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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH HOLLYWOOD · PERSONALITIE

The Gigantic Bird Mystery

That Thing in the Sky—Is It Really a Bird, or Is It a Plane or a Witch?

CHET BURKE OF RICHMOND HEIGHTS SAW A LONG, NARROW TORPEDO-SHAPED BODY WITH A WIDE WINGSPREAD. IT WASN'T NEAR AS BIG AS AN AIRPLANE, BUT A MIGHTY BIG BIRD, HE SAYS.

ABOVE IS A STYLIZED DRAWING OF THE "BIRD" SEEN BY MR. AND MRS. CLYDE SMITH, AND BY COL. W. F. SIEGMUND. AT LEFT BELOW IS AN APPROXIMATION OF WHAT DR. KRISTINE DOLAZEL SAW.

E. M. COLEMAN OF ALTON THOUGHT A SMALL PLANE WAS PASSING OVER, UNTIL HE LOOKED UP. HE IS CONVINCED HE SAW A CONDOR. THIS AND THE OTHER SKETCHES WERE DRAWN BY **AMADEE**, POST-DISPATCH ARTIST, FROM WHAT WITNESSES TOLD HIM.

By Dickson Terry
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

AT 11:30 o'clock on a bright morning in the middle of April, in the year 1948, E. M. Coleman walked out of the garage of his home in Alton onto the gravel driveway with a bucket of paint in his hand. He was going to paint the picket fence surrounding his backyard.

At that moment Coleman, who is a man of medium build, about 45 years old and very observant, noticed a shadow moving past him on his right. He turned his head and saw it also stretched out at considerable distance on his left. His first thought was that it was a Cub plane passing overhead. Then, as the shadow moved past him, he looked up to see. That moment was a sort of turning point in Coleman's life.

What he saw still has him groping for words. So far he has come up with "immense," "incredible" and "enormous," not to mention the fact that he was "absolutely flabbergasted" and that he froze in his tracks.

Any man might have been frozen in his tracks by what Coleman saw. Flying overhead, at a height, he thinks, of about 500 feet, was a bird so gigantic that at first he couldn't believe his eyes. He called his son, James, to come and look. James saw it also, and when Coleman heard his son giving forth sounds denoting a sort of mingled wonder and surprise, he knew his senses weren't playing tricks on him.

It was on April 12, also at 11:30 o'clock in the morning, that Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Smith, of Overland, were standing in their front yard talking to a carpenter about some repairs on their front porch. The Smith home, at 3438 Brown road, is an attractive frame house with a lot of flowers in the yard. Smith, who is retired, spends most of his time these days working in the yard, or sitting and watching planes that come and go from Lambert Field not far away. As a result of this pastime, he has become pretty proficient at plane recognition and can name most of the planes that fly over.

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BUT the "plane" Smith saw this particular morning had him baffled. At first he thought it was one of the smaller private planes, like a Piper Cub, or an Ercoupe. Yet at the same time it didn't move exactly like a plane. Too slow. When he saw it the second time he called its attention to Mrs. Smith and the carpenter, whose name is Lee Chicon. They all watched it, and they all at first thought it was a small plane. Yet no plane could bank so steeply and fly in such a small circle, Mrs. Smith said to herself. When the thing came out of its bank, flapped huge wings three times and soared away and out of sight, they knew they had seen no plane.

By a strange coincidence, it was also at 11:30 o'clock in the morning of April 4 that Col. Walter F. Siegmund, an executive at Western Cartridge Co. at Alton, while taking his usual Sunday morning canter, saw something which left him speechless. He was speechless in more than one sense of the word. He was too amazed for words, to begin with, and he decided he had better remain that way for the sake of his reputation. No one, he was convinced, would believe him if he told them that while taking a horseback ride he saw a bird half as big as an airplane.

Col. Siegmund remained quiet for several days until, all of a sudden, people started calling the newspapers to report that a fabulous monster, with wings, was disporting itself in the air above St. Louis, apparently commuting from Alton. It was then that Col. Siegmund, as well as several others who had kept quiet for the same reason, came forth to report what they had seen. Among them was a 12-year-old boy, Jimmy Trares, who had seen the thing more than a couple of months ago. His mother had assured him that, while she believed him, others might not. So perhaps he had better not say anything about it to the other kids. Jimmy had decided this was sound advice.

