

TEXAS ODYSSEY OF 1897

by Donald B. Hanlon

BY now, readers of FLYING SAUCER REVIEW will be aware that a wave of sightings occurred throughout the United States in the years 1896-7. Contributions to this journal by Jerome Clark¹, a pioneer researcher in this area, and the data contained in Vallée's *Anatomy of a Phenomenon* (the LeRoy sighting) have brought this period into focus. The results of my own researches² into these early observations are partially indicated in Figure 1. Briefly they have convinced me that a wave of **major proportions** occurred, marked by a rather erratic, coast to coast, eastward progression. An interesting characteristic of this wave is that a great many sightings were made over large urban areas, in some instances hovering objects created panic in the city streets (today, of course, we have anti-aircraft facilities for such nuisances). Preliminary investigations (now over 170 reports) encourage me to predict that when all the data has been uncovered, this wave will rival the French wave of the autumn of 1954.

Although far from being an area where a maximum density of these early sightings have as yet been recorded, Texas has produced some of the most important. The following account of a landing appeared in the *Dallas News* of April 28, 1897. The witness was a lawyer who wished to remain unnamed:

"I had been up to old 'Uncle Billy' Gathings to write his will and was driving homeward thinking of the old man and his useful career, and the reward that doubtless awaited him in the good hereafter, when I was astonished by a brilliant flash from an electric searchlight which passed directly over my buggy. I want to tell you also that I was almost frightened to death by it, for it made the space around me as light as day. My horse was also frightened and came near overturning the buggy. He snorted, reared, and plunged madly, trembling meantime like a leaf. My hair stood straight up and I was almost too excited to pay attention to the horse. Fortunately the light rested on us scarcely a second, but glided over the fields and the country till it was suddenly turned upward toward the heavens. Then following it with my eyes, I beheld about 1,000 ft. above me I judge, a huge, black monster, from which the light emanated. It was in shape something like a cigar, but underneath there appeared to be a body similar to the body of a ship, which was attached to the object and from which the light originated. The searchlight was presently shut off, and a number of incandescent lights flashed around the lower edge of the body of the vessel or whatever it was. When I first saw it, it was going very slowly in a southerly direction. The lights were soon entirely extinguished and it glided about three miles this side of the town of Aquila. The vessel or ship steered for the hill, and as it approached it all the lights were again extinguished and the ship disappeared from my sight. I think it may have stopped on the hill.

"I never had anything to so thoroughly work me up, and I resumed my journey home, considering in my mind the strange adventures of the night. I have read and heard much of the airships, but I never expected to see one. I had never seriously thought of them as possible, but in a few minutes I recalled the many stories I have recently seen in the papers about airships and decided that what I had seen was an airship.

"When I was within a mile of Hillsboro, about an hour later, I saw the same object rise from the locality where it disappeared. It ascended till it looked like a mere dark cloud in the skies, when it started in a north-easterly direction and went at a terrific rate of speed. It must have gone at the rate of 100 miles an hour or more. It was headed as near as I can judge toward Dallas, or near there. Every few seconds it would send out brilliant flashes and sparkles, but it travelled most of the time in darkness. Now, gentlemen, I am not prepared by my profession to believe everything I see and hear, but I saw that object and my horse saw it. It almost made both of us frantic. So there is no denying the fact of its existence. The question is, what is it? Man has conquered the ocean, but we are told that the devil is the prince of the air. Again, the scriptures say the devil shall be turned loose for a season. Who knows but what the scripture is being fulfilled right here before our very eyes. It is possible I admit, for man to get up a flying machine, but still, for all that I have seen, I feel curious as to what it was, and can't help it."

This description, which reads like a bad turn-of-the-century novel, gives some indication of the sociological factors which were at work throughout the wave. The appearance of "unknown aerial vehicles" had a profound effect upon the populace. The ramifications have not as yet been fully distinguished. The Wright Brothers were six years away.

One unfortunate factor which must be taken into consideration in these early reports is that journalists of the time were quite prepared to construct an entirely mythical account for publication. This trait was widespread, and considered as a literary exercise of sorts in those days. Many of these accounts are easily recognisable as blatant fakes. However, since seemingly authentic reports also sound quite fantastic to us today, a good deal of analysis will be required before accepting or rejecting a particular incident. Also there is ample evidence to support the belief that there were a considerable number of hoaxes perpetrated by practical jokers of the day, much in the same manner as adolescents and college students staged hoaxes during recent flaps in the United States.

