

The Enigmatic Wilsons and John Keely

The Airship looked like a great black cigar with a fishlike tail... The body was at least 100 feet long and attached to it was a triangular tail, one apex being attached to the main body. The surface of the airship looked as if it were made of aluminum, which exposure to wind and weather had turned dark...The airship went at tremendous speed. As it neared Lorin it turned quickly and disappeared in the direction of San Francisco. At half past 8 we saw it again, when it took about the same direction and disappeared.

— Case Gilson, reported in the Oakland Tribune -
Dec 1, 1896.

The above is but one of the accounts pertaining to the great airship flap of 1896-7. From the accounts it appears that not just one, but perhaps several airships of advanced design were traversing various parts of the United States in 1896 and 1897. But the story doesn't begin there. Instead, the story might begin a few months earlier with a man by the name of John Keely.

John Keely was an independent researcher specializing in the properties of sound during the mid to late 1800's. Purportedly Mr. Keely invented the following:

1. A machine to split the water molecule for the instantaneous release of tremendous pressures.
2. An engine which was reportedly driven by the flow of Aether into its components.
3. Designed and built a mineral disintegrator.
4. An acoustic microscope capable of viewing into the molecular and atomic interstices of matter.
5. A globe which could be made to rotate with no outside source of power as a demonstration of the Aetheric flows into matter.
6. A belt device which enabled the operator to induce levitation or gravity in a test mass.

On the other hand, John W. Keely may have been nothing but a fake and charlatan. After all, subsequent to his death in 1898, no one was able to make any of his devices work. In addition, when his laboratory was dismantled a large tank was found in the basement with pipes and hoses leading from there throughout the building. This resulted in a lot of speculation that his inventions may have actually been powered by compressed air that was not obvious to various observers of his demonstrations.

That being as it may, there are reports that John Keely demonstrated a rather interesting airship to the United States War Department in 1896. An earlier description by a reporter of his airship stated:

"The space which the propeller of the airship occupies in Keely's Laboratory comes within a radius of six feet square. A small space for so powerful a

medium - distributing over 1000 horsepower, as tested by experiment. It consists of over 2000 pieces and weighed in excess of 1000 pounds."

Keely's airship included a small stool that was placed so that it faced a keyboard. Many resonant plates and vibrating mechanisms were attached to this keyboard. According to Keely, when the plates were polarized with "negative attraction" the airship would rise and float above the ground. Then Keely could make his airship accelerate to any desired speed by damping out certain notes on the keyboard.

The demonstration of the airship purportedly took place in an open field where Keely brought the airship from zero to 500 MPH within seconds. Keely was sitting on the stool and before the keyboard. According to the account, there was nothing to shield him from the movement of the ship yet he seemed to suffer absolutely no acceleration effects.

As unlikely as it sounds, The War Department was impressed, yet stated they could see no use for such a complex device. If true, this seems terribly shortsighted. Yet this may not have been the end of the Keely airship.

A few months later, in the fall of 1896, there began a number of interesting sightings, one of which is quoted at the beginning of this article. These sightings continued into the spring of 1897. A list of some of these from the Chicago Record of 1897 include:

April 2, See Great Airship

April 3, Flying Machine Now in Michigan!

April 6, Airship Now Into Illinois

April 7, Airship seen many times last few weeks.

April 9, Airship Seen in Iowa

April 10, Airship Sighted over Chicago and Evanston!

April 12, Giant Airship Continues Over Chicago and environs!

This continues with reports from Omaha, Nebraska, Fort Dodge, Iowa, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin among others. Along with these reports was an interesting bit of history. A number of people met and talked with the pilot and crew of this vehicle (or these vehicles) and in a number of instances the pilot introduced himself as a man named Wilson.

An excerpt from the book "Genesis" published by Dell and written by W. A. Harbinson, copyright 1982 gives more information on the sightings from the late 1800's:

"The most intriguing of the numerous contact stories involved a man who called himself Wilson. The first incident occurred in Beaumont, Texas on April 19, 1897, when J. B. Ligon, the local agent for Magnolia Brewery, and his son Charles noticed lights in the Johnson pasture a few hundred yards away and went to investigate.

"They came upon two men standing beside a large, dark object which neither of the witnesses could see clearly. One of these men asked Ligon for a bucket of water, Ligon let these men have it, and then the man gave his name as Mr. Wilson.

"He then told Ligon that he and his friends were traveling in a flying machine, that they had taken a trip 'out of the gulf', and they were returning to the 'quiet Iowa town' where the airship and four others like it had been constructed.

"When asked, Wilson explained that electricity powered the propellers and wings of the airship, then he and his friends got into the airship and Ligon watched it ascending.

"The next day, April 20, Sheriff H. W. Baylor of Uvalde, also in Texas, went to investigate a strange light and voices in back of his house. He encountered an airship and three men -and one of the men gave his name as Wilson, from Goshen, New York."

Subsequently, the following was also noted (again from W. A. Harbinson).

"Finally, early in the evening of April 30, in Deadwood, Texas, a farmer named H. C. Lagrone heard his horses bucking as if in stampede. Going outside, he saw a bright white light circling around the fields nearby and illuminating the entire area before descending and landing in one of the fields.

"Walking to the landing spot, Lagrone found a crew of five men, three of whom talked to him while the others collected water in rubber bags. The man informed Lagrone that their ship was ONE OF FIVE that had been flying around the country recently, that theirs was in fact the SAME ONE that had landed in Beaumont a few days before, that all the ships had been constructed in an interior town in Illinois -which borders Iowa -and that they were reluctant to say anything else because they had NOT YET TAKEN OUT ANY PATENTS. By May of that same year, the sightings ended...."

Whether the various sightings and conversations with Mr. Wilson were the same person or different people is not completely clear. If they were the same Wilson, the airship must have been quite fast to be everywhere he was sighted (remember the Keely airship reportedly could travel at 500 MPH). Alternatively, the sightings might have involved several Wilsons. This could include Hiram Wilson mentioned in an article by the San Antonio Daily Express on April 26, 1897, in regard to a local airship sighting. The article identifies the airship's occupants as Wilson, from Goshen, New York; his father, Willard H. Wilson, assistant master mechanic of the New York Central Railroad; and their co-pilot C. J. Walsh, an electrical engineer from San Francisco.

According to the story in the Daily Express, Hiram Wilson claimed that his airship design came from an uncle (yet another Wilson?). There is some speculation that the uncle might have indeed been a Tosh Wilson who supposedly developed a special fuel. The airship sightings constantly involved the crew requiring water for their airship. Remember also that Keely claimed to have invented "A machine to split the water molecule for the instantaneous release of tremendous pressures."

Did the Wilsons perfect and build a number of airships based upon the principles presented by Keely? Were they splitting water into constituent Hydrogen and Oxygen to directly propel their craft through burning of this fuel or did they perfect the first Hydrogen/Oxygen fuel cells and power their craft(s) with electric motors (they had an electrical engineer on board)? But the biggest question of all, why did the sightings stop in May 1897 without ever revealing the nature of these airships, their inventor(s), how they worked, what they could do, and how they could be used? Or maybe the sightings never really stopped at all.