

First UFO spotted in Madison skies in 1897

Madisonians tried to laugh it off when an unidentified flying object, presumed to be an "airship," flew over the city back in the horse-and-buggy days.

In a time when airships were in the experimental stage — none of them around here — and the airplane was still a dream, the airborne thing was seen on the northeast end of town on the night of April 11 and again on April 14, 1897.

Years later, on Sept. 21, 1910, a second sighting of a mysterious soaring object was reported by local residents. The first time it was seen the subject was treated with levity; the second appearances, 13 years later, was reported seriously.

The mysterious airborne things earned the names of UFOs and "flying saucers" after 1947 when a



Frank Custer's MADISON

California man spotted a chain of "saucerlike things" in the upper air while he flew over the Cascade mountains in Oregon. His story sparked a rash of UFO sightings for decades, most of them fraudulent.

It would seem at this distance in time the UFO event of 1897 came up after a Chicago man who saw the thing that September day and had snapped a "true photograph" of it. His statement was supported by another Chicagoan who saw the first man take a picture of it.

That report of a cigar-shaped object with a propeller at the rear and its lower portion composed of white metal shaped like ship's keel caught the fancy of Madisonians.

Overnight Madison residents who had read about it in the newspaper became skywatchers.

The State Journal on April 12, 1897, carried a story in which unnamed townsmen told of their seeing an "object like an airship." It was "probably a star," said another.

Brilliant lights were reported, "especially by those who used opera glasses." The thing "wavered up and down just as the boats of the Aerial Rapid Transport line might be expected to do," the newspaper story said.

A Fifth Ward man said the object was shaped like a calamarian. An-

other man said he read the name "Star Tickler" on the object's side.

"A lady who was brought up with the Indians and has very sharp hearing, says she caught a glimpse of a face laughing as if it would split and heard a voice say, 'has the sucker fishing began down there yet?'"

A few people phoned the Washburn Observatory on the University campus where a person answered and told them he didn't feel disposed to take the matter seriously. The ship, he said, had first been viewed in California in 1896.

"Perhaps the gazers saw the lights of steamers on (Lake) Mendota. Unfortunately the boating season is not yet open," said the Journal story.

The second UFO phenomenon occurring in 1910 was witnessed by a

number of family members living in the North Livingston and North Brearly streets vicinity.

The people, according to a State Journal story, saw "a ship approaching from the north, headed south across Lake Mendota." They described it as "slowing down, descending, hovering, as if seeking a place to land, then flying off to the south-west." (Sounds like more recent reports of UFOs).

The witnesses were Mrs. Nils Starck, 218 N. Livingston St., widow of a local realtor; Mrs. Mary Malaney, 208 N. Brearly St., a clerk at the Keeley, Neckerman and Kessenich store; members of the families of Joe Helmus, 210 N. Livingston St., a house painter.

A special Air Force commission named to investigate UFOs since 1947, recently has begun to wind down its research, with no firm conclusions about the existence of UFOs.