



“This Mysterious Light Called an Airship”: Nebraska Saucer Sightings, 1897

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Article Summary: The year 1897 was a year indelibly marked by reported sightings of aerial phenomena. In February 1897, beginning in Nebraska, people across much of the United States began reporting nighttime sightings of an airship flying overhead. The ship was usually described as having multiple lights and was sometimes said to have wings. It was often said to move at great speed. The author investigates the nature of the newspaper reports of the period in Nebraska, having found reports of nearly 200 sightings.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Dick Grant , Walt Scott and Charley Dempster (all of Beatrice), Charley Prescott (Kearney), William Weidner, Anton Pallardy, Al Abel, C W Hodges, J H McCarty, Tom Cass, William Rigge, James Southard, Cyrus McCormick, Bert Disher, Markus Bullock, Jake Long, Connie Eagen, Albert Whipple, John LeMasters, G W Seux, Clinton A Case, Henry Heinz, Lloyd McLean

Keywords: airship, UFO, mystery ship

Photographs / Images: Newspapers in Omaha, Lincoln, Wymore, Hastings and many other towns chronicled the airship sightings of 1897

**“THIS MYSTERIOUS LIGHT CALLED
AN AIRSHIP,”
NEBRASKA “SAUCER” SIGHTINGS, 1897**

By Roger L. Welsch

A huge, canoe-shaped spaceship, like nothing seen before, approaches the small Nebraska town at incredible speed. Its brilliant headlight dazzles onlookers, who stand open-mouthed before the approach of the mysterious craft. It suddenly stops in mid-air, moves abruptly up, then down, sidewise, forward, and backward at will in defiance of all known laws of physics. Some viewers believe they can hear the murmur of a power source, and others detect the voices—even the laughter—of the airship’s passengers; all agree that there is a red light on the stern of the ship and a row of three lights on either side, and a dim green light is seen by some. The lights dim and glare, and in their reflection the earthlings can make out the silhouette of four large wings, two on either side of the ship’s massive body. Suddenly the craft shoots upward and disappears toward the horizon at incredible speed.

The townsmen are left bewildered, mystified, thrilled—even terrified. Has some new power for flight been discovered that was previously unknown to civilization? Is it a mirage or a portent of the Apocalypse? Is it simply an elaborate hoax? Witnesses of the strange visit take some comfort in knowing that other Nebraskans have seen the ship, but they also know that cynics will call them drunks, fools, or charlatans. They too had thought that earlier sighters of the ship had probably seen a brilliant evening star or a vagrant cloud, but now they “know differently.” It is no star, no cloud, no hoax; it is an airship of an appearance and performance previously unknown or imagined. Its sources and purpose are unknown. Whole communities see the ship, use modern communications systems to trace the craft, but still there are no explanations. Soon the Midwest is seized with the hysteria; the craft is seen throughout the country and conversations turn to the mystery ship.

The post-World War II flying saucer scare? A futuristic

television show? A cheap comic book story? No, indeed; a story straight out of Nebraska's history, a chapter that provides one of the most exciting, if not frustrating, episodes of that history.¹

Fiery wheels, airships, flying saucers, and UFOs have been the subject of reports from Ezekiel right up to the United States Air Force's Blue Book Project, an extensive cataloging and analysis program for such sightings, which lasted under various names from 1947 to 1969, when it was terminated without convincing conclusions. Today J. Allen Hynek, a former member of the Blue Book staff and now one of its fiercest detractors, writes best-selling discussions of the UFO experience; the phrases he coins—for example, "close encounters of the first, second, and third kinds"—have captured the attention of popular culture markets too. Scarcely a week's newspapers appear without official denials from world governments of their role in the UFO phenomenon, reports of further sightings, or speculations about the origin and nature of the "saucers."

The purpose of this investigation, however, is not to deal with the authenticity or even the nature of the 1897 sightings but to treat instead the nature of the newspaper reports of the period. Charles Dana Wilber's theory, "Rain follows the plow," must be considered as a factor of Plains settlement whether we now concur with the idea or not. Similarly, whatever our current opinion of UFOs, we can scarcely deny that 1897 was a year indelibly marked by reported sightings of aerial phenomena. If nothing else, these reports provide particular comfort for those who insist that there is indeed nothing new under the sun.

The strange sequence of events opened on February 2, 1897, in Hastings:

Several Hastings people report that an air ship, or something of the kind, has been sailing around in the air west of this city. It was first noticed some time last fall when it was seen floating in the air about 500 feet above ground, and after standing nearly still for about 30 minutes it began to circle about and then took a northerly direction for about two miles, after which it returned to its starting place and sank into oblivion. Since that time it has not been seen until last Sunday evening, when it was observed standing nearly still, a few miles west of Hastings and seemingly about 800 feet in the air. At first sight it has the appearance of an immense star, but after a closer observation the powerful light shows by its color to be artificial. It certainly must be illuminated by powerful electric dynamos for the light sent forth by it is wonderful. At 9:30 last Monday night the large glaring light was seen to circle around for a few minutes and then take a northerly direction for about three miles. It then stood perfectly still for about five minutes and then descended for about 200 feet, circling as it traveled at a most remarkable speed for about two miles and then slowing up it circled about for

fully 15 minutes, when it began to lower and disappear as mysteriously as it had made its appearance. . . . A close watch is being kept for its reappearance.¹

The Hastings sighting was the first reported in Nebraska but not the first in the country; a mysterious airship had been reported in Sacramento, California, the year before, and it had never been satisfactorily explained. The February 3 comment in the *Norfolk News* attributed the unusual aerial sightings by Hastings citizens to excessive drinking:

It would be interesting to know just what brand of liquor the Hastings correspondent drinks, that enables him to see airships carrying powerful lights gyrating about through the atmosphere. It must be a remarkable brand of goods, and if it would have the salubrious effect of enabling one to see his pet mortgage floating away, we would be glad to try a few gallons or so.

On February 5, 1897, the *Omaha Daily Bee* reported that the ship had been seen at Inavale, about 40 miles south of Hastings. It had been spotted several times, once by a pious party of 10 returning from a prayer meeting. This obviously was a slap at the Norfolk cynic who accused those who believed they had seen the craft of drinking. This sighting was more detailed, including a description of the lights along the side of the ship. The onlookers heard the sounds of the engine and voices and laughter of passengers. Observers reported: "It seemed to be conical shaped, and perhaps 30 or 40 feet in length, with a bright headlight and six smaller lights, three on a side, and seemed to have two sets of wings on a side, with a large fan-shaped rudder."

