

125 Years Ago, UFOs Were Spotted Across Area

by Tom Emery
April 23 2022 7:15 AM



This year marks the 75th anniversary of the most famous flying saucer event of all, the Roswell incident of 1947. But a half-century before, alien spacecraft were reported across Illinois, particularly in this area.

One hundred and twenty-five years ago this spring, central Illinois was riveted by a string of spaceship sightings, many of which remain unexplained. The incidents were part of a nationwide phenomenon, as flying craft were reported from the Midwest to the West Coast.

Among the most noteworthy sightings in Illinois was an incident involving three men on a farm one mile north of Nilwood at 2:30 p.m. on April 13, 1897. There, the Macoupin County Enquirer reported the landing of a “cigar or boat-shaped” object with “oars” running from the bottom and a “picnic canopy on top.” This odd-looking craft sat down in a field for 15-20 minutes, then flew off in a northerly direction.

The ship was also spotted around 6 p.m. in nearby Green Ridge, two miles south of Girard. That sighting had an added twist, as the Enquirer wrote that “a man stepped forth,” apparently from the craft itself, “and began to do some repairing on the strange machine” for about ten minutes.

The work of this stranger seemed to do the trick, as the craft was then seen two hours later in Sherman, north of Springfield. At 8:45, the craft was spotted over Williamsville, still heading north.

Apparently, the craft could fly with incredible speed, or there were more than one of them. Around 9 p.m., the ship was witnessed over Edwardsville and also seen “circling about St. Louis,” over 100 miles south of the Springfield area, where it was sighted just minutes earlier.

The craft, or one just like it, supposedly returned the next day. At 8:30 p.m. on April 14, the ship was spotted by “hundreds of people” at White Hall, flying at a speed that was “very great, probably 150 miles an hour.”

It was the continuation of an area-wide trend. On the evening of April 10, “all the police officers on duty, the firemen, and hundreds of citizens” in Jacksonville were left in awe as the ship flew over the city. The following night in Springfield, the foreman of the Sangamon County Jail watched with another man for thirty minutes, witnessing a craft with “a radiating light not unlike a locomotive headlight.”

In a separate incident in the capital city, a newspaper editor and other civic leaders viewed the craft from the top of the Odd Fellows hall, and “were predisposed to the theory that it was a star of unusual brilliancy” until “the element of motion impressed itself upon their minds” and a debate erupted on what they were seeing.

Some responded jocularly to the craft, including a passenger train on the Wabash line near Quincy, which reportedly “raced for 15 minutes with the alleged airship” which had only two lights, “one white, the other red.”

Similar reports came from Hillsboro, where “the airship was seen in the western heavens by a number of respectable citizens.” Other sightings in Illinois were received from Carlyle, Nashville, Moline, Rock Island, Lincoln, Mount Vernon, and Elburn.

Certainly, Illinois is no stranger to UFO sightings. Since 1950, the Land of Lincoln ranks ninth in the highest number of sightings of unidentified flying objects (UFOs), the most of any Midwestern state.

There are plenty of believers in UFOs. In 2012, a National Geographic survey revealed that 36 percent of Americans believe in UFOs, with only 17 percent disputing such a notion. The rest – a whopping 47 percent – was undecided. The following year, a Huffington Post survey found that 48 percent of American adults were “open to the idea that alien spacecraft are observing our planet,” with 35 percent disagreeing.

But believers and non-believers can agree on one thing. Some eighty percent of Americans think the U.S. government has concealed information on UFOs from the public.

That belief is in light of the most famous UFO study of all time, Project Blue Book, a sweeping effort at Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio between 1947-69. The study recorded 12,618 reports of UFOs during that time, most of which were easily explained. A total of 701, however, are still listed as “unidentified.”

In January 2015, some 136,000 pages of declassified records from Project Blue Book were placed online. That, of course, fueled the speculation, though a century before, thousands of Americans were looking to the skies, and wondering what they had just seen.

The alleged crash of an alien spacecraft near Roswell, N.M. on July 7, 1947, captured the imagination of conspiracy theorists and launched a phenomenon on UFOs, a term that was first coined in 1953. Reports of flying saucers and other spacecraft, however, are traced by some researchers to Biblical days.

