

GOSSAMER WINGS

UFO UPDATE

By Daniel Cohen

As the weird light passed overhead, Robert Lowen, of Evanston, Illinois, trained his field glasses on it. He "was able to discern four lights a short distance apart and moving in unison. The first was a bright white light and appeared to be operated like a searchlight. Behind it was a green light, [which] appeared to be operated like a searchlight. Behind [that] was a green light, and farther to the rear were green and white lights set closely together."

Is this a quotation from a recent UFO report? No, it isn't. It is an excerpt from an article that appeared in the *Chicago Times Herald* of April 10, 1897, describing the passage of a "mysterious airship" over the small city just north of Chicago, on Lake Michigan. It is just one of many thousands of "mysterious airship" reports that were made between mid-November of 1896 and the end of April 1897. The "airship" was sighted at various points from California to Indiana, from Canada to Texas. Among the witnesses were trainmen and ranchers, governors and cigar-store owners, police and firemen.

Most witnesses reported seeing a light in the night sky or, as in the case of Lowen, several lights of unknown origin moving across the sky. Others said they could see the large object to which the lights were attached. According to the Quincy, Illinois, *Whig*, "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."

This is only one of many accounts, and virtually everyone questioned seemed certain the object was an airship.

Other, more sensational tales began to surface. There were accounts of secret meetings with the unknown inventor and his crew, of rides aboard the airship, and even of a couple of abductions. A Joseph Joslin, of St. Louis, maintained that he had been hypnotized, taken aboard the airship, and held captive for two weeks. He could not recall exactly what had

happened to him during those "missing weeks" nor remember how he had been returned to Earth. Joslin's story was recounted in the April 23 edition of the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*. There were even a few suggestions that the airship might not have been built on this planet, but the majority of these reports surmised that the cause of the excitement was an airship made somewhere in the United States.

What makes these accounts so interesting is that they all appeared a full seven years before the Wright brothers' Kitty Hawk flight and well before a practical dirigible was flown anywhere in the world, as far as we know. While there had been a considerable amount of experimentation with various forms of flight at the end of the nineteenth century, no one had yet developed a workable aircraft for air travel. As far as the history of aeronautics is concerned, there was no airship in America in 1896 or 1897, and there could not have been one.

But you couldn't tell that to the people of Sacramento or Sioux City or Omaha or Chicago, where they turned out in the thousands to see the famous airship pass overhead. For six months the airship sightings generated intense excitement. "People talk of nothing else," said one newspaper. Stories about the airship appeared in virtually every newspaper in this country, and it had become news in Europe as well.

Then, around the end of April 1897, sightings, or at least newspaper coverage of sightings, declined sharply. Within six weeks just about nothing was to be found concerning the mysterious airship in any American paper. What everybody was talking about became quite suddenly something that no one would discuss. The entire airship excitement cooled off as if nothing had happened at all.

From time to time a newspaperman rummaging through the files for a colorful item from "the good old days" might run across one of the original airship stories, but it would be treated as an isolated event. The May 11, 1952, edition of the Oakland, California, *Tribune* gave the details of an airship story and then



Dirigibles of this type were seen in the United States years before a prototype existed.

commented, "No one seems to have seen the mysterious craft after that. Balloon airplane—or flying saucer? You pays your money and you takes your choice." In 1952 flying-saucer fever was running high.

The Oakland *Tribune* was mistaken. After excitement died down in California, sightings proliferated elsewhere.

It wasn't until the mid-1960s that the mysterious-airship story really began to surface again. People who were interested in UFOs, such as Jerome Clark, Jacques Vallee, Lucius Farish, and Loren Gross, began digging into old newspapers and bringing the story out in bits and pieces, at first in specialized UFO publications like *Flying Saucer Review* or in privately printed booklets. Two individual cases, one in Texas, the other in Nebraska, received national publicity; however, this coverage was highly sensationalized, and generally inaccurate, and did not add anything to our understanding of the airship mystery.

Some popular UFO books devoted a few pages or a chapter to the mysterious craft. But the public, even that segment of the public that has more than a passing interest in UFOs, generally remains unaware of the scope of this late-nineteenth-century phenomenon.

In recent months I've examined much of

the evidence, collected over the last 15 years or so, relating to that airship. This consists primarily of newspaper stories from 1896 and 1897. There are an enormous number of them from papers large and small. (Much of this evidence, by the way, is fast disappearing as financially strapped libraries and historical societies abandon their old newspaper files.)

What strikes one—this one anyway—is the almost eerie parallelism between what happened during the six months or so of the mystery-airship excitement and what was to happen a half century later, in 1947, when the flying-saucer fever began. In both historical periods—at the turn of the century and since the end of World War II—what most people reported seeing were strange lights in the night sky. Many publications, then as now, ridiculed the accounts of witnesses but nevertheless continued to give the topic a lot of publicity and to foster the excitement. The scientific and technical community was largely unimpressed, attributing the sightings to misidentifications of Venus or some star or other, or to just plain fraud. "You can take it from me that this is pure fake," grumped Thomas Edison when he was asked his opinion of the airship.

Dozens of individuals were identified as the inventor of the strange aircraft. There were numerous announcements that the inventor was just about to come out of hiding and put his airship on public display at

some exhibition or other. Some said he would fly to Washington, D.C., to take out a patent. But no one ever stepped forward.

The "mystery" was never really solved. However, it does present certain problems for those who believe that extraterrestrial vehicles exist.

Many of the airship sightings were unquestionably misidentifications. Venus was prominent in the sky during the six months of the excitement. There were hoaxes aplenty. Journalism was a bit more unbuttoned in those days, and respectable newspapers regularly printed stories that today would appear only in checkout-counter tabloids, in the sleazier UFO magazines, and on some of the sensationalized TV shows.

Owing to the nature of the evidence, which is almost exclusively newspaper stories, and often rather vague ones, it is not possible to identify confidently each and every airship report either as a misidentification or as a hoax. So there may be an unexplained and unexplainable residue, just as supporters of UFOs say exists among modern UFO reports.

One need not be accused of indulging in speculative flights of fancy who says flatly that UFOs are not a modern phenomenon. The unconfirmable mystery airship pushes UFOs back at least to 1896. And they may go back much further than that.

The years between 1897 and 1947 were not devoid of UFO reports, either. Mysterious airships were reported over Great Britain in 1909 and 1910. Late in 1910 there were real and unambiguous airplanes and dirigibles, but none that could have accounted for those sightings. Early in 1913 there were sightings of mysterious airships over Britain once again, and war-jittery Englishmen construed them to be German zeppelins, but they weren't. There were the *foe* fighters during World War II and the Scandinavian "ghost rockets" of 1946. From all of this one comes to suspect that UFO activity—whatever it is—is a fairly constant element of our history, and the "waves" or "flaps" are really artifacts of publicity and data-gathering techniques.

If UFOs are indeed extraterrestrial spaceships, why did they appear to be *fin de siècle* visions of an airship in 1896 and 1897, zeppelins in 1913, and disc-shaped spaceships only after 1947?

Is the whole UFO business simply a psychological and sociological reaction to the misidentification of prosaic objects, fanned by sensational publicity and outright fraud? Are mysterious airships and flying saucers merely the reflections of the hopes and fears of different eras? Or must we plunge into the misty world of Jungian symbols, alternate realities, and cosmic deceptions? As the Oakland *Tribune* once said, "You pays your money and you takes your choice."

At the very least the now-well-documented mysterious-airship excitement of 1896 and 1897 must be dealt with in any serious attempt to explain UFOs. ∞



"First time in my life I ever won anything, Ed.
A solar-powered wristwatch."