* * *

AS this is written at least 13 persons have reported seeing it, or something. Doubtless there are many others who have seen it but prefer to remain anonymous, judging from letters which have been received by the Post-Dispatch. One of them, in part, was as follows: "I don't think it's a bird, but I hope it is. This should be looked into, then we can all know, whether its a bird or a plane or a witch."

This writer, accompanied by Amadee, staff artist for the Post-Dispatch, has spent two days "looking into" whatever it is. We have traveled from Alton to Richmond Heights, taking the testimony of people who have seen it, at the same time keeping a wary eye turned skyward on the chance of actually seeing it ourselves. After having heard the story of various witnesses, we have come to the quiet conclusion that that is exactly what it is—a bird or a plane or a witch. It has characteristics of all three.

We first found ourselves drifting to this conclusion after a long talk with Dr. Kristine Dolazel, a chiropractor who lives at 2065 Russell boulevard. Dr. Dolazel, a large and powerful looking woman in a crisp white uniform, is obviously not the type given to imagining things.

It was about 8:40 o'clock on a Monday morning when she saw what she saw. Monday, she explained, is a busy day in her profession, so she had arisen early and finished breakfast in the neat apartment on the second floor above her office. As she walked across the kitchen she heard a plane.

"It sounded," she says, "like something was wrong with the motor. It sort of roared and sputtered, and it was flying very low. Seemed like right over the house." Dr. Dolazel stepped out on the small, second-floor back porch to look. She was hardly prepared for what she saw.

"I looked at the plane," she recalled, "then I glanced over the other way and I saw this bird, just from nowhere, it seemed like. I thought, 'what is it? Is it a big bird, or what?'"

Anyway, as the thing approached, she said, it loomed suddenly much larger. The plane, in the meantime, had changed its course, and she thought for a moment that the thing was headed for the plane. Then both plane and thing disappeared from sight going in the same direction and the thought flashed across her mind that the thing was being towed by the plane.

On the other hand, when she first saw it, it seemed to have had its wings sort of folded up in such a fashion that at first she didn't recognize them as wings. Then, after it had reached its closest point, something happened which added to Dr. Dolazel's perplexity.

"What's wrong with my eyes?" she said to herself. "It seems to be going away, yet its getting bigger?" Then, she says, she realized what had happened. It had unfolded its wings, displaying a wingspread as wide as a small-sized airplane. When its wings were spread, she said, she could see ridges across them, like the ribs which show beneath the covering on the wings of a plane.

Just about the time she had decided that her eyes had been playing tricks on her and it had been a plane all the time, something unbelievable happened. The thing gave about three slow, lazy but extremely powerful flaps of the huge wings. And in a moment it was out of sight in the clouds.

Like others who have seen the thing, she decribes it as grayish black in color. Her description of the slow, deliberate beating of the huge wings also jibes with other descriptions. However, where others described it as having no tail to speak of, the thing she saw had, she says, quite an exceptional tail. It was like a rectangular box which had been sawed or divided down the center.

Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Smith belong to that school which contends the bird had no tail at all to speak of.

"I first saw it when I was out in the yard, that morning," Smith said, "and I thought it was a type of plane I had never seen before. It was circling and banking in a way I had never seen a plane perform, and I kept waiting for it to fall." It didn't fall, and he concluded it was the most maneuverable plane he ever saw.

* * *

LATER that morning he and Mrs. Smith and the carpenter were standing in the yard and he said "there's that plane again that I was telling you about." They all watched it. It seemed to be about three quarters of a mile away.

"It was going around in short circles," says Mrs. Smith, "and the circumference of the circle wasn't more than about four times its wingspread. I knew no plane could do that without going into a spin and falling. Then all of a sudden it started flapping its wings and flying away from us. We were astounded."

Like the others, the Smiths agreed it moved its wings up and down in a slow, heavy manner. Smith said it had a short, thick, torpedo-shaped body, and that its wings were short and very wide at the body, tapering down to rather narrow, squared-off ends.

Col. Siegmund, who was in command of the Army air base at Kearns, Utah, and who knows airplanes when he sees them, reports that at first glance he took it to be a small pursuit plane.

Col Siegmund and Col. Ralph Jackson, head of Western Military Academy at Alton, were taking a Sunday morning canter. They had stopped to talk to a farmer and, while Col. Jackson was talking, Col. Siegmund's gaze wandered. He looked at what he took to be a small pursuit plane; then his eyes bugged out. He realized it wasn't a plane. In the first place it wasn't big enough, and in the second place, it suddenly dawned upon him, no plane could maneuver like that. Then he realized he was looking at "the biggest damn bird I ever saw."

