

USA - An unidentified light spotted in 1917 in Colorado



It is a little past eleven o'clock at night on Sunday, August 12, 1917, when two night watchmen employed at the Durango coal tipple, Messrs. Crawford and Ellis, notice an unusual light hanging above the western horizon. The object, which they would later describe as resembling an "illuminated airship," appears to hold position in the direction of Mancos, a small farming settlement located roughly twenty-five miles west of Durango, in the heart of Montezuma County. The light remains visible for about half an hour before fading out or slipping behind the hills.

The phenomenon does not end there. Around three o'clock in the morning, the same light — or at least a light of identical character — reappears at the same point on the horizon. This second appearance is briefer, lasting only about ten minutes. While several Durango residents claim to have observed the first manifestation around eleven o'clock, few remain awake at the hour of the second, considerably limiting the number of corroborating witnesses for this phase of the event.

The affair is reported the following day by the *Durango Semi-Weekly Herald*, under the laconic headline "Seeing Things After Night" — a title whose wording already betrays, in the editor's choice of words, a blend of curiosity and cautious skepticism typical of regional newspapers of the period.

[A Coal Tipple as Observation Post](#)

The location from which the sighting was made is not incidental. In 1917, the Durango coal tipple was a nerve center of local mining activity, the town then serving as an important railway and industrial hub of southwestern Colorado, fed by coal mines and by the traffic of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. The night watchmen who worked there spent long hours outdoors in the dark, offering a privileged — and above all continuous — vantage point over the night sky, unlike the majority of residents asleep at that late hour.

Mancos, the settlement toward which the light pointed, sits within a region of arid plateaus and mesas, not far from the future boundaries of Mesa Verde National Park, established just a few years earlier, in 1906. The rugged terrain and the near-total absence of artificial lighting in 1917 would have made any isolated light particularly conspicuous — and ripe for every kind of interpretation.

[Colorado Under Tension: A Summer of War](#)

To understand how this light was perceived, it must be placed within its immediate historical context. The United States had entered the war against Germany on April 6, 1917, barely four months before the Durango sighting. The entire country was then gripped by a fever of espionage: rumors of German saboteurs, fear of coastal aerial attacks, widespread suspicion toward any unidentified flying object. This atmosphere was not unique to the United States: as early as 1912-1913, Britain had already experienced its own "phantom airship panic," with thousands of witnesses claiming to see German Zeppelins that, according to historians, simply did not yet exist at that operational scale.

The phenomenon of "phantom airships" was, in fact, nothing new by 1917. The United States had already experienced a spectacular wave of similar reports in 1896 and 1897, stretching from California to Texas, without any definitive explanation ever being reached. The war merely reactivated and intensified this climate, giving it a new coloring: the enemy was no longer a mysterious inventor, but a foreign spy. The Mancos light, in this context, is not an isolated occurrence but fits within a long American tradition of aerial sightings open to the widest range of interpretations, from spy balloon to secret military aircraft.

"The object appeared to be in the direction of Mancos and was visible for about half an hour." —
Durango Semi-Weekly Herald, August 13, 1917

Rational Hypotheses and Possible Explanations

Several natural or technical explanations have been advanced, retrospectively, for this type of sighting typical of the early twentieth century:

A planet or bright star. In August 1917, Venus was visible in the evening sky under certain configurations, and a bright planet near the horizon, distorted by atmospheric refraction, can easily take on a misleading hue and brilliance for an untrained observer — a well-documented phenomenon in ufological annals, later studied notably by astronomer J. Allen Hynek in his work for the US Air Force.

An observation or advertising balloon. Tethered balloons, weather balloons, and sky lanterns (Chinese lanterns) enjoyed a certain popularity at the time and could drift over long distances, producing an oscillating light easily mistaken for a piloted craft.

A distant brush fire. The Mancos region, arid in summer, could experience wildfires whose glow, carried by the night atmosphere, might have created the illusion of a suspended light.

A rare atmospheric phenomenon. Some researchers in meteorology raise the possibility of electro-atmospheric phenomena, akin to St. Elmo's fire or forms of ball lightning, though these hypotheses remain marginal and unverifiable for an event this old.

None of these explanations, however, has been either confirmed or definitively ruled out: the original article provides neither a precise bearing in degrees, nor an exact duration beyond the witnesses' estimates, nor any description of the light's color or movement, which considerably limits any rigorous retrospective analysis.

Reconstructed Document — Watch Report from the Coal Tipple Post

What follows is an archival reconstruction, built from the elements reported by the Durango Semi-Weekly Herald, intended to illustrate the form a night watch report might have taken at the time. It is not an authentic document that was recovered, but an editorial restitution.

Watch Post — Coal Tipple, Durango, Colorado
 Night of August 12–13, 1917
 Observers: J. Crawford, A. Ellis

11:05 PM — Light sighted on the western horizon, approximate direction of Mancos. Constant intensity, no twinkling characteristic of a star. No sound perceived.

11:10 PM — Light remains stationary or moves very slowly. Altitude impossible to determine.

11:35 PM — Light disappears, either by extinction or by occultation behind the terrain.

3:00 AM — Reappearance at the same point on the horizon.

3:10 AM — Final disappearance. End of observation.

A Critical Look

As with the vast majority of early twentieth-century aerial sightings, the Durango observation suffers from a glaring lack of objective data: no photograph, no angular measurement, no direct written testimony from the observers themselves beyond the newspaper's summary. The wording chosen by the Herald's writer — that the object "looked not unlike an illuminated airship" — betrays a telling rhetorical caution: the journalist offers a comparison without ever asserting it as fact.

The context of a newly begun war, the temporal proximity to the United States' entry into that war, and this sighting's place within a long lineage of "phantom airships" documented since 1896 all call for methodological caution rather than hasty conclusions. Whether the Mancos light was a celestial body, a distant fire, a stray balloon, or — as some anxious contemporaries suggested — a craft of unknown origin flying over American territory in wartime, the event remains above all a valuable testimony to the collective state of mind of a small Colorado mining town in the summer of 1917.

Sources

- [*SEEING THINGS AFTER NIGHT*](#), *Durango Semi-Weekly Herald*, August 30, 1917

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