probably one of the greatest hoaxes ... ever sprung on any community" but, in practically the next breath, acknowledged "it is hard to account for the evident sincerity of those who claim they saw the machine and heard the voices" (November 19). The next day, however, it approvingly quoted Prof. George Davidson's remark that the affair was the "outcome of a sort of freemasonry of liars. Half a dozen fellows have got together, sent up a balloon with some sort of an electric light attachment, and imagination has done the rest. It is a pure

fake." The *Oakland Tribune* likened the airship to the sea serpent, which "never appeared ... when there was any dearth of whiskey. The air ship ... cannot be verified properly without a liberal use of stimulant." To the *Woodland Mail* the airship was "about the thinnest fake yet set afloat."

The airship—or anyway "mysterious lights moving through the air at a great distance from the earth," in the *Call*'s words—made a return appearance over Sacramento on the twentieth. The next afternoon, at just after five o'clock, passengers on a streetcar in Oakland saw a "peculiar-looking contrivance" high overhead. It had a headlight in front and a searchlight on the bottom. One witness said it "somewhat resembled a balloon traveling end on ... and with what appeared to be wings both before and behind the [bottom] light" (*Call*, November 22). Earlier that afternoon a bizarre aerial phenomenon was observed near Tagus, just north of Tulare (southeast of Sacramento): an "immense sheet spread out in the air," heading northwest and seemingly against the wind. The *Call* reported that at least one sighting had occurred in early October, when a young woman riding a wheel along San Francisco's Telegraph Avenue observed a "strange-looking object" with a powerful headlight passing overhead in a westerly direction. The next day, November 23, the newspaper published a letter from a San Rafael, California, man, William Jordon, who claimed that in late August, while hunting in the Tamalpais mountain range, he had come upon a machine shop in a secluded area. The mechanics were working on an airship and said it would soon be completed. The hunter was sworn to secrecy. Jordon may be the first person to claim an encounter with the aeronauts. He certainly would not be the last.

As the *Call* was reporting these developments, the rival *Chronicle* was headlining the claims of local attorney George D. Collins, who stated that he represented the airship inventor, a wealthy man who had come to California from Maine seven years earlier. Collins was quoted as saying (though he would soon deny it) that he had seen the machine, a 150-foot metal contraption with "two canvas wings 18 feet wide and a rudder shaped like a bird's tail." Built in Oroville 60 miles away, it had flown over Sacramento and was now hidden in the San Francisco area while the inventor dealt with some technical problems. But soon he would fly the airship over the city "a dozen times" and everyone would get a good look at it. In response another San Francisco paper, the *Examiner*, sent a reporter to Oroville. He learned that the people of that city scoffed at Collins's story. "There is no wealthy man living here [Oroville] who came from Maine, or any other state, in the past seven years," the *Examiner* sneered (November 23), "and there is no one here that a diligent search can uncover who knows anything at all about a flying ship having been invented here or having left here for Sacramento."

Yet even as the ship supposedly was being repaired, reports of its passage were coming in from Sacramento and San Francisco. The object was usually seen as an "immense arc light"; dimly visible above it was a larger, dark balloon or cigar-shaped body. At Oakland witnesses thought it was "birdlike" in appearance.

On the twenty-fourth Collins approached the *Call* to complain that the *Examiner*, which was largely skeptical of airship stories, had printed falsehoods about him and recklessly misquoted him. That day the *Examiner* had published an interview with attorney Frederick Bradley, a friend of Collins. Bradley said Collins had told him about seeing the airship housed in a barn; then its inventor boarded it and shot up into the air, as two side flaps waved like bird's wings and propelled the craft upward for 200 feet. Soon afterwards it landed easily a few feet from Collins. Collins swore this story was a lie ("Bradley must have been drinking to have imagined I told him all such rubbish," he said), that in fact he had never seen the ship but only heard about it from the inventor. The *Chronicle* (November 24) ridiculed the attorney's sudden backtracking and cited an earlier statement in which, after being asked on his "word of honor" if he had seen the airship, he had sworn he had. "Mr. Collins was evidently in a trance at the time," the paper observed wryly.

Suspicion soon fell on itinerant dentist E. H. Benjamin, identified as a Carmel, Maine, native who spent most of his time traveling, selling pianos and tinkering with would-be inventions. Benjamin first proved elusive, but when reporters finally caught up with him, he admitted that Collins was his attorney but

that his "inventions have to do with dentistry" (*Call*, November 24). Nonetheless every time Benjamin went out in public, he was badgered by questions about the airship. Finally, sick of it all, he went into hiding, leaving behind most of his possessions. Reporters and laborers who sorted through them found nothing more exciting than copper dental fittings.

On the twenty-fourth the *Oakland Tribune* announced that a prominent citizen, George Carleton, knew the name of the inventor. He had it from a fellow Mason, "who talked with the man who saw the machine" as it was tested in the Oroville area. Carleton averred he would saw his leg off before he would break his pledge not to divulge the secret of the inventor's identity.

The following day the *Call* weighed in with even more sensational claims. W.H.H. Hart, the flamboyant former attorney general of California (he served one term), was declaring he now represented the inventor, who had fired Collins for talking too much. Yet Collins was the soul of discretion next to Hart, who seemed determined to tell all he knew (or said he knew) short of the name of the inventor, rumored now to be a Dr. Catlin, an alleged associate of Dr. Benjamin. Hart said two airships existed and his role was to "consolidate both interests." One was built in an eastern state and he was intimately familiar with this one, which he had seen with his own eyes. As for the California airship, he said, "I don't see any reason why [it] ... cannot be worked. The whole trouble in the problem of aerial navigation has been a question of motive power. In this they have the right motive power ... and that is by electrical storage batteries.... I propose to use [the California airship] wholly for war purposes, and within the next five or six months it will be put to the test. From what I have seen of it I have not the least doubt but [sic] that it will carry four men and 1000 pounds of dynamite." The dynamite would be dropped on the city of Havana. (In 1898 the United States and Spain would go to war, and the latter country would be forced to relinquish its Cuban colony.)

The same article quotes a secret informant's account of how recently the inventor had spent the late hours sailing from the Oroville area to Sacramento, where observers on the ground mistook engine noises for voices and music. The informant said that "about 3 o'clock in the morning [the inventor] landed in the barnyard of a farm situated in one of the bay counties. He put his airship into the barn and locked the door, for he had previously made arrangements to that end.... This was the very first trip of the new airship. Since then he has been out nearly every night...."

In due course Hart, like Collins, moderated his claims, insisting that he had not seen the airship, only met the man "who claims to be the inventor" and seen drawings and diagrams of the craft. The alleged inventor, Hart said, "was a cousin of Mr. Linn, who was [Cuban revolutionary] Antonio Maceo's electrician." Nothing came of any of this, and soon Hart vanished from press accounts. Nearly a century later, it is impossible to judge what, if any, truth lay behind the claims he and Collins made. Conceivably they were truthfully passing on what they had been told by clients who for their part were less than honest. (Collins's and Hart's reported firsthand observations of the airships, if they are not outright lies, suggest they were the victims of an extraordinarily sophisticated hoax.) Perhaps the clients were trying to develop an airship and took advantage of publicity about unidentified airships (and of the credulity of their lawyers) to claim them as their own; if ever they existed, their own never flew. All that is clear—and all that matters for our purposes here—is that *someone* was lying.

Meanwhile reports of sightings continued up and down the state of California. Most were of nocturnal lights, and at least some of these were planets (most prominently Venus) and stars. Others were lighted kites sent aloft by pranksters. But the remainder seemed to have no apparent explanation, if one is to credit press and witness testimony. For example, on the evening of November 25, a mysterious light circled Sacramento at a rapid rate of speed. Observers included such officials as Deputy Secretary of State George A. McCalvy, District Attorney Frank D. Ryan and E. D. McCabe, the governor's personal secretary. It shared the sky with Venus but was, according to the *Call* (November 26), "fully three times as large." Its behavior was certainly not that of an astronomical body: "When [it] first appeared it was seen moving rapidly from the northeast and

heading in a southwesterly direction. As it neared the southern boundary of the city it turned directly toward the west and after passing the city went south, being distinctly visible for upward of 20 minutes. It moved with far more rapidity than it had been seen to do in its two former visits" even though there was not a "breath of wind moving at the time." It made a second appearance later in the evening, approaching from the west and disappearing in the northeast. One witness, a Prof. Dodge, said he had seen the "outlines of a dark body" just above the light. Lt. Fred Martin of the Signal Corps stated that at four o'clock that afternoon two men told him they had just seen a rapidly moving "dark, misty object, traveling at an enormous height" in a cloudless northeastern sky.

On November 26, between 8 and 8:30 P.M., electrician Case Gilson and three other men allegedly saw an unlighted airship in the clear sky 1000 feet over Oakland. It was coming from the southeast and flying northward against the wind. He told the *Oakland Tribune* (December 1) that it "looked like a great black cigar with a fishlike tail.... The body was at least 100 feet long and attached to it was a triangular tail, one apex being attached to the main body. The surface of the airship looked as if it were made of aluminum, which exposure to wind and weather had turned dark.... The airship went at tremendous speed. As it neared Lorin it turned quickly and disappeared in the direction of San Francisco. At half past 8 we saw it again, when it took about the same direction and disappeared." An identical object was reported over Oakland two nights later, though this time the witness, Percy Drew, said it carried a red light. About an hour earlier, in East San Jose, John Bawl and his family saw, in Bawl's words, "some bright object in the sky some 150 yards distant." As it approached the witnesses, moving in a southwesterly direction, "it was lunging from side to side, sometimes swerving sharply to one side.... It had a pair of wings which were constantly flapping not from side to side like a bird's, but with more of a forward and downward motion. Beneath it several feet hung a ball of red light which lit up the bottom of the ship and sent its rays far down below it. At the front was a cone-shaped projection which I surmised was a windbreak.... It varied in height considerably during the time I watched it. Its speed I judged to be about that of an electric car doing its best."

Just after 6:30 on the evening of December 4, travelers on a freight train between Dixon and Elmira saw two large, bright lights moving parallel to them at about 1000 feet altitude. The lights quickly outdistanced the train and disappeared in the southwestern sky.

Less credible–but characteristic of some of what was to come in the months ahead–were tales of meetings with airship inventors and crews. Among these was the yarn told by electrician John A. Horen, who informed the *Examiner* that on November 27 he met a stranger who took him to an airship hidden in a remote location some 50 miles from San Francisco. The two boarded an airship and sailed over Honolulu. When informed of her husband's story, his wife laughed, described him as a habitual practical joker, and said he had been sound asleep in his own bed during the evening in question. During the early morning hours of December 2 two fishermen near Pacific Grove supposedly saw an airship land on water and float to a beach. It turned out to have three occupants, including one addressed by the others as "captain," who explained that the ship was undergoing repairs and that, as he put it, "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." As in other aeronaut-encounter stories which would be reported in the next months, the aeronaut's words are "quoted" extensively, as if the witnesses (in this case two Italian fishermen) were taking careful notes. The *Call* (December 5) reported the testimony of William Gordon, who said that on the evening of the third he was invited aboard an airship parked a mile from Indio, then taken on a flight through southern California. The pilot "was of swarthy appearance and spoke Spanish to the only companion he had, a woman." George Jennings, proprietor of the bar at the Grand Central Hotel in Fresno, had another kind of story to tell. Just before noon on the third, Jennings told a *Call* correspondent, a dusty traveler entered the establishment and Jennings immediately recognized him as an "old friend whose name I cannot possibly give at present." The man, of course, was one of the airship inventors. Mechanical problems and a strong

air current had brought their ship involuntarily to the area, and the man was about to embark for San Francisco for parts and assistance. "I know the man well," Jennings is quoted as saying. "He had no reason to tell me such a story if it was not true."

The reason one Col. H. G. Shaw told his story about meeting Martians is lost to history, though the account in the *Stockton Evening Mail* of November 27 mentioned that Shaw ("formerly of the *Mail* editorial staff") "is at present engaged in collecting an exhibit for the Stockton Commercial Association to be displayed at the Citrus Fair which will be held in Fresno during the coming month." Perhaps it was publicity he was seeking, or maybe he just liked a good joke. Whatever the explanation, his story is interesting because it reveals that for all the talk about American and Cuban inventors, there was an undercurrent of speculation about extraterrestrial visitors. Such notions would attain more prominence as the airship saga moved eastward, but Shaw's tale is the first explicitly to link alien beings with unidentified airships.

Shaw said he and a companion, Camille Spooner (whom the *Mail*, possibly because it was in on the joke, never sought out for confirmation), had left Lodi around six o'clock on the twenty-fifth and "were jogging along quietly when the horse stopped suddenly and gave a snort of terror. Looking up we beheld three strange beings ... nearly or quite seven feet high and very slender." The horse was paralyzed with terror, so the two men were unable to flee the scene. In any case, the beings, who looked more or less human, gave no indication of hostile intent. Shaw walked up to them and asked where they were from. "They seemed not to understand me," he reported, "but began—well, 'warbling' expresses it better than talking. Their remarks ... were addressed to each other, and sounded like a monotonous chant." As the beings stared at the travelers, their carriage and the horse, Shaw observed them closely, noting small, delicate, nailless hands and long, narrow feet. When he touched one under the elbow, he found the being weighed less than an ounce.

"They were without any sort of clothing," Shaw went on, "but were covered with a natural growth ... as soft as silk to the touch, and their skin was like velvet. Their faces and heads were without hair, the ears were very small, and the nose had the appearance of polished ivory, while the eyes were large and lustrous. The mouth, however, was small, and it seemed to me that they were without teeth. That and other things led me to believe that they neither ate nor drank, and that life was sustained by some sort of gas. Each of them had swung under the left arm a bag to which was attached a nozzle, and every little while one or the other would place the nozzle in his mouth, at which time I heard a sound as of escaping gas." The beings, "possessed of a strange beauty," each carried an egg-sized light which, when opened, revealed an "intense but not unpleasant light."

The beings then attempted what has to be the first would-be UFO abduction in history. They tried, according to Shaw, "to lift me, probably with the intention of carrying me away," but they lacked the strength to budge him or his companion. Abandoning this effort, they turned and flashed their lights toward a nearby bridge. Shaw and Spooner saw a 150-foot airship hovering 20 feet above the water. "The three walked rapidly toward the ship, but not as you or I walk," Shaw related, "but with a swaying motion, their feet only touching the ground at intervals of about 15 feet.... With a little spring they rose to the machine, opened a door in the side, and disappeared within." The ship then flew quickly out of sight.

Shaw concluded his account with a theory that "those we beheld were inhabitants of Mars, who have been sent to earth for the purpose of securing one of its inhabitants." With tongue presumably planted even deeper in cheek, he inveighed against "the stories being told by certain San Francisco attorneys." These are "clumsy fakes" which "should not be given credence by anyone."

San Francisco attorney Hart makes his final appearance in the January 16, 1897, issue of the *Call*, with the news that some weeks ago his client, the airship inventor, took the craft apart and shipped it, via New Orleans and Key West, to Cuba.

By the second week of December, California had begun to recover from airship fever, though sporadic sightings continued into January. On the twenty-second the *Stockton Evening Mail* took note of a recent daylight sighting in Acampo, just north of Lodi.

Witnesses said it "seemed as big as a small house, and looked as if it were built of canvas." Another Acampo report of the same day was of something "like a cigar box with a spark of fire in it and afterwards [it] seemed as if it was burning." Yet another a few days later was reminiscent of 1880 reports of flying men. Five Acampo residents allegedly sighted an "aerial navigator [which] appeared to be a man with wings, having a fiery glow presumably from the reflection of some light carried with him" (*Mail*, January 26).

The 1897 story begins. On February 2, 1897, a dispatch from Hastings, Nebraska, published in the *Omaha Daily Bee*, remarked on airship sightings in the south-central part of the state. The first sighting had occurred, it said, the previous fall, when an airship "was seen floating in the air about 500 feet above ground, and after standing nearly still for about 30 minutes it began to circle about and then took a northerly direction for about two miles, after which it returned to its starting place and sunk [sic] into oblivion." On February 1 the craft returned, appearing as a "large, glaring light" hovering, ascending, descending and moving at a "most remarkable speed." On February 4 a group of 10 or 12 worshippers returning from a prayer meeting at Inavale, 40 miles south of Hastings, saw a bright light pass far overhead. Ten minutes later it was back, only this time it was much closer to the ground and the witnesses could see a cone-shaped construction 30 to 40 feet long, "with a bright headlight and six smaller lights, three on a side, and ... two sets of wings on a side, with a large fan-shaped rudder" (*Bee*, February 6). Voices and laughter could be heard.

