

*A military  
observation balloon*

## ZEPPELIN in Minnesota

### *A Study in Fact and Fable*

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A CHERISHED tradition among Minnesota balloonists is the claim that Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin of dirigible fame made his first flight in the North Star State and was thereby inspired to embark on his long career as an inventor and aeronaut. If one can believe Zeppelin's own words, as reported by a journalist in 1915, the story is true. But in seeking to find out when, where, and how the ascension was made, one encounters some of the most elusive and contradictory myths in Minnesota history.

According to one general version of the story, Zeppelin arrived at Fort Snelling about 1863 (the date varies) as a young German military attaché sent to observe Union

army operations in the Civil War. During his stay at the fort he became interested in balloons. By some accounts an officer stationed there had custody of a balloon and let Zeppelin try it; but the more usual story holds that Zeppelin himself commissioned the fort's military tailor to manufacture a crude bag which he filled with illuminating gas purchased from the St. Paul Gas Company. He was quartered at the time in the Round Tower, and using its top as a launching site, he made a short flight. Tradition agrees that he was hampered by either a lack of gas or leaks in the balloon; it differs as to whether he made a free flight or merely a captive ascension.

No explanation has ever been offered of how (or why) the young German transported the gas company's product from St. Paul to Fort Snelling, and anyone with experience in ballooning might wonder why he chose to hoist all his equipment to the top

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of the Round Tower, when a smooth and unobstructed parade ground lay at his feet. Nor, for that matter, has any reason been given for sending a foreign military observer to an isolated frontier recruiting center in the year of Gettysburg and Vicksburg. Nevertheless the incident has been soberly recorded as a proud "first" in the annals of the old fort.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest version of this legend thus far located is an unsigned article appearing in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of October 12, 1928, under the title "Granddaddy of Zeppelin Built Here 65 Years Ago." No Minnesota newspaper of the 1860s mentions a balloon ascension conducted at Fort Snelling or by anyone connected with the fort — yet balloons were a subject of keen public curiosity at the time, and they are difficult to conceal. Even the purchase of gas for the purpose could hardly have been kept a secret. A recent exhaustive search of the National Archives for records of Fort Snelling has revealed no reference whatever to a foreign military attaché or a balloon.<sup>2</sup> How and where the story got started remains a mystery.

<sup>1</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 12, 1928, p. 1; October 15, 1928, p. 1; *Minneapolis Journal*, August 27, 1929, p. 1; *Minneapolis Daily Times*, February 4, 1947, p. 5; *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 12, 1947, travel section, p. 14; *Minneapolis Star*, April 11, 1956, sec. 2, p. 7; *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 20, 1959, sec. 2, p. 30; John R. Holt, *Historic Fort Snelling*, 21 (St. Paul, 1938); Federal Writers' Project, *Minnesota, A State Guide*, 374 (New York, 1938); Russell W. Fridley, "Fort Snelling From Military Post to Historic Site," in *Minnesota History*, 35:184 (December, 1956).

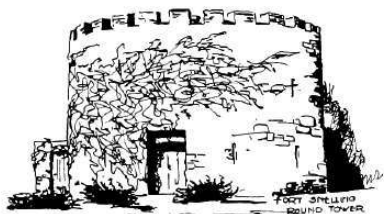
<sup>2</sup> The author is indebted to Helen McCann White, whose careful search for possible references to Zeppelin in the Fort Snelling records has made this statement possible.

<sup>3</sup> "Count Zeppelin Makes First Balloon Ascent in St. Paul," in *Hennepin County History*, January, 1942, p. 6; *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 16, 1945, p. 4; John Toland, *Ships in the Sky: The Story of the Great Dirigibles*, 41 (New York, 1957); Oscar A. Jackson Diary, August 18, 1915, Mitchell Young Jackson Family Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>4</sup> The interview is fully reported, with some variations in detail, in the *St. Paul Daily News* and the *Minneapolis Journal* for February 9, 1915, p. 1. This quotation is identical in both papers.

