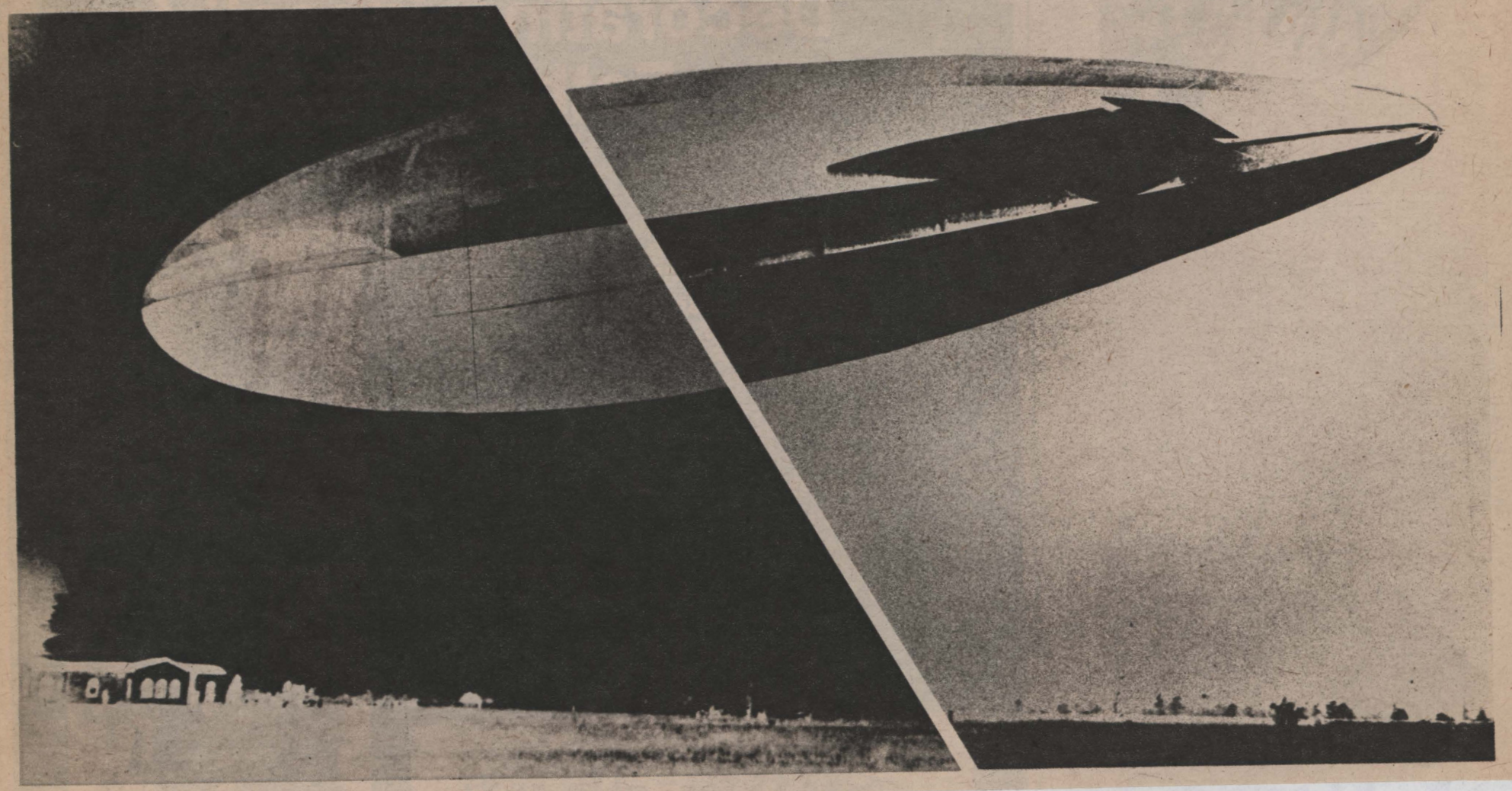


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A 19th century UFO . . . **Why Not an Airship?**



## By Wayne H. Bartlett

Fifteen-year-old Edna Campbell, walking home one night from a rural schoolhouse near Haigler in Dundy County, was startled by a brilliant light that suddenly appeared about a mile away.

