

# M H R

---

Michigan and the Great Mass Hysteria Episode of 1897

Author(s): Robert E. Bartholomew

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), pp. 133-141

Published by: [Central Michigan University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20173722>

Accessed: 11/12/2011 10:14

---

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](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Central Michigan University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Michigan Historical Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## Research Note

### Michigan and the Great Mass Hysteria Episode of 1897

by

**Robert E. Bartholomew**

During the final decade of the nineteenth century, in the wake of a series of revolutionary technological advances—from the telephone to electric lights and the horseless carriage—a form of mass hysteria swept across the United States.<sup>1</sup> It involved tens of thousands of citizens who claimed to have observed an airship flying across the country. The vessel was typically described as cigar-shaped with wings or propellers and an attached undercarriage—resembling a crude and smaller version of the modern Goodyear Blimp. Witnesses sometimes claimed that the wings slowly flapped up and down in a bird-like motion.

During the 1890s Americans were enchanted with literature on science and invention, which had become something of a national obsession. One writer has described this period as “an age that was in love with the great wonders of science.”<sup>2</sup> Within this social climate, almost any invention seemed possible, and an exaggerated optimism developed in the belief that the perfection of the world’s first heavier-than-air ship was imminent. This widespread conviction was fostered by a heavy output of books, magazines, and newspaper articles on the subject, as the American public were fed “a steady diet of aeronautical speculation and news to prime people for the day

---

<sup>1</sup> For fuller discussion and analysis of this event, refer to Robert Emerson Bartholomew, *UFlore: A Social Psychological Study of a Modern Myth in the Making* (Stone Mountain, GA: Arcturus Books, 1989); Robert Emerson Bartholomew, “The Airship Hysteria of 1896-97,” *The Skeptical Inquirer* 14 (1990): 171-81; Robert Emerson Bartholomew, “The Social Psychology of ‘Epidemic’ Koro,” *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 40 (1994): 44-60.

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Frederick Clarke, “American Anticipations: The First of the Futurists,” *Futures* 18 (1986): 584-96.

when the riddle of aerial navigation finally would receive a solution.”<sup>3</sup>

In practical terms this event was several years away, and when it did occur with the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina in 1903, the first piloted self-powered flight was a very modest achievement by modern standards, lasting just fifty-nine fragile seconds. The episode was more of a hop than a flight, and aerial navigation over the next decade was a very dangerous occupation, as a sudden wind gust could easily bring down the crude airplanes of the era, and night flying was tantamount to suicide.

The phantom airship sightings in Michigan occurred during April and May of 1897, following a flurry of sightings in nearby Iowa and Missouri.<sup>4</sup> During the last week of March, there were several reports of mysterious aerial lights in Michigan, but these were interpreted as either a strange “meteor” that was observed for an hour at Holland or “ghost lights” on Boughner and Mills Lakes near the village of Shearer which resulted in several frightened inhabitants leaving the vicinity.<sup>5</sup> A similar episode was reported in the bay off Caseville, where a fluttering light was thought to have been ghosts from the steamer Oconte that had sunk near Big Charity Island several years earlier.<sup>6</sup> Also a mysterious nocturnal light seen by Rodney Heddon near his farm in Byron was attributed to the ghost of his deceased father.<sup>7</sup>

The first Michigan airship sighting occurred in the village of Alma on Saturday evening, 10 April 1897.<sup>8</sup> The following night at 7:45 a group of Benton Harbor residents on Morton Hill reported observing an airship that flew above Lake Michigan for fifteen minutes before fading off to the northwest.<sup>9</sup> The vessel was described as having red, green, and blue flickering lights and was also seen from neighboring St. Joseph at about the same time.<sup>10</sup> An hour later several hundred people—including prominent

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Edward Bullard, “Mysteries in the Eye of the Beholder: UFOs and Their Correlates as a Folkloric Theme Past and Present” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1982), 203.

<sup>4</sup> “Strange Aerial Craft,” *Saginaw Courier-Herald*, 11 April 1897.

<sup>5</sup> “Wolverine Tidbits,” *Detroit Free Press*, 24 March 1897; “Weird Lights. Seen in Two Little Lakes in Ogemaw County,” *Detroit Evening News*, 29 March 1897.

<sup>6</sup> “Caseville Has a Mystery. Strange Light Moves at Right in the Bay,” *Saginaw Globe*, 30 March 1897.

<sup>7</sup> “State Notes,” *Detroit Free Press*, 9 April 1897.

<sup>8</sup> “Mysterious Airship,” *Saginaw Courier-Mail*, 14 April 1897.

<sup>9</sup> “Airship Seen Here. It Was Moving in a Northwesterly Direction,” *Benton Harbor Evening News*, 12 April 1897.