STILL ANOTHER and completely different body of Zeppelin lore exists. According to this version, the whole thing occurred in St. Paul. Zeppelin is variously reported as stationed at Fort Snelling, going by way of Lake Superior to join the "Army of the Mississippi," or on an expedition to explore the sources of the Father of Waters. He either owned a balloon or borrowed one from an army officer and made an ascension over St. Paul in 1863. Whether the balloon was in free flight or captive is again uncertain. Local tradition adds that he was traveling under the assumed name of "Count Steiner," and that one of his passengers was Marion Ramsey, the ten-year-old daughter of Minnesota's former governor.<sup>3</sup>

The sources of this second version are easier to trace — no doubt because it is closer to fact than the first. Early in 1915, two years before his death, the aged inventor granted a rare series of interviews to Karl H. von Wiegand, a representative of the United Press. In the course of the second interview Zeppelin reminisced about his visit to the United States in 1863 and recalled that his first balloon ascension had been made in St. Paul and "not on the Civil War firing line, as has been stated." He went on to describe the circumstances: "An officer of the Union army, whose name I have forgotten, was at St. Paul and had a captive balloon. I wanted a real sensation and arranged for the use of the balloon, he to cut the rope and let me make a long flight after I had gotten up the limit. I bought all of the spare gas that the St. Paul gas works would let me have and was able to get up several hundred feet, but the gas was of such poor quality that I could not get the bag filled sufficiently to essay a long flight."<sup>4</sup>



The story was given prominent display by the Twin Cities newspapers and aroused a good deal of local interest. There were people still living in 1915 who recalled the balloon ascensions made at St. Paul in the summer of 1863. These had been conducted by a "Professor Steiner" and had been fully reported in the St. Paul papers of that year.<sup>5</sup> Since they were the first flights to take place in Minnesota after those made by William Markoe in 1857, they had created a minor sensation. The most celebrated of Steiner's ascensions was one on which the aeronaut had carried with him Senator Alexander Ramsey's daughter Marion, then ten years old.

Alert to the local angle, both the *Minneapolis Journal* and the *St. Paul Daily News* sent reporters to search the old newspaper files of the Minnesota Historical Society and to find any persons who might recall the incident. Among those interviewed was Return I. Holcombe, librarian of the society, who, although he had "no personal knowledge nor recollection of the ascensions" was "well posted on Minnesota history." It was apparently Holcombe who suggested that Steiner and Zeppelin were one and the same man.<sup>6</sup>

The writer for the *Daily News* pointed out dubiously that "this view is hardly borne out by Zeppelin's own version of the event as given in his interview." The *Journal* reporter, however, was either more credulous or less concerned about the accuracy of a good story. Conferring an honorary (and imaginary) title on the aeronaut, he wrote: "'Count Steiner,' according to the newspapers, came to St. Paul in the summer of 1863 and obtained the use of a 'captive war balloon' owned by an army officer who lived in St. Paul. He failed in several attempts to make ascents, but on Aug. 9 with the governor's little daughter as a passenger made a successful ascent from seventh street and Jackson." Having thus thoroughly confused the information in the 1863 papers with the more recent account given by Zeppelin, he went on to interview Mrs. Charles E. Fur-

ness, formerly Marion Ramsey. She was quoted as saying: "I can remember making the balloon ascension but I didn't realize that the pilot was so distinguished a person as Count von Zeppelin." The resulting story was headlined: "Ten-Year-Old Daughter of Governor Ramsey 'Flew' With German Aviator in 1863."<sup>7</sup>

According to the more cautious report in the *St. Paul Daily News*, Mrs. Furness said: "I have no reason to doubt that Count Zeppelin was a passenger on one of the ascensions made that day, yet I cannot now seem able to remember anything about the other passengers." She did feel certain that the balloonist was a young man and that he was a German. Warren Upham, secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society, was reported as saying that he had never heard Zeppelin's name mentioned in connection with the Steiner flights, although he had talked with a number of people who had witnessed them.

On October 15, 1928, when the German dirigible "Graf Zeppelin" was making a

<sup>5</sup> "Professor" was the professional title commonly assumed by aeronauts.