All that month airship stories would circulate through the state, setting the stage for the nationwide flap that would erupt in late March. Near Big Springs, in western Nebraska, on February 17, three men reported seeing a barrel-sized light abruptly rising up 300 feet and then descending rapidly and shooting out sparks. It moved across a clear sky in this fashion until it was lost to view. The *Kearney Hub* (February 18) suggested that the "now famous California airship inventor is in our vicinity," but the incident sounds more like a modern UFO report than a typical airship sighting. (The same phenomenon was reported over North Loup on March 13 [*Nebraska State Journal*, March 16].) If we can judge from newspaper accounts, many, perhaps most, sightings were of Venus, meteors and kites; evidently the publicity was inflaming the imaginations of the suggestible and proving irresistible to pranksters. Mostly the "airship" was observed as a large light, but viewers were more than willing to fill in the missing details. As Lincoln's *Nebraska State Journal* (February 26) remarked of witnesses who saw a southbound light, "They were unable to tell anything about the shape of the ship back of it, but all seemed to be of the opinion that it must be the cigar-shaped vessel which was discovered at Inavale a few weeks ago." On the twenty-sixth, at 10:15 P.M., a group of persons at a railroad depot in Falls City, in the extreme southeastern part of the state, saw in the northern sky, according to dispatcher Ike Chidsey, "what appeared to be a big search-light, moving in a westerly direction, apparently at a speed of about 60 miles an hour, and in the same portion of the sky a red light, much like a switch lamp, was plainly seen" (*Atchison* [Kansas] *Daily Globe*, February 27). Because it was moving in the direction of Stella, Nebraska, Chidsey wired the agent there and he in turn reported seeing it a few minutes later. Other reports came in over the next four and a half hours from Beatrice, Wymore, Hastings, Kenesaw and Hartwell. Some of the station operators said the object had been appearing for the past several nights but they had been reluctant to say anything about it for fear of ridicule. At 9:30 P.M. on March 14 something looking like a "big engine headlight" sailed over South Omaha and was visible for between 30 and 40 minutes. This was its second appearance; the other had been a couple of weeks earlier. In both cases, according to the *Omaha Daily Bee* (March 16), "Nothing definite could be distinguished regarding any other part of it."

By the latter part of February strange lights were appearing in the skies of northern Kansas. At Valley Falls people thought they saw the outlines of an airship behind some moving lights. By March 28 the *Kansas City Star* was complaining about "credulous correspondents in various parts of Kansas" who were mistaking Venus, then in the northwestern sky, for an airship. No doubt some were, but Venus could not have been responsible for the object that appeared over Belleville late at night on at least two occasions late in March, moving at 75 mph and "lighting up the

houses and city like an immense meteor and seem[ing] to stop a little northeast of the city, remaining almost stationary for 20 or 30 minutes, then sail[ing] rapidly up and down going northwest, then south passing below then above some scattering clouds and moving in a playful manner, finally disappearing in the distance; appearing again at two o'clock going south and return[ing] north about five o'clock in the morning" (*Topeka Daily Capital*, March 28). After a "blood-red light" appeared in the western sky over Topeka on the twenty-seventh, numerous residents looked for it to show up again the next evening but were disappointed. The *Kansas City Times* (March 29) remarked, "The only star [sic] near where the light of last night was seen was Venus, and some people who were not out last night made the assertion that the people had been fooled by that planet, that she was the only airship in sight. But there can be no truth in this assertion. The light seen last night probably may not have been an airship, but it was certainly neither a star nor a planet. The light moved parallel with the horizon and with great rapidity. Stars do not perform these feats. Neither do planets. And then when the strange light was reddest there was Venus, a short distance to the right, shining forth in all her effulgent glory. Again, when the midnight watchers caught another glimpse of the light, Venus had long before sunk to rest."

With the onset of April, airship sightings spread throughout a variety of midwestern, southern and eastern states. They were mostly over by the end of May, though reports of unidentified "balloons" continued in Canada, especially in Manitoba and British Columbia, through the summer (Bullard, 1982; Pethick, 1980). A full account would occupy a thick book. A sense of what the 1897 airship scare involved can be gained, however, from an examination of its constituent features, at least as they were reported in period newspapers (the quality of whose reporting, as we shall see, left much to be desired).

Representative airship reports. To many observers the airship was a brilliant nocturnal light, often compared to an arc light, which moved through the heavens at a notable speed. A number of these reports are apparently of Venus or a kite. Others seem not to be. Frequently the object would appear first as a light, then at some point as a structured craft. For example, at Quincy, Illinois, late on the evening of April 10 hundreds of onlookers saw a "bright white light," with red and green lights on either side of it, flying low over the Mississippi River on the city's west side. As they watched, it rose in the air, headed east over Quincy, then south, then west. It hovered over a park for a few minutes before moving north and stopping half a mile later to hover again. It reversed direction and left in a southerly direction at "tremendous speed." The *Quincy Morning Whig* (April 11) reported, "At times it did not appear to be more than 400 or 500 feet above the ground, and in the bright moonlight was plainly silhouetted against the clear sky. Men who saw the thing describe it as a long, slender body shaped like a cigar, and made of some bright metal, perhaps aluminum, on which the moonlight glistened. On either side of the hull extending outwards and upwards were what appeared to be wings, and above the hull could be seen the misty outlines of some sort of superstructure, a clear view of which, however, was intercepted by the wings. At the front end of the thing was a headlight, and from the brightness and intensity of the stream of light thrown out it was apparently similar to the searchlights used on steamboats. About midway of the hull were small lights, a green light on the starboard or right hand side, and a red light on the port or left hand side...." Estimates of its length varied from 50 feet to twice that.

Emerson, South Dakota, April 15: As it passed over town over a 15-minute period between 9 and 10 P.M., the airship appeared "cigar-shaped" with a "row of red lights along the sides" (*Sioux City* [Iowa] *Journal*, April 17). Cochransville, Ohio, April 19: "It was cone shaped, 180 feet long, and flashed, red, white and green lights from the bow" (*Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, April 20). Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 11: After observing an airship through glasses, R. G. Adams described it as "18 or 20 feet long. It was shaped like a cigar and in the middle and on top of it was a square light. This light was alternately red, green and red" (*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 12). Marshfield, Wisconsin, April 10: "It seemed to assume different colors, and moved at good speed. With a glass it showed up cone shape[d] with a bright headlight" (*Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 11). Decatur, Illinois, April 11: A witness said the airship "looks like

two monster cigars with three bright headlights" (*Decatur Evening Republican*, April 12). Boynton, Illinois, April 16: While taking an evening stroll around 9:30, the village blacksmith saw a cigar-shaped vessel, "about 150 feet long by 50 feet wide ... with two large wings ... lit up very brilliantly with different colored lights ... a very beautiful sight" (*Delavan* [Illinois] *Times*, April 22). Benton Harbor, Michigan, April 11: "[I]t had the appearance of a huge ball of fire but with opera glasses leveled up on it ... its aspect greatly changed. It threw off a variety of colored lights of soft yellow lustre. The outline of the ship could not be seen" as it "traveled rapidly north-northwest" (*Benton Harbor Evening News*, April 12). Bay City, Michigan, April 16: As it passed 50 feet over observers, the airship was seen to be "from 50 to 75 feet long, perhaps one-third as wide. It shone with a dull red glow, as if there were lights on the upper side. In shape it was conical and no mode of propulsion was visible ..." (*Saginaw Courier-Herald*, April 16). Eastern Iowa, April 8: "[H]undreds of people ... all describe it about the same way. A bright glaring headlight, revealing a glistening steel hull, dim winglike projections on either side and a hissing sound as it glides through the air" (*Chicago Record*, April 9). Grinnell, Iowa, mid-April: J. W. Lansing said, "It was early in the evening and the ship could be seen distinctly. It was shaped like a cigar, and it moved in various directions, some of the time against a strong wind" (*Springfield* [Illinois] *News*, April 26). Kokomo, Indiana, April 22: "The ship soared almost directly over the town from southwest to northeast. It came in the form of a ball of light.... Some could distinguish the faint outline of a long cigar shaped object and something that looked like arms or wings. Others saw nothing but the light" (*Kokomo Tribune*, April 23). Toledo, Ohio, April 24: Two witnesses saw "bright lights of different colors ... attached to a cigar shaped object" at about 500 feet altitude. "Both gentlemen agree as to the size and general shape of the airship, and say that there was nothing to indicate the use of wings or propellers ..." (*Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 28). Erie, Pennsylvania, April 21: J. S. Scheer "describes the mysterious ship as being quite long and shaped like a cigar. It had two wing-like fans on each side and a huge propeller on the stern. It also carried bright lights on the bow ..." (*Erie Daily Times*, April 22). Dunkirk, Ohio, April 15: "The affair looked as large as a wagon bed and had something like wings stretching from each side and a propeller at each end. On the front was a red light while on the rear was a greenish-yellow lamp" (*Kenton* [Ohio] *News-Republican*, April 16). Trenton, Tennessee, April 17: A "large conical mass, shaped like a cigar, was seen behind the light. Soon a red light on the right and a green light on the left became discernible" (*Memphis Commercial-Appeal*, April 18). Denton, Texas, circa April 14: An airship passed over the face of the moon and a stargazer who watched it through powerful glasses reported "it floated about a half mile above the earth and seemed to be about 50 feet long, of a cigar shape with two great wings thrust out from each side; a broad tail or steering sail behind and a long beak or blade resembling a cutwater on a ship in front. At the point where the beak joined the main body a powerful search light threw its rays far into the night ahead, beside which even the luminosity of the moon paled. A row of windows along the side gave out similar lights" (*Dallas Morning News*, April 15). Cresson, Texas, circa April 15: The airship was "long and pointed at both ends, with powerful searchlight in the front end, with several smaller ones on the sides ... about 60 feet in length ... moving at a terrific rate of speed.... It had wings on it, something like that of a bat" (*Dallas Morning News*, April 16). Hillsboro, Texas, April 16: "There was a brilliant light, as if coming from an arc light ... and then [witness J. S. Bounds] saw it gliding over a field near by. It then turned upward and he watched it until he says it must have been 1000 feet up in the air. The light appeared to him to be the headlight of some kind of a ship.... [T]he light went out and small ones, such as incandescent lights, appeared all around the body of the vessel ..." (*Austin Daily Statesman*, April 18).

Unusual reports. Bloomington, Illinois, April 11: At 12:15 in the afternoon a resident saw, moving at a high altitude and a rapid rate of speed, a "flat-shaped" object which "looked like a big piece of yellow canvas" (*Bloomington Daily Pantagraph*, April 12). Lincoln, Illinois, April 12: At 8 P.M. more than 50 observers saw an unusual aerial vehicle pass overhead. John Fitzgerald, one of those who got a particularly good look at it, reported a large, bright headlight "in front of a V-shaped object" (*Lincoln Weekly Courier*, April 13). Mount Vernon, Illinois, April 14:

"What is thought to be the mysterious airship was seen here last night by a hundred persons. Mayor [B. C.] Wells said it resembled the body of a huge man swimming through the air with an electric light on his back" (*Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, April 16). Eldridge, North Dakota, mid-April: Between 9 and 10 P.M. a local man saw a "car attached to a large kite-shaped structure above it to which were fastened large wings or planes which supported the apparatus in the air.... [I]t stopped and swung around.... At one time it was so close to him that he could hear ... a humming which he took to be the operation of a machine. Some of the time it carried colored lights, then again it was entirely without lights" (*Jamestown* [North Dakota] *Weekly Alert*, April 22). Fort Wayne, Indiana, mid-April: A fast-moving, yellow-colored object in the western sky looked "pear-shaped with the apex downward," according to witness F. Crocker. R. T. Tretheway described it as "round with a V-shaped tail to it. The color of it seemed a bright yellow and strong rays of the same colored light were constantly being shot out from the main body" (*Fort Wayne Weekly Gazette*, April 15). Beaumont, Texas, April 17: At 1:30 A.M. a night watchman observed a "globular shaped thing a little dark with a bright light the size of a star at one end" as it passed at a high altitude from the southeast to the northwest (*Dallas Morning News*, April 18). Cincinnati, Ohio, May 4: Dr. Louis Dumhoff and other witnesses reported an object "moving in a zigzag course, first up, then down." It was "egg-shaped, red in color and appearing as though a portion of it was covered with a curtain, the rays escaping in the center and at each end" (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 5). Norwalk, Ohio, May 10: "Newspaper accounts describe the airship as cigar shaped," one witness said, "but they are way off; at least, the one I saw is not of that shape at all, but round, like a huge ball.... I followed it over a mile. Part of the way it led me over a field. We were so far from the street lights that it was quite dark.... [I]t cast a shadow, which I saw distinctly and repeatedly" (*Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, May 11).

Landings and close encounters. Western Iowa, April 4: Around 12:15 A.M. dairy farmer Dick Butler, returning home from a business trip in Sioux City, saw a glow in the cornfield near his home. The source was, according to a newspaper report, "a dark bulk through the windows of which the light shone." It looked like a "long, narrow car, resembling a corset box in shape, but perhaps 30 or 35 feet in length and six or seven in width and height. Over this car floated a cigar-shaped bag, horizontally placed, of about the same length as the car, and eight or 10 feet thick at its greatest diameter." At that moment Butler's horses bolted and he was tossed into the ditch. By the time he was on his feet again, the object had ascended and was flying away (*Marshalltown* [Iowa] *Evening News-Republican*, April 9). Lake Elmo, Minnesota, April 13: Two men riding to Hudson, Wisconsin, from nearby Lakeland, Minnesota, at 11 P.M. spotted a figure in a clearing. "He walked around as if he was looking for something," Frederick Chamberlain said. When Chamberlain and his companion turned off the road to investigate, they heard a crackling sound, as if twigs and brush were being crushed, followed by an irregular "rushing noise." "A second later," Chamberlain said, "and we distinguished a long, high object of a gray white color. The thing struck me as resembling most of the top of a 'prairie schooner' or immigrant wagon covered with canvas. At the same instant we saw two rows of lights—four lights in two pairs—on each pair including a red and green light. The thing rose quickly at a sharp angle, so as to just clear the tree tops. As it passed over the trees to the south we saw several more white lights. But we could make out no machinery or wings or wheels or rudders or human figures, or even the exact outline of the affair." In the mud the witnesses found "14 footprints ... each two feet in length, six inches wide, arranged seven on each side, and in an oblong pattern." A farmer in the area independently reported seeing a dark object with green and red lights flying overhead at about the same time (*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 15). Frankfort, Indiana, April 14: A group of workers returning home from an out-of-town job in the early morning hours heard a "swishing, roaring sound" and saw green and yellow lights in a break in the clouds. A brilliant white searchlight blinded their eyes momentarily. When the men's sight had cleared, they saw a winged, cigar-shaped object descending over nearby treetops, where it hovered briefly before rising and shooting off toward the southeast, making the same noises that had brought it to the witnesses' attention in the first place (*Indianapolis Sentinel*, April 15).

In the larger context of UFO history, reports such as these are not inherently any more incredible than modern UFO reports, which they resemble to a striking degree. What differences exist are relatively minor. In the twentieth century cigar-shaped UFOs (including ones with wings) are reported less often than discs ("flying saucers") but are nonetheless among the most commonly seen anomalous aerial phenomena. A ufologist might argue that a more significant contrast is that in our time UFOs observed nocturnally are likely to be described as luminous or glowing, whereas the 1896-97 reports have the objects carrying lights on the sides but otherwise being unilluminated; yet a close reading of twentieth-century UFO reports uncovers a number of little-noted sightings of silver, nonluminous objects of dirigible shape, often carrying body lights and sweeping searchlights (for examples, *see* **UFOs, 1900–1946**). There are, however, other kinds of nineteenth-century airship stories which figure prominently in press accounts of the period and which are difficult to square with the UFO phenomenon as it is ordinarily understood. These are reported below, in ascending order of improbability and with qualifying adverbs such as "allegedly" and "supposedly" withheld for reasons of readability. It should be stated that stories of aeronaut hearings, sightings and meetings that are at least *obvious* jokes, satires, or hoaxes are not listed here.

Aeronauts heard. Hawarden, Iowa, April 11: As a 60-foot-long, cone-shaped airship with four wings passed overhead at low altitude, witnesses heard "the working of machinery and the sound of human voices ... among which was mingled the laughter of women" (*Des Moines Leader*, April 13). Jacksonville, Illinois, April 10: "Many reliable persons assert that they plainly distinguished human voices" as a long, narrow, metallic craft with a searchlight flew over the town (*Quincy* [Illinois] *Morning Whig*, April 11). Casstown, Ohio, April 14: From a huge, birdlike object with wings and a rudder James McKensie heard a sound like distant music and a shout from a human voice (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 16). Dunkirk, Ohio, April 15: At 4 A.M. witnesses to a passing airship, including Town Marshal Willis Mahon, "could hear several men ... talking very loud, but could not distinguish what they were saying" (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 16).