The modern reader might assume that Nebraskans were seeing a dirigible balloon. But such craft were only in the development stages in Europe and the East and could scarcely have been independently developed on the Plains or have flown there on a jaunt. The speeds and control of the craft as described in the reports were not to be reached by engineers for some time. Round hot-air balloons were well known at the time and had been used in the Civil War 30 years before. But in no case did they have the kind of maneuverability of this ship that could circle, make right turns, fly upwind, attain great speeds, and hover motionlessly. On February 8, 1897, the *York Daily Times* reported that an "honest" citizen and his daughter had spotted the lights of the mystery ship and called in a witness, who swore on a Bible that he had seen what he claimed.

Four days later the *Falls City Journal* noted a space ship report from Elwood, Kansas, and editorialized, "Our people

never saw such things in Nebraska," suggesting that the mania had not reached any sizeable proportions in its first two weeks. On the same day the *Hastings Tribune* wished that someone in the area would create one of the rumored spaceships, which scientists theorized was possible.

Next the ship turned up at low altitude over Omaha. While nothing could be discerned regarding the form of the airship, the lights were in evidence. It was seen by several people, the chief witness being Thomas Hazel of 26th and H Streets, "[who] holds a responsible position with the Hammond Packing Company and is considered trustworthy in every respect."³

The *Beatrice Daily News* reported on February 16 that five men had spotted the ship over that city the night before, "moving slowly and very perceptibly toward the west." However, the light-hearted nature of the report suggests that the rumors were still not being taken seriously by all editors: "Dick Grant has come perilously near a description of the machine in solemnly asserting that it has a tail. Walt Scott thinks it had two eyes, while Charley Dempster will not venture more than one whopping big eye." The craft now returned to central Nebraska and appeared nearly every night between Hastings and North Platte. One report had sparks falling from the sides (at North Platte), and another alluded to the California ship, suggesting that this might be the same craft which had crossed the mountains—a feat no balloon of the time could have accomplished. City Clerk Charley Prescott of Kearney spotted the ship and reported it to the *Daily Hub* editor, who published the report on February 19 but refused to take it seriously, noting that he had once been gullible himself.

However, the same editor swallowed his pride the next day and ran a story in serious mien, that the ship had been spotted by reputable people and there could no longer be doubt that something was paying nocturnal aerial visits to the town. Indeed, sightings seem to have affected even social life: "Several 'airship' parties will watch for the strange phenomenon each evening [from] now on and an effort will be made to get more accurate descriptions."

Now reports were coming in frequently enough and with sufficient reliability that they had to be taken seriously. Efforts were now begun to explain the phenomenon:

William Weidner is another candidate for fame. He has come forward with one more explanation in reference to the mysterious light. Down at Juniata . . . about fifty-five miles distant from York, there is a station agent . . . who is such in name only, inasmuch as his railroad duties take but a small part of his time. This man the neighbors call a kite crank. . . . He flies kites of a new and remarkable kind, . . . known to kite specialists as box kites. They are built on an entirely different plan from that on which small boys usually construct high flyers. They are tail-less, and look at a little distance more like a box than a kite. But a closer examination would reveal considerable differences between them and boxes. The affairs, in short, are merely a series of planes built one over the other and which are so arranged as to afford the least possible resistance to the air from an upward pressure. The things soar aloft with wonderful ease. . . .

At night, the kite flyer attaches a light to a kite and sends it up to startle and puzzle people for miles and miles around. The nature of this light is not very well known. It is intensely brilliant, and, Mr. Weidner says, looks much like an arc light. Whether or not this light could be seen from Juniata by people of York is a question, but there is a possibility, and a strong one, too, that a bright light raised to an elevation of a couple thousand feet could be seen for over 50 miles on a bright night, although its apparent elevation from here would not be so great as stated by those who saw the light a few nights ago.'

Nor, one might add, would it explain fantastic speeds and traverses across the zenith!

Even though the spaceship matter had begun to snowball in the 16 days since the first report, some editors continued to use the idea as a target for their wit. The editor of the *Kearney Daily Hub*, for example, wrote that now the "light in the sky" was seen every night over the city and remained unexplained. But he also wrote:

Chief of Police Julian is the last gentleman who claims to have seen the airship. He says he saw it rise in the west, sail toward the east, and light near Durley Hall. Janitor Eck refused to confirm the story of his chief, and the night police object to making affidavits to anything the chief says.'

The *Beatrice Daily Express* carried a story about a second sighting in that city on February 23:

It has the appearance of a greatly magnified star with luminous rays shooting out unevenly from the disc. There is no suggestion of an airship about it, but it has rather the resemblance of the frame of an opened umbrella without the cover. It is Venus, and the swaying motion and peculiar rays are the results of atmospheric conditions.

On February 26 the *Grand Island Independent* carried an article on another "sighting" there but explained it as the brilliant showing of Venus, the evening star. The *Independent* reported that the airship had "attracted much attention," but the *Hastings Tribune* of the same date scoffed: "O, that airship people see on high at night isn't in it with the midnight sleighing crowd."

Now the craze was three weeks old, but there had been over 20 appearances of the craft reported in southeastern Nebraska

THE WEEKLY ARBOR STATE

J. R. DODDS Editor and Proprietor.

OUR CURBSTONE PHILOSOPHER.

The Beatrice Express takes us to task for copying Anton Pallardy's article recently published in the Woman's Weekly Gazette of Beatrice on the air ship. It is said in conclusion: "Believing all these things the editor of the ARBOR STATE has the audacity to write editorials on gumption" and yet that gold bug exponent of protection its readers believe that a standard is right, that a walk on one leg as well as ought to see as clearly well as two, hear as well breathe as well with one and our nation do as much one dollar as it can on the

A Strange Air Ship.

The frequent reported appearances of air ships and flying machines in different parts of the country and especially in Nebraska, should certainly give some color to the presumption that such machines do exist. Of course the great mass of people are skeptical, and pronounce the practical air ship an utter impossibility. So it is, since a steamboat, the steam engine and the telegraph. Yet now established fact: it is as to cease to be of common knowledge told by the scientists and that the air ship is actually that it is impossible for it to move through the air. We cannot tell us how it is that

SAW A STRANGE LIGHT.

Nebraska Citizens Are Startled by a Supposed Airship.