<sup>6</sup> *Daily News*, February 9, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Journal*, February 9, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> The two principal biographies of Zeppelin available in English are: Margaret Goldsmith, *Zeppelin: A Biography* (New York, 1931); and Hugo Eckener, *Count Zeppelin: The Man and His Work* (London, 1938). Neither book is annotated nor gives any clear identification of the sources used. Both authors apparently had access to some of Zeppelin's early correspondence, but Miss Goldsmith deplors the lack of information on his Civil War experiences and remarks (p. 42) that "he was never a good correspondent." Mr. Eckener quotes at length from an account which Zeppelin wrote of his experiences while with the Union army. Neither the date of writing nor the location of the original is mentioned. Concerning Zeppelin's trip to the Northwest both biographers give a vague story of an exploring party composed of the count, two Russians, and two Indians which proposed to investigate the sources of the Mississippi. Both tell of long wanderings in a "desert" area and great sufferings from hunger and even more from thirst, which ended when the party "at length reached St. Paul" (Eckener, *Count Zeppelin*, 54). Whether this tale was suggested by Zeppelin's letters or based on some other source is never made clear. In either case the details are hardly credible.



*ZEPPELIN (kneeling, center) posed with a group of Union officers before the camera of Alexander Gardner during his sojourn with the Army of the Potomac*

widely publicized Atlantic crossing, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* dug up the story again and once more interviewed Mrs. Furness. She went over her memories of the Steiner flight a second time and supplemented them with a passage from her father's diary. On August 19, 1863, Ramsey had written: "Professor Steiner, the balloonist, desired me to 'go up.' I attempted it, but had to come down as he had not gas enough. Marion, however, took a ride for which I paid \$5." In this article the paper identified Steiner as "one of Count Zeppelin's associates in St. Paul." Nevertheless the legend persisted that Marion Ramsey had flown with Zeppelin and that he had gone under the pseudonym of "Count Steiner."

RELIABLE evidence concerning Zeppelin's stay in Minnesota is slim indeed. In fact, the whole story of Zeppelin's early years is shrouded in a maze of legend, which he himself may have cultivated as a young man and which adulatory biographers have done little to dispel.<sup>8</sup> Lacking access to original sources, it is difficult to state anything with certainty. As far as it goes, the von Wiegand interview seems to offer the most reliable set of facts concerning the count's American journey. It stemmed directly from Zeppelin himself, was recorded within a few hours, and has a certain tone of candor. In addition, the statements it contains agree with the known historical facts and contemporary records, so far as these can be checked.



The scion of an aristocratic German family, Zeppelin had embarked on a military career. With the outbreak of the American Civil War he secured an appointment from the king of his native principality of Württemberg to serve as an observer with the Union forces. How official the post was is debatable. One source claims that he made the trip on his own account to study the organization of a militia army.<sup>9</sup> Certainly his movements while in the United States do not suggest any heavy responsibility. They give the distinct impression of a wealthy young nobleman engaged in a reverse version of the "grand tour."

The date of his arrival in America and the length of time he spent with the army are difficult to determine. According to one report he sailed from Liverpool as late as April 30, 1863, although another has him present at the battle of Fredericksburg, which was fought in December, 1862.<sup>10</sup> He secured an interview with President Abraham Lincoln, who, Zeppelin recalled in 1915, "made the impression on me that the kaiser always makes." Lincoln gave him a military pass and permission to join the Army of the Potomac. Zeppelin's remarks as recorded by von Wiegand suggest that he met with nothing more stirring than a number of pleasant acquaintances and a cavalry engagement, probably the one at Ashby's Gap in June, 1863, where a Confederate force under General J. E. B. Stuart held off the troops of Union General Joseph Hooker.<sup>11</sup>

He must have left the army by mid-July, because he claimed to have witnessed the draft riots in New York City. Determined to see more of the country, he evidently proceeded to Buffalo, where he tested American beer and found it "heavy stuff." At Niagara he swam the river below the American falls—an exploit which gave rise to numerous tall tales among his friends in Germany.<sup>12</sup>

Taking ship on the Great Lakes, he passed the time by flirting with a group of American girls aboard and traveled as far as Superior, Wisconsin. There he must have made friends, for he claimed that a movement

was launched to rename the town in his honor.<sup>13</sup> "I suffered great hardship for several days," he told von Wiegand, "making my way through the dense woods from Superior to St. Paul, accompanied by two Russians and an Indian half-breed. On the way I passed a camp where the Chippewas were engaged in a war dance in honor of a victorious fight with the Sioux." The party probably followed the military road, which, according to other contemporary accounts, was wretched traveling at best.<sup>14</sup>

In St. Paul Zeppelin registered at the International Hotel on August 17, along with two of his traveling companions, who signed themselves as "Mr. Donsemaren, Russia" and "Mr. Dauydan, Washington." The fact created no particular stir, for St. Paul as the head of navigation on the Mississippi received many visitors, and the presence of European aristocracy—genuine or otherwise—was not unknown.<sup>15</sup>

ON THE DAY Zeppelin checked into the International, the corner across the street from the hotel was occupied by the "enclosure" of a traveling balloonist. His first ascension had been scheduled for four o'clock

<sup>9</sup> Goldsmith, *Zeppelin*, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Eckener, *Count Zeppelin*, 41; Goldsmith, *Zeppelin*, 42.