Aeronauts seen. Minnetonka, Minnesota, April 11: Late in the evening a cyclist observed a "flying machine ... shaped like an ordinary boat," with red and green lights on each side and a powerful light in front. Inside the craft were "living persons, men, women and children. They were moving about as if very busy" (*Minneapolis Tribune*, April 13). Near Birmingham, Iowa, April 14: An airship 100 feet long and 20 feet high in the center came down in a meadow almost a mile from town between 8 and 9 P.M. As witnesses raced to the scene, the craft rose with a loud whirring sound. In the moonlight two men could be seen inside; one "carried a lantern which he waved as the ship ascended" (*Burlington* [Iowa] *Hawk-Eye*, April 16). Danvers, Illinois, April 16: Just after midnight an "airship" and a smaller "trailer which followed it very closely" were observed by many residents. "The ships were of some bright material and the occupants were dressed in western style" (*Bloomington* [Illinois] *Pantagraph*, April 17). Near Marion, Indiana, April 14: In the afternoon a cigar-shaped object with large wings appeared six miles south of the city, coming in from the northwest and veering toward the east. "Six passengers were aboard" (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 15). Near Louisville, Kentucky, April 12: Just before daylight farmer Augustus Rodgers encountered a brilliantly lighted, "huge, oblong shape" 400 feet above him. He called his wife and the two of them watched the object, traveling at about 100 mph, disappear in the southeastern sky. "Before it vanished uncouth and enormous shadows flickered from all parts of the ship, and both Rodgers and his wife saw a form, like that of a man, standing in the front of the ship and directing its course" (*Louisville Evening Post*, April 13). Farmersville, Texas, April 15: "Two-thirds of the citizens of the city" watched a dim light approach from the northwest. As it got closer, it turned out to be a "ship or balloon." City Marshal Brown said he was within 200 feet of it and "could see two men in the ship and something resembling a large Newfoundland dog." Though he heard the passengers speaking, they were doing so in a language he did not understand (*Galveston Daily News*, April 18). Elysian, Minnesota, April 19: Just before 6 A.M. a farmer saw an airship descend in a wooded area. He ran toward it and was within a few feet of it when it abruptly ascended. There were three men inside the craft (*Mankato* [Minnesota] *Review*,

April 20). Lyons, Nebraska, April 19: At 9:30 P.M. an airship appeared a mile above the town. It had large fans or propellers which the witnesses could hear. One observer who watched it through opera glasses saw a "large man muffled in a great coat, apparently presiding over some kind of a steering apparatus" (*Logan Valley Sun* [Lyons], April 21).

Aeronauts encountered. Near Peru, Nebraska, April 6: While looking for strayed cattle, James Southard became lost. At 2 A.M. he noticed a light on a bar in the Missouri River. It was from a landed airship, 200 feet long, whose crew were repairing the searchlight. The aeronauts answered all of Southard's questions. "The craft is loaded with several tons of dynamite and is bound for Cuba," where it would bomb Spanish troop camps and ships (*Auburn* [Nebraska] *Granger*, April 9). Near Elburn, Illinois, early April: Farmers came upon a landed airship, "made of some light substance like aluminum." Two aeronauts, who were repairing the vehicle, would not reveal much about themselves, except to say that they were crossing the country from the Pacific coast to the Atlantic and were "following the Northwestern railway" (*Rockford* [Illinois] *Daily Republic*, April 12). Near Cisco, Texas, April 15: Late in the evening, seeing a light where he knew no farmhouse stood, Patrick Byrnes investigated, spotting a 200-foot airship and startling its crew members who were repairing the searchlight. "The craft is loaded with several tons of dynamite and is bound for Cuba." (Note the identical phrasing in the Nebraska story above.) The airship resumed its flight at 1 A.M. (*Fort Worth Register*, April 18). Near Springfield, Illinois, April 14: At just after 9 P.M. John Halley and Adolph Wenke saw an airship land and talked with one of its occupants, a bearded scientist who stepped outside the craft. Inside, the witnesses could see another man and a woman identified as the scientist's wife. He said little about himself but remarked that "as soon as Congress recognized Cuban belligerency his air ship would be heard from" (*Springfield News*, April 15). Lexington, Kentucky, April 17: Three men taking a mid-evening stroll heard a whirling noise just as an airship descended on a vacant lot. As they rushed to the site, they encountered a 40-year-old man carrying a bucket of water from nearby springs. Declining to answer questions, the aeronaut reentered his ship and "sailed away in the direction of Richmond" (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 19). Near Beaumont, Texas, mid-April: Hearing that an airship had landed at a farm two miles from town, Rabbi A. Levy went to check out the story. In the darkness he "could see very little except the outlines of the ship," 150 feet long with 100-foot wings. "I spoke to one of the men when he went into the farmer's house, and shook hands with him.... Yes, I did hear him say where it was built, but I can't remember the name of the place, or the name of the inventor. He said that they had been traveling a great deal, and were testing the machine. I was so dumbfounded that I could not frame an intelligent question to ask" (*New Orleans Daily Picayune*, April 25). Near Homan, Arkansas, mid-April: Jim Hooton, a railroad conductor on his way back to work after several hours' hunting, heard a sound "like the working of an air pump on a locomotive." When he investigated, he found an airship undergoing repairs. After a brief exchange the four- or five-man crew reentered the ship, "which gradually arose with a hissing sound.... In less time than it takes to tell you, the ship had gone out of sight" (*Arkansas Gazette*, April 22). Rockland, Texas, April 22: At 11 P.M., alerted by his barking dogs, John Barclay looked out his window to see an oblong-shaped, winged airship hovering above a pasture. The object circled a few times, then landed. Taking a Winchester with him, Barclay went outside and confronted an "ordinary mortal" who identified himself as "Smith" and who gave Barclay $10 with which to purchase lubricating oil, two cold chisels, and bluestone. He would not permit Barclay to approach the ship. When the witness returned with the requested materials, before departing the aeronaut would say only that he was from "anywhere," adding that "we will be in Greece tomorrow" (*Houston Daily Post*, April 25). Near Chattanooga, Tennessee, April 24: An airship in need of repairs landed on the spur of a mountain. Several witnesses spoke with its two occupants, one of whom identified himself as Prof. Charles Davidson. Davidson said he had left Sacramento a month earlier and was touring the country (*Paducah* [Kentucky] *Daily News*, April 26). Near Hot Springs, Arkansas, May 6: During a rainstorm two law-enforcement officers saw a light in the sky come down behind a hill half a mile away. After seeing two persons carrying lights, they drew their rifles and demanded to know who was

there. A man with a long dark beard said he, a young man, and a young woman were traveling around the country in an airship, which was clearly visible behind him, as were the two other aeronauts, and they hoped to end up in Nashville at the end of their trip. He invited the officers (as they put it in a subsequent sworn statement) to "take a ride, saying that he could take us where it was not raining. We told him we preferred to get wet." The officers, who were searching for a suspect, left. Forty minutes later, on their return to the site, the airship was gone (*Helena* [Arkansas] *Weekly World*, May 13).

The mysterious Mr. Wilson. One of the especially curious aspects of the airship affair concerns several separate reports, all but one from Texas, involving an aeronaut named Wilson. Someone who may be Wilson first appears in a letter published in the *Dallas Morning News* for April 19. The correspondent, C. G. Williams of Greenville, reported that at midnight on April 16, as he was taking a walk two miles south of town, he saw a brilliant light in front of him. The light went out, revealing an "immense cigar-shaped vessel" illuminated by the light of the moon. Three men emerged from the landed craft. Two went to work on the ship and the third approached Williams, asking if he would mail some letters but "not disclose the names and addresses." "Having been at one time connected with a daily paper, and by mere reportorial instinct I took out my pencil and paper," Williams wrote, and recorded the conversation that followed. Saying that the airship ran by "electricity," the aeronaut claimed he had perfected his ship after many years of work "at a little town in the interior of New York state." After a few minutes the aeronauts boarded the craft and flew away and Williams went to Greenville to send off the letters.

On May 16 the *Morning News* published another letter, this one said to have been sent to Dr. D. H. Tucker from a young friend who not long afterwards perished in Grenada, Mississippi, while trying to rescue livestock from a flood. The letter, dated April 20, was sent from Lake Charles, Louisiana. The writer claimed that the day before, around noon, "while driving across country in a leisurely trot," he observed an airship coming in his direction. Half a mile from him the airship let loose with an "unearthly whistle" which terrified his horses, causing him to be thrown from the buggy. As the horses fled, the ship landed, a rope came down, and two men rushed over to apologize and to inquire after his well-being. The young man was invited into the airship, where he was introduced to two other crew members, a Mr. Waters and a "Mexican or Spaniard, who did the cooking, I suppose." The two whom he first encountered were "Mr. Wilson, the owner, and Mr. Scott Warren, his friend." When the young man asked if the ship ran by electricity, Wilson "said this was not the case, but that it was propelled and sustained by a gas.... I learned that Mr. Wilson (though I doubt if that is his correct name) formerly lived in Fort Worth, but I do not remember to have ever seen him. He is apparently a young man and has the typical face of a genius or an inventor." A number of ships "had been built according to plans at different places and had been put together at Mr. Warren's place, but he did not say where that was.... The inventor said that as soon as he could demonstrate satisfactorily the practicability of economically and safely operating his ships he and some capitalists would construct a line of air ships to be operated between New York and San Francisco and other points...."

At 11 P.M. that same day, near Beaumont, Texas, 60 miles west of Lake Charles, J. R. Ligon and his son Charley noticed lights in a neighbor's pasture and went to investigate. They found "four men moving around a large dark object," which turned out to be an airship. The aeronauts asked for water. "They came to my house, each bringing two buckets. After filling them, they started to return. I accosted one of the men and he told me his name was Wilson and that he and his companions were traveling in a flying machine. They were returning from a trip out on the Gulf and were now headed toward Iowa, where the airship was built" (*Houston Daily Post*, April 21). Ligon followed them to the ship, which proved to be an enormous craft 136 feet long and 20 feet wide. It had four large wings and was steered by propellers attached to the bow and stern. The entire apparatus was powered, Ligon was informed, by electricity. Wilson said it was one of five built in a small Iowa town.

It is tempting to link this story with the one told in New Orleans by Rabbi Levy of Beaumont (see above), despite some small discrepancies. Levy places his

encounter late in the evening on a farm not far from the city limits and mentions "immense wings"—not, apparently, a single wing—on either side of the craft. His estimate of a 150-foot length is close enough to Ligon's (perhaps suspiciously precise) 136 feet, and Levy has the aeronauts entering the farmer's house to get water. Both Levy and Ligon have the aeronauts saying the ship was run by "electricity." In his April 24 interview with a *Daily Picayune* reporter, Levy states that his experience took place "about 10 days ago"—in other words, five days earlier than Ligon's—but he also mentions that "the whole country around was aroused by a report that the airship had been seen and that it had alighted on a farm near by." There is no press mention of a Beaumont-area landing on or around the 14th; the closest such report is Ligon's on the nineteenth.

Twenty-three hours after Ligon's encounter, at Uvalde (over 300 miles southwest of Beaumont as the airship flies), Sheriff H. W. Baylor conversed for a short time with the three-man crew of an airship which had alighted close to town. One of the aeronauts gave his name as Wilson and his hometown as Goshen, New York. He inquired about a Capt. C. C. Akers, whom he said he had known in Fort Worth and who he understood lived in the area. Told that Akers now worked as a customs officer in Eagle Pass but that he frequently visited Uvalde, Wilson asked to be remembered to him. The crew re-entered the ship and flew away. County Clerk Henry J. Bowles saw the object as it passed up Getty Street north of the Baylor residence (*Houston Daily Post*, April 21). When contacted by the *Galveston Daily News* (April 28), Akers stated, "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 24 years of age, and seemed to have money with which to prosecute his investigations, devoting his whole time to them. From conversations we had 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 for many years and know that any statement he may make can be relied upon as exactly correct."

On the twenty-second, at midnight, Frank Nichols, a farmer living two miles east of Josserand (approximately 75 miles northwest of Beaumont), was awakened by a "whirring noise." Looking out the window, he saw a huge, brilliantly lighted vessel in his cornfield. He got out of bed and went out for a closer look. Before he got to the airship, however, two men with buckets asked him if they could draw some water from his well. Nichols consented and in return was invited to examine the ship. The craft had a six- or eight-man crew, and its motive power was "highly condensed electricity." One of the crew remarked that five such ships had been built in an Iowa village, from which an immense stock company was being formed. The airships would be in general use within the year (*Houston Daily Post*, April 26).

The next night, at Kountze (20 miles northwest of Beaumont), an airship came down for repairs. The first witnesses were Capt. H. A. Hooks and A. W. Hodges. The aeronauts, who introduced themselves as Wilson and Jackson, said they would have to stay over several days for repairs. "Any one wishing to see it," the *Houston Daily Post* reported (April 25), "may do so by coming to Kountze any time before Monday night [the twenty-sixth], as it will take until then to get it in flying order." The ship was estimated to be 50 feet long and 20 feet wide.

At eight o'clock in the evening on or about April 28, according to a letter he wrote to the *Houston Daily Post* (April 30), H. C. Legrone of Deadwood, Texas (130 miles directly north of Beaumont), heard a disturbance among his horses. When he stepped outside, he saw a fast-moving, brilliant, multicolored light heading toward him from the southwest. It slowed and hovered for several minutes, then descended on a nearby field. "I, by this time, having recognized it as the airship, went directly to the place of landing, and on arrival found the ship of about the same make up as given by various correspondents. Its crew was composed of five men, three of whom entertained me, while the other two took rubber bags and went for a supply of water at my well, 100 yards off. They informed me that this was one of five ships that had been traveling the country over recently; and

that this individual ship was the same one recently landed near Beaumont, in the State, after having traveled pretty well all over the Northwest. They stated that these ships were put up in an interior town in Illinois. They were rather reticent about giving out information in regards to the ship, manufacture, etc., since they had not yet secured everything by patent, but stated they would soon be secure in this, and expected to establish a factory in St. Louis at an early day and would at once enter into active competition with the railroads for passenger traffic; especially in transcontinental travel. They stated that they could shorten time from Atlantic to Pacific two to three days."

On April 26 the *San Antonio Daily Express* reported that between midnight and 1 A.M. the previous night, an airship passed over the city. The same article stated matter-of-factly, citing no source:

> The inventors were Hiram Wilson, a native of New York and son of Willard H. Wilson, assistant master mechanic of the New York Central Railroad, and a young engineer, C. J. Walsh of San Francisco. The men had labored on their project for several years, and when their plans were matured they had the parts of the ship constructed to order in different sections of the country, whence they were shipped to the rendezvous at San Francisco and put together on the island. After some experimental navigation in California an attempt was apparently made to cross the continent and the ship was traced as far east as Utah, after which nothing was heard of it for months. The most plausible theory of the sudden disappearance of the ship is that some defects were developed and that a rendezvous was made in some out of the way section of the west until changes could be effected. It is believed that the present trip of the machine is for further experimental purposes.

Both the similarities and the differences in the Wilson stories will be apparent even to the casual reader. Another, perhaps less immediately obvious difficulty confronting those inclined to take these accounts literally has to do with the physical appearance of Wilson himself. Akers has him "about 24 years of age" in 1877; yet at Lake Charles 20 years later, when this Wilson should have been well into middle age, he is described as "apparently a young man." In 1980 Daniel Cohen could find no evidence that an inventor or mechanic named Wilson, Hiram or otherwise, had ever lived in Goshen, New York (Cohen, *op. cit.*).

Aeronauts or astronauts? Throughout the airship scare newspapers everywhere were filled with claims and speculations about the airship inventor, and numerous hoax messages, allegedly dropped by inventors from their passing airships, contributed to the excitement. It is true that all across America hopeful tinkerers (including two who would succeed in their endeavors, Wilbur and Orville Wright) were working on devices which they hoped would become functioning heavier-than-air craft. On August 11, 1896, the U.S. Patent Office gave an airship patent to C. A. Smith of San Francisco and on April 20, 1897, another to Henry Heintz of Elkton, South Dakota, but neither of these craft ever flew (Lore and Deneault, *op. cit.*).

Though press treatment of the airship mystery overwhelmingly assumed its terrestrial (and usually American) origin, there was also talk of extraterrestrial visitation. More than that, there were *reports* of otherworldly visitors. Some, again, were obvious jokes. Others were printed, at least ostensibly (and at times only initially), as serious stories. Some examples of these:

Near Reynolds, Michigan, April 14: At 4:30 A.M. a "flying machine" came down half a mile southwest of the town. A dozen farmers who had watched it maneuvering overhead rushed to the site. Inside the craft was a giant, manlike figure, nine and a half feet tall, whose "talk, while musical, is not talk at all, but seems to be repetition of bellowing." Though what looked like the pelts of polar bears were visible, the giant "seemed to have no use for them, as he was almost naked and seemed to be suffering from the heat." One brave or foolish farmer who tried to approach the being was kicked severely enough to cause a broken hip. "Great excitement prevails here, and lots of people are flocking here from Morley and Howard City to view the strange being from a distance, as no one dares to go near. He seems to be trying to talk to the people" (*Saginaw Courier-Herald*, April 17).

Near Linn Grove, Iowa, April 15: A large airship passed slowly over the town, heading north, and five men followed it four miles into the country, where it landed. But when the pursuers got within 700 yards of the vessel, it spread out four massive wings and flew away. The occupants tossed out two boulders "of unknown composition." According to witnesses, the beings had extraordinarily long beards and were "queer-looking," making "desperate efforts to conceal themselves" (*Indianapolis Journal*, April 17).

Near Springfield, Missouri, April 16: While wandering through hills east of town, W. H. Hopkins spotted a landed airship in a clearing. Next to it was the "most beautiful being I ever beheld," a nude young woman with hair falling to her waist. As she plucked flowers, she spoke, with a lovely, musical voice, in a foreign language, all the while fanning herself even though it was a cool day. In the shade cast by the ship, a naked man with shoulder-length hair and a beard as long as the woman's hair lay, also fanning himself. After some minutes Hopkins approached the woman who, when she saw him, shrieked and ran to the man's arms. Hopkins tried to tell them he meant no harm, but they did not understand his words. Eventually the two aeronauts relaxed, and communication of sorts was effected. Asked where they came from, they "pointed upwards, pronouncing a word which, to my imagination, sounded like Mars." The two examined him "with the greatest curiosity.... They felt of my clothing, looked at my gray hair with surprise and examined my watch with the greatest wonder." Hopkins was shown the interior of the ship, which soon flew away, the two occupants "laughing and waving their hands to me, she a vision of loveliness and he of manly vigor" (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 19).

