# The Airship Hysteria Of 1896-97

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DURING the "Great Airship Wave" in the United States between November 1896 and May 1897, thousands of Americans claimed to have observed an airship.[1] This vessel was typically described as cigar-shaped, having wings and/or propellers and an attached undercarriage; yet, in terms of historical context, the nineteenth century lacked the technological sophistication to successfully fly heavier-than-air machines (Sanarov 1981:164; Klass 1976:302). The Wright Brothers did not fly until 1903, and attempts at earlier heavier-than-air flight were crude and erratic at best. According to British aviation historian Charles Gibbs-Smith (Clark and Coleman 1975:133):

> Speaking as an aeronautical historian who specializes in the periods before 1910, I can say with certainty that the only airborne vehicles, carrying passengers, which could possibly have been seen anywhere in North America . . . were free-flying spherical balloons, and it is highly unlikely for these to be mistaken for anything else. No form of dirigible (i.e., a gasbag propelled by an airscrew) or heavier-than-air flying machine was flying—or indeed could fly—at this time. . . .

*Ambiguity, anxiety, excitement, newspaper articles, and fallibilities of human perception contributed to a wave of sightings.*

## *Sociocultural Perceptions*

During the period of the outbreak, although speculation about the stimulus for the sightings varied from misperceptions of natural or manmade bodies (i.e., heavenly bodies or fire balloons) to hoaxes, hallucinations, and so on, the overwhelming belief existed that an inventor

had secretly developed the first practical airship.

In terms of sociopsychological expectations of the era, most Americans possessed at least a general idea of how an airship and its occupants should appear. This conception was shaped by the popular literature of the time, which contained large volumes of stories on the sensational, and thus highly marketable, subject of attempts at early flight.

Aerial flight was very much in the public eye just prior to the wave. In 1895, the Swedish explorer Salomon August Andrée made headlines describing plans for an Arctic balloon trip, which he unsuccessfully attempted in 1896, just two months before the outbreak. Andrée died in a second attempt the following year. On May 6, 1896, Samuel Pierpont Langley, described by Gibbs-Smith (1985:63) as "the first major aeronautical figure in the United States," made headlines after successfully testing in flight his large aeroplane model no. 5. About one month before the outbreak, the *New York Times* (September 28, 1896) carried an article with front-page headlines describing the crash of the experimental airship *Albatross:* Inventor/navigator William Paul narrowly escaped serious injury after his craft "dropped rapidly, beat into a clump of trees, and fell." The article concludes: "The inventor says the experiment was unsuccessful because of the quartering northeast wind, and that but for this he would have made a flight to astonish the world."

Further, intense interest in the invention of mechanical contrivances, especially air machines, developed in the early 1890s and resulted in a major weekly series beginning in 1892 that achieved widespread readership (Clarke, 1986:589).

The sightings occurred in two separate waves: the first from November 17 to mid-December 1896, and the second, January 22 to May 1897 (Bullard 1982a:207, 211).

Sensationalistic "yellow journalism" typified the period just prior to and encompassing the sightings as newspapers often reported highly speculative stories (or in some case even made up stories) on a wide range of events. One purpose was to create news on "slow news days," in order to increase circulation (Hiebert, Ungurait, and Bohn 1982). One story in particular generated a tremendous amount of newspaper and magazine coverage speculating about the identity of an apparently fictitious airship inventor said to have been constructing such a craft. Whatever the editors' motivation, on November 1, 1896, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that in the near future a New York inventor would construct and fly an "aerial torpedo boat." Sixteen days later, the *Sacramento (California) Bee,* printed a telegram from a New York man claiming he and two friends would board an airship of his invention and fly to California, which he promised to reach within two days. Coincidentally, that night the first sightings in the 1896-97 wave were recorded as hundreds of witnesses in Sacramento reported sighting an airship.

This report, and the ones to follow, seemed to spark a snowball effect. Speculative stories about the possible existence of an airship and inventor(s), in addition to reports of other sightings, appeared in hundreds of newspapers and in nearly every state. Based on a collection by T. E. Bullard (1982b) of more than 1,000 separate airship-related newspaper stories from this period, a conservative estimate of the number of alleged individual sightings would be 100,000, as several sightings were said to have involved participa-

tion by entire cities and towns.[2] Bartholomew (1989) has analyzed newspaper accounts of witnesses during the wave who (usually alone, at night in isolated areas), similar to those in modern UFO waves, claimed to have conversed with the pilots. However, unlike modern-day encounters, witnesses described occupants "who appeared to be ordinary American citizens and claimed that their invention was about to revolutionize travel and transportation" (Sachs 1980:9).