<sup>11</sup> *Daily News*, February 9, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> See Goldsmith, *Zeppelin*, 44. The same author goes on to claim (p. 45) that at this period Zeppelin became "a legend among his friends."

<sup>13</sup> If so, it was not considered worthy of notice by the local newspaper editor. The *Superior Chronicle* for 1863 contains no reference to the young German.

<sup>14</sup> This quotation is from the *Daily News*. The *Journal* gave the time as "21 days," rather than "several days." The usual time for the trip was five or six days, but it is possible that Zeppelin's party became lost and wandered in the woods for a while. The relationship between this part of the journey and the exploring expedition discussed in footnote 8 above is obvious.

<sup>15</sup> Both St. Paul daily papers list the hotel registrations for that date in their issues of August 18, 1863. The spellings here used are from the *Pioneer*, which gives Zeppelin's name as "Count Reppelin." The *Press* version is "Zepperlin." His name was among fifty-six registered at the International that day.

that afternoon, but it was postponed because of bad weather. Following the usual custom of professional aeronauts at that time, he had contracted with the city fathers to make a series of ascensions—one “grand” or “cloud” ascension for the benefit of onlookers, followed by a number of captive or “army” flights “for the accommodation of ladies and gentlemen who may wish a short aerial trip of one thousand feet in the air.” A subscription was taken beforehand to cover his expenses, and his profits accrued from the five dollars paid by passengers plus what he could collect from those who wanted admission to the enclosure.<sup>16</sup>

The aeronaut was John H. Steiner, a German who made his home in Philadelphia

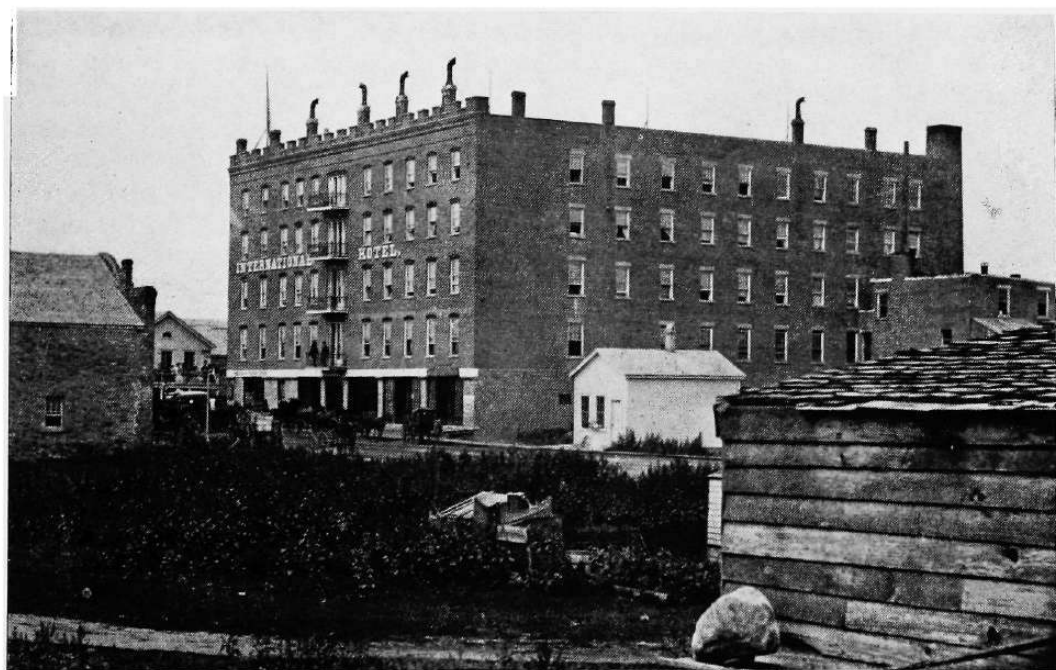
<sup>16</sup> *St. Paul Press*, July 24, 31, August 5, 12, 16, 19, 1863. The term “army” ascension probably referred to the fact that military observation flights employed tethered balloons.