People of Beatrice, Wyoming and Hastings were startled to night over the appearance of a strange light about half a mile above ground. The light was like a star and the color of a lantern. It was visible to the people of the town for a time. Then it would flash and disappear for a moment. It was seen at some other points. It was pronounced to be a meteor. It was seen about 10 o'clock on the 20th. It was seen about 10 o'clock on the 20th. It was seen about 10 o'clock on the 20th.

Another Air Ship Story.

Quite a long dispatch dated from this city appeared in a recent issue of the Omaha Bee telling about a mysterious aerial object of somewhat floating over Juniata, the same displaying a powerful light. It was stated that it would rapidly ascend 400 or 500 feet, at times stand still and then rapidly descend about to circles. The Bee man describes it thus:

EXPERTS ON THE "AIRSHIP"

Some Nebraska Landsmen Size Up the Apparition of the Celestial Craft.

Each Has an Opinion That Is Copyrighted, Original and Solodly Else's.

A City Jailor, a Union Pacific Trainman and a Western Cattleman Give Opinions Upon It.

Conjecture is rife over the "airship," or celestial craft that has been sailing for some weeks, and at Sacramento. The same colored lights being course have been pointed to point, but the has met many Doubt-reputable private citizens and South Omaha and and sighting the aerial been reports of clergy institutions and city Templar Idges. Every in a train of weather as been frowned down upon, who has insistently existence pertained the department—that and not to that day Morton's bureau, if has the honor to be humanity the World-Her-

PLANS OF THE AIRSHIP.

Invention of Henry Heintz on Exhibition in Omaha.

In the office of G. W. Sims, the Omaha patent solicitor, may be seen the plans of an aerial machine which would seem very much like the invention of a naval aviator of Henry Heintz.

would not be at out that the vessel to have been seen the Heintz little more than The invention s, it is thought s, through me of a bird The elongated aerial provided with a shaft provided

Newspapers in Omaha, Lincoln, Wymore, Hastings (above) and many other Nebraska towns chronicled the airship sightings of 1897.

and northern Kansas. Editors felt obliged to print the reports and rumors but described the luminous objects as kites or the planet Venus. They did not like the "feel" of the stories, however, and continued to balance news reports with ridicule. Immediately following an article about a sighting in Kearney, the *Hub*, tongue in cheek, ran this on March 4:

While on the question of strange lights, the *Hub* reproduces an extract from a letter, published in good faith by the *Woman's Gazette* of Beatrice by Anton Pallardy, a scientist from the Black Hills, who has recently been visiting in Beatrice:

February 26, 1897—To the Editor: The airship which has been seen over Grand Island, Hastings, and Beatrice is no myth. It is a reality. Where it was built, I dare not tell you; more than that your readers know that to the northwest of Nebraska is a weird, lonely and strange country known as the Mauvais Terres. There are canyons, caverns, nooks and crannies in these badlands that are so secret and remote from the ordinary pathways that men can and have lived there uninterruptedly for years, with none to molest or make afraid. It is from these Mauvais Terres the airship comes.

With my three companions I have sailed over Nebraska in a line from the forks of the Platte, along the Little Blue Valley and thence to Manhattan, Kansas, generally at night, returning to the Mauvais Terres in the early morning. . . .*

It was necessary that we should become familiar with the earth configurations lying under our aerial track. Hence, I am in your city to make some necessary investigations, in order that we may obtain a title to the route over which we propose to operate our ship.

For prudential reasons, I dare not describe our ship in detail to you. Those who have seen it, know its general appearance to be something like a very large umbrella with a transparent covering. This large umbrella is immediately above a pair of wings. These wings are expanded and contracted at the pleasure of the engineer. Suspended above and attached to the wings are two very thin aluminum balloons containing the new gas, helium. Immediately between the wings is another smaller umbrella-like affair that can be made to revolve very rapidly, for a purpose I dare not disclose to you. This then is the airship in brief, and its description will correspond with the observations of those who have obtained a good look at it. . . . Anton Pallardy.

The March 2, 1897 *Omaha World Herald* carried a series of humorous explanations from various walks of life: a jailer said, "Dere's different kinds of de red liquor; dat which makes youse see snakes, and dat which makes youse see balloons and airships"; a railroader, who felt that someone had probably mistaken train lights for a vision; and a cowboy, who felt that some fellow must have "wandered off the range . . . into a buffalo wallow and got a little mixed up on the way the herd was drifting."

The greatest cause for skepticism was that no one had seen this "airship" on the ground and that it only appeared at night. The *Adams County Democrat* said: "The airship, which is reported to have been seen by so many people, does not materialize very fast. It is funny what some people see after dark. We have heard of people 'seeing snakes' but seeing

'airships' is a new deal, and must be caused by water-diluted forty-rod."⁷

There had now been nearly 30 sightings. The *Lincoln State Journal* noted that some residents felt the airship was a sign that the world was coming to an end. Serious reports were frequently accompanied with a statement like that in the March 5 *Hastings Tribune*, "We know Bert to be a total abstainer, and we don't believe that he could stand on his head for five hours."

The editor of the *Beatrice Daily Express* heaped ridicule on the editor of the *Wymore Arbor State* for giving credence to the rumors: "The *Arbor State*, of Wymore, swallows the whole of the hoax, and implicitly believes in the airship, even going so far as to profess to having seen it. Believing all these things the editor of the *Arbor State* has the audacity to write editorials on gumption."⁸

One gets the impression that newspapers were caught in a dilemma: They didn't want to believe in nonsense, and yet there were reports from reliable witnesses. The *Lexington Pioneer* started a story on March 6 in a way that was clearly meant to draw forth from the sophisticated reader a knowing smile: "Al Abel, the groceryman, alleges that he saw the airship Tuesday night last. It had a brilliant headlight and was a sight to inspire one with terror. Al was so overcome with astonishment and wonder that he walked off the sidewalk near his residence and tore off the bow and stern of his pantaloons." However, a few lines later the writer feels compelled to note, "All the people who have seen the wonderful ship are strictly temperate in their habits and their stories ought to be credible."⁹

Now the stories began to pour in from across the state—McCook, Fremont, Clarks, and Papillion. Cynics became converts:

People may talk all they please about the strange light that has been reported seen in the sky so often of late, and claim that those who have seen it don't know a star from an airship until they are gray-headed, but they won't make C. W. Hodges believe anything of the kind. Until Thursday morning he was one of the scoffers, and didn't take much stock in airships, but he talks about it now in a serious manner. He has seen something himself—what it was he doesn't pretend to say, other than a very bright light—and is now willing to believe that other people have not been fooled by the stars.¹⁰

The descriptions of the airship remained constant through these first five weeks of reports. No one else had heard noises from the ship, but the headlight and sidelights remained. It still hovered and darted and moved with great speed. The ship was

seen moving toward all quarters of the compass, upwind as fast as downwind. (The author plotted on a map reported flight directions from the 150 sightings used for this paper, and there was no pattern, other than that most flights were toward the northwest.) There were plenty of explanations, none of them very plausible:

A gentleman . . . said that last year someone had predicted that Kearney would be destroyed by an aerial visitor who would drop from the clouds, begin work on a certain street and exterminate the town. The name of the false prophet was not given, but the fact that such idle prophecies are repeated shows what strange speculations are indulged in over the strange light seen."