<sup>10</sup> “It Bore Colored Lights. Benton Harbor People Claim They Saw the Airship,” *Detroit Free Press*, 14 April 1897.

citizens J. D. Wetmore, and C. L. King, manager of the large King Basket Factory—saw the aerial “machine” floating above Black Lake near Holland.<sup>11</sup> Near Niles, Michigan, two men saw bright aerial lights, possibly from the airship, in the evening sky, while at 10:00 p.m. it was seen by three Mendon residents.<sup>12</sup> On 12 April some twenty “reputable citizens” in Battle Creek claimed to have observed the vessel pass two miles west of the city at 8:55 in the evening: “Sparks flew forth and the ship began to slowly settle to within about half a mile from the earth.”<sup>13</sup> It was twenty-five to thirty feet long and remained near the ground a few moments, when a buzzing noise was heard: “Again the sparks flew out as if from an emery wheel and the machine began to rise slowly . . . [and] the lights went out.”<sup>14</sup> Some witnesses even claimed they could discern faint voices coming from the “craft.”<sup>15</sup> The object disappeared to the southwest.<sup>16</sup> When the brilliantly illuminated airship was spotted by several residents in Kalamazoo on the same evening, it was said to be moving about fifty miles per hour as it passed northwesterly. The editor of the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, Andrew J. Shakespeare, also observed the object.<sup>17</sup> The most sensational report of the evening came from the town of Pavillion, where residents George W. Somers and William Chadburn saw an illuminated object explode in the air, leading them to assume that the airship had exploded. Several other residents heard the noise but saw nothing. When part of an electric appliance was found lying on the ground the next morning, it was thought to have come from the airship, as were mysterious tiny fragments of an unknown material found scattered near a barn in the town of Comstock.<sup>18</sup>

On the night of Tuesday, 13 April, the airship mania continued. When

---

<sup>11</sup> “Is Seen at Holland,” *Benton Harbor Evening News*, 12 April 1897; *Grand Haven Daily Tribune*, 12 April 1897.

<sup>12</sup> “Queer Object. Seen in the Skies Last Evening—Might Have Been Airship,” *Niles Daily Star*, 12 April 1897; “All Sorts,” *Evening News* [Detroit], 15 April 1897.

<sup>13</sup> “The Air Ship. It Was Seen to Pass Over Battle Creek Last Night,” *Battle Creek Daily Moon*, 13 April 1897; “The Airship With Us. It Was Seen by Responsible Citizens in a Number of Cities,” *Saginaw Evening News*, 13 April 1897.

<sup>14</sup> *Battle Creek Daily Moon*, 13 April 1897.

<sup>15</sup> “High in the Air. Airship Taking Spin over Michigan If the Testimony of Sober Men is Accepted,” *Evening News* [Detroit], 13 April 1897.

<sup>16</sup> “Shower of Sparks: Marks the Air Ship’s Path in Michigan,” *Grand Rapids Evening Press*, 13 April 1897.

<sup>17</sup> “Air Ship or Not,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, 14 April 1897; “Shakespeare Saw It. The Kalamazoo Editor Gives His Version of the Air Ship,” *Saginaw Evening News*, 16 April 1897.

<sup>18</sup> “Went to Smash. Airship Said to be Scattered Over Kalamazoo County,” *Evening News* [Detroit], 13 April 1897.



Photograph reproduction by Brian Allen Roberts

**NEWS ITEM IN THE *SAGINAW COURIER HERALD*,  
16 APRIL 1897**

a mysterious glow appeared in the southern sky over Kalamazoo, the cry of airship immediately went up, though it turned out that the illumination was a reflection from Thomas Moore's barn burning down on South Burdick Street.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile George Parks and his wife, who lived five miles north of Battle Creek, reported that an airship swooped to within one hundred feet of a field on their farm and claimed that a wheel fell off, embedding itself in the ground. The wheel, three feet in diameter, was on display at

---

<sup>19</sup> "Not an Air Ship. Just a Reflection in the Sky of the Light from a Burning Barn," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, 14 April 1897.

their farm.<sup>20</sup>

The airship episode peaked in mid-April. An excerpt from the *Saginaw Courier-Herald* conveys the widespread nature of the sightings:

Corroboration of the visit of the flying air-ship to this city [Saginaw] yesterday morning has been received from many sources. . . . **Charlotte, Mich., April 16.**—The mysterious air ship was seen by many people last night. . . .

**Hudson, April 16.**—This morning's Hudson Gazette contained an account of the passage of the airship over this city . . . last night. It . . . was also seen at Pittsford, Clayton and Cadmus. . . .