Merkel, Texas, April 23: In the evening, as local people were returning from a church service, they saw a heavy anchor-shaped object being dragged by a large rope which was attached to an airship in the sky not far above them. After 10 minutes a small figure dressed in a blue sailor suit started down the rope, but when he saw that he was being observed, cut the rope below him and returned to the ship, which sailed off toward the northeast. "The anchor is now on exhibition at the blacksmith shop of Elliott and Miller, and is attracting the attention of hundreds of people" (*Houston Daily Post*, April 28).

Near Cassville, Indiana, May 3: While riding home at 1 A.M., Edwin Shaffer passed a gravel pit in which sat a cigar-shaped, 40-foot airship. It was "handsomely furnished on the inside and the aerial craft was inhabited by a crew of foreign-tongued midgets who spoke no English" (*Kokomo* [Indiana] *Daily Tribune*, May 4).

A typical expression of the extraterrestrial hypothesis, 1897 version, appeared as a letter to the editor of a Tennessee newspaper. Adam Oldham wrote:

> Scientists assert that the inhabitants of Mars have superior intelligence to our people, and must have made far greater progress in the sciences. They report that the Martians have been signalling the earth with electrical lights for more than a year. An air machine can only be driven by electricity, and such a machine after penetrating the thin atmosphere of Mars, could travel through the airless space with the speed of electricity, which is 300,000 miles a second [sic], until it reached the envelope of our heavier atmosphere.... The air-ship could easily be stored with compressed air to last the travelers for a much longer journey than from Mars to this earth. The visitors, no doubt provisioned for months, evidently fear to land among strange peoples who may be barbarous in their view, and therefore seem to be reconnoitering, and examining the country here and there before landing.... I predict that the air ship will be seen many times and in many places, before a landing is finally made. I suggest that our visitors be informed that a friendly welcome awaits them.... The Smithsonian Institution at Washington should take the matter in hand at once. The air ship has been seen by too many creditable witnesses living far apart for it to be pronounced a sensational hoax (*Clarksville Daily Leaf-Chronicle*, April 17).

Nineteenth-century airships, twentieth-century views. By the summer of 1897 the airship scare was largely forgotten, and printed references to it afterwards are surprisingly rare. The first reassessment of even part of the story appeared in 1938, in an article by Rudolph Umland in the University of Nebraska's literary magazine *Prairie Schooner*. Umland dealt exclu-

sively with Nebraska reports. Though he did not take the affair entirely seriously, his article is a full and accurate account of what it involved.

The first book to mention the airship scare of the late nineteenth century was **Charles Fort**'s *New Lands* (1923). Chapter 28 devotes two and a half pages to the subject, citing several of the more dramatic reports, including an April 19 visitation at Sistersville, West Virginia, where an observer looking through glasses noted, according to the *New York Herald* of the following day, a "huge cone-shaped arrangement 180 feet long, with large fins on either side." Fort also takes note of astronomers' efforts to explain the sightings (as Venus, which did inspire many "airship" reports) and the abundant hoaxes. In common with many who later would try to make sense of the affair, Fort threw up his hands. "Against such an alliance as this, between the jokers and the astronomers," he wrote, "I see small chance for our data," adding these prophetic words: "The chance is in the future. If, in April, 1897, extra-mundane voyagers did visit this earth, likely enough they will visit again, and then the alliance against the data may be guarded against."

It would be 27 years before airships would reappear between book covers. Drawing, apparently, on Fort (who goes uncredited), **Donald Keyhoe**, in his paperback *The Flying Saucers Are Real* (1950), summarizes the episode in three short paragraphs on page 60 but manages nonetheless both to give a misleading impression and to make at least two false statements. He refers to nonexistent sightings by astronomers who viewed airships through telescopes, and he also has witnesses reporting "short" or "stubby" wings when in fact they almost invariably characterized the wings as "large" or even "magnificent." (In his imaginative retelling of the sighting at "Sisterville" [sic], he invents stubby wings in defiance of contemporary statements to the contrary.) Keyhoe does not mention the hoaxes, the supposed landings and contacts with "ordinary mortals," and the claims about inventors–the elements that Fort acknowledged confounded any immediately obvious interpretation involving extraterrestrial visitors.

The first UFO-age writer to publish original research on turn-of-the-century reports was Harvard University astronomer Donald H. Menzel, author of the first debunking book, *Flying Saucers* (1953). Chapter 6, "The Flying-Saucer Scare of 1897," is based on news stories, most quoted verbatim, that appeared in the *Oakland Tribune* and the *New York Herald*. Menzel noted the large number of hoaxes and wild rumors but added, perhaps surprisingly, "A few of the reported incidents probably referred to true flying saucers." Menzel's treatment is marred only by his assertion that Thomas Edison's April 19 dismissal of the airship phenomenon "broke the airship bubble" and "killed the sensation." As we have seen, sightings and news reports continued for almost another month. (Among other things Edison said, "I prefer to devote my time to objects which have some commercial value. At best airships would be only toys.")

Between Menzel's book, whose perceptive coverage unfortunately was largely ignored or simply recycled (Chaplin, 1959), and 1964, little further original research was conducted into 1896-97 newspapers; a rare exception was the reprinting, in the Spring 1957 issue of Max B. Miller's ***Saucers***, of a number of accounts collected by ufologist Zan Overall from 1896 and 1897 issues of the *Los Angeles Times*. But as a rule the airship scare was mentioned only in passing in UFO books by authors who seemed to know no more than what Fort had reported, though his cautionary remarks were never quoted. One of the most important mentions of the 1897 events is in Jacques Vallee's *Anatomy of a Phenomenon* (1965). Vallee's treatment is brief and unsatisfactory–he twice mentions, as "the first landing of a classical 'flying saucer'," a Carlinville, Illinois, story which is an almost certain hoax (Neeley, 1979)–but where 1897 reports are concerned, *Anatomy* is best remembered for introducing the UFO community to rancher Alex Hamilton's tale, originally published in a Kansas newspaper (*Yates Center Farmer's Advocate*, April 23), of the rustling of a calf by alien beings in an airship. The yarn subsequently made repeated appearances in the UFO literature over the next 12 years, and even beyond (Sachs, 1980). Eventually it was exposed as a tall tale concocted by Hamilton, the newspaper editor, and members of a local liars' club (Clark, 1977; Rickard, 1977). Several years later folklorist Thomas E. Bullard would discover that Hamilton himself had admitted, when a Missouri newspaper editor asked him about the story shortly after it was supposed to

have occurred, "I lied about it" (*Atchison County Mail*, May 7; Bullard, 1982).

Ufologists' perceptions of the airship story began to change as soon as the first systematic examinations of 1896-97 newspaper accounts commenced. Initial research was conducted in 1964 by Jerome Clark, who not long afterwards reported to the UFO community that matters were more complicated than Keyhoe and subsequent writers had indicated. Among landing and occupant cases, for example, "we find a number of major differences between the older [1897] and the newer [post-World War II] stories," Clark remarked, adding that these "may prove highly significant." He noted the Springfield, Illinois, encounter claimed by Adolph Winkle and John Hulle (Wenke and Halley in other accounts; see above), who reported meeting human aeronauts who identified themselves as inventors on their way to Cuba (Clark, 1965). (A later investigator, Robert G. Neeley, Jr., was unable to find any evidence that the two men, however their names were spelled, were real people [Neeley, *op. cit.*].) In a longer follow-up article Clark suggested that UFOs are a phenomenon whose true nature is unknowable but which is experienced as something that conforms to witnesses' cultural expectations; in other words, before the nineteenth century people observed "gods and wizards.... Today, in the 'Space Age,' we are led to believe that 'flying saucers' are spacecraft. In April 1897, then—six and a half years before Kitty Hawk—what [would be] more logical than a terrestrial aircraft?" (Clark, 1966).

These arguments were considerably expanded in Vallee's *Passport to Magonia* (1969), the first major book, other than those by debunkers such as Menzel and Lawrence J. Tacker (author of the forgotten *Flying Saucers and the U.S. Air Force* [1960]), to reject the extraterrestrial hypothesis then dominant in world ufology. Vallee argued that "flying saucers" are but an ancient paranormal intelligence in disguise; previous disguises included fairy and demonic manifestations as well as nineteenth-century aeronauts. Particularly revealing in this connection, he suggested, were parallels between the Merkel, Texas, story (see above) and the following story, recorded by Gervase of Tilbury (A.D. 1150-1235) in part three of his *Otia Imperialia* (1211):

> There happened in the borough of Cloera, one Sunday, while the people were at Mass, a marvel. In this town is a church dedicated to St. Kinarus. It befell that an anchor was dropped from the sky, with a rope attached to it, and one of the flukes caught in the arch above the church door. The people rushed out of the church and saw in the sky a ship with men on board, floating before the anchor cable, and they saw a man leap overboard and jump down to the anchor, as if to release it. He looked 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 it might kill him, he said. The man was freed, and hurried up to the ship, where the crew cut the rope and the ship sailed out of sight. But the anchor is in the church, and has been there ever since, as a testimony.

This oddly compelling tale led even so cautious a scholar as the prominent British folklorist Katharine Briggs to remark, "This strange early space-men story ... shows some glimmering of scientific knowledge about the relative density of the air near the earth. It is one of those strange, unmotivated and therefore rather convincing tales that are scattered through the early chronicles" (Briggs, 1977). Nonetheless there is nothing eerie or significant about the apparent repetition in small-town Texas centuries later. It is now known that Gervase's account was reprinted in American newspapers in the spring of 1897 (see, for example, the *Taylorville* [Illinois] *Daily Breeze*, April 17), providing the hoaxer (probably the author of the *Houston Daily Post* story) with a model from which he or she deviated only slightly (even identifying the witnesses as worshippers leaving a church) in producing an 1897 version.

(On the other hand, Hopkins's tale of an encounter with a Martian Adam and Eve is conceivably not a hoax but a hallucinatory or visionary experience. Though it was not rediscovered until the 1970s, it corresponds strikingly to an obscure 1950 contact story told by an uneducated Centralia, Washington, man who claimed—those who interviewed him thought sincerely—to have met unclad space people from an Edenic Venus [Clark, 1981]; *see also* **Samuel Eaton Thompson Contact Claim**).

In *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse* (1970) John A. Keel wrote that the events of 1896 and 1897 were part of a "grand deception" carried out by sinister beings he calls "ultraterrestrials"– entities from another order of reality–who, not wanting us "even to know that they existed," elected to "construct a few craft that at least resembled dirigibles and make sure that they were seen in several places by many people, such as Chicago." They also staged landings "in relatively remote places and [contacted] a few random individuals, telling them the 'secret invention' story" so that they could "spread the word.... To lend further confusion to the situation, some of the contactees would be told ridiculous things which would discredit not only them but the whole mystery. Knowing how we think and how we search for consistencies, the ultraterrestrials were careful to sow inconsistencies in their wake." The inventor with whom George Collins and W.H.H. Hart dealt in San Francisco was actually an ultraterrestrial, according to Keel.

Not many ufologists or other probers into the airship story have been willing to embrace speculations as radical as these, or as far removed from anything that could be empirically validated. In fact, as research continued and more came to be known about the period, caution mounted and at times shaded into outright skepticism. UFO historian Loren E. Gross produced two conservative monographs, *The UFO Wave of 1896* (1974) and *Charles Fort, the Fortean Society and Unidentified Flying Objects* (1976), dealing in whole or in part with the period. By the mid- to late 1970s it was becoming increasingly evident that hoaxes played a far more prominent role than anyone had imagined. Particularly telling was the revelation that the Hamilton calfnapping story was fictitious, in spite of published affidavits from prominent citizens attesting that "for truth and veracity we have never heard his word questioned." After that researchers were never able to take entirely seriously comparable endorsements appended to other, equally extraordinary airship reports. They learned, for example, that the Linn Grove, Iowa, landing never happened, according to the testimony of a man who lived there in 1897 (Lundt, 1973). The crash of an airship, with alien occupant, in Aurora, Texas, was concocted by a local correspondent for the *Dallas Morning News* (Simmons, 1985; *see also* **Crashes of UFOs in the Nineteenth Century**). The Merkel airship-and-anchor yarn, which had seemed as interesting and as suggestive as Hamilton's story, was declared a hoax by Neeley in the late 1970s (Neeley, *op. cit.*).

Soon it appeared that any landing-occupant case that could be investigated could also be counted on to disintegrate under scrutiny. Most airship investigators concluded that such stories were probably concocted in editorial offices or by jokesters in outlying districts. (Papers of the period published letters from outraged small-town readers who complained they were falsely identified as witnesses to airship activity. For example, J. H. Tibbles of Rochelle, Illinois, wrote the *Chicago Record* [April 10] that a report in a Chicago paper notwithstanding, no one in Rochelle had seen an airship on April 3; "I took it upon myself to hunt down the report, and for several days I have been busy doing so.... I have not [even] found a person who had seen another who claimed to have seen it.") Many of the stories, even those that to twentieth-century eyes look serious, may have been published with a nudge and a wink to the readers. After residents of Waterloo, Iowa, built a bogus airship on a property ordinarily used by a traveling circus, hired a practical joker from another town to pose as its pilot, "Prof. Jourgensen," and for a time fooled both tourists and area newspapers, the *Fort Dodge Messenger* praised Waterloo for pulling off the "biggest, yet best joke of all.... American people delight in being humbugged." To many Americans, including editors and reporters, the airship story was played or taken largely for its laugh value; the facts, or what facts there were, were a secondary priority, if even that.

By the time the first full-length book, Daniel Cohen's *The Great Airship Mystery* (1981), was published, even nonlanding reports were coming under suspicion. In common with other writers over the next decade (Arts, 1990; Bartholomew, 1989, 1990; Chariton, 1991; Miller, *op. cit.*), Cohen treated the airship scare less as a UFO wave than as a peculiar moment in the history of popular culture. He linked it to Americans' fascination with aviation developments, proto-science-fiction tales of marvelous flying machines, and tension between the United States and Spain over Cuba. He concluded that airship reports could be explained as hoaxes and misidentifications, though he con-

fessed to a nagging feeling that "*all* of these people could not have been mistaken or lying"; yet "there is not a single piece of tangible evidence to support any story."

The next year, in the introduction to his self-published compilation of hundreds of newspaper stories from the period, *The Airship File*, Thomas E. Bullard remarked on "how seldom airship reports turned up in the columns devoted to news from outlying communities. The content of this correspondence includes sicknesses, births, deaths, marriages, crop news, and mention of anything new or changing in these areas where newness or change was rare. A crime was a major event, and an airship sighting would surely rate a mention. After reading about a lot of Sunday picnics, weekend visits and fine hunting dogs, I can say with safety that those mentions are lacking." Bullard is implying that regular provincial correspondents were more likely to be trustworthy and thus less likely to tell sensationalistic airship yarns. In cases where featured dispatches were filed concerning local events (outside, in other words, the "area happenings" columns), the authors may not always have been true locals; they may have been urban newspaper staff writers who put phony datelines in front of phony stories. One possible exception to Bullard's dictum may be a cryptic sentence published in the "Holloway Items" column of a small western Minnesota newspaper, the *Appleton Press*, on June 1, 1898, fully a year after the airship hysteria had subsided (at least for a time): "Several strange objects have been observed floating through the atmosphere in this vicinity of late." The paper provided no more details, unfortunately. Could these have been belated airship sightings?

What happened? Any effort to uncover the truth about the late-nineteenth-century airship scare comes up against some unhappy realities: Newspaper coverage was unreliable; no independent investigators ("airshipologists") spoke directly with alleged witnesses or attempted to verify or debunk their testimony; and, with a single unsatisfactory exception, no eyewitness was ever interviewed even in the 1950s, when some presumably were still living. The sole exception was a retired *San Francisco Chronicle* employee with whom Capt. **Edward J. Ruppelt**, then head of the Air Force's **Project Blue Book**, had a long phone conversation in 1952. Ruppelt, who died in 1960, wrote only, "He had been a copy boy at the time and remembered the incident, but time had canceled out the details. He did tell me that he, the editor of the paper, and the news staff had seen 'the ship,' as he referred to the UFO. His story, even though it was fifty-six years old, smacked of others I'd heard when he said that no one at the newspaper ever told anyone what they had seen; they didn't want people to think that they were 'crazy'" (Ruppelt, 1956).

In 1952 the Los Angeles-based **Civilian Saucer Investigation** (CSI) invited UFO witnesses to report their sightings. Among the letters CSI received, it later noted, "was a good sprinkling of sightings extending through the 30s and several ... sightings as early as 1896 [and] 1898" (Williams, 1952). Unfortunately, if these letters still exist, their whereabouts are unknown. In 1990 ***Fate*** published a letter from a reader who said her late mother, Hilda Stoll Wallace, had seen an airship near Beatrice, Nebraska, in 1897. She "was a child of nine at the time," Audrey M. Wagner wrote. "I have heard her tell many times of the strange air ship (cigar shaped) that she and her family witnessed as it passed slowly over their farm" (Wagner, 1990a). When asked for further details, Wagner stated she could remember only that her mother had said the object "was similar to dirigibles and was silver in color" (Wagner, 1990b).