All descriptions practically agree, a fact which would tend to convince the skeptical that there must be something besides bad whiskey in the airship theory."

During the past few months there have been several reports regarding an individual in the state who is working on an airship. The inventor has been located somewhere near Hastings, but he has succeeded in keeping his identity pretty well concealed. They say he does not want his airship invention to be stolen by unprincipled individuals."

Some declare [the spaceship] portends dire disaster to the country."

J. H. McCarty, of the night tower at the Portal Station, is firmly convinced that the light seen in the east is either a mammoth kite or an airship of some kind."

Nor did the scoffers relent in their attacks:

A reporter, wishing to get an idea of the airship from an expert, this morning interviewed Tom Cass, and found him a walking cyclopedia of knowledge on the subject of aerial travel. Learning that he was to be interviewed, Mr. Cass threw caution to the winds, and talked as freely and unreservedly as a phonograph.

"Did you ever see an airship?" queried the reporter.

"Never in my waking hours," was the reply.

"What would you do should you see one?"

"That depends. If I were near a newspaper man I would keep my mouth continually closed."

"If you saw one do you think you would do anything you might afterwards be sorry for?"

"I might. If I should see an airship with snakes for passengers I probably would take the Keeley cure."

"If there were no snakes?"

"I would question the integrity of my eyesight." . . .

"What do you think this ship is that everybody is seeing and talking of?"

"One of Norris Brown's air castles that floated beyond his reach and got away."

"Do you think anyone has ever seen it?"

"Yes. Charley Bessie saw it."

"Do you want this interview published?"

"No.""

Father William Rigge, SJ, professor of astronomy at Creighton University, Omaha, argued:

I am satisfied in my own mind that the alleged airship seen about a month ago was the planet Venus. I remember the night very well, it was cold and the clouds were being blown along in rifts and this will account for the deception of the star, appearing to move. The last airship was undoubtedly a balloon which some wag had sent up to enjoy

the fun the next morning. It does not seem probable that when such men as Maxim and others, who have been working on the theory of aerial navigation for years and so far have failed to solve the riddle that some fellow in the backwoods has been able to solve the matter."¹⁷

The airship had now been cruising Nebraska's skies for two months and new sightings scarcely rated a column-inch. The *World-Herald* jokingly suggested that perhaps the conman who had last year bilked several hundred people of 25¢ each on the pretense of flying in an airship had repented and was fulfilling his pledge—but was afraid to land until his safety from the mob was assured.¹⁸

From the *Auburn Granger*, April 9, 1897, came a story that is baffling in light of the fact that the author's name is given and there is attestation of his character:

James Southard, a farmer on the bottoms north of Peru, was in Auburn on Wednesday and made this office a call. Mr. Southard tells a story which a great many will doubt, and were it not for his reputation as a truthful man we would hardly care to repeat the story. He has resided in Peru precinct for the past 20 years and has always been known as a truthful and honest citizen.

Some time during Monday a number of cows belonging to Mr. Southard strayed away from his farm and were not missed until evening. A hunt for the missing cattle resulted in Mr. Southard finding himself several miles from home when darkness came on. He soon became lost and wandered about for some time in the dense growth of willows, becoming all the time more confused as to his whereabouts.

About two o'clock in the morning he saw a light on a bar in the river, and finding a place where the bar ran into the bank, made his way to the light. Imagine his surprise when he found that he had stumbled on to the airship which has attracted so much attention and been the occasion of a great deal of speculation as to what it really was, of late.

A number of men were moving about the ship, or machine, and seemed considerably surprised when Mr. Southard appeared; nevertheless, they were nothing loath to talk when he had explained how he came to be there. Something had gone wrong with the searchlight on the ship, and not daring to proceed in the darkness, the ship had been brought to the ground. It is cigar shaped, about 200 feet long and 50 feet across at the widest point, gradually narrowing to a point at both ends. Mr. Southard was allowed to examine as much as he pleased and all his questions were answered. At each end of the ship is a large, steel, snail-shell-shaped device. This, he was informed, was the apparatus by which the strange machine was propelled. Large gasoline engines caused whichever one of these in use to revolve rapidly, and to bore into the air, dragging or pulling the ship along at a wonderful rate of speed. . . .

The craft is loaded with several tons of dynamite and is bound for Cuba. Spanish troops are being massed in the cities for transportation to the Philippine Islands, and it is proposed to sail over these cities and drop the dynamite into the camps of the soldiers and on the transport ships. Besides destroying the camps and transport ships it is proposed to destroy the Spanish navy. . . . They expect to sail or fly for Cuba yet this week, and reach there by Sunday or Monday. When they do, Spain is likely to hear something drop.

This is the most extended and bizarre explanation of the craft and the most detailed sighting. One must admire the ingenuity

of either the spaceship's engineers or Mr. Southard's imagination, for it was not until a year later that airship engineers in France used a 3½ horsepower gasoline engine. The techniques of bombardment from airships as described by Southard were not to mature for another 20 years. We are thus faced with the same dilemma confronting Nebraska's editors: It seemed unlikely that such an airship could have appeared in Peru, Nebraska, and yet it seemed unlikely that a farmer could have come up with such an accurate description without prior knowledge. Perhaps Southard's report was inspired by writers like Jules Verne whose works were widely circulated in 1897.