## *Literature Survey*

A survey of mass-hysteria literature reveals the importance of three key elements in the composition of any case: ambiguity, anxiety, and a redefinition of the situation from the general to the specific. Hall (1972:216) summarizes the role of these elements:

> The recipe for this type of hysterical outbreak is a combination of a high level of anxiety or tension with some kind of ambiguous event which is interpreted as posing a serious threat. The ambiguous event is transformed, in beliefs, into an unambiguously threatening event which apparently justifies the diffuse anxiety which was its antecedent.

Hall, a UFO proponent, finds fault with the suggestion that many UFO reports (past or present) are due to hysterical contagion. One of his central arguments is that UFO witnesses often fail to interpret the incidents as serious personal threats. Thus witnesses are frequently excited but not scared during an incident. I will argue that contagion can occur in situations where the actual hysterical belief is nonthreatening. The 1896-97 airship wave is viewed as a case of collective wish-fulfillment as a response to rapid sociotechnological strains and to rumors that someone had invented the world's first practical airship.

## *Generalized Belief*

In the years leading up to and immediately prior to the airship sightings, the possibility that someone would soon perfect the first practical heavier-than-air flying machine was the subject of widespread speculation in science-fiction stories. This was given special emphasis as the twentieth century approached. In the 1890s, Americans were obsessed with science and inventions. According to Clarke (1986:589):

> The Frank Reade Library [was] . . . designed to meet the insatiable demand for tales of mechanical novelty by concentrating on a nonstop run of invention stories. The series opened on 24 September 1892 and continued for 191 issues. It was the first serial publication of any size ever to be devoted exclusively to science fiction stories; and every issue throbbed with the dynamism of coming things—robots, submarines, flying machines . . . and the rest of the imaginative bric-a-brac of an age that was in love with the great wonders of science.

Bullard (1982a:203) also notes that from about 1880 through the early twentieth century widespread publicity in books and magazines helped to mold a common belief that a heavier-than-air vessel would be perfected imminently:

> Magazines devoted to science and engineering vied with Jules Verne's *Robur the Conquerer* and other fictional publications to describe the flier which would soon succeed, and this literature fed the public a steady diet of aeronautical speculation and news

to prime people for the day when the riddle of aerial navigation finally would receive a solution.

Further fueling this generalized belief were the growing number of failed aerial trials making news. Although all were unsuccessful in perfecting a practical airship, during "the late 1890s numerous inventors in the United States obtained patents for planned airships" (Brookesmith 1984:107; Jacobs 1976:27).

## *Ambiguity*

The boom in airship patents during the latter 1890s coincided with the airship wave. (For actual reproductions of some of the original patents, see Lore and Deneault 1968:16-17, 38-39). Intense competition to be the first to patent such a machine resulted in a shroud of secrecy, as many inventors often withheld vital data on their patents and experimental craft. As noted in Brookesmith (1984:107), the air of mystery surrounding the state of aerial development only fostered public belief that a practical airship had been developed.

This view is supported by historian David M. Jacobs (1976:27-28):

> In the late 1890s many people in the United States obtained patents for proposed airships. Most people believed someone would soon invent a flying machine, and many wanted to capitalize on the fame and fortune that would certainly come to the first person to launch an American into the skies. As soon as someone had a glimmer of an airship design, he immediately applied for a patent. These would-be inventors constantly worried over possible theft or plagiarism . . . [and] most people kept their patents secret. Given this atmosphere and the numerous European and American experiments with flight, it is not surprising that secret inventor stories so captured the public imagination and seemed such a logical explanation for the airship mystery.

Environmental factors further contributed to ambiguity during the episode. As there were a minimum of several thousand sightings, a specific breakdown of each case is unfeasible. However, Bullard (1984, personal communication), commenting on the approximately 1,000 newspaper stories detailing sightings that he had collected during the wave, noted that approximately 80 to 90 percent of the cases were reported to have occurred at night. Other researchers have noted the overwhelming tendency of the airships to appear at night (Berliner 1978:2; Sanarov 1981:166). Also, the wave occurred primarily during the winter months and abruptly ended in early spring, coinciding with a reduction in hours of sunlight.