There were a number of humorous accounts in the 1897 reports. For instance, on April 19, an object passed over Farmersville, Texas causing much local comment. One individual claimed to have detected three men on board the craft who were passing out temperance tracts and singing "Nearer My God to Thee"! (Human voices from the airship were

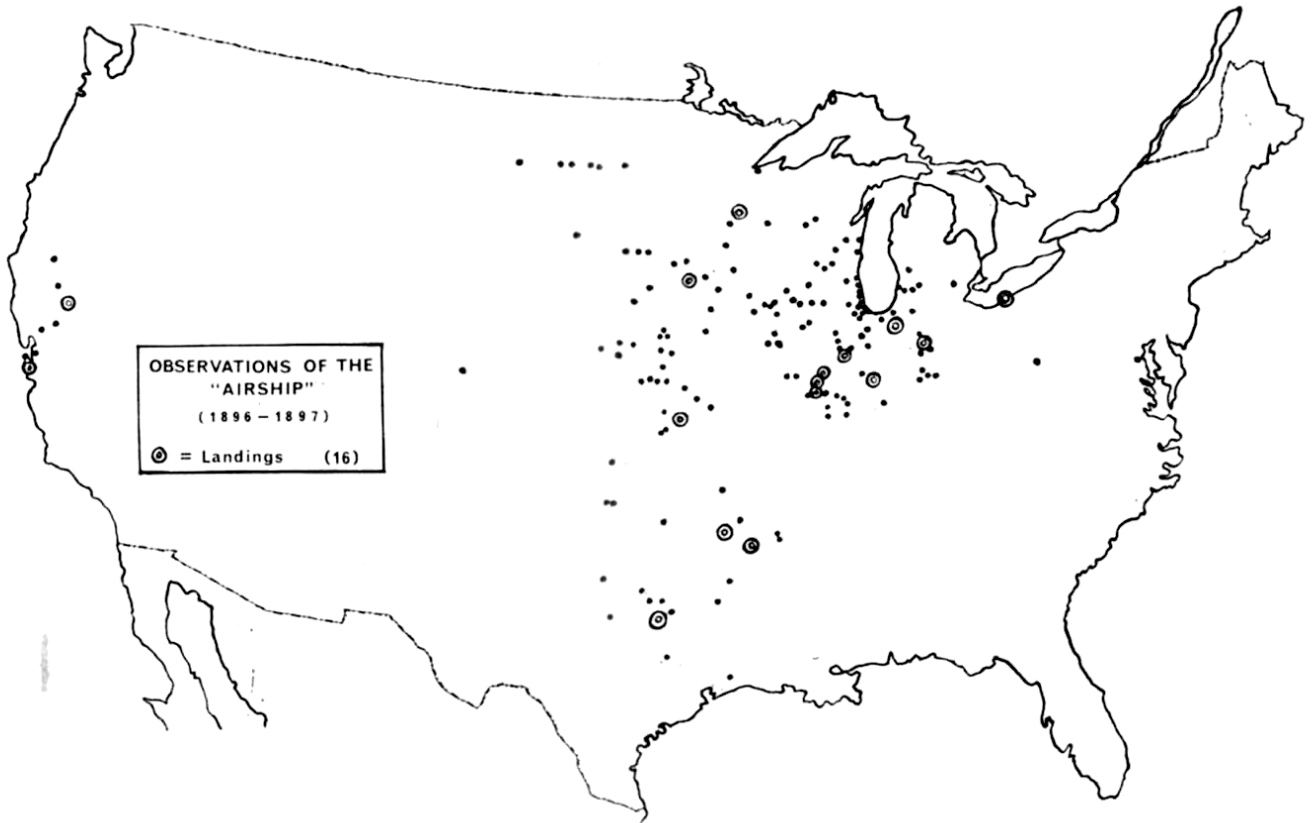


Fig. 1

Based on a sketch by J. Vallee and D. B. Hanlo

supposedly heard at Galesburg, Michigan, on April 3, and also at Vermillion, South Dakota on April 17. Both accounts are mentioned by Clark.¹⁾ The following appeared in the *Chicago Chronicle* of April 13, 1897, under the headline AIRSHIP SEEN IN IOWA :

“ Fontanelle, Iowa—April 12—The airship was seen here at 8.30 tonight, and was viewed by the whole population. It came from the south-east, and was not over 200 feet above the tree tops and moved very slowly, not to exceed ten miles an hour. The machine could be plainly seen, and is described as being sixty feet in length, and the vibration of the wings could be plainly seen. It carried the usual coloured lights, and the working of the machinery could be heard, as also could the **strains of music, as from an orchestra**. It was hailed, but passed on to the north, seeming to increase its speed, and disappeared. There is no doubt in Fontanelle that it was the real thing, and is testified to by the most prominent citizens among whom are: J. H. Hulbert, S. Shoemaker, J. I. McCampbell, ex-mayor Dr. D. B. Scott, Editor McClure and others. The weather was very cloudy, and it has been raining lightly all evening, so it could not possibly have been a star.”