It is safe to assume there were no airship inventors flying over America in 1896 and 1897. It is wise to be skeptical of newspaper accounts of meetings with aeronauts, even as it is forgivable to be intrigued by the suggestion of a link between J. R. Ligon's story and Rabbi Levy's. If *this* aeronaut encounter happened, could not others have? Since that prospect opens up a bottomless pit of philosophical difficulties (forcing us, on what is at best vaguely suggestive evidence, to imagine a nearby parallel universe—with an aviation history slightly at variance with ours—confusing its affairs with our own), surely the answer to the question is no; surely there is a much less interesting (and sanity-preserving) explanation which does not require us to believe that anyone ever *really* met an 1897 aeronaut. In the one other genuinely interesting aeronaut encounter, the one at Uvalde, Texas, it is easy to speculate, if we do not allow the

absence of evidence to stop us, that Capt. Akers and the "witness" Sheriff Baylor conspired to fashion a hoax or joke.

Only one thing is certain, and that is that we will never know exactly what happened in 1897. But one defensible interpretation is that, amid all the misperceptions, exaggerations, and fabrications, UFOs—and UFOs of a modern variety—*were* observed; once in a while, they even touched briefly on the ground (as in the Lake Elmo, Minnesota, incident, a story that has at least the appearance of credibility). After all, cigar- or dirigible-shaped objects have an honored place in UFO lore, and occasionally witnesses have described wings. We have already noted, as well, reports of unambiguously modern UFOs amid the airships: V shapes, barrels, globes, eggs, pears, and fast-moving nocturnal lights. It is difficult to believe that even an amused and hugely tolerant newspaper readership would have put up indefinitely with wholly false reports of a wholly bogus phenomenon. Anyway, soon enough the airships would be back.

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ALLENDE, CARLOS. *See* **Allende Letters.**

ALLENDE LETTERS

One day in October 1955 **Morris K. Jessup** received a packet of letters forwarded from the publisher of his book *The Case for the UFO.* Among the letters was a rambling communication from someone in Pennsylvania. Written in several different colors of pen and pencil, with erratic capitalization and punctuation, it took issue with Jessup's speculations about levitation and contended that levitation was a "known process" and had been mastered by human technology. The correspondent signed his name "Carlos Miguel Allende." Jessup wrote a brief response and gave the matter little further thought.

On January 13, 1956, he received a second letter from Allende, whose return address indicated he lived along a rural route outside New Kensington, Pennsylvania. Allende evidently was familiar with Jessup's pitch, made in lectures, that the public press for research into Einstein's Unified Field Theory, which could unlock the secret of antigravity and thus make possible "effective and economical space travel, at but a small fraction of the costs we are now incurring, within the next decade" (Moore with Berlitz, 1979). Allende deemed this a terrible idea, asserting that such research had already led to a test that resulted in "complete invisibility of a ship, Destroyer type, *and all* of its crew, While at Sea. (Oct. 1943).... Half of the officiers [sic] and the crew of that Ship are at Present, Mad as Hatters." Moreover, "The Experimental Ship

AIRSHIP SIGHTINGS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

On July 12, 1891, residents of Ottawa, Ontario, observed something they had never seen before. According to a press account:

> Some of the residents of Theodore street were considerably startled last Sunday evening about 7 o'clock by seeing a dark object apparently suspended in the air over the Rifle range. From one of the houses on the street a pair of binocular glasses . . . was borrowed, and . . . the object appeared somewhat in the shape of a huge cigar, at one end of which there appeared to be a revolving fan, while the other end was enlarged, from which a bright light was plainly visible. Lesser lights were visible at intervals in the center. On being asked whether it might not have been an air baloon [sic], those who saw it said the structure was far too large and of a peculiar shape. It was travelling from south to north, and soon passed out of sight.

In March 1892 accounts in the *New York Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and newspapers on the European continent detailed a furious controversy raging on the border of Russian Poland and Germany, scene of numerous sightings of mysterious "balloons." The objects, usually seen coming from the west, were thought to be carrying German spies. Observers said the vehicles appeared fully maneuverable—in other words, not subject to the vagaries of the wind, as with conventional balloons—and were even able to hover for as long as 40 minutes at a time. They also carried brilliant searchlights.

These curious and apparently isolated stories would serve as a small preview of a much greater epic to come, one that would occupy newspapers all over the United States for six months between November 1896 and April 1897.

The latter nineteenth century saw great popular interest in the possibilities of human flight. In 1862 aviation enthusiasts in France formed a society to promote research and experiments in this area, and in the United States inventors published designs for rigid dirigibles and powered aircraft, but what flights there were consisted of little more than short hops. No history of aviation reports flights of large, piloted dirigibles and other aircraft over the western United States at any time in the nineteenth century, the dreams and schemes of would-be inventors notwithstanding.

The California saga. The great American airship scare begins in California in the fall of 1896. Early on the evening of November 17, according to the next day's *Sacramento Evening Bee*, a light resembling an "electric arc lamp propelled by some

mysterious force" passed over the city and was seen by hundreds of persons as it traveled at low altitude and, as if intelligently controlled, took evasive action as it approached buildings and hills. Some observers claimed to have gotten a good look at the object and to have heard voices. Residents of Oak Park, a suburb, told reporters that the day before, an aerial object had circled the town at a high altitude and left a trail of smoke.

The airship made a return appearance over Sacramento on the twentieth. The next afternoon passengers on an Oakland streetcar saw a "peculiar-looking contrivance" high overhead. It had a headlight in front and a searchlight on the bottom. One witness said it "somewhat resembled a balloon traveling end on . . . and with what appeared to be wings both before and behind the [bottom] light" (*San Francisco Call*, November 22). The *Call* reported that at least one sighting had occurred in early October, when a young woman riding a wheel along San Francisco's Telegraph Avenue observed a "strange-looking object" with a powerful headlight passing overhead.

Meanwhile the *Call*'s rival, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, was headlining the claims of local attorney George D. Collins, who stated that he represented the airship inventor, a wealthy man who had come to California from Maine seven years earlier. Collins was quoted as saying (though he would soon deny it) that he had seen the machine, a 150-foot metal contraption with "two canvas wings 18 feet wide and a rudder shaped like a bird's tail." Built in Oroville 60 miles away, it had flown over Sacramento and was now hidden in the San Francisco area while the inventor dealt with some technical problems. But soon he would fly the airship over the city "a dozen times" and everyone would get a good look at it. In response another San Francisco paper, the *Examiner*, sent a reporter to Oroville. He learned that the people of that city scoffed at Collins's story.

On the twenty-fourth Collins approached the *Call* to complain that the skeptical *Examiner* had printed falsehoods and recklessly misquoted him. That day the *Examiner* had published an interview with attorney Frederick Bradley, a friend of Collins. Bradley said Collins had told him about seeing the airship housed in a barn; then its inventor boarded it and shot up into the air. Soon afterwards it landed easily a few feet from Collins. Collins swore this story was a lie, that in fact he had never seen the ship but only heard about it from the inventor. The *Chronicle* (November 24) ridiculed the attorney's sudden backtracking and cited an earlier statement in which, after being asked on his "word of honor" if he had seen the airship, he had sworn he had.

Suspicion soon fell on itinerant dentist E. H. Benjamin, identified as a Carmel, Maine, native, traveling salesman, and inventor. When reporters finally caught up with Benjamin, he admitted that Collins was his attorney but insisted that his "inventions have to do with dentistry" (*Call*, November 24). Badgered by questions about the airship, Benjamin went into hiding, leaving behind most of his

possessions. Reporters and laborers who sorted through them found nothing more exciting than copper dental fittings.

On the twenty-fourth the *Oakland Tribune* announced that a prominent citizen, George Carleton, knew the name of the inventor but was pledged to secrecy. He learned it from a fellow Mason, "who talked with the man who saw the machine" as it was tested in the Oroville area.

The following day the *Call* weighed in with even more sensational claims. W.H.H. Hart, the flamboyant former attorney general of California, declared he now represented the inventor, who had fired Collins for talking too much. Yet Collins was the soul of discretion next to Hart, who seemed determined to tell all he knew (or said he knew) short of the name of the inventor, rumored now to be a Dr. Catlin, an alleged associate of Dr. Benjamin. Hart said two airships existed and his role was to "consolidate both interests." One was built in an eastern state, and he was intimately familiar with this one, which he had seen with his own eyes. He added, "I . . . propose to use [the California airship] wholly for war purposes, and within the next five or six months it will be put to the test." It would drop dynamite on Havana. (In 1898 the United States and Spain would go to war, and Spain would be forced to relinquish its Cuban colony.)

The same article quotes a secret informant's account of how the inventor recently had spent the late hours sailing from the Oroville area to Sacramento. The informant said that "about 3 o'clock in the morning [the inventor] landed in the barnyard of a farm situated in one of the bay counties. He put his airship into the barn and locked the door, for he had previously made arrangements to that end. . . . This was the very first trip of the new airship. Since then he has been out nearly every night. . . ."

In due course Hart, like Collins, moderated his claims, insisting that he had not seen the airship, only met the man "who claims to be the inventor" and seen drawings and diagrams of the craft. The alleged inventor, Hart said, "was a cousin of Mr. Linn, who was [Cuban revolutionary] Antonio Maceo's electrician." Nothing came of any of this, and soon Hart vanished from press accounts. Nearly a century later, it is impossible to judge what, if any, truth lay behind the claims he and Collins made. Perhaps the clients were trying to develop an airship and took advantage of publicity about unidentified airships (and of the credulity of their lawyers) to claim them as their own; if ever they existed, their own never flew.

Meanwhile, reports of sightings continued up and down the state of California. Most were of nocturnal lights, and at least some of these were planets and stars. Others were lighted kites sent aloft by pranksters. But the remainder seemed to have no apparent explanation, if one is to credit press and witness testimony. For example, on the evening of November 25, a mysterious light circled Sacramento at a rapid rate of speed. Observers included such officials as Deputy Secretary of State George A. McCalvy, District Attorney Frank D. Ryan, and E. D. McCabe, the governor's personal secretary. It shared the sky with Venus but was,

according to the *Call* (November 26), "fully three times as large." Its behavior was certainly not that of an astronomical body: "When [it] first appeared it was seen moving rapidly from the northeast and heading in a southwesterly direction. As it neared the southern boundary of the city it turned directly toward the west and after passing the city went south, being distinctly visible for upward of 20 minutes. It moved with far more rapidity than it had been seen to do in its two former visits" even though there was not a "breath of wind moving at the time." It made a second appearance later in the evening, approaching from the west and disappearing in the northeast. One witness said he had seen the "outlines of a dark body" just above the light.

This sketch of an airship over Oakland, California, appeared in the *San Francisco Call* in November 1896. (Fortean Picture Library)

On November 26, between 8 and 8:30 p.m., electrician Case Gilson and three other men allegedly saw an unlighted airship in the clear sky 1000 feet over Oakland. It was coming from the southeast and flying northward against the wind. Gilson told the *Oakland Tribune* (December 1) that it

> looked like a great black cigar with a fishlike tail. . . . The body was at least 100 feet long and attached to it was a triangular tail, one apex being attached to the main body. The surface of the airship looked as if it were made of aluminum, which exposure to wind and weather had turned dark. . . . The airship went at tremendous speed. As it neared Lorin it turned quickly and disappeared in the direction of San Francisco. At half past 8 we saw it again, when it took about the same direction and disappeared.

The *Stockton Evening Mail* of November 27 recounted what may be the first published claim of a UFO **abduction**. It reported that Shaw ("formerly of the *Mail* editorial staff") "is at present engaged in collecting an exhibit for the Stockton Commercial Association to be displayed at the Citrus Fair which will be held in Fresno during the coming month." Perhaps it was publicity he was seeking, or maybe he just liked a good joke. Whatever the explanation, his story is interesting

for what it reveals about another strain of speculation: for all the talk about earthly inventors, there was also some talk about extraterrestrial visitors. Shaw's tale is the first explicitly to link alien beings with unidentified airships.

Shaw said he and a companion had left Lodi around six o'clock on the twenty-fifth and "were jogging along quietly when the horse stopped suddenly and gave a snort of terror. Looking up we beheld three strange beings . . . nearly or quite seven feet high and very slender." The beings, who looked more or less human, appeared friendly and curiously beautiful. Shaw asked where they were from. "They seemed not to understand me," he reported, "but began—well, 'warbling' expresses it better than talking." Shaw observed them closely, noting small, delicate, nailless hands and long, narrow feet. When he touched one under the elbow, he found the being weighed less than an ounce. Shaw went on:

> They were without any sort of clothing, but were covered with a natural growth . . . as soft as silk to the touch, and their skin was like velvet. Their faces and heads were without hair, the ears were very small, and the nose had the appearance of polished ivory, while the eyes were large and lustrous. The mouth, however, was small, and it seemed to me that they were without teeth. That and other things led me to believe that they neither ate nor drank, and that life was sustained by some sort of gas. Each of them had swung under the left arm a bag to which was attached a nozzle, and every little while one or the other would place the nozzle in his mouth, at which time I heard a sound as of escaping gas.

The beings each carried an egg-sized light that, when opened, revealed an "intense but not unpleasant light." They then attempted, according to Shaw, "to lift me, probably with the intention of carrying me away," but they lacked the strength to budge him or his companion. Abandoning this effort, they turned and flashed their lights toward a nearby bridge. The two men saw a 150-foot airship hovering nearby. Shaw related, "The three walked rapidly toward the ship . . . with a swaying motion, their feet only touching the ground at intervals of about 15 feet . . . . With a little spring they rose to the machine, opened a door in the side, and disappeared within." The ship then flew quickly out of sight.

Shaw concluded his account with a theory that "those we beheld were inhabitants of Mars, who have been sent to earth for the purpose of securing one of its inhabitants." With tongue presumably planted even deeper in cheek, he inveighed against "the stories being told by certain San Francisco attorneys." These are "clumsy fakes" that "should not be given credence by anyone."

By the second week of December, California had begun to recover from airship fever, though sporadic sightings continued into January.

The 1897 story begins. On February 2, 1897, a dispatch from Hastings, Nebraska, published in the *Omaha Daily Bee*, remarked on airship sightings in the south-cen-

tral part of the state. The first sighting had occurred, it said, the previous fall, when an airship "was seen floating in the air about 500 feet above ground, and after standing nearly still for about 30 minutes it began to circle about and then took a northerly direction for about two miles, after which it returned to its starting place and sunk [sic] into oblivion." On February 1 the craft returned, appearing as a "large, glaring light" hovering, ascending, descending, and moving at a "most remarkable speed." On February 4 a group of worshippers returning from a prayer meeting at Inavale, 40 miles south of Hastings, saw a bright light pass far overhead. Ten minutes later it was back, only this time it was much closer to the ground and the witnesses could see a cone-shaped construction 30 to 40 feet long, "with a bright headlight and six smaller lights, three on a side, and . . . two sets of wings on a side, with a large fan-shaped rudder" (*Bee*, February 6). Voices and laughter could be heard.

All that month airship stories would circulate through the state, setting the stage for the wave that would sweep the country in late March. If we can judge from newspaper accounts, many, perhaps most, sightings were of Venus, meteors, and kites. Mostly the "airship" was observed as a large light, but viewers were more than willing to fill in the missing details.

By the latter part of February strange lights were appearing in the skies of northern Kansas. By March 28 the *Kansas City Star* was complaining about "credulous correspondents in various parts of Kansas" who were mistaking Venus, then in the northwestern sky, for an airship. No doubt some were, but Venus could not have been responsible for the object that appeared over Belleville late at night on at least two occasions in late March, moving at 75 mph and

> lighting up the houses and city like an immense meteor and seem[ing] to stop a little northeast of the city, remaining almost stationary for 20 or 30 minutes, then sail[ing] rapidly up and down going northwest, then south passing below then above some scattering clouds and moving in a playful manner, finally disappearing in the distance; appearing again at two o'clock going south and return[ing] north about five o'clock in the morning [*Topeka Daily Capital*, March 28].

With the onset of April, airship sightings spread throughout a variety of midwestern, southern, and eastern states. They were mostly over by the end of May. A full account would occupy a thick book. A sense of what the 1897 airship scare involved can be gained, however, from an examination of its constituent features, at least as they were reported in period newspapers (the quality of whose reporting, as we shall see, left much to be desired).

Representative airship reports. To many observers the airship was a brilliant nocturnal light, often compared to an arc light, that moved through the heavens at a notable speed. Frequently the object would appear first as a light, then at some point as a structured craft. For example, at Quincy, Illinois, late on the evening of April 10 hundreds of onlookers saw a "bright white light," with red and green lights

on either side of it, flying low over the Mississippi River on the city's west side. It rose in the air, headed east over Quincy, then south, then west. It hovered over a park for a few minutes before moving north and stopping half a mile later to hover again. It reversed direction and left in a southerly direction at "tremendous speed." The *Quincy Morning Whig* (April 11) reported,

> At times it did not appear to be more than 400 or 500 feet above the ground, and in the bright moonlight was plainly silhouetted against the clear sky. Men who saw the thing describe it as a long, slender body shaped like a cigar, and made of some bright metal, perhaps aluminum, on which the moonlight glistened. On either side of the hull extending outwards and upwards were what appeared to be wings, and above the hull could be seen the misty outlines of some sort of superstructure, a clear view of which, however, was intercepted by the wings. At the front end of the thing was a headlight, and from the brightness and intensity of the stream of light thrown out it was apparently similar to the searchlights used on steamboats. About midway of the hull were small lights, a green light on the starboard or right hand side, and a red light on the port or left hand side.

