

Sentimental Journeys

with Tom Snyder

Islands in the Sky

Few things so poignant as a future, that however bidden, never arrives. And because that future never turns up, it dwells on the edge of the mind like an unrealized love, warm as a tea-cozy and immune to the harsh light of reality. Dirigibles—those vast airships once on the verge of becoming kin to the sky—live on like that in the minds of all who wish they had experienced them.

For dirigibles were never merely seen, any more than you **see** the Grand Canyon or Yosemite Falls. Instead, you are engulfed in the experience.

A hundred feet tall and over two football fields in length, with a silvery skin stretched taut over a sweetly curved aluminum frame, these great airships were able to cross oceans and remain aloft for five days or more.

What's more, their commanders often flew at low altitudes when making an appearance. Above, the sky itself seemed to be moving. On the ground below, it was more like standing in the shadow of an eclipse. For over two decades the great ladies reigned supreme.

As is often the case with curious inventions, it took French creative genius to imagine and build the craft and German engineering to make it practical. Until World War I, the British and Americans largely ignored Count von Zeppelin's flying sausages. But when the Germans got up to mischief by conceiving of dirigibles as aerial bomb-carriers, everyone finally took notice.

Following the first crossing to the United States, there was reaction in Washington. Suddenly, the Atlantic looked less like an ocean and more like a pond. We scrambled to launch a program of its own, but the effort came too little and too late. Germany's loss of the war provided most of our air early dirigible fleet. It wasn't until the 1930s that U.S. Navy dirigibles appeared in American skies

Soon, ever-better German airships dominated the world's skies, culminating in the successes of the magnificent **Graf Zeppelin**, christened in 1928. Making 147 Atlantic crossings to North and South America, the mighty **Graf** managed to do quite well financially while turning every

voyage into a good-will tour. Americans were so impressed by the Zeppelin's first appearance over New York, that when the Empire State Building was completed in 1931, a dirigible mast topped the structure.

Everything seemed to come together: streamlined trains fast automobiles, and romantic travel aboard great airships. All that ended at Lakehurst, New Jersey on May 6th, 1937 when the **Hindenburg's** hydrogen cells exploded and she crashed to earth .



But the symbols of the great sky islands had already entered the culture. Images of dirigibles were everywhere. Stories, songs, books and movies featured them. The unforgettable sound they made and their beauty in flight were so great that later generations knew them well, if at second-hand.

My family once moved into a house with old wallpaper still in the kids' room, showing autogyros flitting among great city skyscrapers while dirigibles cruised majestically above.

So strong was the imagery, that I would not let a pair of double-hand-me-down pajamas be discarded until the elbows had worn completely through and the last printed airship image had faded into cloudless flannel skies.

Twenty years later, after finishing flight school, the lighter-than-air spirit was still with me and I spent months hustling a ride in the Goodyear blimp. It wasn't the Zeppelin of my childhood dreams, but it was close. Damn close.

But what shall we make of a picture of the **Graf Zeppelin** moored to the Empire State Building? Careful thought will reveal that there is no way on God's green earth that passengers could transferred from ship to tower—even if a dirigible had been able to withstand the turbulence 1,200 feet above the street. Several versions of these photographs ran in newspapers worldwide. Sadly, each one is a fake.

Or would it be kinder to say that the image is simply part of a future that never arrived?

