

## **Airship pays visit to downtown Bloomington in 1910**

For Bloomington, the age of aviation arrived on September 14, 1910. On that date, a one-man airship known as the Comet sailed over the city, drawing astonished crowds wherever it passed.

The Pantagraph hailed the flight as the first made by a “controllable aircraft” in Bloomington history.

Lighter-than-air airships, which unlike hot air balloons are propelled and steered, actually date back to the 1780s when balloons were first fitted with rudimentary propulsion mechanisms such as hand-cranked propellers.

A full-blown airship craze began in 1901 when Alberto Santos-Dumont piloted his small airborne craft from the Parc Saint Cloud west of Paris to the Eiffel Tower and back in less than thirty minutes, earning 100,000 francs in prize money for his effort. Santos-Dumont’s basic airship design was then copied by many adventure-seekers, promoters, tinkerers, and aviation buffs on both sides of the Atlantic, and soon these weird and wonderful lighter-than-air contraptions were plying the skies over European and American cities and towns.

Nine years later, in 1910, Bloomington residents got to see such a flying machine up close and in person. The Business Men’s Association invited Capt. George E. Yager to the city so he could launch his airship, christened the Comet, twice a day for a week.

Yager, an aviation showman from Omaha, also brought along mechanic J.T. Birmingham and “aeronaut” Horace B. Wild. The “dirigible balloon” (as it was called by The Pantagraph) was tethered at an open lot in the White Place development on what was then the city’s far northeast side. Technically, the Comet was a blimp, since it did not have an internal skeleton undergirding the fabric-enclosed cavity holding the lighter-than-air gas, like the ones made of aluminum alloy on the great behemoths built in the late 1920s and early 1930s (the Graf Zeppelin being the most famous of these).

The far-smaller, one-person Comet was lifted into the air by means of a lemon-shaped “bag” holding 10,080 cubic feet of hydrogen gas. It measured 75 feet in length and 16 feet in diameter, and was made from 1,020 yards of varnished Japanese silk, “sewed in squares, as bricks are set in a wall, so that a seam could rip only for a distance.”

Underneath the inflated gas envelope was a girder-like framework supporting a “whirring and buzzing” six-horsepower gasoline engine (see top accompanying image). The sixteen-foot diameter propeller was in the bow (or front) of the craft, and at cruising speed it made 250 revolutions per minute. The pilot pulled ropes to either side of him to control the the 5 x 6½ feet rudder, which was made of spruce and covered in French muslin.

Taking the Comet aloft was risky business when the winds exceeded eight miles per hour, and it appears Yager and his crew pulled off just three recorded flybys during their Bloomington

stopover. To the disappointment of many, the inaugural launches for Tuesday, September 13, were cancelled due to high winds.

Although the winds had not subsided by the next day, the Business Men's Association (worried, according to the local press, that "another postponement would subject them to much criticism if not ridicule") pressured Yager to green light a launch. The promoter capitulated, and a crowd of around 2,000 curiosity seekers watched the Comet's first takeoff from White Place.

All along the route the airship and its pilot were greeted with "cheers and waving hands and handkerchiefs," remarked The Pantagraph. "Seldom in the history of the city has a public amusement project created so universal interest."

The Comet sailed over the city before the pilot, no longer willing to risk the craft amid the strong northwesterly winds, cut short the initial jaunt and made an unscheduled landing at the corner of Robinson and Clay (today Oakland Ave.) streets.

The following day brought more favorable flying conditions as the Comet journeyed to downtown Bloomington, a trip highlighted by a landing on the rooftop of C.W. Klemm's, department store. "Circling above the Illinois Hotel," observed The Pantagraph, "the big dirigible sailed over the row of buildings on the north side of the square and then, as gently as a bird, it dropped down to the roof."

With surrounding streets, the courthouse lawn and office building windows crowded with onlookers, the airship rested on the store roof for one half hour (see the bottom accompanying image) before lifting off and gliding toward the seven-story People's Bank building at the corner of Center and Washington streets. The Comet then circled the courthouse dome and headed back toward White Place.

Despite the efforts of Yager and many others, airships never lived up to their promise. In the 1920s, the U.S. Navy constructed massive dirigibles with the idea that they could serve as airborne aircraft carriers. Between 1925 and 1935, three of these enormous airships, including the USS Akron, were lost to deadly accidents. And most famously, the brief and colorful history of transatlantic passenger service came to an end in 1937 with the fiery explosion of the German-operated Hindenburg near Lakehurst, NJ.

The story of the Comet's 1910 visit has attracted the attention of organizers of the upcoming "Cogs and Corsets: A Steampunk Happening," a weekend festival scheduled Friday, June 2 through Sunday, June 4, with events planned in and around downtown Bloomington.

Not familiar with steampunk? Well, it's an interactive fictional world which imagines steam powered inventions of the Victorian era to match modern technology. Adults (and sometimes whole families) dress the part and interact with likeminded enthusiasts who delve into a "future past that never was." Participants to steampunk gatherings such as the one next weekend showcase their own whimsical, often intricate costumes and personas for what's been described as an "anachronistic mix of science fiction, modern values and a sense of fun."

Steampunk fiction and art often feature city skies crowded with airships of all shapes and styles.

Free activities for this “Steampunk Happening” include a Friday evening Tesla coil demonstration at Red Raccoon Games on North Main Street. On Saturday there will be a promenade of costumed participants and a display of steam tractors, both on the museum square. Events that require a paid ticket include a soiree and historic mansion tours.

For more information, visit the Downtown Bloomington Association’s website.

In January 1950, The Pantagraph revisited the exploits of the Comet forty years after it had sailed the skies over Bloomington. The now 72-year-old George Yager had given up the thrills of promoting powered flight in favor of a more sedentary life. The herald of an airship age that never came was now in the wicker furniture business in Omaha, Neb.

Unfortunately, we’re not aware of any connection between steampunk and the wicker furniture business!