The light would dart forward rapidly, suddenly come to a stop, and dart again. Then it made a 360-degree circle at a rapid rate of speed. It continued its circuit several times. Then as abruptly as it had appeared, it disappeared.

What Edna saw was the "phantom airship," observed by thousands of people. The year was 1897.

Within the next fortnight, between the hours of 9 and 10 p.m., Edna and her family would watch the light make its darts and stops; then take up its circuitous course, sometimes making as many as a half dozen complete circles. Occasionally, the object would come as close as a quarter of a mile to the Campbell farm, while the Campbells stood in amazement and fear.

Telling her children of the mysterious light many years later, Edna said that she and her family speculated on what the strange object might be but could never come up with a plausible explanation.

The Campbell family had apparently not heard that the visitor was making nightly appearances from Cripple Creek, Colo., to as far east as Washing-

ton, D.C., northward into South Dakota and as far south as central Oklahoma.

The only explanation the Campbell family could come up with was a man running about carrying a lantern. However, the family discarded this theory; for what man in his right mind would, night after night, run a two-mile circle over the Dundy County hills with a lantern?

Besides, the light was too bright to be that of a lantern.

The phenomenon caused just as much speculation and consternation elsewhere. One must remember these nocturnal visitations occurred long before the airplane was invented. Jules Verne's science fiction stories of airships were widely read at the time, and his mythical airships appealed to the practical as well as those who enjoyed fantasy.

Consequently, when the mysterious craft appeared it was called an "airship." In 1897 there seemed to be no other word available.

Unless one saw the craft and its bright lights, one doubted, and there seemed to be many more doubters than believers.

Newspapers dutifully reported sightings, yet editorially were skeptical of the stories they printed regarding the airship.

Most papers along with individual doubters usually dismissed stories of

Meanwhile, during an initiation of Ak-Sar-Ben members, the fellows stepped outside for a break and were entertained by the "thing."

"A stampede was at once made for the south entrance," reported The World-Herald, "and the course of the ship was watched for five or six minutes. The knights returned to the den, and after the initiation, while waiting for the streetcars, the ship was again seen far to the southwest."

The World-Herald reported that among those who saw it were the prominent men of the time, men like O. D. Kiplinger, W. I. Hawks, H. K. Burket, A. Hospe, Gould Dietz, Arthur Guiou and others.



As an editorial writer for The World-Herald wrote 79 years ago: "Why not an airship?" Why not? Indeed, why not UFOs?

the mysterious airship as some sort of hoax. Or perhaps those who saw it were under the influence of intoxicants (this belief was most common), were watching box kites, seeing balloons, seeing

the planet Venus or the star Betelgeuse.

Those who saw the "airship" were equally sure of their eyesight, mental stability and sobriety.

The appearance of the visitor occurred from about the last of January through May. First news report of the aircraft appeared in the Chicago Chronicle on February 2, 1897.

"A strange star or light in the heavens has been puzzling the people of Montreal for a week," said the Chronicle. The paper said the light made its appearance shortly after 5 o'clock in the evening, then disappeared shortly after 7.

The object was thought to be a balloon used in military maneuvers. The object was also seen at Albany, N.Y.

Although the flying craft was subsequently seen in many states, its activity seemed to be largely centered in the Midwest and particularly in Nebraska.

Sightings were first noted in Nebraska in the vicinity of Hastings the first week of February, 1897.

The Juniata Herald on February 10 reported that people in and around Hastings observed an "airship."

The Herald said the craft floated 500 feet above the ground "and after standing nearly still for about 30 minutes it began to circle about, then took a northerly direction for about two miles, after

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# Airship

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which it returned to its starting place and sank into oblivion."

A few days later the Herald reported the airship had been seen a few miles west of Hastings, "standing still." At first, people thought it to be a star but after careful observation decided the color of the light showed it to be "artificial."

