

Hoosier Folklore Society

Flying Saucers as Folklore

Author(s): Howard H. Peckham

Source: *Hoosier Folklore*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1950), pp. 103-107

Published by: [Hoosier Folklore Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27650026>

Accessed: 21/06/2014 11:07

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Hoosier Folklore Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Hoosier Folklore*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

was a lady; they did not open the door to see. Presently they heard the sedan drive away.

The young men said not a word of all this to the housekeeper, but the next morning she announced that she was giving a tea party for them. During the party that afternoon they heard the housekeeper mention casually to her friends, "Oh yes, Miss Jane comes back to see me periodically, and as is her custom, she drives up in her sedan." It seems that since her mistress had been troubled with insomnia, it had not been unusual for her to ask her chauffeur to take her driving late at night. "And so," the housekeeper said, "she continues that practice and comes back now and again to check on me. I know that everything is all right when she goes up the stairs and sighs as she reaches the top."

Upon hearing this story, the young men were satisfied that what they had seen and heard the previous night had actually happened.

University of Minnesota

Louise P. Olsen

FLYING SAUCERS AS FOLKLORE

By HOWARD H. PECKHAM

For the past three years, students of folklore have had a rare opportunity to witness the birth and development of a modern myth—the "flying saucers."

Reports of airborne "things" began to be heard after the war ended, along with other reports that neither President Roosevelt nor Adolph Hitler was dead, which are familiar folklore manifestations. Various persons in scattered locations in this country saw "things" moving through the air. The word "saucer" was utilized to describe them, and newspapers began to advertise "flying saucers." Publicity begat more reports. So persistent were the stories that in January, 1948 the technical intelligence division of the Air Material Command at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, organized a project for the official investigation of all reports of flying saucers.

The official story is brief. With the help of the FBI and university scientists, the technical intelligence division questioned those who saw flying saucers and those who "knew someone who had seen them." At the end of 1949, the saucer project was closed down by the Air Force and a report issued.

Three hundred seventy-five incidents had been investigated, and the conclusions were that some persons who thought they saw flying saucers had misinterpreted various conventional objects, that other persons had seen nothing and simply perpetrated hoaxes, and that in some instances the alleged observations were a mild form of mass hysteria. Another incident was investigated and not concluded until June, 1950, but results were also negative.

However, as all folklorists know, the truth, particularly a negative, empty, or disillusioning finding, has small effect in dissipating a widely received and mysterious tale. The fascination of the tale itself, the embroidering it received from remote quarters, the opportunity it offered for speculation on interplanetary communication or international spying, all were powerful bellows in keeping bright the flame that officials tried to douse. It is a kind of game in which any number can play, and the protesting umpire is ignored.

Aside from intermittent newspaper stories, which were promptly repeated on radio news broadcasts and woven into the scripts of radio comedians, an "explanation" of flying saucers was aired by two responsible and influential magazines. David Lawrence, editor of *U. S. News and World Reports* (April 7, 1950), asserted that flying saucers were new weapons of war developed by and for our Navy air arm—"a combination of helicopter and fast jet plane." President Truman denied this, and the eminent aeronautical engineer, Igor Sikorsky, said he doubted if such a combination were possible. This reaction did not discourage Henry J. Taylor from reporting on the radio and in *The Reader's Digest* (July, 1950) that "flying saucers really do exist." Implying that he was privy to some top secrets of our Air Force, he said that the objects seen were of varying size and shape. "I know what these so-called 'flying saucers' are used for. But they are an important military secret." Obviously they were a new weapon undergoing tests. They are ours and they are good news was his theme.

The mystery might have died there for at least the readers of those two magazines, but the tottering ghost received a new shot in the arm from another journalist, Frank Scully. His book, *Behind the Flying Saucers*, appeared in October.¹ It took violent issue with the final report and conclusions of

¹ Published by Henry Holt and Co., New York.

the Air Material Command. Mr. Scully implied that the Air Force knew much more than it revealed, but at the same time accused it of being ignorant of "magnetic propulsion." He professed to be worried over whether the Air Force was deceiving the public for reasons of military security concerning a new American invention, or misleading the public by dismissing an interplanetary phenomenon it doesn't understand

After denying the truth of the Air Force report, Mr. Scully set up a breath-taking alternative. He advanced the explanation he had uncovered: flying saucers are real but not American-made or even earth-made; four of them have landed on this continent, three of them having been captured and examined; and 34 dead crew men, measuring 36 to 40 inches tall, have been found on these saucers! The vehicles were made of two metals not known to us, they operated by harnessing magnetic forces, and they probably came from Venus!²

Reviewers have tended to dismiss the book as pseudo-science fiction, not labelled as such, or to accuse the author of perpetrating a further hoax. Nevertheless, the editors of *Pageant* magazine thought enough of the book to condense it in their issue of October, 1950.