In April there were additional sightings, northward to the Black Hills, eastward to Chicago, and south into Kansas. The cynics and mirth-makers smirked, requesting samples of the whiskey that brought such hallucinations.¹⁹ The *Wilsonville Review* editor heard a voice from the spaceship shout: "Weiver Eht Rof Ebircsbus." This translates to "Subscribe for the Review" when spelled backwards.²⁰ An open letter was sent to the Omaha Trans-Mississippi Exposition:

My identity up to date has been unknown, but I will come to the front now, i.e., if you guarantee me 3,700,000 square feet of space. I am the famous airship constructor and will guarantee you positively of this fact in a week. The airship is my own invention, and I am an Omaha man. I wish it to be held as an Omaha invention. It will carry twenty people to a height of from 10,000 to 20,000 feet. I truly believe I have the greatest invention and discovery ever made. Will see you April 17, 1897, at the headquarters.—A. C. Clinton²¹

The Exposition directors took the note with a grain of salt but did show up at the suggested meeting place. "A. C. Clinton," signer of the note, did not.

Throughout April, descriptions of the airship remained fairly constant. A few saw flames and fireballs or heard muffled engines, but usually the ship was canoe-shaped, had the customary four wings, moved smoothly, quickly, and apparently under full control of the pilot. The *Hastings Republican* editor remained caustic, opening one news story with the line: "Another man has had snakes in his head and is seeing airships and other things."²² But an *Omaha World-Herald* editorial of April 10 gave some credence to the airship phenomenon:

A number of newspapers that are now making merry over the foolishness of the people who have mistaken Venus for an airship may soon be called upon to announce that they knew all the time that an airship had been perfected. In this day and age it is not the part of wisdom to decry an alleged invention.

Folk called Cyrus McCormick a fool when they learned that he was trying to invent a

machine that would bind grain as fast as cut. . . . The man who invented the telephone was laughed at when he said he had a machine that would carry articulation over hundreds of miles of wire, and the world stopped whirling when Edison invented the phonograph. Now we have the kinoscope the telautograph, the electric motor and a hundred other things that our forbears would have thought impossible or of the devil.

And why not an airship? Of course, Maxim, the great inventor, has failed to make a successful one, but our greatest inventions were not made by skilled inventors. That mysterious light may be the long sought for navigator of the air. If it is, the fact is not surprising. . . .

The population of young Nebraska was only a bit over one million in 1897 and the fact that several thousand people had now seen the mysterious ship represents a substantial proportion. Every day the newspapers carried notices of new visits to towns that had previously not had a chance to view the wonder, while other towns like Hastings and Omaha had sufficient reason to establish a schedule, so common was the night visitor.

It was clearly established that some airship sightings were pure hoaxes. For example, the *Wymore Arbor State*, which had previously been a firm proponent of the reality of the craft, admitted on April 16: "The airship seen by the Ak-Sar-Bens at Omaha Monday night is now declared a balloon, and the guilty men who sent it up, have confessed to the joke." And the *Fremont Herald* noted on April 18: "It has developed that the Waterloo, Iowa, airship is a most cleverly constructed fake about 40 feet long, 20 feet wide, 12 feet high, put up by a practical joker during the past week and brought out Thursday night."

Perhaps the most difficult task for the researcher is separating tongue-in-cheek newspaper reports from those intended to be objective. For example, the following report from the April 16, 1897, issue of the *Albion Weekly News* is clearly a spoof:

Last Sunday Bert Disher and Markus Bullock went to Cedar Rapids to endeavor to find out if possible at what point the flying machine landed after leaving St. Edward on Thursday night. Mr. Disher is very reticent in regard to the matter, but Mr. Bullock, who likes nothing better than to see his name in print, gave us a history of the trip:

"Soon after leaving the Rapids to come home, about three o'clock, when about three miles this side of that place, we observed a bright light in the sky which seemed to be rapidly nearing the ground. . . . It soon began to take on form and finally we could see what the thing was like. It was about 37 feet and 3 inches long and 11 feet and 13 inches wide; in shape it looked a great deal like Jake Long's and Connie Eagen's hats. It struck the ground about 3 inches from us and we went over to where it was. When we arrived all we could find was a man standing there. We asked him where his airship was and putting his hand in his vest pocket he brought out a queer looking arrangement which he informed us was the ship and that whenever he landed he compressed the machine so that people could not find it. Bert gave him a cigarette and we came home."

On the other hand, what is one to make of a report like the

following, from the *Table Rock Argus*, April 16, 1897:

The mysterious airship . . . was seen in Table Rock Tuesday night by reputable citizens. It was going from the southeast to the northwest and seemed to be about 20 x 40 feet in size and so brilliantly lighted that it lighted the sky for a great distance around it. Over Table Rock it was going very slow, seemingly almost at a standstill, as though something unusual was transpiring on it; there were windows in the side and the passengers seemed to be hurrying to and fro about its compartments; just how many persons were aboard could not be ascertained even with the aid of a powerful glass brought into operation, but there were at least two ladies in the company, one of whom seemed to have her hands fastened as though chained to the seat, and the other seemed to be waiting on her, while the figure of a man, holding a huge revolver and sitting directly opposite her, left the impression on the minds of the onlookers that there was foul play aboard.

Suddenly the windows darkened and at the same instant the ship shot out into space so rapidly that in the space of a few seconds it was out of sight and the awe-stricken crowd looked at each other terror-stricken. It is safe to say most of them fell into a disturbed slumber when they went to sleep, while visions of the beautiful prisoner on the mysterious airship filled their dreams.

Those who vouch for this story are among the most reliable citizens, and are not given to imbibing bug juice, and lay no claims to vivid imaginations, and the *Argus* gives the story for what it is worth.

Checking only a limited number of Nebraska papers between April 16-22, sightings were reported at Clarks, Clay Center, Havelock, Harrison, Lyons, Hastings, Nebraska City, North Platte, Portal, Juniata, and Franklin, Nebraska; Villisca, Waterloo, and Jefferson, Iowa; Pierre, South Dakota; and one location in Illinois. Papers consulted were the *Omaha World-Herald* and *Bee*, *Hastings Republican*, *Nebraska City News*, *North Platte Telegraph*, *University Place Times*, and *Juniata Herald*.