The Herald commented: "It certainly must be illuminated by a powerful electric dynamo, for the light sent forth by it is wonderful."

Again on February 17 the Herald reported that "without joking" a very large light was observed in the sky. "The light seems to be like an electric arc light with a glass dome over it, and floated high in the air, then sideways for a distance, then drop, then disappear and reappear some distance away."

Sightings were subsequently seen in the area of York, North Platte, Beatrice, Kearney, Falls City, Wymore and Omaha at various times during February and March.

Some 100 persons witnessed its appearance at Wymore on February 25. "As it approached us the light became so brilliant it dazzled our eyes," said one observer.

On March 28 about 200 people saw it from the steps of the Kansas State

Capitol at Topeka. Some of those witnessing the sight were reported to have hurried to cellars, fearing impending doom. About the same time, the craft was observed at Atchison, Holton, Hiawatha and Belleville, Kan.

A second visit of the strange aircraft to Omaha occurred on April 5 at 9:30 p.m.

A streetcar motorman saw it while running his trolley in a residential district. The surprised motorman quickly applied the brakes, bringing the car to a grinding stop; at the same time he rang the bell for the conductor to come forward.

Both the motorman and conductor stood on the front platform watching the craft as it hovered some 600 feet in the air. The streetcar operator said the object appeared cigar-shaped and about 90 feet long. Forward and aft were what appeared to be wings, and on the forward end there was a bright light. There was a red light on the rear.

For a few seconds the ship seemed to slow down and become almost motionless. Then it gathered speed and disappeared.

People in downtown Omaha also saw the peculiar light. Said the Omaha Bee: "All descriptions tally in regard to lights, for all who were fortunate enough to get a glimpse of the thing which is causing so much conjecture, state that it carried two of them, and that they were red and white."

It was reported at Cedar Rapids at 9 p.m., April 8; one hour later it was sighted over Northwood, Ia., near the Minnesota border, fully 150 miles from Cedar Rapids.

On April 10 at 7:25 p.m. it was sighted at Eldon, Ia.; 15 minutes later it was observed over Ottumwa, Ia., some 15 miles away. According to a newspaper story, at Ottumwa it was "seen by half the town."

Railroad telegraphers followed the mystery craft in some of its wanderings over Iowa — Reinbeck, Shell Rock and Waterloo.

It was seen at Deadwood, S.D., on April 13. Also the same night it was seen at Harrison, in northwest Nebraska and for the second time at Decatur, Neb., all the way across the state from Harrison.

At Decatur, it seemed to fly dangerously close to the Missouri River, and at a secondary sighting it skirted the Iowa side of the river.

The Omaha World-Herald, reporting the sighting at Harrison, said it was an "airship of gigantic dimensions" seen by a number of lawyers, jurors and witnesses who were attending the spring term of District Court.

When first discovered, it was "sailing" in a southeasterly direction at what seemed to be an extraordinary rate of speed, "when suddenly, to the astonishment of all, it seemed to slacken its speed and careen around in a

circle, and then came to a stop and hung motionless as if suspended by a rope for several minutes."

The World-Herald story said the craft had different colored lights which changed alternately from white to red, blue and green. After the display of multicolored lights, an extremely bright light shot from either side of the phantom followed by its moving off and disappearing.

On April 14, the nocturnal visitor was seen at Red Cloud, Oak, and Plainview, Neb., and Canton and Woonsocket, S.D. It appeared at Underwood, Ia., the next night, the same night it was seen at Columbus, Silver Creek and Clarks, Neb.

The next night people in Clay Center, Neb., and Villisca, Ia., were given a glimpse of the traveling phenomenon.

Then, in the latter part of April, the celestial visitor was sighted in Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana and even put in an appearance at Perry, Okla.

Some railroad men at Madison, Wis., insisted it was a captive balloon sent aloft as an advertising stunt by a circus at Baraboo, Wis.

And so it was just about every night through the month of May, at which time the mysterious visitor discontinued its journeys. Some two generations later, that particular mystery craft and/or its descendants began appearing again to establish the age of UFOs.