Further inducing ambiguity were the mysteries associated with the airship. Who actually was the inventor? How had he accomplished this great feat? Who helped him, if anyone? Where was his secret hideout? Where would he test his machine next?

## *Anxiety and Intense Excitement*

The wave occurred during a period of rapid technological change and amid intense public interest in airship development. As detailed earlier, a widespread belief circulated in the United States just prior to the outbreak that someone had invented the world's first practical airship. A major role in spreading this belief was played by period newspapers, characterized by sensationalism and intense speculation on issues of the day. Newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst noted this in an editorial attacking such press coverage:

> "Fake journalism" has a good deal to answer for, but we do not recall a more discernible exploit in that line than the persistent attempt to make the public believe that the air in this vicinity is populated with airships. It has been manifest for weeks that the whole airship story is pure myth. (Klass 1976:314, citing *San Francisco Examiner*, December 5, 1896)

Bullard (1982a:224) and Klass (1976:314-315) also concur with the belief that newspapers exerted considerable influence in perpetuating and maintaining the outbreak.

A. M. Herring, writing in the *Scientific American* of June 26, 1897, noted the intense experimentation and the widespread publicity of the belief that a practical airship existed in the late 1890s, but "especially" in the period of time coinciding with the airship outbreak:

> This line of experiment has resulted in such great progress in the last few years (and especially so in the last six months) that attainment of long, free flight for man, which not long ago seemed an invention for the far distant future, is a thing now near, if not quite at hand. (403)

Neeley (1979:68) attributes the episode to social stress fostered, in part, by rapid technological changes. Neeley surveyed 223 Illinois newspapers during the outbreak. He clearly applies his Illinois findings to the larger pattern of reports across the United States:

> Let us first consider the people of 1897. They lived in very interesting and stress-filled times. They were amazed at the technological achievements of the time. The telephone was merely fourteen years old, electricity had just been made available for practical uses, x-rays had been discovered merely two years earlier. The horseless carriage was just around the corner as was flight. They had just dealt with a bad winter and spring had brought forth one of the greatest floods to hit the Midwest. It was raining constantly and only snow broke the monotony. A clear sky was a rarity. Affairs had just returned to normal following the Civil War and there were accounts of wars in Greece and Cuba. . . . Jules Verne was writing stories of . . . an electric airship. Suddenly the skies clear and in the northwest a bright light was seen. The cry "Airship!" went up and a crowd gathered to watch. Soon a cloud obscured it and the airship had "left." Or a bright light was seen in the southeast and the witnesses "followed" its path behind a cloud until a bright light was seen in the northwest. Surely they had seen the airship cross the sky.

## *Redefinition of the Situation*

The airship wave occurred in two separate phases: the first primarily between November 17 and mid-December 1896, and the second between January 22, 1896, and late May 1897. The separate waves closely paralleled newspaper accounts of where the airship would appear. For instance, the overwhelming majority of sightings in the 1896 wave took place in California, and all of the sightings occurred within the general Pacific Coast region (Bullard 1982b). From a definitional view, it's interesting that the popular belief prior to and during the November-December 1896 wave held that an inventor would fly an airship to California and then slowly progress back across the country, ending in New York. The popular newspaper accounts circulating during the second wave (although there were a variety of stories) centered around

an inventor partaking in a transcontinental airship flight. One story told how the inventor would fly his airship across the country to Washington, D.C., where he would take out a patent. Another speculated that the United States government was secretly testing an airship by flying it across the country. Coincidentally, the second wave began in the western United States and worked its way eastward in an erratic but systematic pattern, so that the 1897 wave closed abruptly in early May with sightings on the coastal northeast:

> Suddenly the climax. The conclusion to the extraordinary transcontinental voyage was reached. On April 30, 1897, the great airship was seen over Yonkers, New York . . . at 3 A.M. . . . toward the sea.
>
> . . . Curiously, when the 1896-97 complex stopped, for all practical purposes it stopped cold. Various sightings continued to be recorded through the years, but this particular phenomenon reached a dead end at the shores of the Atlantic. . . . Virtually no new sightings emerged from the areas over which it had soared. It was all over. (Flammonde 1977:115-117)

During both waves, the cultural expectation of the time frames appears to have been shaped and defined by newspaper accounts and subsequently fulfilled by the pattern of reports. It appeared that the collective consciousness, as reflected and defined in newspaper stories, created a consensual belief that the airship had completed its transcontinental flight. This would explain not only the general west-to-east pattern across the country but also the abrupt end to the wave.