Estimates of its length varied from 50 feet to twice that.

Cochransville, Ohio, April 19: "It was cone shaped, 180 feet long, and flashed red, white and green lights from the bow" (*Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, April 20). Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 11: After observing an airship through glasses, R. G. Adams described it as "18 or 20 feet long. It was shaped like a cigar and in the middle and on top of it was a square light. This light was alternately red, green and red" (*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 12). Decatur, Illinois, April 11: A witness said the airship "looks like two monster cigars with three bright headlights" (*Decatur Evening Republican*, April 12). Eastern Iowa, April 8: "[H]undreds of people . . . all describe it about the same way. A bright glaring headlight, revealing a glistening steel hull, dim winglike projections on either side and a hissing sound as it glides through the air" (*Chicago Record*, April 9). Denton, Texas, circa April 14: An airship passed over the face of the moon and a stargazer who watched it through powerful glasses reported "it floated about a half mile above the earth and seemed to be about 50 feet long, of a cigar shape with two great wings thrust out from each side; a broad tail or steering sail behind and a long beak or blade resembling a cutwater on a ship in front. At the point where the beak joined the main body a powerful search light threw its rays far into the night ahead, beside which even the luminosity of the moon paled. A row of windows along the side gave out similar lights" (*Dallas Morning News*, April 15).

Unusual reports. Lincoln, Illinois, April 12: At 8 p.m. more than 50 observers saw an unusual aerial vehicle pass overhead. One reported a large, bright headlight "in front of a V-shaped object" (*Lincoln Weekly Courier*, April 13). Fort Wayne, Indiana, mid-April: A fast-moving, yellow-colored object in the western sky looked "pear-

shaped with the apex downward," according to witness F. Crocker. R. T. Tretheway described it as "round with a V-shaped tail to it. The color of it seemed a bright yellow and strong rays of the same colored light were constantly being shot out from the main body" (*Fort Wayne Weekly Gazette*, April 15). Cincinnati, Ohio, May 4: Dr. Louis Dumhoff and other witnesses reported an object "moving in a zigzag course, first up, then down." It was "egg-shaped, red in color and appearing as though a portion of it was covered with a curtain, the rays escaping in the center and at each end" (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 5).

Landings and close encounters. Western Iowa, April 4: Around 12:15 a.m. dairy farmer Dick Butler, returning home from a business trip in Sioux City, saw a glow in the cornfield near his home. The source was, according to a newspaper report, "a dark bulk through the windows of which the light shone." It looked like a "long, narrow car, resembling a corset box in shape, but perhaps 30 or 35 feet in length and six or seven in width and height. Over this car floated a cigar-shaped bag, horizontally placed, of about the same length as the car, and eight or 10 feet thick at its greatest diameter." At that moment Butler's horses bolted and he was tossed into the ditch. By the time he was on his feet again, the object had ascended and was flying away (*Marshalltown* [Iowa] *Evening News-Republican*, April 9). Lake Elmo, Minnesota, April 13: Two men riding to Hudson, Wisconsin, from nearby Lakeland, Minnesota, at 11 p.m. spotted a figure in a clearing. "He walked around as if he was looking for something," Frederick Chamberlain said. The witnesses heard a crackling sound, as if twigs and brush were being crushed, followed by an irregular "rushing noise." "A second later," Chamberlain said, "and we distinguished a long, high object of a gray white color. The thing struck me as resembling most of the top of a 'prairie schooner' or immigrant wagon covered with canvas. At the same instant we saw two rows of lights—four lights in two pairs—on each pair including a red and green light. The thing rose quickly at a sharp angle, so as to just clear the tree tops. As it passed over the trees to the south we saw several more white lights. But we could make out no machinery or wings or wheels or rudders or human figures, or even the exact outline of the affair." In the mud the witnesses found "14 footprints . . . each two feet in length, six inches wide, arranged seven on each side, and in an oblong pattern." A farmer in the area independently reported seeing a dark object with green and red lights flying overhead at about the same time (*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 15).

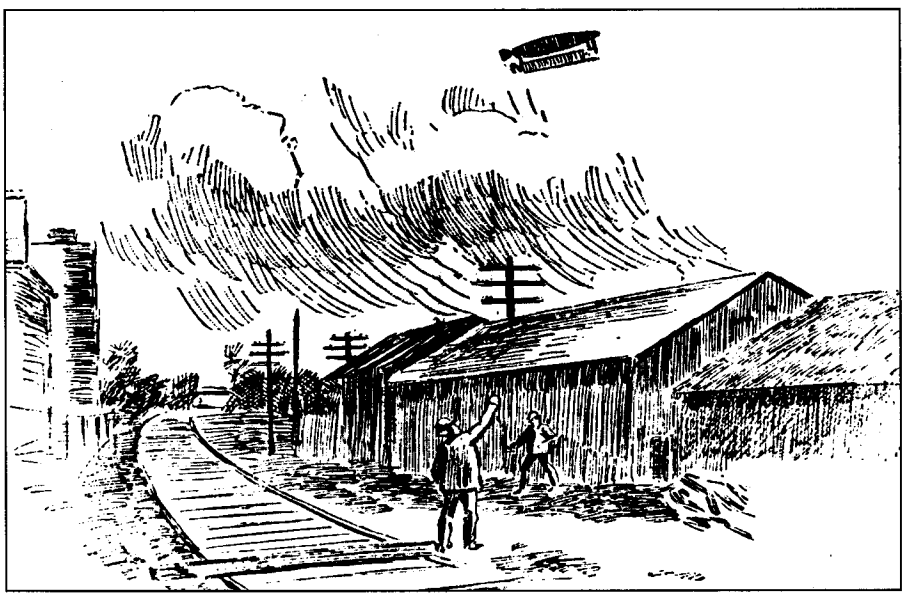
In the larger context of UFO history, reports such as these are not inherently any more incredible than modern UFO reports, which they resemble to a striking degree. What differences exist are relatively minor. In the twentieth century cigar-shaped UFOs (including ones with wings) are reported less often than discs ("flying saucers") but are nonetheless among the most commonly seen anomalous aerial phenomena. A ufologist might argue that a more significant contrast is that in our time UFOs observed nocturnally are likely to be described as luminous or glowing, whereas the 1896-97 reports have the objects carrying lights on the sides but otherwise being unilluminated; yet a close reading of twentieth-century UFO

reports uncovers a number of little-noted sightings of silver, nonluminous objects of dirigible shape, often carrying body lights and sweeping searchlights. These may well be the same sorts of objects turn-of-the-century witnesses were reporting.

There are, however, other kinds of nineteenth-century airship stories that figure prominently in press accounts of the period and that are difficult to square with the UFO phenomenon as it is ordinarily understood. These are reported below, in ascending order of improbability and with qualifying adverbs such as "allegedly" and "supposedly" withheld for reasons of readability. It should be stated that stories of aeronaut hearings, sightings and meetings that are at least *obvious* jokes are not listed here.

Aeronauts heard. Hawarden, Iowa, April 11: As a 60-foot-long, cone-shaped airship with four wings passed overhead at low altitude, witnesses heard "the working of machinery and the sound of human voices . . . among which was mingled the laughter of women" (*Des Moines Leader*, April 13). Jacksonville, Illinois, April 10: "Many reliable persons assert that they plainly distinguished human voices" as a long, narrow, metallic craft with a searchlight flew over the town (*Quincy* [Illinois] *Morning Whig*, April 11).

Aeronauts seen. Minnetonka, Minnesota, April 11: Late in the evening a cyclist observed a "flying machine . . . shaped like an ordinary boat," with red and green lights on each side and a powerful light in front. Inside the craft were "living persons, men, women and children. They were moving about as if very busy" (*Minneapolis Tribune*, April 13). Danvers, Illinois, April 16: Just after midnight an "airship" and a smaller "trailer which followed it very closely" were observed by



This depiction of an airship sighting over Chicago appeared in the *Chicago Times Herald* on April 12, 1897. (Fortean Picture Library)

many residents. "The ships were of some bright material and the occupants were dressed in western style" (*Bloomington* [Illinois] *Pantagraph*, April 17). Lyons, Nebraska, April 19: At 9:30 p.m. an airship appeared a mile above the town. It had large fans or propellers that the witnesses could hear. One observer who watched it through opera glasses saw a "large man muffled in a great coat, apparently presiding over some kind of a steering apparatus" (*Logan Valley Sun* [Lyons], April 21).

Aeronauts encountered. Near Peru, Nebraska, April 6: While looking for strayed cattle, James Southard became lost. At 2 a.m. he noticed a light on a bar in the Missouri River. It was from a landed airship, 200 feet long, whose crewmen were repairing the searchlight. The aeronauts answered all of Southard's questions. "The craft is loaded with several tons of dynamite and is bound for Cuba," where it would bomb Spanish troop camps and ships (*Auburn* [Nebraska] *Granger*, April 9). Near Elburn, Illinois, early April: Farmers came upon a landed airship, "made of some light substance like aluminum." Two aeronauts, who were repairing the vehicle, would not reveal much about themselves, except to say that they were crossing the country from the Pacific coast to the Atlantic and were "following the Northwestern railway" (*Rockford* [Illinois] *Daily Republic*, April 12). Near Cisco, Texas, April 15: Late in the evening, seeing a light where he knew no farmhouse stood, Patrick Byrnes investigated, spotting a 200-foot airship and startling its crew members who were repairing the searchlight. "The craft is loaded with several tons of dynamite and is bound for Cuba." (Note the identical phrasing in the Nebraska story above.) The airship resumed its flight at 1 a.m. (*Fort Worth Register*, April 18). Near Beaumont, Texas, mid-April: Hearing that an airship had landed at a farm two miles from town, Rabbi A. Levy went to check out the story. In the darkness he "could see very little except the outlines of the ship," 150 feet long with 100-foot wings. "I spoke to one of the men when he went into the farmer's house, and shook hands with him. . . . Yes, I did hear him say where it was built, but I can't remember the name of the place, or the name of the inventor. He said that they had been traveling a great deal, and were testing the machine. I was so dumbfounded that I could not frame an intelligent question to ask" (*New Orleans Daily Picayune*, April 25).

Aeronauts or astronauts? Though press treatment of the airship mystery overwhelmingly assumed its terrestrial (and usually American) origin, there were both speculations about and reports of otherworldly visitors. Some, again, were obvious jokes. Others were printed, at least ostensibly (and at times only initially), as serious stories. Some examples:

Near Reynolds, Michigan, April 14: At 4:30 a.m. a "flying machine" came down half a mile southwest of the town. A dozen farmers who had watched it maneuvering overhead rushed to the site. Inside the craft was a giant, manlike figure, nine and a half feet tall, whose "talk, while musical, is not talk at all, but seems to be repetition of bellowing. . . . [H]e was almost naked and seemed to be suffering from the heat." One farmer who tried to approach the being was kicked severely enough to suffer a broken hip (*Saginaw Courier-Herald*, April 17).

Near Linn Grove, Iowa, April 15: A large airship passed slowly over the town, heading north, and five men followed it four miles into the country, where it landed. But when the pursuers got within 700 yards of the vessel, it spread out four massive wings and flew away. The occupants tossed out two boulders "of unknown composition." According to witnesses, the beings had extraordinarily long beards and were "queer-looking," making "desperate efforts to conceal themselves" (*Indianapolis Journal*, April 17).

Near Cassville, Indiana, May 3: While riding home at 1 a.m., Edwin Shaffer passed a gravel pit in which sat a cigar-shaped, 40-foot airship. It was "handsomely furnished on the inside and the aerial craft was inhabited by a crew of foreign-tongued midgets who spoke no English" (*Kokomo* [Indiana] *Daily Tribune*, May 4).

What happened? Any effort to uncover the truth about the late-nineteenth-century airship scare comes up against some unhappy realities: newspaper coverage was unreliable; no independent investigators ("airshipologists") spoke directly with alleged witnesses or attempted to verify or debunk their testimony; and, with a single unsatisfactory exception, no eyewitness was ever interviewed even in the 1950s, when some presumably were still living. The sole exception was a retired *San Francisco Chronicle* employee with whom Capt. **Edward J. Ruppelt**, then head of the Air Force's **Project Blue Book**, had a long phone conversation in 1952. Ruppelt, who died in 1960, wrote only:

> He had been a copy boy at the time and remembered the incident, but time had canceled out the details. He did tell me that he, the editor of the paper, and the news staff had seen "the ship," as he referred to the UFO. His story, even though it was fifty-six years old, smacked of others I'd heard when he said that no one at the newspaper ever told anyone what they had seen; they didn't want people to think that they were "crazy."

In 1952 the Los Angeles-based Civilian Saucer Investigation (CSI) invited UFO witnesses to report their sightings. Among the letters CSI received, it later noted, "was a good sprinkling of sightings extending through the '30s and several . . . sightings as early as 1896 [and] 1898." Unfortunately, if these letters still exist, their whereabouts are unknown. In 1990 *Fate* published a letter from a reader who said her late mother, Hilda Stoll Wallace, had seen an airship near Beatrice, Nebraska, in 1897. She "was a child of nine at the time," Audrey M. Wagner wrote. "I have heard her tell many times of the strange air ship (cigar shaped) that she and her family witnessed as it passed slowly over their farm." When asked for further details, Wagner stated she could remember only that her mother had said the object "was similar to dirigibles and was silver in color."

On July 15, 1961, the *Detroit News* carried a brief letter from John B. Rosa, who gave this sketchy account of a sighting he remembered as occurring in 1897, when he was eight years old:

> Going down Grand River for my papers, about 4 in the morning (the *Morning Tribune*), the policeman I was with and I saw an object that looked to be about three feet in diameter. It was about 1,000 feet in the air and was heading east. It was [a] silvery color and had a tail about three blocks long. It traveled like those big sea serpents you read about skimming over the top of the water. It made a low hissing noise that we could just hear. My dad[,] who was leaving our home for work, also saw it as it seemed to pass right over our house.

It is safe to assume that no airship inventors flew over America in 1896 and 1897. It is wise to be skeptical of newspaper accounts of meetings with aeronauts. We will never know exactly what happened in 1897. But one defensible interpretation is that, amid all the misperceptions, exaggerations, and fabrications, UFOs—and UFOs of a modern variety—*were* observed; once in a while, they even touched briefly on the ground (as in the Lake Elmo, Minnesota, incident, a story that has at least the appearance of credibility). After all, cigar- or dirigible-shaped objects have an honored place in UFO lore, and occasionally witnesses have described wings. We have already noted, as well, reports of unambiguously modern UFOs amid the airships: V shapes, eggs, pears, and fast-moving nocturnal lights. It is difficult to believe that even an amused and hugely tolerant newspaper readership would have put up indefinitely with wholly false reports of a wholly bogus phenomenon. Anyway, soon enough the airships would be back.

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CRASHES OF UFOs IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Though reports and rumors of crashed UFOs have circulated widely since the beginning of the modern era, following **Kenneth Arnold's sighting** in 1947, it is less well known that comparable stories were being told over a century ago.

Giants from another world. The earliest known crash-landing of an extraterrestrial spacecraft is said to have taken place in 1862. The report was published as a letter to the editor in the *Houston Daily Post* for May 2, 1897, just as a wave of turn-of-the-century reports of mystery **airship sightings** (usually though not always assumed to be of secret terrestrial inventions) was winding down. The letter, written by John Leander of El Campo, Texas, and dated April 29, reads in part:

> There is an old sailor living now in El Campo with his daughter who has proclaimed that he had not only seen the vessel but had actually seen people from another world. His immediate relatives have known of the circumstances for some years, but he says the story has never been published. The name of the old gentleman is Mr. Oleson, and for many years he was a boatswain in the Danish navy, but at the time he saw the airship he was a mate on the Danish brig *Christine*.
>
> In September 1862, the *Christine* was wrecked in the Indian ocean on a desert rock or island several miles in size. This rock is set down on charts of the ocean, but is not mentioned in geographies.
>
> A furious storm had raged for hours and the ship was swept far from her course when this immense rock loomed ahead amid the deafening roar of the breakers. A great wave dashed Mr. Oleson high on the rocks and for a long time he was insensible. When he recovered he found five of his companions had been saved, though they were more or less injured, and one man died of his injuries.
>
> They collected their faculties and found themselves confronted by starvation, since there was not a vestige of vegetation or animal life on the rock. They found plenty of fresh rain water in holes, which revived them very much.
>
> They had given up all hope and had clustered at the base of a cliff waiting for the awful end, while the wind howled and the furious waves dashed on the rock.
>
> Suddenly another terror was added to the horrors of the scene, for high in the air they saw what seemed to be an immense ship driven, uncontrolled in the elements. It was driving straight toward the frightened mariners, who cried aloud in their despair. Fortunately, however, a whirl of wind changed the course of the monster and it crashed against the cliff a few hundred yards from the miserable sailors.
>
> Speechless with fear, they crept toward the wreck. It seemed a vessel as large as a modern battleship, but the machinery was so crushed that they could form no idea as to how the power was applied to the immense wings or sails, for they could plainly discern the fact that it was propelled by four huge wings. Strange implements and articles of furniture could be

seen jumbled in an almost shapeless mass. They found in metal boxes covered with strange characters what they afterward discovered to be very wholesome and palatable food which, with the water in the rocks, saved them from immediate death.

