

History

1909 Willimantic has a 'close encounter'

The *Willimantic Chronicle* of Dec. 24, 1909, reported the appearance of a brilliant white light in the evening skies above the city during the previous evening. Many eyewitnesses dismissed it as a bright twinkling star. Others were not too sure. Was it an airship?

The light was first noticed in the southeast, around 7:30 p.m., above the American Thread plant, as viewed from the foot of Railroad Street. Many bystanders reckoned that it was a long way off, maybe some 20-30 miles, and not directly over the thread mill. By 8 p.m., there were around 500 people on Willimantic's streets peering into the night sky at the mysterious light. Many believed it to be Halley's Comet.

The local police asked people to move on. Willimantic's finest had no idea what it could be. They ended up in deep conversation with the locals, attempting to define what was floating in the eastern skies. Because of its size and the rays it threw out, many believed it to be a powerful searchlight. It remained still for a few minutes before shooting upwards. The mysterious craft then circled around, appearing as if someone was purposefully manipulating the controls.

Mayor Danny Dunn's tobacco and newsagent store was located on Railroad Street, and as usual it was crowd-

ed at that time in the evening. Benjamin Murphy, the timekeeper on the New Haven Railroad, entered the store in a state of excitement, and called the men out to see the strange light in the sky.

Dunn also ran out onto Railroad Street to take a look.

Dunn later told a *Chronicle* reporter that he would not swear it was an airship, but that it certainly did look like one. Others who saw it were of the same opinion.

People doing their Christmas shopping forgot what they had come for and stood on the sidewalk and in the middle of the street looking to the east, hoping to see the return of the airship, or whatever it was. Many who witnessed the strange light said it could not have been an airship, because the buzzing of an engine usually accompanied sightings of airships. Was it a star, a comet or an airship? No one could say for sure what had hovered above American Thread's Mill No. 2. The concept of unidentified



Tom Beardsley

flying objects, or UFOs, was unknown 90 years ago.

A local reporter witnessed the phenomenon. He described it thus: "The light was miles away apparently and quite high in the air. It played in the east for about 15 minutes and then vanished. Later there appeared a brilliant star in the firmament and those who had not seen the first light and saw this star were of the opinion that both lights were one and the same, but those who saw the first light said it was no star. It was too bad that the airship, if it was one, did not come nearer the city so that the people could inspect the machine. The scoffers would then have had no ground for scoffing."

A well-known Irish-American mill worker had a lot of fun. He pointed to the bright light and said "See it? It's the airship, stopped for repairs. The fellow running it dropped a monkey wrench overboard and it struck a man on the head, and they've taken him to the hospital!" The large crowds on Willimantic's streets were in such a pitch of excitement that many believed the story to be true.

The strange light was seen elsewhere in New England that evening. A Boston newspaper reported that something strange had been seen above Worcester,

Mass. "It was apparently the searchlight of a dirigible airship. It was also observed from villages east of Worcester. People in the towns of Marlboro, South Framingham, Natick, Ashland, Grafton, North Grafton, Upton, Hopedale and Northboro turned out in throngs and viewed the mysterious light in the heavens, shortly after it had been seen above Willimantic. Many declared that the light had all the appearance of a strong. There was no framework behind it, such as an aeroplane would have. It was not a balloon, as it was under control, and flew into the wind. It is estimated that fully fifty thousand people thronged the streets of Worcester watching for the reappearance of the visitor in the skies. The gaping crowds in the main thoroughfares seriously impeded the passage of trolley cars."

The New York Sun picked up the story, and reported of the mysterious dark shape with a searchlight, hovering above Willimantic. No one guessed the true origins of the Willimantic and New England UFO of December 1909. This was near Christmas. It was obviously Santa and his reindeer preparing for the busy time ahead.

Want to read more about Willimantic history? Log on to www.threadcity.com.

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.