A survey of the more than 1,000 original airship reports from United States newspapers collected by Bullard (1982b) shows that most sightings of unidentified aerial objects between November 17, 1896, and May 1897 closely paralleled popular literature accounts of early heavier-than-air travel attempts. An examination of Bullard's data shows that whenever specific descriptions of airships were given, beyond the interpretation of ambiguous nocturnal aerial lights, eyewitness accounts vacillated between two types of craft. One was a large oblong or egg-shaped main structure having wings similar to those of a bird. These wings were frequently reported to be "flopping" in a birdlike manner. The second craft type also consisted of a large central portion, but sported propellers or fanlike wheels. Both types of craft were said to possess powerful searchlights and some type of motor propulsion system, and often had a carriage suspended under the main structure. The drawing in Figure 1 is of an airship reported by hundreds of persons on November 23, 1896, over the city of San Francisco. The description conforms to cultural expectations of how an American citizen of 1896 would project such a craft to appear. None of the vessels were described in terms of more contemporary disc or saucer shapes. Other sightings during the wave resembled a common type of UFO description. (See Figure 2.)

These descriptions closely mimic early heavier-than-air flight attempts. For instance, the first known manned powered flight was Heneri Giffard's steam airship (Figure 3). The large cigar-shaped top portion, with a smaller basket underneath, featured a structural design commonly reported 45 years later during the 1896-97 U.S. airship wave.

Figure 4 shows a model of the first airship to complete a circular flight. On August 9, 1884, the *La France* flew nearly five miles at an average speed of 13 miles per hour. A very similar type of airship was reported on April 10, 1897, over the city of Chicago.

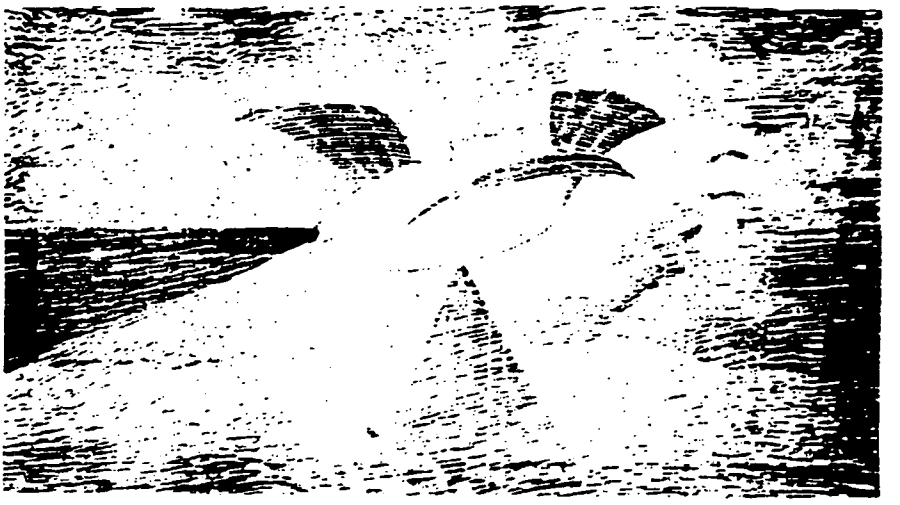

FIGURE 1. An artist's rendition of the airship reportedly seen by hundreds of people over San Francisco on November 23, 1896. (Source: *San Francisco Call*, November 23, 1896, p. 1.)

Grabbing his son's box camera, Walter McCann claimed to have taken two photographs. An etching of the best photo, appearing on the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* of April 12, is depicted in Figure 5. The picture was taken as the craft allegedly sailed over a suburb at approximately 6 A.M. The pictures were taken during the height of a monthlong airship wave in Illinois, with thousands of reported sightings.