When reviewed collectively these curious incidents begin to lose some of their humour and assume a weird quality.

Taking into consideration the various negative and positive factors inherent in the 1897 reports, we cautiously present the following, taken from the April 19 edition of the *Dallas Morning News* :

“ Aurora, Wise County, April 17—About 6 o'clock this morning the early risers of Aurora were astonished at the sudden appearance of the airship which has been sailing throughout the country.

“ It was travelling due north and much nearer the earth than before. Evidently some of the machinery was out of order, for it was making a speed of only 10 or 12 miles an hour and gradually settling toward the earth.

“ It sailed directly over the public square, and when it reached the north part of town collided with the tower of Judge Proctor's windmill and went to pieces with a terrific explosion, scattering debris over several acres of ground, wrecking the windmill and water tank, and destroying the judge's flower garden.

“ The pilot of the ship is supposed to have been the only one aboard, and while his remains are badly disfigured, enough of the original has been picked up to show that he was not an inhabitant of this world.

“ Mr. J. T. Weems, the U.S. Signal Service Officer at this place and an authority on astronomy, gives it as his opinion that he (the pilot) was a native of the Planet Mars.

“ Papers found on his person—evidently the records of his travels—are written in some unknown hieroglyphics and cannot be deciphered. (A distinct resemblance here to the “ 1864 Martian Hoax ” discussed by Vallée in the revised Ace edition of *Anatomy* p. 174, and more recently the Brooksville “hoax” discussed by Charles Bowen, *FLYING SAUCER REVIEW* July/August 1965 p. 6.—D.B.H.)

“ This ship was badly wrecked to form any conclusion as to its construction or motive power. It was built of an unknown metal, resembling somewhat a

mixture of aluminium and silver and it must have weighed several tons.

"The town is full of people today who are viewing the wreck and gathering specimens of strange metal from the debris. The pilot's funeral will take place at noon tomorrow." (The pilot's epitaph must have been quite special!—D.B.H.)

After reading a report such as this, one has the impulse to either burst into gales of laughter or head for Texas with spade and shovel!

Some substance is given to this report by a similar event which occurred on April 10 at Winemac, Indiana. The airship allegedly hovered directly over the centre of town before moving off, displaying red, blue, and white lights, with a terrific lunge toward the "Pink Mink Marshes." It stopped directly over the marshes and was seen to quiver, after which an explosion tore off the wings. It then began to settle, slowly at first, then "at the speed of a bullet." It struck the softest part of the marshes and sank out of sight with a gurgling noise. It was also reported that two mysterious "tramps" who had been "stealing a ride on the airship" were killed.

We now proceed to another fantastic report, taken from the April 28 edition of the *Houston Daily Post* :

"Merkel, Texas, April 26—Some parties returning from church last night noticed a heavy object dragging along with a rope attached.

"They followed it until, in crossing the railroad, it caught on a rail. On looking up they saw what they supposed was the airship. (This feature seems to be directly related to a report from Sioux City, Iowa on March 29, 1897, in which a farmer, Robert Hibbard, was pulled several rods distance after being hooked by a grapnel which was attached to a drag rope dangling from the rear of 'an airship'. The grapnel finally ripped through his trousers depositing him in a cow lot.—Just fishing, I suppose.—D.B.H.)

"It was not near enough to get an idea of the dimensions. A light could be seen protruding from several windows; one bright light in front like the headlight of a locomotive.

"After some ten minutes, a man was seen descending the rope; he came near enough to be plainly seen; he wore a *light blue sailor suit and was small in size.* (My italics.—D.B.H.)

"He stopped when he discovered parties at the anchor, and *cut the rope* below him and sailed off in a north-east direction. The anchor is now on exhibition at the blacksmith shop of Elliot and Miller and is attracting the attention of hundreds of people."

This account sounds much too familiar to be taken lightly.

Drake³ and Wilkins⁴ relate rather garbled accounts of "cloud ships" whose "anchors" allegedly caught on some terrestrial snag in either Kent or Ireland (ca. AD 1211 or earlier) according to which account you prefer. The Irish account runs as follows :

"There happened in the borough of Cloera, one Sunday, while the people were at Mass, a marvel. In this town is a church dedicated to St. Kinarus. It befell that an anchor was dropped from the sky, with a rope attached to it, and one of the flukes caught in the arch above the church door. The people rushed out of the church and saw in the sky a ship with men on board, floating before the anchor cable, and they saw a man leap overboard and jump down to the anchor, as if to release it. He looked as if he

were swimming in water. The folk rushed up and tried to seize him; but the bishop forbade the people to hold the man, for it might kill him, he said. The man was freed, and hurried up to the ship, where the crew cut the rope and the ship sailed away out of sight. But the anchor is in the church, and has been ever since, as a testimony."