But their horror was intensified when they found the bodies of more than a dozen men dressed in garments of strange fashion and texture. The bodies were a dark bronze color, but the strangest feature of all was the immense size of the men. They had no means of measuring their bodies, but estimated them to be more than 12 feet high. Their hair and beard were also long and as soft and silky as the hair of an infant.

They found tools of almost every kind but they were so large that few of them could be used. They were stupefied with fright and one man, driven insane, jumped from the cliff into the boiling waves and was seen no more.

The others fled in horror from the fearful sight, and it was two days before hunger could drive them back to the wreck. After eating heartily of the strange food, they summoned courage to drag the gigantic bodies to the cliff and tumble them over.

Then with feverish haste they built a raft of the wreck, erected sails and gladly quit the horrible island. The sea had become as smooth as a lake and the experienced mariners made rapid progress. They tried as best they could to steer for Vergulen island, but fortunately in about sixty hours fell in with a Russian vessel headed for Australia. Three more of the old man's companions succumbed to their injuries and the awful mental strain and died before reaching port.

Fortunately as a partial confirmation of the truth of his story, Mr. Oleson took from one of the bodies a finger ring of immense size. It is made of a compound of metals unknown to any jeweler who has seen it, and is set with two reddish stones, the names of which are unknown to anyone who has ever examined it. The ring was taken from a thumb of the owner and measures 2 1/4 inches in diameter.

Now, Mr. Editor, many people believe those airship stories to be fakes. That may be so, but the story now told for the first time is strictly true. While Mr. Oleson is an old man, he still possesses every faculty and has the highest respect for truth and veracity. Quite a number of our best citizens, among them Mr. Henry Hahn, Mr. H. C. Carleton, Green Hill and S. Porter, saw the ring and heard the old man's story.

There is no reason to believe this story is anything other than melodramatic fantasy. It employs such standard devices of nineteenth-century adventure fiction as a shipwreck and marooning on a remote (and unmapped) rocky island (as Herman Melville says of Queequeg's fictional island home in *Moby-Dick* [1851], "It is not down on any map; true places never are"). Then there is the remarkable coincidence of a spaceship crash at the same unlikely location, followed by madness, suicide, and eventual escape via raft constructed from parts of the alien wreckage so fortuitously provided. The final detail is characteristic of much period science fiction (for example the pterodactyl that is freed at Queen's Hall in London at the conclusion of Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* [1912]), in which "proof" of the extraordinary experience is produced and doubters are silenced.

An alternative interpretation of the story's genesis has been suggested by Swedish writer Sven Rosén, who contends that the tale has its origins in archaic Scandinavian folklore. He writes that according to traditional belief, trolls—once thought to be giants—were mostly wiped out in a series of violent storms in the seventeenth century. Subsequent tales recounted discoveries of strangely clad, dark-skinned giants found dead after storms. "The folklore explanation is that these beings were killed by lightning because 'God uses thunder against the crew of Satan,' as one nineteenth-century informant said," according to Rosén, who adds that in the pre-Christian era the trolls' enemy was Thor, the god of thunder, who often attacked his enemies with lightning (Rosén, 1990).

Nebraska spaceship. The second earliest known UFO-crash claim was published in early June 1884, in the *Nebraska Nugget*, a weekly newspaper published in

Holdrege. As the story went, on June 6 a remarkable vehicle crashed near Benkelman in remote Dundy County, in the south-central part of the state.

Cowboys engaged in rounding up cattle heard a "terrifying whirring noise over their heads" and looked up to see a blazing object plunging to earth. It fell out of sight on the other side of a bank. When the cowboys got to where they could see it, they observed "fragments of cog-wheels, and other pieces of machinery lying on the ground, scattered in the path made by the aerial visitor, glowing with heat so intense as to scorch the grass for a long distance around each fragment and make it impossible for one to approach it." One witness, Alf Williamson, was overcome by the heat and collapsed senseless to the ground, his face blistered and his hair "singed to a crisp."

Unable to approach the craft, the *Nugget* related, "the party turned back on its trail. The sand was fused to an unknown depth over a space of 20 feet wide by 80 feet long, and the melted stuff was still bubbling and hissing. Between this and the final resting place there were several other like spots where it had come in contact with the ground, but none so well marked."

The cowboys left to secure medical help for Williamson.

Word of the strange visitor spread quickly, and as night fell, many people came to see the phenomenon, which continued to glow. The following morning, June 7, a party led by district brand inspector E. W. Rawlins arrived on the scene.

By this time, the *Nugget* reported, "the smaller portions of the vast machinery had cooled so that they could be approached, but not handled. One piece that looked like the blade of a propeller screw, of a metal in appearance like brass, about 16 inches wide, three inches thick and three and a half feet long, was picked up on a spade. It would not weigh more than five pounds, but appeared as strong and compact as any metal. A fragment of a wheel with a milled rim, apparently having a diameter of seven or eight feet, was also picked up. It seemed to be of the same material and had the same remarkable lightness. The aerolite, or whatever it is, seems to be about 50 or 60 feet long, cylindrical, and about 10 or 12 feet in diameter."

On June 8 the *Daily State Journal*, published in Lincoln, reprinted the story. Elsewhere in the issue an editorial note says of the story, "Unless the alleged facts are greatly magnified or distorted, this unusual object of wonder must be an air vessel belonging originally to some other planet which sailed too far from its orb and after wandering in space has at last been caught by the attraction of the earth and drawn to it. Further investigations will be hastily pursued and awaited with the liveliest interest."

Two days later the newspaper printed its follow-up, apparently from the same anonymous Benkelman correspondent. The story bore this title: "THE MAGICAL METEOR/ It Dissolves Like a Drop of Dew Before the Morning Sun/ The Most Mysterious Element of the Strange Phenomenon." The correspondent reported that he and a dozen other persons had seen the vehicle's remains vanish in a blinding rainstorm; the "queer object," he wrote, "melted, dissolved by the water like a spoonful of salt." For the benefit of slow-witted readers who had yet to get the joke (which evidently was that salt was the substance with which the story should be ingested), he added that though the unfortunate Williamson seemed to have been permanently blinded, "otherwise, he does not appear to be seriously injured."

By the next day the *Journal* editorial writer, who earlier had all but declared the story authentic ("The details are given with a fullness and a particularity that almost command belief"), was treating it as a joke: "It is believed the aerial visitor that recently descended from the sky in Dundy county was the democratic candidate for president the bourbons [opponents of the prohibition of alcohol] have been looking for. Its dissolution by contact with water would appear to support the theory."

In 1964 the (ostensibly serious) original story, though not the (clearly comic) sequel, was rediscovered by a Holdrege man, who sent a copy to the *Omaha World-Herald*. Reporter Russ Toler asked his mother, Ida Toler, a member of the Dundy County Historical Society, to investigate. Mrs. Toler, born in 1897 and a lifelong resident of the county, interviewed old-timers but could find no one who remembered it, though John Ellis, on whose ranch the event supposedly occurred, did exist. "I grew up hearing pioneer sto-

ries but never did I heard this one," she said. In her view the tale grew out of a "dull day at the newspaper office.... They needed a story so some person concocted this tale" (Toler, 1986). Nebraska historian and folklorist Roger Welsch also conducted inquiries in the area and found that "nobody had the foggiest notion" about it (Welsch, 1986).

An epidemic of crashes. Newspaper pranks as well as other kinds of hoaxes would play a significant role in the rash of crash reports published during the airship scare of 1896 and 1897. Some examples:

Stanford Heights, California, December 3, 1896: Late in the evening occupants of a dairy farm heard a loud noise, followed by cries for help. When they went outside to investigate, they found the wreckage of an airship in a gulch, along with the vehicle's two injured occupants, one of whom identified himself as J. D. deGear of San Francisco. DeGear would not identify the airship's inventor but denied that the wrecked airship was the one that had been observed over San Francisco recently. After examining the wreckage closely, one man at the site noted that the contrivance "had been freshly painted, but the paint was worn off, indicating that it had been dragged over the ground some distance.... [F]rom the flimsy appearance of the machine, I came to the conclusion that the whole thing was a fake, and that the airship had been dragged to that place" (*San Francisco Call*, December 4). A rival newspaper reported that "under close cross-questioning" deGear confessed that the bogus airship "had been hauled to the crest of the hill on a wagon, dumped over and dragged down into the gulch where it was found" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, December 4). The stunt apparently was cooked up by deGear and the director of a local amusement park.

Bethany, Missouri, early April 1897: Someone signing himself "A True Fakir" wrote that a collision between an airship and a flagpole had led the former and its two occupants to disaster. The bodies were so mangled as to render identification "next to impossible.... From letters found in the pockets of each it is believed that the men originally came either from San Francisco or Omaha" (*St. Joseph* [Missouri] *Daily Herald*, April 9).

Rhodes, Iowa, April 9: At 11 P.M. the appearance of a rapidly-approaching bright light brought a crowd into the street. As the object got closer, it got louder, its machinery making sounds "as loud as a heavy train of cars." Suddenly it descended and plunged into the "reservoir of the C[hicago], M[ilwaukee] & St. P[aul] railway, which is almost a lake, covering about eight acres of land. No pen can describe what followed. The boiling lava from Vesuvius pouring into the sea could only equal it. The light was so large and had created so much heat that the horrible hissing which occurred when the monster plunged into the lake could be heard for miles, and the water of the reservoir was so hot that the naked hand could not be held in it. As soon as the wreck is raised out of the water a full description of the machine will be sent" (*Burlington* [Iowa] *Hawk-Eye*, April 14). There was, however, no further word.

Near Lanark, Illinois, April 9: At 4 A.M., as a blizzard raged, an on-board explosion caused a cigar-shaped airship to fly out of control and plow into the ground near the home of Johann Fliegeltoub. Two of the occupants were killed. A third, dressed in robes "after the fashion of the Greeks in the time of Christ," shouted hysterically before lapsing into unconsciousness. Fliegeltoub wasted no time charging one-dollar admission to curiosity-seekers who wished to view the largely intact airship in his barnyard. When a correspondent came to the scene, he learned that the pilot was being kept in a room in the house. After fortifying himself with morphine and cocaine to steady his nerves, the writer entered the room, where he found the aeronaut still unconscious; he noted that the stranger "wore a white tunic reaching to his knees and on his feet were sandals.... The tunic was embroidered with a coat of arms over the breast, a shield with a bar sinister of link sausages and bearing a ham sandwich rampant." A few minutes later the aeronaut revived and told the correspondent ("in a language that I at once knew to be Volapuk") that he and his companions were from Mars. The two went out to the yard to examine the airship, which the Martian quickly repaired. He then retrieved the bodies of his fellow extraterrestrials, shouted farewell, and sailed away. The correspondent retired to a Lanark hotel and "sat up all night smoking opium and eating hasheesh to get in condition to write this dispatch" (*Sterling* [Illinois] *Evening Gazette*, April 13).

Pavilion, Michigan, April 11: A fast-moving airship

exploded as it passed over the town in the early morning hours. The next morning part of an electric device was found; elsewhere a "propeller blade of some very light material, in a partially fused condition," turned up. Later, when carpenters shingling a house came to work, they discovered that the roof was covered with "minute fragments which had in some instances penetrated the shingles and entered the boards beneath" (*Detroit Evening News*, April 13).

Decatur, Illinois, April 14: In the evening, as he was walking to the barn, a man noticed a bright moving light in the sky. He paid little attention to it, entered the building and sat down to milk a cow. Just as he was finishing, a loud crash sounded and much of the roof was ripped off. The frightened cow kicked the man in the head, knocking him out. After he was restored to consciousness, he told his wife he had glimpsed the airship as it plowed into the roof, then managed to sail on (*Decatur Evening Republican*, April 15).

Humboldt, Tennessee, mid-April: Riding along a stretch of the Forked Deer River, Sam McLeary saw an airship which had crashed in the woods. Its one occupant was encased in ice, apparently because his machine had "reached too high altitudes, and its manager had succumbed to the pitiless cold" of the upper atmosphere (*Nashville American*, April 18).

Highland Station, Kansas, April 15: "[T]he airship passed over that town ... and ... owing to an explosion of chemicals, the ship sank to the ground. Underneath the mass of debris, a man was found groaning, and unconscious. When sufficiently restored to talk, he said that his name was Pedro Sanchez of Cuba. He refused to tell anything further, shipped it to St. Joe and then went to Omaha" (*Atchison* [Kansas] *Daily Globe*, April 17).

Near Jefferson, Iowa, April 16: An airship plunged to earth, leaving a large hole in the ground (*Omaha Daily Bee*, April 17).

The Aurora Martian. By far the most famous nineteenth-century UFO crash—no other even comes close—is the one that is supposed to have occurred at Aurora, Texas, on April 17, 1897. Because this story was revived, with much hoopla, in the 1960s and 1970s, it needs to be told in detail.

It first appeared in the April 19 issue of the *Dallas Morning News*. A short account, datelined Aurora (in Wise County 45 miles northwest of Dallas) and bylined S. E. Haydon, reported that at 6 A.M. two days earlier, residents saw an airship flying in a northerly direction over the town. It was traveling so close to the ground that observers thought it might be experiencing mechanical difficulty. "It sailed gradually over the public square and when it reached the north part of town collided with the tower of Judge Proctor's windmill and went to pieces with a terrific explosion," according to Haydon, "scattering debris over several acres of ground, wrecking the windmill and tower and destroying the judge's flower garden." In the wreckage searchers found the "badly disfigured" body of a being whom one T. J. Weems, identified as the "United States signal service officer at this place and an authority on astronomy," declared to be a "native of the planet Mars." Papers found with the body contained undecipherable "hieroglyphics."

Haydon's account continues:

> The ship was too badly wrecked to form any conclusion as to its construction or motive power. It was built of an unknown metal, resembling somewhat a mixture of aluminum and silver, and it must have weighed several tons. The town is full of people today who are viewing the wreck and gathering specimens of the strange metal from the debris. The pilot's funeral will take place at noon tomorrow.

Neither the *Morning News* nor any other paper published a follow-up, and there is no evidence that anyone took the story seriously at the time. The *News* was treating the airship scare as a hilarious joke, printing one preposterous story after another. The day before the Aurora report appeared, the paper had taken note of a Kaufman County airship which resembled a "Chinese flying dragon ... a monster breathing red fire through its nostrils.... The legs were the propellers." The same issue told of a Farmersville "eye witness" who saw "three men in the ship and ... heard them singing 'Nearer My God to Thee' and ... distributing temperance tracts." A few paragraphs later it is alleged that an airship that flew over Waxahachie "seemed to be operated by a woman who was running a patent [sic] resembling a sewing machine."

The story was forgotten until June 1966, when Frank Masquelette of the *Houston Post* rediscovered it, along with other Texas airship reports of the period. Through the editor of the *Wise County Messenger* Masquelette was able to verify that a Judge J. S. Proctor had lived in Aurora in 1897. The first mention of the Aurora story in the UFO literature followed not long after, in an article by Donald B. Hanlon in the September/October 1966 issue of England's ***Flying Saucer Review***. In introducing the story, Hanlon remarked that he was "taking into consideration the various negative and positive factors inherent in the 1897 reports" and presenting the tale "cautiously."

At the request of J. Allen Hynek, the Northwestern University astronomer who then served as the chief scientific consultant for the Air Force's **Project Blue Book**, William F. Driskell of Dallas went to Aurora, by then barely more than a few houses. Driskell talked with a man named Brawley Oates, whose house and service station sat on what had been Judge Proctor's property. Oates said he knew little about the story but referred Driskell to Oscar Lowry of Newark, a few miles down the road.

Driskell subsequently wrote Hynek:

> [Lowry] was about 11 years old when this happened.... [He] said that Aurora was a busy little town until the railroads put down their new tracks and neglected to include Aurora in their plans. As a result, the town began to diminish as people moved to be near the railroad. E. [sic] E. Haydon was a cotton buyer and writer who lived in Aurora and wanted to do something to help keep people in town and to make it a tourist attraction. He got the idea, I suppose, from the actual sightings he had read about and made up his story. The T. J. Weems that [sic] was supposed to have been a U.S. Signal Service officer was actually the town blacksmith and, according to Mr. Lowry, the Proctor place never had a windmill on it.... [T]he cemetery is a Masonic cemetery and a chart is kept on who is buried there. There are no graves unaccounted for. Mr. Lowry said that Mr. Haydon later told others about his story and many went on letting people believe it (Driskill, 1966).

In 1967 Alfred E. Kraus of West Texas State University twice visited Aurora. He searched the alleged crash site with a metal detector but found only old stove lids, rings used on horse bridles, and several 1932 license plates ("The Aurora, Texas, Case," 1973).