## *Conclusion*

In the presence of the widespread airship rumors holding that such an invention was on the verge of perfection, the ambiguity of the nighttime sky, and the intense emotions held by many Americans that such a dramatic achievement was at hand—and the fanning of these emotions by speculative and often fabricated newspaper stories—people attempted to relieve their emotionally aroused states by looking to the skies for proof or disconfirmation of the airship-invention stories. They expected to see airships and saw them. Whereas

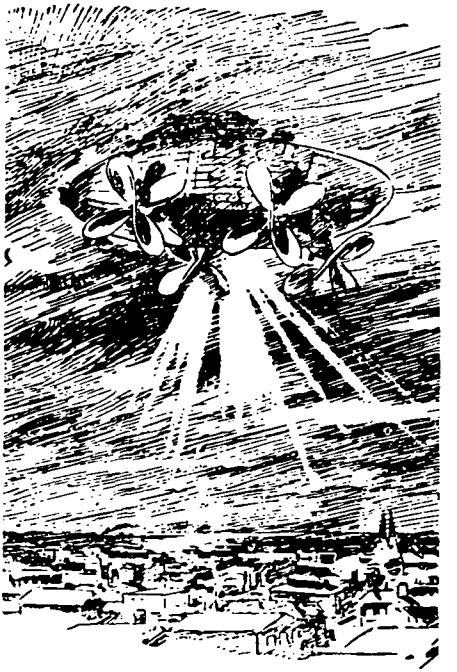

FIGURE 2. Airship sighted over Oakland, California, between November 17 and 19, 1896. (Source: *San Francisco Call*, November 19, 1896, p. 1.)

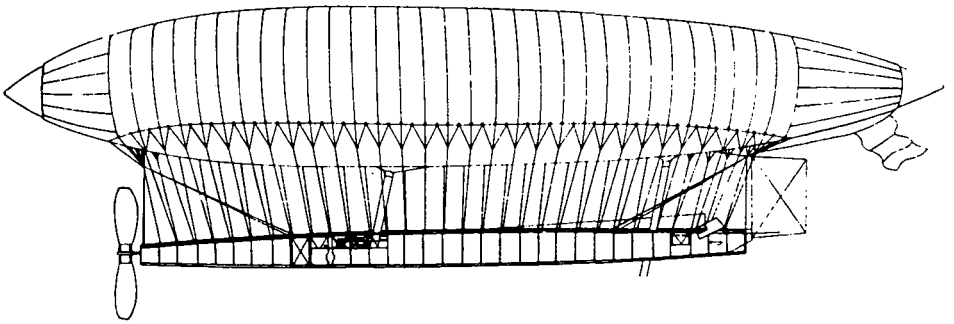

FIGURE 3. Heneri Giffard's 1852 steam-powered airship. (Source: B. Collier, *The Airship: A History*, Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, London, 1974, p. 29.)

contemporary people collectively perceive "flying saucers" from outer space, citizens in 1896-97 were predisposed by popular literature of the era to see airships. Research on autokinetic movement appears applicable, as it concerns problem-solving dynamics (Turner and Killian 1972:35). Interpretation of ambiguous stimuli within a group setting will result in members' developing an increased need to define the situation, depending less on their own judgment for reality validation and more on the judgment of others (reality testing).

> When the stimulus situation lacks objective structure, the effect of the other's judgement is . . . pronounced. . . . In one . . . study of social factors in perception utilizing the autokinetic phenomenon, an individual judged distances of apparent move-

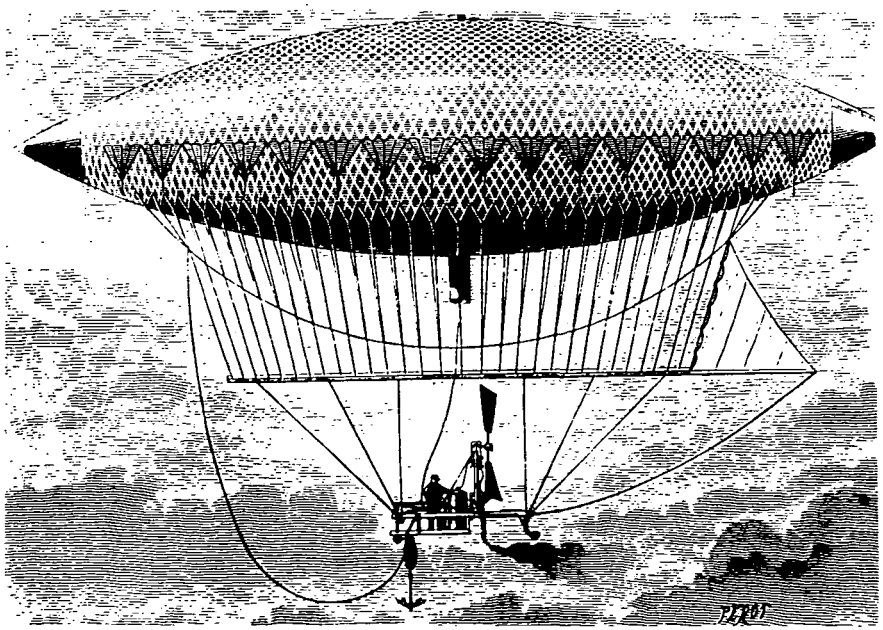

FIGURE 4. The *La France* circa 1884. (Source: C. H. Gibbs-Smith, *Flight Throughout the Ages*, Thomas Y. Crowell, New York, 1974, p. 76.)


