

INTRODUCTION

I think it's fair to say that most ufologists regard the Kenneth Arnold sighting of several "flying disks" over Mount Rainier in 1947 to be the official beginning of the modern era of ufology, but I don't believe that is entirely accurate. While that event was important in that it was the first significant incident in which the UFO phenomenon first came into public awareness in a major way, to those who have studied the phenomena in detail, what those in the UFO community call the "modern era" of ufology actually started much earlier—fifty years earlier, in fact—with the great "airship flap" of 1896-97.

For those unfamiliar with this brief but curious event, in November of 1896 and continuing on almost nonstop for several weeks, newspapers in California began publishing accounts of a mysterious light seen flying low in the sky over various cities throughout central California, including both the capital of Sacramento and its largest city at the time, San Francisco. Quickly dubbed an "airship" by many—probably due to reports that the light appeared to be suspended beneath a great cigar-shaped body as well as for lack of a better term—airship fever soon took hold. Not surprisingly, it wasn't long before reports of the mysterious craft began coming in from

all over the West Coast, capturing the public's fascination and holding it for weeks at a time in a way that is seldom seen.

But just as news of the mysterious craft began growing in momentum, reports of the mysterious craft inexplicably ended. By Christmas of 1896, the strange vessel seemed to have disappeared as mysteriously and suddenly as it had first appeared—almost as if whoever—or whatever—had been responsible for the curious phenomena had tired of their game and left, leaving millions of Californians to ponder what the thing was and who might have built it.

But that was not the end of the mysterious visitor. After a two-month hiatus, reports of the same craft—or one very similar to the one spotted over California two months earlier—began being reported throughout the Midwest. Apparently making its way across the nation's remote farming belt in a leisurely and seemingly casual manner, reports began tumbling in from all over the country about the mystery craft, many of them made by supposedly "honest and credible" witnesses and written up in many of the largest and most prestigious newspapers in the region. It even supposedly appeared over Chicago shortly after dawn one morning in mid-April of 1897, where it allegedly had its picture taken by a man borrowing his son's small box camera. Then, just as it had five months earlier in California, the "airship" again abruptly vanished, leaving nothing in its wake but a mountain of newspaper clippings and rampant speculation. Though reports of the mysterious vessel would continue to trickle in for a few more weeks afterwards, by late spring the great airship flap of 1896-97 was over and the world was left with one more mystery to ponder.

So what was it that so many thousands of witnesses saw to cause such a stir? Clearly something had been seen in the skies over central California that November of 1896, and later that next spring over the Midwest, but what could it have been and, more importantly, what happened to it? Researchers have uncovered as many as fifteen hundred individual newspaper accounts of the ship having being made between November 1896 and May of 1897, but to this day no one is certain what the bright object (or, perhaps,

objects, for there may have been more than one) may have been.

That's not to say that there are no shortage of opinions. Debunkers maintain it was all the product of the tendency of newspapers of the day to invent stories to boost sales along with a liberal dose of mass hysteria in which people imagined any bright light in the sky to be a rogue "airship." Some in the UFO community, noting that modern UFOs are sometimes described as being "cigar shaped," speculate that perhaps these were early appearances by extraterrestrials—which, if true, would demonstrate that extraterrestrials were interested in us long before Kenneth Arnold had his brief encounter over Mount Rainier in 1947.

In any case, what I found most curious about the whole affair—and a point which I believe has been overlooked by most commentators over the years—is that at the time, most witnesses thought the vehicle neither imaginary nor extraterrestrial. Instead, most believed it to have been a very man-made machine—a powered balloon perhaps or, more accurately, a dirigible—being tested in the chilly night air of North America. In other words, they saw it as neither hoax nor alien visitor, but simply as an example of nascent technology being put through its paces by some mysterious but intrepid inventor.

Most dismiss this explanation today, however, as being an impossibility considering the still fairly primitive technological capability of the time. It is assumed that in a world that was still in its industrial infancy, such a thing as sustained manned flight—that is the ability to keep a steerable craft in the air for hours at a time and making it capable of traveling any great distance—was beyond the realm of possibility. After all, even the Wright brothers were still five years away from putting their rickety canvas and wooden flyer into the air, making the thought that anyone could build a working dirigible capable of flying across much of the country in 1896 laughable.

Or was it? While admittedly in a world that had only just been introduced to the light bulb and the telephone but in which most people still used kerosene lamps to light their homes and the U.S. mail to commu-

nicate with each other, such a prospect seems most unlikely. But can we really be so certain that the technology to build such a vessel—even one of fairly substantial size and capabilities—was truly beyond the ability of inventors of the late nineteenth century? Are we so confident that the history of the development of manned flight is so thoroughly complete and fully catalogued that no room remains within which we might even consider the possibility that sustained and powered human flight might not have been possible a decade earlier than previously imagined? In effect, with the airship of 1897, could we be talking about a real machine here and not merely a phantom of our collective imagination drifted majestically through the night sky?

This is the question this book will examine. In it, we will consider the idea that such a craft was not only possible, but may have been very possible in 1896. This is not some Jules Verne fantasy replete with fantastic devices and magical technologies suitable only for science fiction, but an examination that will explore not only how such an extraordinary feat might have been accomplished, but even consider the nuts and bolts of how such a craft might have looked, how it functioned and operated, and what powered it through the air. To do this, it will be necessary that we not only examine the history of the development of the airship throughout the nineteenth century, but also consider the technological hurdles building such a vessel would have entailed and how they might have been overcome. Obviously, determining whether such a vessel could have been feasibly built using the technology available at the time will remain ultimately an exercise in speculation, but we can propose a few hypotheses in an effort to explain how it might have been possible, despite the fact that no physical evidence of this fantastic craft remains to either confirm or refute such theories.

On the way to getting there, it will also be necessary to explore each of the conventional (and unconventional) theories put forward to explain the mysterious craft of 1896-97 in an effort to keep this a balanced approach, but in the end this will be primarily an examination of the possibility that

we are looking at is a nascent technology lost to the historical record that, had it proven successful, would have rewritten the history of aviation in the twentieth century.

But why do this? Because *something* happened that winter of 1896-97 that needs to be explained. Additionally, we need to do this because we have a record that fairly shouts that the history of aviation may be much less complete and far richer than anyone can imagine. It is the purpose of this book, then, to consider this possibility and give it substance while attempting to avoid the sensationalism and patent nonsense such a study inevitably threatens. I may not be correct in my hypothesis, but it will at least offer an alternative to the usual denials and debunking that the story routinely inspires. Of course, it is unlikely anything I write in this brief tome will persuade aviation purists to abandon their traditional understanding of the history of aviation, but then that's not the purpose behind this book. It is instead designed to offer the reader an opportunity to unravel a century-old mystery that beckons us from the past and determine for themselves whether that past is complete as is or is yet to be finally written—or, should I say, rewritten?

So come along and let's explore the great airship mystery of 1896-97. I guarantee you'll find it a fascinating journey if you can keep an open mind and consider the possibility that the history of manned flight may be far richer and more remarkable—and incomplete—than we can begin to appreciate.