The phenomenon was now nearly three months and 150 sightings old, and while the reports of the craft were proliferating, explanations were keeping pace. Stromsburg had a visit from the aircraft on April 13, but the excitement died down when it was found that pranksters had launched a hot-air balloon "with a rod across the bottom, to which were attached two lanterns." It is worth noting that witnesses claimed that they had seen the huge body and the rudder and wings of the craft, as had been reported at other sightings!²³

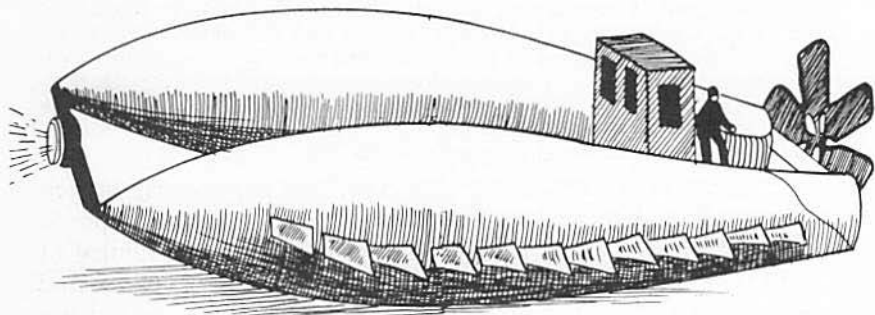
Witnesses of the visit to Harrison (near the Wyoming border) on April 18 reportedly were able to discern the form of the ship, and could so clearly see two passengers that they tentatively identified one as Albert Whipple, who had disappeared from Crawford after robbing the Crawford Baking Company. Whipple had told a friend he was "working on an airship, and

that some day he would startle the world." Many believed this solved the mystery; that it was really an airship; and that its inventor, a fugitive from justice, was afraid to land in daylight and make his wonderful invention known. Lest anyone be impressed by the certainty of this account, it should be noted that another witness asserted that the ship resembled a huge man with wings; others were so certain that it was a meteor that a party set out to "the butte" where it had disappeared to search for the pieces.²⁴

By now the existence of *something* had become so accepted that an editor of the *Fremont Herald* read another's assertion that there was no ship and everybody should have known it and wondered what *he* had been drinking. But thousands of mid-westerners who believed wholeheartedly in the mystery airship must have done so more in spite of plausible explanations than because of them. They *wanted* to believe, and reports continued to pour in with bewildering diversity.

The *North Platte Daily Telegraph* carried an article on April 20, 1897, that the airship had again been spotted, and an explanation was advanced for its presence. John LeMasters, a local craftsman and inventor, told *Telegraph* reporters that he had been visited a week before by two "mysterious looking gentlemen" who made a bargain with him to devise a working model of an idea they had wanted to enlarge on. LeMasters

The Cedar Rapids (Iowa) Gazette of April 16, 1897, carried this "eye-witness" drawing labeled: "The airship that landed in Waterloo, Iowa, yesterday morning."



agreed to the arrangement and in secrecy they drew their plans for him and he executed them in miniature, described by LeMasters as "a box 3½ inches square, with four windows, one on each side, of red, green, amber and white colored glass. Over each window an arm 6 inches long projected, to which was attached a fan or wing-like attachment." The men complimented LeMasters on his work and lack of unwelcome inquisitiveness. They packed the box, "silently folded their tent and disappeared."

The *Lincoln Evening Post* of April 21, 1897, proclaimed that the riddle had been solved and that "the countless thousands who have watched the aerial spectre in its travels over the Mississippi valley can feel assured that they were not suffering hallucination of sight or guilty of drinking a poor brand of bitters." The *Post* had come into possession of a letter dated April 20, 1897, addressed to "the editor into whose hands this note falls," and sent from—the *Airship Pegasus*:

The great problem of aerial navigation is at last solved and a mighty stride forward is at hand for humanity. After having traveled twice across the American continent, I have completed the half of the third journey from the southern part of West Virginia to the Pacific coast. . . . I do not wish to describe the mechanical workings of my air machine until I file letters patent in Washington and the larger cities of Europe. Suffice at this time to say that the prime sustaining agency is a long oval balloon, pointed at both ends and containing 30,000 cubic feet of a certain gas, not hydrogen, the whole airship weighing, when balloon inflated, not more than 2,500 pounds with a supporting power of 1,200.

After having worked for almost three years on my place in Southern West Virginia—thought to be a crazy recluse by the simple mountaineers—I have been rewarded beyond all my most sanguine hopes. . . . In the length of time that I have been afloat, about 42 days, I have lived seemingly a whole century of ordinary life, nor would I forego this rapturous delight for that of a whole century of ordinary existence.

At noon Today I rose to an elevation of nearly 2,500 feet in search of a more direct current but found none so favorable as the one I am now in. I can choose my current and should I find all against me I can make good headway with the propeller. I experience at times considerable discomfort with the cold and dampness, but do not find any difficulty in breathing at the high altitudes with the exception of a slight constriction of the chest. . . . I do not approach the earth except during the night time. Sometimes passing over cities and towns the people seem to catch sight of the ship when I drift near the earth. I wonder what they think it is? Do they realize that it is the *Pegasus*, the first to navigate space?—J. F. Calipha, Capt. of the *Pegasus*.

The envelope in which the note came had the request written on it that it be delivered to the editor of the largest newspaper in whatever town it happened to be. Since it had been mailed at 10:30 that morning, the editor assumed that the envelope had been found and mailed earlier that day. The writing was written hurriedly in pencil but, as the editor observed, showed the

captain to be "thoroughly educated." Another smaller note, tucked into a corner of the envelope, was in a feminine hand. "Evidently put in without the captain knowing it," it read darkly. "Another letter is dropped. Hunt it." But nothing more was found.

Unregenerate skeptics continued to suggest that whatever airship there might be was made of such stuff as came out of a whiskey bottle, while others found occasion to lampoon Nebraska's rising Democratic politician. They said the craft was a project of the government, most likely buoyed by hot air generated by "such experts as William Jennings Bryan."²⁵

The *Ainsworth Star-Journal* of April 22, 1897, anticipated crop dusters by some decades in suggesting possible agricultural applications of such aircraft:

Don't get too high from the ground or let your machine run faster than a mile a second. You may not hit the right spot [when sowing grain]. Don't sow on days when the wind is blowing harder than at the rate of a mile a minute or your grain may drop on some one else's farm. All fields should be at least 5 miles long and 6 rods wide. By making them in that shape you can save time in seeding. Never use less than twelve cultivators or about ten disc harrows at one time. In that way by using log chains in fastening your cultivators to your airship you can put in your crop by making one round trip. The whole thing may be accomplished by one man, 12 cigars, and a pint of whiskey. No stop is needed for food and water.

And the April 22, 1897, *Northern Nebraska Journal* of Ponca kept its readers abreast of the controversy by publishing abstracts of editorial comment from daily newspapers around the country—some of it scathing, none of it written by true believers.

