

by Robert Bartholomew

Between November 1896 and May 1897, scores of Americans became convinced that one of their citizens had perfected the world's first heavier-than-air flying machine. As this widespread belief spread, airship mania swept across the United States. This little-known episode in American history was extraordinary, in that at the height of the rumors, it is estimated that tens of thousands of Americans in many states actually reported that they had seen the craft in various points across the nation — thousands of miles apart — at the same time! The maneuvers described by witnesses, were far above any technology of the period — even by today's standards. While the episode in general has been examined as a case of "mass hysteria," in this article I will document the airship wave in Illinois, and suggest an explanation. It was typically described as oval or cigar-shaped with an attached undercarriage, having a powerful headlight and giant fans or wings protruding from both sides. Some observers even claimed that the wings slowly flopped up and down like a bird! More

The Illinois UFO Mania of 1897
Why We Should be Leery of Modern-Day UFO Reports

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The Illinois Airship Hysteria

The state of Illinois was inundated with airship reports during April 1897. The first known sighting was in Nashville, Illinois, as a balloon-like airship with a large red light was spotted at 8 p.m. by many residents. On April 8th, a Rock Island police officer claimed that while on his east end beat, he was startled by the illuminated vessel a half mile overhead. He described it as having "a glittering steel hull, with dim wing-like fans on either side, and it swayed gently in its flight." On April 9th hundreds of people observed it over Chicago, Evanston, Niles Center and Schermerville. On the night of April 10th, scores of Jacksonville residents watched the airship pass over the city. "It was seen by all the police officers on duty, the firemen and hundreds of citizens." By the evening of the 11th, the sightings reached Springfield as Richard Schriver, foreman of the county jail, watched it for 30 minutes with another man. It was described as "a radiating light not unlike a locomotive headlight." At 8 p.m. in Lincoln on April 12th, "More than fifty people stood on Pulaski street and whenever the lightening flashed and the clouds separated" they thought they could discern the airship's light in the distance.

On April 13th, more than 200 people saw its white and green lights as it passed near Lincoln at 8 p.m., while 30 minutes later it was seen over Moline by several farmers including Benjamin Carr who said it was "a cigar-shaped body or hull, apparently about 15 feet long, with large wing-like projections on each side."

These are just a handful of hundreds of Illinois sightings that occurred during April. Not only are there striking parallels between the airship wave and present-day UFO reports — but there were also reports of close encounters. I will briefly mention three Illinois close encounter cases. Keep in mind that they are just three of many from Illinois and across the

nation during 1897.

According to the Decatur Daily Republican of April 16, 1897, p. 1, the airship landed near Springfield the previous night. Farmhand John Halley and local vineyard owner Adolf Wenke said that it landed three miles west of the city along the Jefferson street road. They said a long-bearded man emerged and inquired where he was. "Inside the car was seated another man and also the scientists [sic] wife." He said they usually rested during the daytime in remote parts of the country in order to conceal the vessel's huge wings. When they asked the scientist his name, "he smiled and pointed to the letter M., which was painted on the side car." After bidding the farmers farewell, he pressed a button and the ship flew off.

The Springfield News also reported on an airship touching down near Carlinville on April 12th. It was reportedly spotted between the town of Nilwood and Girard about 6:15. William Street, Frank Metcalf and Ed Temples and the telegraph operator all saw it at Girard. "These men saw it alight, and a man get out and fix some part of the machinery. They started for the place where it had alighted, but within a quarter of a mile it rose and disappeared from view" to the north.

My favorite encounter report came from Elburn, Kane County, on April 10th. According to a report on the front page of the Rockford Daily Republic of April 12th, "Trainmen running through there say that the operator says that some stockmen say that some farmers say that the ship had a breakdown near there and came down for repairs."

Near the height of the wave, the following is a modest sample of Illinois sightings that appeared in the Chicago Tribune:

Mount Vernon, Illinois, April 15. -- (Special.) -- What is thought to have been the mysterious airship was seen here by more than 100 persons last night. ...

Carlyle, Ill., April 15. -- (Special.) -- The airship was seen this evening travelling rapidly in a northwesterly course. ...

Quincy, Ill., April 15. -- (Special.) -- The Wabash passenger train which arrived here at 10 o'clock tonight raced for 15 minutes with the alleged airship. They first sighted the thing near Perry Springs, 52 miles east of Quincy... All of the passengers saw it, but all they could see was two lights, one white, the other red.

Hillsboro, Ill., April 15. -- (Special.) -- ...the airship was seen in the western heavens by a number of reputable citizens last evening.

Toward the end of the month, the press grew increasingly skeptical in their discussion of the airship, and several mass sightings were being attributed to pranksters after the remains of tissue balloons or fire balloons were found in the vicinity of reports. There were also instances where illuminated kites were sent skyward and accounted for some sightings. Among the skeptical was a journalist for the Monmouth Daily Review who noted that "The 'airship neck' will have to be counted a modern malady as much as the 'bicycle face' and other kindred ills." At the Chicago Record it was observed that the airship had been sighted at several places at once.

What is the most likely explanation for the sightings? In the heat of excitement, did witnesses suddenly lose rationality and take on a herd mentality? Were they purely imagining things? Very few witnesses are likely to have created their perceptions from pure imagination alone, but were likely misperceiving existing objects their environment such as stars and planets. I think we need to look no further than basic theories of social psychology. Human perception is highly unreliable, and influenced by a one's "mental set" at the time of an observation. Stars and planets often appear to move, change colors and flicker, and misidentifications of stars and planets are the most common explanation for contemporary UFO sightings. By examining the historical context of UFOs over the past two centuries, we are afforded a fascinating array of similarities including close encounter cases. The only significant difference between these two periods is the UFO form. During the 1897 wave in Illinois, people expected to see airships, while today they expect to see saucer-shaped UFOs. In each instance, residents saw, or thought they saw — exactly what they expected.

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1998), with Professor George S. Howard, former Chair of the Psychology Department at Notre Dame University, Notre Dame, Indiana.

Editor's Note — The following is a statement from the author:

Using several thousand rare press reports, and conventional theories of social psychology, they [Bartholomew and Howard] examine the context and meaning of UFO sighting waves including the US airship wave of 1896-97, sightings of Thomas Edison's imaginary "giant light bulb" in the latter 1800s; Canada's ghost balloons of 1896; The New Zealand Zeppelin Scare of 1909; The New England airship hoax of 1909-10; The British UFO panic of 1912-13; phantom German air raids and spy missions over Canada, Upstate New York, Delaware, New Jersey, New Hampshire and South Africa during World War I; Sweden's ghost rocket wave of 1946; and the emergence of flying saucers since 1947. The book also examines pre-Roswell crashed UFOs involving aliens, and includes over 200 case summaries of alleged contacts with ETs. I should emphasize that a detailed discussion of the Illinois airship sightings does not appear in the book (although some reports do). I have written these reports into this modest article for the Illinois skeptics to make them aware of this fascinating, all but forgotten chapter in Illinois history, and let them know of the publication of my book.