"It was so incredible, I didn't say anything about it," he says. "I was afraid people would think I was seeing things." He didn't even mention it to Col. Jackson. He held his tongue, in fact, until others began to report the thing to the newspapers. Then he spoke up.

Col. Siegmund is a well-known sportsman, in addition to being widely known in Army circles, and when a news service sent out a story about his having seen the thing, he began to get joking letters from friends all over the country, all asking the same question: What had he been drinking?

Col. Siegmund has been looking up material on big birds and has come to the conclusion that what he saw was an albatross. His chief ally in Alton, Mr. Coleman, is convinced, however, that it is a condor. While Siegmund has been reading up on albatrosses, Coleman in turn has been reading up on condors. He insists what he saw fits every description of the latter.

"It was flying about 500 feet high," he says. "As it flew away it flapped one wing and then the other." He estimates its wing spread at around 14 feet, and according to his book condors have been known to reach such proportions. It flew, he said, with its big feet sort of drawn up under it. It had a thick, torpedo-shaped body, not much tail, and its wings were long, rather narrow and sort of squared off at the ends. Since it was flying away from him he couldn't tell much about the head. There are bluffs along the Mississippi north of Alton which resemble, he thinks, the Andes mountains, the natural habitat of the Andean condor. Maybe one strayed up there and homesteaded.

* * *

CHET BURKE, who lives at 1029 Commodore drive in Richmond Heights, also belongs to the 11:30 a.m. group. It was shortly before lunch, on April 18, when he was standing in his backyard that he saw the thing soar over, headed toward the southwest. It was flying at about 700 feet, he thinks, and although it didn't move its wings, he has no doubt about it being a bird.

Burke, a former newspaperman, is a keen observer, and he promptly sat down and made a rough sketch of what he saw. It had, he says, a long, torpedo-shaped body, straight, rather narrow wings, with squared off ends, a head which seemed to be drawn into its shoulders, and a longish beak. Burke, after thinking it over, has joined the Albatross school of thought.

First known person to have seen the thing is 12-year-old Jimmy Trares, who saw it a couple of months or so ago, but told no one except his mother. Jimmy, red-haired, well-mannered and intelligent, insists that it was as big as a small plane. "Because there was a plane in the sky at the time," he says, "and the bird seemed to be as high as the plane and looked as big."

The Zoo, which has been receiving a lot of inquiries about big birds, some from people who say they have seen it, some from people who are just wondering what other people might be seeing, takes a very dim view of the whole business. The only birds which could even approach such dimensions, they point out, are the Wandering Albatross and the Andean Condor, and to find one of either in this part of the country would be like finding a polar bear on a tropical beach. It just doesn't happen.

Meantime, people were still seeing it and some were none too happy about it. Harry Bradford, who lives at the Jefferson Hotel, says he has seen it three times and has found it so upsetting he offers $10 for a plausible explanation.

There has been no shortage of explanations, but none that seem conclusive enough. One of them was to the effect that the big what-is-it is really an aerial magnetometer, a device 12 inches in diameter and six feet long which, when towed from a plane, is used to detect ore deposits. But it has no wings, and witnesses of the big what-is-it stand unanimous for wings.

Another "solution" was advanced with the discovery of some tracks of a Big Blue Heron on the banks of the Meramec. Amateur ornithologists immediately concluded it could have been nothing else. On the other hand, Big Blue Herons are no strangers to these parts, and they have a wingspread at best of six feet which, in the light of testimony given by eye-witnesses, would seem to place the heron out of the running.

As for the demands for a city investigation, Mayor Kaufmann has turned the job over to Administrative Assistant Charles Hertenstein, who has said he'll be glad to investigate it. He just wonders how to begin. That's all.

ONE SCHOOL OF THOUGHT HOLDS THE BIRD TO BE A WANDERING ALBATROSS, PICTURED HERE IN FLIGHT, WHICH SOMETIMES ATTAINS A WINGSPREAD OF 14 FEET. ONLY FLAW IN THIS THEORY, ACCORDING TO BIRD EXPERTS, IS THAT A WANDERING ALBATROSS WOULD NEVER WANDER THIS FAR FROM THE OCEAN.

THE GREAT BLUE HERON HAS ALSO BEEN ADVANCED AS THE SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY. THE HERON, PICTURED HERE IN FLIGHT, ATTAINS A WINGSPREAD OF SIX FEET. THEY ARE NOT UNCOMMON IN THIS REGION.

Giant bird sighting - 1948.

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