While the cynics became more vocal, the believers became more credulous. The disclosure of hoaxes now and then must have disillusioned a few proponents of the "yes-there-are-so-airships" faction, but there is evidence that occasionally scoffers "saw the light":

For some time the papers have been giving accounts of the airship floating through space in different parts of the country. We have read these accounts and, in our superior wisdom, laughed at the idea of people being so far carried away by their imagination as to mistake a brilliant star for an airship. But 'pride goeth before a fall' and we are humiliated, for out of the mouths of our own people we are condemned. On Tuesday night the mysterious airship was seen hovering over our little city by several citizens.²⁶

The April 25, 1897, issue of the *Omaha World-Herald* might as well have been labeled "Airship Edition," for it carried three major (and totally contradictory) articles on the airship mystery. The first, issued by "his royal majesty . . . King Ak-Sar-Ben III, King of Quivera"—Omaha's fictional monarch—

pronounced the "aerolite" indeed real and fabricated by his court for the wonder of his subjects. His sublime majesty said it was of aluminum and could carry 20 men.

The second, a more serious treatment of the phenomenon, recalled that a Clinton A. Case, "inventor by nature, violin maker by necessity," had two years previously submitted to prominent Omahans plans for an airship and power source, which he had now "obviously" put to application. The *World-Herald* noted the similarity between his name and that of "A. C. Clinton," an applicant to Omaha's Trans-Mississippi Exposition (1898) for space for his airship and suggested that the letter had perhaps been genuine.

The third article in the *World-Herald* carries an account of a flying machine that is more easily disposed of:

In the office of G. W. Suex, the Omaha patent solicitor, may be seen plans of an airship that it would seem very nearly solves the problem of aerial navigation. The invention is that of Henry Heintz of Elkton, South Dakota. In this connection it would not be [at] all strange if it turned out that the people of Nebraska reported to have seen an airship had really seen the Heintz Airship, as Elkton is little more than 200 miles from Omaha. The invention, as described by Mr. Suex, it is thought very nearly duplicated, through mechanical means, the flight of a bird. The invention embodies an elongated aerial car entirely enclosed, provided with a steam engine to drive a shaft provided with a buoyant propeller.

Extending upward from this aerial car are ten hollow posts, which are secured at their upper ends to an elongated cigar-shaped balloon, which is to be propelled point forward. Upon these ten posts are ten parachutes, so arranged that they reciprocate in a vertical plane. They are in belt connection with a driving shaft within the car and are made to operate alternately. . . .

It would not be at all surprising if Inventor Heintz has constructed an airship which could be made commercially profitable.

Yes, it would have been surprising. The solicitor's enthusiasm to the contrary, many imaginative airship builders applied this principle to various craft, and some of them attained the heady altitude of twelve inches in between the bone-jarring, bronco-like leaps that the vertically driven pistons occasioned, and a few managed to bounce 10 or 15 feet in random directions before the navigator decided to abandon the craft and rescue his spine, or before the would-be "air"-craft collapsed in a jerking pile of broken machinery.

The airship dominated conversation—political, religious, social, military, and casual. In Grand Island it was suggested that the city siren be blown at the next sighting to alert the entire population.²⁷ The crowning of new knights in the pageantry of Ak-Sar-Ben in Omaha centered on the airship theme.²⁸ The

Democrat-leaning *World-Herald* theorized that the reason the craft never landed was that it had failed to find a *good* western Republican for the election of 1900.²⁹

The *Hastings Daily Republican* suggested that the airship be added to Uncle Sam's Navy in view of the fact that it had never yet "run aground."³⁰ The *Beaver Valley Tribune*, apparently dissatisfied with state government, reported that "the airship was seen in Lincoln and the man who was engineering the green light held his nose as they passed over the capitol building."³¹ An Arkansas preacher, according to the *Fremont Herald*, said that the airship was "the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony, and that the third angel is now pouring out from it his vial upon the rivers and fountains of the water."³² This explained to his satisfaction recent floods.

Prolonged and clear sightings of the craft in Nebraska City's bluffs provided new grist for the enthusiasts' mills:

Instead of being cigar or balloon shaped it is said to be in the exact shape of a shad, minus head and tail. The metal is aluminum, bound around with thin strips of steel. On each side of this are two large wings, which are fixed to knuckle and socket joints. The wings can be moved up or down, back or forward, or in any direction. This makes the ship rise or fall without any loss of gas.

Two motors, one electric and the other naphtha, give the motive power. It is said that from the stern there is a propeller at least 9 feet in diameter, which has a maximum revolution of 900 turns a minute. The shad-shaped portion is filled with hydrogen gas, having a pressure of 27 pounds, and a lifting capacity of 1,800 pounds.

The passenger car underneath the ship is 9 feet long, 4 feet wide and 3 feet deep, and is made of bamboo and aluminum strips, which combine strength and lightness. The navigator is said to carry provisions in the shape of canned goods and compressed biscuits. Aluminum vessels comprise the culinary utensils.

Several presumably truthful citizens of that section who were in the city today, have given the foregoing account of the vessel. They say that they came upon the vessel resting on top of a bluff in a cleared place in the timber, 6 miles south of this city, last Wednesday night. Two men were at work on it and explained that they had been compelled to return to earth because the machinery was out of order. One of the men said his name was "Prof. Charles Davidson." He is alleged to have said that the vessel left Sacramento a month ago and has since been sailing all over the country.³³

Reality now began to catch up with the airship mystery. Experimenters were everywhere, with schemes, ideas, and some minor successes with small lighter-than-air objects. And the Wilbur and Orville Wright age of heavier-than-air motored craft was only six years hence. A Professor Barnard gave exhibitions at the Nashville, Tennessee, Exposition with his airship. It was considered "the most wonderful invention of the age." Once after floating to a landing 12 miles east of town, he issued this statement: "I find I can manipulate the machine right or

left, even in a light wind. This is certain, I cannot go directly against a wind of 8 miles an hour with muscular power, as at present arranged, but by cutting across obliquely, I can make progress in the direction desired.³⁴

The *Hastings Republican* sniffed that the Nashville craft "invariably was brought back on a lumber wagon."³⁵ It was more complimentary to the less ambitious experiments of Professor Lloyd McLean of nearby Juniata, who sent aloft an airship, kites, and flags: "Look out for McLean's airship July 3rd. The local committee are negotiating with Prof. McLean, with view of securing his flock of kites as a July 3rd feature. He will float a 30-foot flag at a height of 1,000 feet. McLean is the original airship inventor."³⁶

The down-to-earth *Hastings Tribune* could not, however, let the space ship frenzy rest without poking fun one last time at the true believers:

Wednesday night as the west bound train No. 3 (Burlington) had run about 5 miles west of Kenesaw, Engineer Johnson saw a red light which was being swung to and fro across the track as a warning of danger. Cautiously approaching the light he came to a dead stop. During these days of washouts it does not take much of a danger signal to stop a train and Engineer Johnson wondered if there had been a cloud burst in the vicinity.