Though the 1897 wave made headlines, flight was not a new concept to humanity. The Wright brothers' flight of 1903 was only six years away, and countless inventors had tried to launch aircraft with various power sources.

Balloons had been in the public consciousness for decades and had been used with some success in Civil War operations. In Germany, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin concocted

a rigid airship in 1874 and by July 1900, his ideas had resulted in the first flight of the airships that bore his name and evolved into a global sensation, with the beloved Graf Zeppelin and the infamous Hindenburg.

Today, most UFO sightings are isolated incidents, reported by one or a handful of witnesses of varying credibility. The 1897 wave, however, was a national event. Sightings were reported in Iowa, Missouri, and Nebraska, where at least 200 reports were received.

In Kansas on March 28, around a thousand residents of Topeka reported a red light in the sky west of the city. Similar reports were received in the areas around the Kansas capital.

Between April 13-17, a total of 38 sightings were reported across 23 counties in Texas, most notably in Aurora, where a UFO allegedly crashed into a windmill on April 17.

There, an alien body was reportedly taken from the wreckage and buried in a local cemetery. The Aurora incident has become one of the most famous in UFO history and the subject of intense speculation, though many have dismissed the event as a hoax.

UFOs were also seen over California, beginning with a slow-moving craft at an altitude of 1,000 feet over Sacramento in late 1896.

Not surprisingly, the sightings had filled newspapers for months, ranging from spectacular to skeptical. In central Illinois, the Macoupin County Enquirer was among the latter.

The paper's coverage of the Nilwood sighting was described under the headline "That Elusive Air Ship" which had spawned "the query about town yesterday... 'have you seen the airship?'" The Enquirer, though, declared that "some syndicate is creating this excitement by sending up balloons shaped like ships with lights attached" as part of a big publicity stunt.

These imposters were "secretly sent up from different points" so "in a month or so, the newspapers of the country will come out with glaring headlines: 'Air Ship Discovered! Startling Expose of a Mammoth Advertising Scheme of the Podunk Corn Cure Company...on the New Sensational Method.'" Then, claimed the Enquirer, "the Podunk corn salve will be sold in every large city and little hamlet."

The following week, the Enquirer hammered the point home in a follow-up, entitled "The Faithful Duped." This article told of a few "young fellows relying on the credulity of the people had sent up several toy balloons," causing the "faithful who for many

evenings had searched the heavens for a glimpse of the airship” to have their dreams “sadly shattered.” Clearly, the Enquirer had washed its hands of the craze.

But a report from Springfield offered a practical answer, even for the time. A local paper reported that, three miles west of the city, two men on April 14 watched “in the heavens, a mysterious object with a large light” that descended to land two hundred feet from where they were standing.

Their “abject fear” was abated by the appearance of a “long-bearded man” who explained that “his airship reached from Quincy in thirty minutes” and “kindly explained the several requisites necessary for a craft of this kind to take flight.” He was joined inside the craft by “another man and also the scientist’s wife.”

The craft had a “frame of aluminum, covered with canvas” and “carried an ordinary locomotive headlight” for night flying, since the pilot “could be easily seen in the day time, which accounts for his night travels.”

This explanation reflects an incident in the Ouachita Mountains of Arkansas on May 6, when two law enforcement officers trailed a bright light in the skies until, as one modern account reports, they were “startled when a man with a beard approached, holding a lantern, and announced that he and two companions were traveling the country in an airship.”

It was also in line with the Green Ridge sighting, where the man had repaired the mysterious craft. In addition, the sightings in the Topeka area mentioned “a huge headlight,” possibly like the one in the Springfield report.

Certainly, the airship seemed to be ahead of its time, as the Wrights only managed to stay up for twelve seconds and 120 feet in their initial try, six years later.

Whatever became of the mad scientist of the airship is not known, but it seems the UFO wave of 1897 may have an earthly explanation. Or, maybe not.

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This story originally printed in April 2022 issue of The Prairie Land Buzz Magazine, a free publication distributed monthly to 11 IL counties. Find out more at <http://www.thebuzzmonthly.com>.