In the late 1960s Wise County historian Etta Pegues looked into the story and confirmed Lowry's version. Among the old-timers she interviewed was Mrs. Robbie Hanson, who declared, "It was a hoax. I was in school that day and nothing happened." Moreover, Pegues wrote, if the "Aurora story had been factual rather than fiction Cliff D. Cates would have included it in his *Pioneer History of Wise County* which he published in 1907. It would have sold him a billion copies. Also, if it had been true, Harold R. Bost would have included it in his *Saga of Aurora*. It would have been the highlight of his theme. But neither men [sic] mentioned it because it had been forgotten as any other piece of fiction would have been forgotten" (Pegues, 1975).

Pegues believed Haydon had concocted the story to revive Aurora's fortunes. During the 1890s the town, established in 1873, had rapidly declined, not only because the railroad had passed it by but because a spotted-fever epidemic killed or drove away many residents, a fire destroyed the western half of the town, and the boll weevil wiped out the cotton industry.

But the story stubbornly refused to die. On March 25, 1973, *Dallas Times Herald* aviation writer Bill Case reported that Hayden Hewes, of the Oklahoma-based International UFO Bureau, had located the crash site. Case retold the original story, inserting errors in date and time and incorporating material from other airship accounts. Area newspapers picked up Case's version and soon reporters and curiosity-seekers were bedeviling the locals with questions.

In May a self-described treasure hunter named Frank Kelley appeared in Aurora and declared that a metal detector gave the same readings at a certain grave in the town cemetery as it did at the crash site. Metal fragments were unearthed at the site and sent out for analysis. That same month a local man who till then had refused all interviews told Case that he knew of the crash from firsthand experience; shortly after the incident his father had taken him to the site and shown him the wreckage. He said, however, that he

remembered nothing about a body. Except for that one detail, his account repeated detail for detail, error for error, the widely circulated Case version (Simmons, 1985).

Meanwhile, convinced that he had reason to believe an extraterrestrial being was buried where the metal was found, on a Sunday morning Hewes showed up in Aurora determined to dig—only to be thwarted by angry townsfolk who armed themselves and kept him from entering the cemetery. The cemetery association was able to prove the plot belonged to the Carr family (*Denton* [Texas] *Record-Chronicle*, May 25).

Stung by criticism from Aurora citizens and fellow ufologists (the *A.P.R.O. Bulletin* described him as a "gadfly who flits hither and yon as circumstances allow when the midwest area is infected with UFO reports"), Hewes withdrew from the case and pronounced the incident a hoax (*Daily Oklahoman*, June 8). The investigation was picked up by the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON). Two nonagenarian former residents of Aurora led MUFON's investigators to a heretofore-unnoticed grave site near the edge of the cemetery. Under the limb of a gnarled oak tree was a peculiar circular grave with a triangular headstone on which a crudely drawn image of a cigar-shaped object was inscribed.

Then two local persons claimed to remember the crash. Ninety-one-year-old Mary Evans recalled (*Dallas Times-Herald*, May 30) that her parents had told her about the incident. She claimed she had forgotten about it until the recent spate of newspaper articles jogged her memory. A 98-year-old man, G. C. McCurley, from nearby Lewisville said he had heard about the crash from two friends who had seen the wreckage (*Times-Herald*, June 1).

The analysis of the metal revealed it to be an aluminum alloy used during the 1920s to make cookware. Evidently the metal had been planted at the site. Not long afterwards the *A.P.R.O. Bulletin* remarked, "Dr. Kraus found no unusual metal, aluminum or otherwise, in 1967, yet it allegedly showed up on the crash site after the initial flurry of publicity in April of this year.... An examination of all the 'evidence' leads us to an obvious conclusion: The aluminum alloy arrived at Aurora after 1967 ... and therefore has no bearing on the mystery whatsoever. Whether the aluminum was brought to the scene by publicity-seeking UFO buffs or by people who wanted to inject some life into a ghost town ... we may never know but it seems certain that we should relegate the story of the 1897 Aurora, Texas, airship crash to the hoax bin."

The controversy created a furor within the community, splitting it between those who favored further investigation and those who opposed it. The latter held that the grave contained the body of a victim of a turn-of-the-century spotted-fever epidemic and that to exhume it would be to bring back the disease. Brawley Oates reported that he was getting calls from individuals who claimed to be associated with the Army or the CIA and who were expressing interest in the metal fragments and the occupant of the grave (*Daily Oklahoman*, May 31). Eventually the district court blocked the exhumation effort. The affair was over.

By 1979 the very mention of the subject was enough to "send many residents into profound depression," a writer for the *New York Times* observed (February 26).

In 1985 a feature film, *The Aurora Encounter*, was produced in Texas by Jim McCullough, Sr., using a mostly local cast but also including veteran character actor Jack Elam and country singer Dottie West. A sort of *ET* set in the Old West, *Encounter* has the editor of the (nonexistent) *Aurora Sentinel* (played by Carol Bagdasarian) investigating reports of a little alien being (Mickey Hays) who has befriended a local character (Elam) and a little girl (Mindy Smith). In the end she and fellow Aurorans signal the airship to land, but when it does, a trigger-happy Texas Ranger (Will Mitchell) wounds its occupant. The alien staggers back into the ship and crashes it into the windmill. He is buried in the Aurora cemetery.

When the movie premiered in Dallas in March 1986, reviewer Steve Smith wrote:

> *Aurora Encounter* looks like a film you or I might make if somebody bought us a couple of movie cameras and gave us enough money to hire marginal actors, except I hope you or I might do a bit better. It is reminiscent of the cheap science fiction movies of the 1950s when flying saucers looked like pie plates tossed through

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HOAXES THROUGH 1959

UFO hoaxes were being perpetrated long before the terms "flying saucers" and "unidentified flying objects" entered the English language.

Nineteenth-century tales. What may have been the first "UFO" hoax was chronicled in the March 29, 1880, issue of the *Santa Fe Weekly New Mexican.* The newspaper reported that late one evening a large fish-shaped balloon passed over Galisteo Junction, New Mexico, and onlookers on the ground could hear its merry occupants, who apparently were having a party. They tossed several items overboard. One item, immediately recovered, was a "magnificent flower, with a slip of exceedingly fine silk-like paper, on which were some characters resembling those on Japanese tea chests." The next morning searchers found a peculiar cup. The evening of the following day a young Chinese man showed up in town, examined the writing on the silk paper, and recognized it as a message from his fiance, a passenger on an airship which had flown from China on a maiden voyage to America (*New Mexican*, April 7).

No such voyage between China and America occurred, or could have occurred, in 1880. The story was typical of the yarns that would fill newspapers between November 1896 and May 1897, during the first great American UFO wave (*see* **Airship Sightings in the Nineteenth Century**). Though some of the reports, especially those involving overflights of cylindrical objects, were almost certainly authentic (and continue to the present), the press tended to treat the entire affair as a huge joke, and consequently it did not hesitate to publish fantastic fiction thinly disguised as sober fact. In many instances the hoaxes (some concocted by the newspapers themselves) were of landings and contacts with airship pilots, usually alleged to be American inventors. In a small but notable minority of these hoaxes, extraterrestrial beings figured. The first of these was published in the *Stockton Evening Mail* of November 27, 1896. A publicist for the Stockton, California, Commercial Association wrote that he and an associate had encountered naked, seven-foot-tall beings who tried to carry them into a nearby airship, but the attempt failed because the aliens were weightless and lacked the strength to carry out the would-be abduction.

The most successful airship hoaxes, in that they were revived decades later and believed by some, came out of Aurora, Texas, and Le Roy, Kansas, in April 1897.

In the former instance, according to a brief account by Aurora resident S. E. Haydon in the *Dallas Morning News* of the nineteenth, an airship crashed into a windmill, killing its sole occupant, a "native of the planet Mars." The Martian was to be buried in the local cemetery, the *Morning News* alleged in its one story on the incident. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, after a *Houston Post* reporter rediscovered the article, curiosity-seekers, ufologists, and journalists flocked to tiny Aurora to find out if indeed it harbored the remains of an extraterrestrial. Sober investigation uncovered all kinds of discrepancies between the story and the historical realities of the town (which, to start with, had no windmill), and eventually it was concluded that Haydon had made up the story to attract attention to Aurora in hopes of reviving its flagging economic fortunes (Chariton, 1991; Cohen, 1981; Simmons, 1985). A 1985 feature film, *The Aurora Encounter*, produced in Texas by Jim McCullough, Sr., as a sort of Old West *ET*, elaborated on the legend, making the Martian (played by 13-year-old Mickey Hays, who suffered from progeria, a disease that causes premature aging) the victim of a trigger-happy Texas Ranger. Folk singer Tom Pacheco composed a tongue-in-cheek ballad, "Judge Proctor's Windmill," which appears on his 1976 RCA album *The Outsider.*

The other major hoax was introduced to ufologists in Jacques Vallee's *Anatomy of a Phenomenon* (1965) and was repeatedly cited in the UFO literature of the next decade (Clark, 1966; Edwards, 1966; Farish, 1966; Lore and Deneault, 1968). Taken out of the context of the innumerable newspaper hoaxes of the period, it certainly *seemed* impressive: a prominent citizen, in the company of two other witnesses, reporting an extraordinary encounter, with affidavits signed by other community leaders attesting to his honesty. So, anyway, the first newspaper to carry the chief "witness'" story, the *Yates Center* [Kansas] *Farmers Advocate* of April 23, had it. Alexander Hamilton of nearby

Le Roy swore that on the evening of the nineteenth he, his son, and his hired man had seen the strange-looking occupants of an airship rustle one of his calves. The next day the butchered remains were found in a neighbor's pasture. The story touched off a sensation, even though Hamilton candidly acknowledged, when a Missouri newspaper inquired, "I lied about it" (*Atchison County Mail*, May 7). By the time Hamilton's confession was rediscovered (by airship scholar Thomas E. Bullard [Bullard, 1982]), however, the tale had already (if belatedly) been exposed as a hoax by Jerome Clark. Clark collected testimony from an elderly woman, a friend of Hamilton's daughter Nell, who had been at the Hamilton residence when the elder Hamilton returned from town and chuckled about the story he had made up and which would appear in the *Advocate* shortly. The signers of the affidavit were fellow members of the local liars' club (Clark, 1977; Cohen, *op. cit.*).

A remarkable UFO hoax outside the airship tradition entertained readers of Nebraska newspapers for a few days in early June 1884. On the sixth cowboys in remote south-central Dundy County were reported to have seen a blazing object plunge to earth and crash into many glowing pieces which burned the grass and fused the sand on which they fell. The light was so intense as to blind one of the witnesses. Two days later the *Lincoln Daily State Journal* suggested that the vehicle could be nothing less than an "air vessel belonging originally to some other planet." But on the tenth the paper reported that the remains of the spaceship had "melted, dissolved by the water like a spoonful of salt," in a rainstorm. Apparently a correspondent in Benkelman, the Dundy County seat, had written a science-fiction story and sold it as a factual account, then slyly confessed with an absurd follow-up which hinted that readers ought to take his tale with at least a pinch of sodium chloride. Decades later investigators interviewed old residents of the county and found none, even among those devoted to the preservation of local history, who recalled such an event (Clark, 1986b; *see also* **Crashes of UFOs in the Nineteenth Century**).

Hoaxing enters the UFO age. Many hoaxes in the years after the **Kenneth Arnold sighting** of 1947 can more accurately be characterized as pranks. On many occasions teenagers and other practical jokers doctored up garbage lids, circular saw blades, and comparable artifacts, then either photographed them in flight or left them out for some guileless soul to find and take to be alien wreckage. Most such pranks involved photographs, and in no time at all the number of fake flying-saucer pictures was overwhelmingly larger than the other kind (Edwards, 1957).

Among the pranks—crueler than most—was one played in July 1953 by Atlanta barber Edward Watters, who, to win a 10-dollar bet that he could get his name in the papers, bought and killed a monkey, shaved it and cut off its tail, and deposited the creature in the middle of a rural highway. Then he and two friends who had accompanied him waved down the first approaching car and breathlessly informed the driver that they had suddenly come upon a landed flying saucer and plowed into one of its occupants. The barber made the papers and briefly caught the interest of both the FBI and the Air Force. He stuck to his story until an Emory University Hospital scientist's examination of the body determined its true identity. A court fined the prankster for littering a public highway with the body of an animal (Gross, 1989).

Nonetheless, popular suspicions notwithstanding, hoaxes have played a minor role in UFO-reporting. Even the anti-UFO **Project Blue Book**, when it issued periodic lists of the cases it had solved and the identifications (balloons, aircraft, astronomical) assigned to them, had no specific category for hoaxes; they fell simply under "other" (Tacker, 1960). There just were not enough of them to warrant a heading of their own. In nearly all cases Air Force investigations proceeded from the assumption that the individual making the report had seen something; the investigators' job was to try to find the presumably prosaic stimulus for the sighting. It became clear in time as well that even most persons claiming bizarre UFO experiences believed what they were saying, and those who could not bring themselves to accept the reality of UFOs and UFO beings had to search for other conventional explanations than outright fabrication to account for a wide body of testimony from sincere, sober citizens.

Yet spectacular hoaxes—some of which some ufologists would stubbornly refuse to recognize *as* hoaxes—occurred from time to time. Still among the most

notorious was the first major one, hatched soon after the Arnold sighting by a yarnspinner named Fred L. Crisman of Tacoma, Washington. Crisman got an associate, Harold Dahl, to claim that on June 21 (three days before the Arnold experience) he and others aboard a boat near Maury Island, three miles from the mainland, saw doughnut-shaped UFOs disgorge metallic materials. Crisman then wrote **Ray Palmer**, a science-fiction editor whose magazines also carried articles on "true mysteries," and told him about it, claiming further that a threatening stranger in a black suit had warned Dahl not to talk, even though he had told nobody. Kenneth Arnold flew to Washington to investigate the story. Convinced immediately of the two men's sincerity, he notified a military intelligence officer, Lt. Frank M. Brown, who had investigated Arnold's report, and soon Brown and Capt. William L. Davidson of Hamilton Field in California were on the scene. Dahl confessed to them that the story was a hoax. Embarrassed for Arnold, Brown and Davidson left Tacoma without telling him what they had learned. On the way back to California their B-25 crashed after its engine caught fire, and the two men were killed (Ruppelt, 1956; *see also* **Maury Island Hoax**). A flying-saucer legend was born, with inevitable suggestions that Brown and Davidson had been killed because they knew too much (Barker, 1956; Wilkins, 1954).

In 1949 two veteran confidence artists, Silas Newton and Leo A. GeBauer, representing themselves respectively as a Texas oilman and a government scientist, approached *Variety* columnist Frank Scully with a fantastic story. According to them, on three occasions the U.S. government had recovered crashed spaceships along with the bodies of their occupants, humanlike beings believed to be Venusians. Taking them at their word, Scully rushed into print with what quickly became a best-selling book, *Behind the Flying Saucers* (1950). Newton and GeBauer's motive was not to sell a saucer story but to peddle a bogus oil-detection device; being mentioned and endorsed in a popular book, where they were portrayed as sufficiently credentialed to have access to the deepest official secrets, gave them enormous credibility in their dealings with potential investors. *True* magazine asked **Donald E. Keyhoe**, an aviation journalist and retired Marine Corps major who was writing articles on UFOs for the magazine, to look into the story. Keyhoe did so and concluded it was a hoax (Keyhoe, 1950). Subsequently J. P. Cahn conducted a fuller investigation, which brought to light the criminal backgrounds of Newton and GeBauer and their likely motives (Cahn, 1952, 1956). When William L. Moore reinvestigated the episode in the early 1980s, he found that to their deaths years later, the two men had continued to pursue dubious schemes which often they were forced to defend in court (Moore, 1985). Yet even in the absence of supporting evidence for Newton and GeBauer's crash claims, their stories are still defended by some (Steinman and Stevens, 1987). (For further details, *see* **Scully Hoax**.)

Another hoax involving a claim about little men in UFOs appeared originally in the September/October 1950 issue of the *Steep Rock Echo*, the house magazine of Steep Rock Iron Mines, Ltd., of Steep Rock Lake, Ontario. In a detailed letter to the editor, an anonymous correspondent claimed that on July 2, while picnicking on the shore of a cove in Sawbill Bay, he and his wife saw a flying saucer on the water. "The top had what looked like hatch covers open and moving around over its surface were about 10 queer-looking little figures.... These figures I estimated to be roughly three feet six inches to four feet high and all were the same size.... The most noticeable thing was that they looked like automatons, and did not turn around .... they just changed the direction of their feet." Several Canadian newspapers reprinted the story, but when ***Fate*** ran it in its February/March 1952 issue, it was quickly picked up by UFO writers and was cited from time to time in the literature over the next two decades (Bloecher, 1956; Edwards, *op. cit.*; Lorenzen and Lorenzen, 1967; Wilkins, *op. cit.*; Nicholson, 1958). No one bothered to investigate the story, however, until the mid-1970s, when Robert Badgley, an Ontario member of the Tucson-based **Aerial Phenomena Research Organization** (APRO), found that one Gordon Edward had written the tale, which was entirely fictitious, to entertain readers of the magazine ("1950 Steep Rock Lake," 1977).

Contactees. In the 1950s the bulk of the controversy related to hoaxing charges centered on the claims of contactees, persons who purported to enjoy ongoing communications with friendly extraterrestrials often referred to as "Space Brothers." Though claims of