**Hart, April 16.**—A large crowd witnessed a strange sight Wednesday night. Something floated over Shelby. . . .

**Olivet, April 16.**—The airship was observed here Wednesday night by a large crowd. . . .

**Battle Creek, April 16.**—The aerial phenomenon, construed by some to be an airship, was seen by many persons here Wednesday evening. . . .

**Middleville, April 16.**—This village takes the cake in regard to airships. Several responsible residents claim to have seen two of them Wednesday evening. . . . A car attachment had colored lights and scattered sparks, and what was supposed to be smoke.

**Lansing, April 16.**—Many citizens of Lansing are willing to swear that they saw the airship last evening.<sup>21</sup>

As numerous hoaxes came to light and stories grew more outlandish, press editors grew increasingly incredulous. A carrier boy for the *Battle Creek Daily Moon* claimed to have found a letter dropped from the vessel.<sup>22</sup> A sensation was caused in Pontiac on the evening of 15 April as hundreds of persons were certain that the airship had passed about two hundred and fifty feet above Saginaw Street—only to discover that enterprising students

<sup>20</sup> "Airship Again. Broken Wheel Dug Up Near Battle Creek," *Evening News* [Detroit], 15 April 1897; "That Airship. Well-To-Do Battle Creek Farmer Claims to Have Found a Wheel From the Mysterious Craft," *Saginaw Courier-Herald*, 16 April 1897.

<sup>21</sup> "Tip of the Airship . . . Seen at Different Points throughout the State As Well As in Other Parts of the Country," *Saginaw Courier-Herald*, 17 April 1897.

<sup>22</sup> "Dropped From the Clouds. A Message From the Airship Picked Up on Maple Street," *Battle Creek Daily Moon*, 16 April 1897; "Letter From Airship. Received by a Paper in Battle Creek," *Evening News* [Detroit], 16 April 1897.



Photograph reproduction by Brian Allen Roberts

**NEWS ITEM FROM THE *SAGINAW COURIER-HERALD*,  
16 APRIL 1897**

had hauled lanterns up on the flagstaff of the Grove school.<sup>20</sup> On the same evening hundreds of Lansing residents reported seeing the airship, which was later identified as a toy balloon.<sup>21</sup> Also called “fire” or “paper” balloons, such items were popular during the period and typically available at stores selling pyrotechnics. They consisted of paper balloons with candles attached near the mouth which made them buoyant by generating hot air.

From this point onward witnesses were mercilessly ridiculed in most press accounts, although sightings continued until early May when they tapered out, with reports in Manistee, Saginaw, Davison, Three Rivers, Saline, Grant, Marquette, Marshall, Geneseville, Sidnaw, Dayton, and

<sup>20</sup> “Trip of the Airship,” *Saginaw Courier-Herald*, 17 April 1897.

<sup>21</sup> “Seems To Be Catching. Stories Told About an Airship in Michigan,” *Detroit Free Press*, 17 April 1897.

Flint.<sup>25</sup> After a report by several people in Wyandotte, a Detroit editor noted that bock beer season had begun.<sup>26</sup> One journalist quipped that an American had “the same right to see airships that he has to see pink-winged elephants and man-eating cockroaches.”<sup>27</sup> Another reporter warned that if the sightings did not abate soon, large numbers of citizens were in danger of getting cricks in their necks. One newspaper reported that “the sea serpent” was “green with envy over the notoriety being enjoyed just now by its rival the airship.”<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile the *Saginaw Globe* commented that future historians should note “the fact that the airship is always seen on Saturday night, when a large portion of the population is in a proper mood to see such things.”<sup>29</sup> One writer told of being pleased by three consecutive days of rain, since during this time “nobody claims to have seen the airship.”<sup>30</sup> A press editor sarcastically urged sinners to repent, noting that since the Bible predicts the appearance of strange signs and wonders during the Last Days, the airship might portend that “the day of judgment draws near.”<sup>31</sup> A credulous hunter near Galesburg exposed himself to ridicule. When he came upon a hole which appeared to contain a metal instrument, “visions of airships and grappling hooks arose before him and he made all speed to town” to relate his finding to the local newspaper. Whereas the paper reported that an anchor dropped from the airship had made a deep hole, subsequent investigation revealed “a steel trap in the entrance of a