FIGURE 5. Walter McCann's alleged photo of an airship over Chicago. (Source: *Chicago Tribune*, April 12, 1897, p. 1.)

> ment first alone and then with two or three other subjects. This unstructured situation arouses considerable uncertainty. Even though they were not told to agree and were cautioned against being influenced, the individuals in togetherness situations shifted their judgement toward a common standard or norm of judgement. . . . The influence of various individuals differed, and the emerging common norm for judgement was in various instances above or below the average of individual judgements in the initial session alone. (Sherif and Harvey 1952:302)

Research on the "autokinetic effect" is of more specific interest, as it has shown that individual judgments tend to agree in a group setting while observing the common stimulus of a pinpoint of light within a dark environment. This effect is well known in social psychology and was first demonstrated by Sherif (1936). Individuals in situations lacking in stable perceptual anchorages begin to feel a sense of uneasiness, with anxiety generated as the person experiences a heightened need to visually define or make sense of the light. In group settings, individuals will attempt to reduce the anxieties created by an uncertain situation. Beeson (1979:180) outlines this process:

> A viewer in a completely dark room seeing one pinpoint of light experiences a visual stimulus without its normal attendant visual context. Up, down, back, forward, far and near, exist in relation to other stimuli and when this frame of reference is missing, the light is free to roam in one's perceptual field. It is for this reason that considerable random motion will be experienced by anyone viewing the light.

Within highly ambiguous situations, such as the people scanning the nighttime skies for an imaginary airship, "inference can perform the function of perception by filling in missing information in instances where perception is either inefficient or inadequate" (Massad, Hubbard, and Newtson 1979). Accordingly, individuals with an airship "mind-set" perceived airships. Today, with the existence of a collective belief in extraterrestrials traversing the skies, usually at night, flying saucers are seen. Allan Hendry, former editor of the *International UFO Reporter*, a scientifically orientated UFO publication, provided a good example of this process. He noted in 1978 that a large number of advertising planes had been initially mistaken for UFOs and were described as having been distinctly disc- or saucer-shaped:

> In the three hundred calls that . . . [our organization] has dealt with that were based on confirmed ad planes at night, 90 percent of the witnesses described not what was perceptually available, but rather that they could see a disc-shaped form rotating with "fixed" lights; many of these people imagine that they see a dome on top and, when pressed, will swear that they can make out the outline with confidence.

Overall, the sightings appear to have functioned as a reassuring symbol during a period of great uncertainty with rapid technological changes at the end of the twentieth century. People had great affection for these technological marvels that were changing social patterns that had existed for thousands of years but were simultaneously concerned with the potential destructive power these machines could hold over their lives.

The airship wave functioned to show man's dominance over the untamed and previously sacred skies, leaving them with the comforting belief that a positive element was in control. In the words of Clark and Coleman (1975:163):

> Most of them [Americans] saw the craft as a sort of final triumph of technology, and something about which they must surely have entertained ambivalent feelings. All the talk about bombs and aerial machine guns, pointing toward a time when there would be no safety anywhere, must have been disconcerting in the extreme. Moreover, now the heavens had been violated; men had tainted even the domain of angels.

It is important to note that, although social strains generated by rapid technological advancement were especially acute during this period, Americans sighting these phantom craft clearly did not fear them. Airships were seen as a positive influence in reaction to the negative strains brought about by rapid technological advancements in a variety of fields. Hence the redefinition of the ambiguous, mundane, predominately nocturnal aerial stimuli (i.e., stars, planets) functioned to create a reassuring presence.

## Notes

1. A am indebted to T. E. Bullard, folklorist, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, for providing access to original airship data.

2. Any such specific estimate is hazardous. However this figure seems reasonably accurate as a conservative estimate of the minimum number of participants, based on Bullard's data.

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