There has naturally been another explanation of the saucers that falls between the American-made and Venus-made theories. They are attributed to Russia, and their obvious mission is spying. Though this flatters the recently revealed inventive genius of the Russians, it was not taken seriously even by Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko, who said that perhaps the saucers were caused by a Russian discus thrower ignorant of his own strength.³

Another country was credited with causing the phenomenon by that rare combination of a psychologist with a sense of humor, Prof. G. Milton Smith of the College of the City of New York: "The explanation of the saucers is obvious—they originated in Scotland, where the Loch Ness monster caused such a sensation several years ago. The sea serpent,

² This is the second book to accuse Venus of interfering with Earth. Immanuel Velikovsky in *Worlds in Collision* (New York, 1949) advanced the thesis that twice, 3500 and 2600 years ago, Venus almost collided with the Earth, which event explained certain Biblical phenomena and ancient epics. The author's ignorance of astronomy was attacked by critics who did not assail the book as an outright hoax.

³ *The New York Times*, Apr. 9, 1950, sec. 4, p. 10.

angered by a lack of attention, has been discharging eggs at supersonic velocity by lashing its tail about . . ."⁴

In an effort to let the Air Force have an inning against Mr. Scully, Bob Considine, International News Service staff writer, interviewed Col. Harold E. Watson, chief intelligence officer of the Air Material Command, etc., etc., of Dayton, Ohio. Col. Watson had conducted the saucer investigation project. Patiently and a little wearily, he went over the "sources" of Mr. Scully's information. They emerge with less authority than they did in Mr. Scully's pages. Col. Watson could find no midgets or parts of captured saucers. This was the last story followed up by the project, even after it was officially dissolved.⁵

An interesting sidelight on the development of the myth may be found, in all places, in the solemn *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*. Up until February, 1950, it carried a heading: "Flying Saucers. See Illusions and hallucinations." But in the new supplement indexing magazine articles from March to August, 1950, there are two "see" references to flying saucers. One reads: "See Illusions and hallucinations." The other: "See Aeronautics: airplanes, jet propelled." Apparently David Lawrence and Henry J. Taylor were accepted. The change emphasizes an evolutionary development in this magic tale. Hallucinations have been winnowed, and a few kernels of truth found: some of the flying saucers are real, man-made vehicles or weapons. Yet Mr. Taylor's thesis has received no hint of official endorsement, only official denial. But now a good excuse has been found for the denial—military secrecy.

Folklorists may prefer to catalogue the whole business under "D—1520" as a variant on the theme of "magic object affords miraculous transportation."⁶

If anyone believes the matter is closed, he doesn't realize the persistence of this kind of illusion in times of anxiety and fear. The whole dispute also appeals to the civilian's latent suspicion of officialdom in uniform. It has other interesting facets. Man's most trusted sense—sight—is involved. The saucer itself is an advancement in engineering over anything

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Published in *The Indianapolis Star*, Nov. 13, 1950, p. 12.

⁶ Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Bloomington, 1933), II, 224.

we have been able to develop—but a kind of reversion to a motorless magic carpet. The crew are from another world, but not supernatural in power nor essentially different in appearance. Here the imagination has fallen flat, so far. The layman's ignorance of astronomy makes many details credible. The flying saucer may become our midcentury mystery story, a technological "sea serpent" of the Power Age, reappearing from time to time.

Indiana Historical Bureau

Indianapolis

THE TALE OF THE SCOTT COUNTY (IOWA) MILITIA

By PAULINE COOK

This story, embroidered though it is in the history books, is true in the main, and forms one of the liveliest chapters of midwestern history. The background of the spirit of belligerent independence involved goes back to the American Revolution, when one of the military expeditions started from this county. The Fox Indians, who lived on the site of Davenport, which was strategically located, joined with the Sacs to the east of them in an alliance with Great Britain, and attacked Spanish and American country around St. Louis, the foray being commanded by a British trader named Hesse, and consisting of traders, Indians, soldiers and servants. An attack on Pencour (St. Louis) was unsuccessful, as was also one on Cahokia, and the invaders returned in disorganized detachments.

In the War of 1812, the Sacs and Foxes were again hostile to the United States. An expedition in 1814 of the Americans from St. Louis to Prairie du Chien was intercepted by the Indians at Rock Island and nearly destroyed. Ammunition being transported at that time fell into the hands of the Indian chief Black Hawk, and was taken to the Fox village at Davenport for distribution. Another expedition from St. Louis encountered British and Indians here, and the Battle of Credit Island took place within what is now the city limits of Davenport. It was then an island in the river below the town, taking its name from the fact that it was a trading station of the Great American Fur Company, which located here for safety from ambush, and extended credit to the Indians for purchasing supplies.