---

<sup>25</sup> “That Air Ship. The Cigar-Shaped Body Gives Us a Call,” *Manistee Daily News*, 17 April 1897; “Was It an Air Ship?” *Manistee Daily Advocate*, 20 April 1897; “People Who Saw It. Three Citizens of Saginaw Claim to Have Been Favored,” *Saginaw Evening News*, 17 April 1897; “That Airship Again . . .,” *Saginaw Courier-Herald*, 21 April 1897; “Are Adrift in the Air . . .,” *Flint Daily News*, 19 April 1897; “Michigan News. Some Citizens of Three Rivers Are Positive the Airship Passed over That Place Saturday Night,” *Saginaw Globe*, 19 April 1897; “Beats Any Fish Story . . .,” *Detroit Free Press*, 20 April 1897; “That Rapid Airship. Now the Citizens of Grant, Newaygo County, Claim to Have Spied It,” *Muskegon Daily Chronicle*, 20 April 1897; “Air Ship Passed over . . .,” *Daily Mining Journal* [Marquette], 23 April 1897; “Out in Broad Daylight . . .,” *Flint Daily News*, 24 April 1897; *Daily Chronicle* [Marshall], 27 April 1897; “The Airship at Geneseville,” *Flint Daily News*, 28 April 1897; “Airship Seen at Sidnaw,” *Daily Mining Journal* [Marquette], 28 April 1897; “Fragments of Flint,” *Flint Daily News*, 1 May 1897; “The Airship in Flint,” *Flint Daily News*, 11 May 1897.

<sup>26</sup> “Saw the Airship. Bock Beer Season Has Opened,” *Evening News* [Detroit], 18 April 1897.

<sup>27</sup> *Evening News* [Detroit], 18 April 1897.

<sup>28</sup> “Around the State,” *Muskegon Daily Chronicle*, 14 April 1897.

<sup>29</sup> *Saginaw Globe*, 26 April 1897.

<sup>30</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, 3 May 1897.

<sup>31</sup> *Kalamazoo Gazette*, 23 April 1897.

skunk's dwelling place."<sup>32</sup>

The airship hysteria can be explained using mainstream theories of social psychology. Human perception is remarkably unreliable and subject to error.<sup>33</sup> Further, under ambiguous circumstances such as looking at the night-time sky, stars can appear to change color, flicker, and move.<sup>34</sup> A person's frame of reference has a strong influence on how external stimuli are interpreted and internalized as reality.<sup>35</sup> A classic illustration of this process occurred at 8:45 p.m. CST on 3 March 1968 when the Russian Zond IV moon probe plunged into the atmosphere, resulting in the appearance of several "man-made meteors" in the northeastern United States.<sup>36</sup> After witnessing the reentry, witnesses told Air Force investigators:

It appeared to have square-shaped windows along the side that was facing us.

It appeared to me that the fuselage was constructed of many pieces of flat sheets of metal-like material with [a] 'riveted-together look. . . .' The many windows seemed to be lit up from the inside of the fuselage. . . .

[W]hen the craft was flying near us, it did seem to travel in a flat trajectory. I toyed with the idea that it even slowed down somewhat, for how else could we observe so much detail in a mere flash across the sky?

All three of us agreed that we had seen something other than any planes we had seen or read about from our Earth, or that we had seen a 'craft from Outer Space.'<sup>37</sup>

During the airship episode, residents were preconditioned by the

<sup>32</sup> "Stories of the State," *Evening Press* [Grand Rapids], 23 April 1897.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Robert Buckhout, "Nearly 2000 Witnesses Can Be Wrong," *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, 16 (1980): 307-10; David Ross, J. Donald Read, and Michael P. Togli, *Adult Eyewitness Testimony: Current Trends and Developments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> Daniel S. Gillmor, ed., *Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects* (New York: Bantam, 1969); William R. Corliss, ed., *Handbook of Unusual Natural Phenomena* (Glen Arm, MD: Sourcebook Project, 1977); William R. Corliss, ed., *Mysterious Universe: A Handbook of Astronomical Anomalies* (Glen Arm, MD: Sourcebook Project, 1979).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Buckhout, "Eyewitness Testimony," *Scientific American* 231 (December 1974): 23-31.

<sup>36</sup> Philip J. Klass, *UFOs Explained* (New York: Random House, 1976), 14-15.

<sup>37</sup> Bullard, "Mysteries in the Eye of the Beholder," 10-11.

popular press to plausibly expect that the world's first heavier-than-air flying machine was on the verge of perfection. The sightings that followed were a symbolic projection of this widespread belief and of faith in the technological revolution that was sweeping across America. Perhaps this historical event can teach us a valuable lesson concerning the origin and nature of mass sightings of "flying saucers" over the past fifty years, in addition to chronicling a fascinating chapter in Michigan history.<sup>38</sup>

Robert E. Bartholomew teaches in the Department of Sociology and Psychology at the James Cook University of North Queensland, Australia.

---

<sup>38</sup> I am grateful to Thomas E. Bullard, Department of Folklore, Indiana University at Bloomington, who provided the press accounts used in this article.