He was soon relieved of any fears upon that score by the man with the red light approaching the engine and asking whether he could borrow a bushel of coal. Johnson asked what in the world he wanted with so much coal out upon that houseless piece of prairie. The man said, "Just look out of the south side of your cab and you will see the airship about which there is so much wonder these days." Sure enough, there was the mysterious wonder. Mr. Johnson had no time to stop and examine the machine but told the fireman to fill the man's basket with coal.

While the filling of the basket was going on the engineer of the airship asked, "What kind of coal do you use?" Mr. Johnson replied, "Why, Newcastle of course." Whereupon the engineer of the airship said, "Newcastle be d----d, do you suppose I could trust myself up a mile in the air and depend upon that stuff for steam! Well, not much, I am sorry I stopped you. I will go out to a farmer's field and get some corn stalks and straw. So long, old man."³⁷

And "so long" it was to the Nebraska mystery ship. What indeed was the phenomenon? Was it a fake? The *Hastings Tribune* hinted darkly on May 7: "The *Tribune* is on the ground floor to know that this is the biggest fake ever published." And it should be remembered that the first news report of the airship in Nebraska came from Hastings. Was it merely a trumped-up story on a slow news day that exploded into hysteria?

It seems unlikely that the airship could have been a prototype of the dirigible or airplane. Where could it have taken off and where could it have landed? Tennessee reports indicated the

Nashville craft was unmaneuverable even in the hands of the best engineers. European flying machine developers had attained nothing that could approach the described characteristics of the American "airship," which moved in all directions under total control and could fly swiftly or even against the wind—if witnesses could be believed.

Was it purely a figment of the imagination? Hundreds of people saw the ship at the same time and concurred in descriptions; independent descriptions were virtually identical. The ship's course was traced with the telegraph. In the incomplete data I have, there were nearly 200 sightings reported. It seems only appropriate that some credence be given this mass of evidence, much of it volunteered by persons who faced cruel ridicule. Other possibilities lie open and, although unattractive to the scientist and historian, they are all the more tantalizing for the folklorist.

And yet the material is not, to my mind, the stuff of folklore; what is perhaps most fascinating about the 1890s "flying saucer" (a modern term) scare is that accounts of them were not passed on to the next generation. One would think tales of the supernatural, extra-terrestrial—if that's what they were—would be the kind of material that makes up the legend—wonder tale or belief tale. But that has not been the case. In my investigation I have yet to find a single "airship" narrative in oral transmission. They died with the people who experienced them.

Of the thousands of people I have mentioned this to, not a single one had heard of the flying machine syndrome except from newspaper research. Why should something so controversial that captured the imagination of a large audience, fade away so totally? There are at least three possible explanations:

1. As I have noted, the wonder of fantasy, or at any rate mystery, was eclipsed by the unlikelihood of reality.
2. The mood 80 years ago may have been as it is today—very difficult for witnesses reporting flying saucers. Such was the case centuries ago when sailors reported the "impossible" feat of sailing against the wind.
3. Whatever it was that people observed may have ceased to appear.

Yet, perhaps the field of folklore is nonetheless the place for the study of the phenomenon. Folklorists have long examined the occult and the mysterious, whether truly folklore or not, as background for the traditional tale. Moreover, folklorists have rarely been reluctant to approach what is labeled by others as superstition, for folklore—the substance as well as the field—proceeds from the view that there are things we do not know, while the popular practitioner of scientific methodology has all too often suffered from the arrogance of not realizing that most scientific statements are ultimately only theses and subject to revision.

NOTES

1. Substantial portions of this paper were presented at the International Symposium on Creatures of Legendry at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, September 30, 1978; at that session a similar paper with a different geographic concentration, "Once Upon a Town Named Aurora: The Great Airship Mystery of 1897," was delivered by Michael H. Simmons of Bloomington, Indiana. Some data in this article also appeared in a short item by Rudolph Umland in the University of Nebraska's literary magazine, *The Prairie Schooner* (Winter, 1938).
2. *Omaha Daily Bee*, (clipping), spring, 1897.
3. *South Omaha Bee*, (clipping), spring, 1897.
4. *York Daily Times*, February 20, 1897.
5. *Kearney Daily Hub*, February 22, 1897.
6. The peregrinations described by Pallardy total nearly 1,000 miles.
7. *Adams County Democrat*, March 5, 1897.
8. *Beatrice Daily Express*, March 6, 1897.
9. *Lexington Pioneer*, March 6, 1897.
10. *Kearney Daily Hub*, March 11, 1897.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, March 12, 1897.
13. *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 16, 1897.
14. *Pierce County Call*, March 19, 1897.
15. *Kearney Daily Hub*, March 30, 1897.
16. *Ibid.*, March 19, 1897.
17. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 8, 1897.
18. *Ibid. Hastings Tribune*, April 9, 1897.
19. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 9, 1897.
20. *Wilsonville Review*, April 9, 1897.
21. *Kearney Daily Hub*, April 14, 1897.
22. *Hastings Daily Republican*, April 10, 1897.
23. *Stromsburg Weekly News*, April 16, 1897.
24. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 18, 1897.
25. *Hastings Daily Republican*, April 24, 1897. *Northern Nebraska Journal* (Ponca) April 22, 1897. *Holdrege Citizen Forum*, April 23, 1897.
26. *Hebron Journal*, April 23, 1897.
27. *Grand Island Daily Independent*, April 27, 1897.
28. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 27, 1897.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Hastings Daily Republican*, April 29, 1897.

31. *Beaver Valley Tribune*, April 30, 1897.
32. *Fremont Herald*, April 30, 1897.
33. *Nebraska City News*, May 4, 1897.
34. *Madison Reporter*, April 30, 1897. *Hastings Tribune*, May 7, 1897. *Nuckolls County Herald* (clipped from Nashville, Tenn., paper), May 17, 1897.
35. *Hastings Daily Republican*, May 20, 1897.
36. *Ibid.*, June 25, 1897.
37. *Hastings Tribune*, May 7, 1897.