The Kentish account comes from Gervase of Tilbury's *Otis Imperialia*, in which it is related that an anchor from a "cloud ship" became fastened in a mound of stones in a churchyard at Gravesend. Voices from above were heard, and the cable connected to the anchor was seen to move as if an attempt to free the anchor was being made. A man, of human proportions, was observed to slide down the cable, after which he cut the cable and ascended (or died from suffocation as one account has it) leaving the anchor behind.

What connection do the "celestial sailor" of ancient Eire and/or Kent, have with the little man in the blue sailor suit of Merkel, Texas? The similarities are strange, in fact, downright suspicious. The dates and locations of the English and Irish stories could, and should, be clarified.

The mention of "anchors" remind one of the Gulliver device, developed by G. V. Levan and N. H. Horwitz. This device was designed as a means to secure and analyse Martian soil samples when an instrument package is landed on that planet's surface. Projectiles which are shot out to a distance of 25 feet, are attached to the device by strings coated with an adhesive material. The projectiles are

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then reeled back, and any material adhering to the string is analysed in the device.⁵ One could speculate that the "anchors" of the cloud-and-air ships may have served a similar purpose.

Mr. Frank Masquelette of the *Houston Post* has done an admirable job in researching the 1897 reports from Texas. In following up the Merkel account Mr. Masquelette states :

"Recent enquiries among old-timers in Merkel have turned up no one who could remember anything about the incident, if indeed there was one.

"Several people, though, readily recognised the name of Elliot and Miller. The blacksmith shop occupied a building facing the railroad track. The building is now used by an International Harvester Company dealer as a warehouse.

Mrs. Elaine Brumbeau, editor of the *Merkel Mail* recently ran an item asking if anyone knew anything about the airship incident. There have been 'no replies.'"⁶

And for the Aurora incident :

"Gene Carter publisher of the *Wise County Messenger*, learned that there was a Judge Proctor who

used to live in the Aurora area. But that is the only part of the story that anyone recognised.

"Two life-long residents of the Aurora area—Miss Mag Morris and Mrs. Lou Inman (88 and 93 respectively)—scoffed at the story."⁶

If the link with present day UFO sightings is as strong as it would seem, then, by comparison, the Phenomenon itself was in primitive state. This consideration has led those of us researching the period to believe that the "key" to the UFO Phenomenon may well be found among these reports. Oddly enough it may be that we are closer to "proving something" with the 1896-7 Airship Phenomenon than with the post 1945 UFO Phenomenon !

NOTES

¹ FLYING SAUCER REVIEW: January/ February 1965 and July/ August 1966.

² *Enigma of the Airship* by Donald B. Hanlon—to be published.

³ *Spacemen in the Middle Ages* by W. R. Drake—FLYING SAUCER REVIEW May/June 1964.

⁴ *Flying Saucers on the Attack* by H. T. Winkins, p. 160-3.

⁵ *Sourcebook on the Space Sciences* by Samuel Glasstone, p. 721.

⁶ *Claims made of UFO Evidence* by Frank Masquelette—*The Houston Post* June 13, 1966.

Advanced Life on the Planet Earth ?

Although the Mariner IV space probe which took photographs of the surface of Mars was designed for geological and not biological reconnaissance, it has been suggested that the absence of signs of advanced life in the 22 photographs (whose resolution was a few kilometres) tends to confirm that such life does not exist. S. D. Kilston and his colleagues, at Harvard College and the Goddard Space Flight Centre have tried examining photographs of the Earth for signs of our own civilisation (*Icarus*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 79).

Although several hundred thousand suitable photographs of the Earth have been taken by the Tiros and Nimbus meteorological satellites, only three of the high resolution pictures showed signs which were indicative of an advanced civilisation on Earth : a recently completed inter-state highway could be seen on one ; another photograph showed the condensation trail left by a jet aircraft ; and a third showed a rectilinear grid pattern, subsequently found to be due to the activities of Canadian lumber men, which was thought by Kilston to be a clear indication of advanced life. A fourth photograph, however, contained what appeared to be the most convincing sign of advanced civilisation—a long straight breakwater on the Moroccan coast which in fact proved to be a natural peninsular.

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(Our thanks to Peter Haythornthwaite for drawing our attention to this item in the *New Scientist* of April 21, 1966.)