<sup>17</sup> F. Stansbury Haydon, *Aeronautics in the Union and Confederate Armies*, 1:262, 269 (Baltimore, 1941); *Harper's Weekly*, 1:422 (July 4, 1857); 2:678 (October 23, 1858); *Press*, July 24, 31, 1863. Lowe and his aeronauts were civilian employees of the army.

and had been in the ballooning business for a number of years. He was relatively well known, having survived a hairbreadth escape from drowning in Lake Erie in 1857; engaged in a balloon race with the French aeronaut Eugene Godard at Cincinnati in 1858; and made the first recorded ascension from Toronto, Ontario, in 1859. Steiner had enrolled in Thaddeus S. C. Lowe's Union army balloon corps in December, 1861, and had served along the upper Potomac, at Cairo, Illinois, and on Island No. 10 in the Mississippi below Cairo. In December, 1862, he left the corps, allegedly because of delays in receiving his pay.<sup>17</sup>

That the adventurous twenty-five-year-old count and the German-speaking aeronaut quickly made contact would seem almost inevitable. The fact that both had recently spent time with the federal forces and that military aeronauts enjoyed the courtesy title of “captain” would account for Zeppelin's recollection fifty-two years later that the owner of the balloon was “an officer of the Union army.”

ST. PAUL's *International Hotel* in the 1860s, showing a vacant lot (foreground) which may well have been the site of Steiner's balloon ascensions





MARION Ramsey  
at about  
the age of seven

Zeppelin's memory of difficulty with the gas supply is also borne out by the contemporary record. According to the *St. Paul Pioneer* of August 20, 1863, the capacity of the balloon was 41,000 cubic feet and the gas company was able to furnish only 36,000 feet. Thus on August 19, when the weather proved fair and Steiner commenced his "army" ascensions, the balloon could carry only one passenger at a time instead of the anticipated four to six.

Even a single passenger proved too much when that one had the "specific gravity" of Alexander Ramsey, and to the vast amusement of the crowd the senator was forced to descend without having cleared the rooftops. "But the Ramsey blood was bound to show itself," declared the *Pioneer*, "and Miss Marion Ramsey, a young lady of ten years, made the ascent on her own account and

said when she came down that her only regret was that she could not stay up long enough." According to her later recollections, Miss Marion was particularly impressed with "how horrified my mother was on learning that my father had permitted me to go up in the balloon."<sup>18</sup>

Following this event, the *Pioneer* relates that "some single ascensions were made, the ascensionists taking the responsibility on their own shoulders. Of course Captain Steiner gave them all the necessary information as to the conduct of the balloon." Zeppelin may well have been one of these. His personal arrangements with the balloonist and perhaps with the gas company need not have been made public.

<sup>18</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer*, August 20, 1863; *Daily News*, February 9, 1915, p. 2; *Pioneer Press*, October 15, 1928, p. 2.

Next day, August 20, the captive flights were resumed, but by mid-afternoon the gas supply was so low that even the empty basket could not be lifted, and Steiner was forced to deflate his balloon without attempting a free flight. Both St. Paul papers were vehement in their disgust with the officials of the gas company, who had insisted that regular customers be supplied before the balloon was filled. Many people were disappointed in their hopes of making an ascension, and according to the *Pioneer* Steiner had incurred a loss of three or four hundred dollars.<sup>19</sup>

There was some talk of a flight several weeks later, but it never came off. Steiner apparently made a trip to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to assist another aeronaut, and his next appearance was at La Crosse, Wisconsin, in September. There the "local" reporter for the *St. Paul Press*, bound on a trip east, encountered the professor and wrote that

<sup>19</sup> *Pioneer*, August 21; *Press*, August 21, 1863.

<sup>20</sup> *Pioneer*, August 23, 1863; *Press*, August 28, September 18, 1863; Haydon, *Aeronautics in the Union and Confederate Armies*, 1:263n.

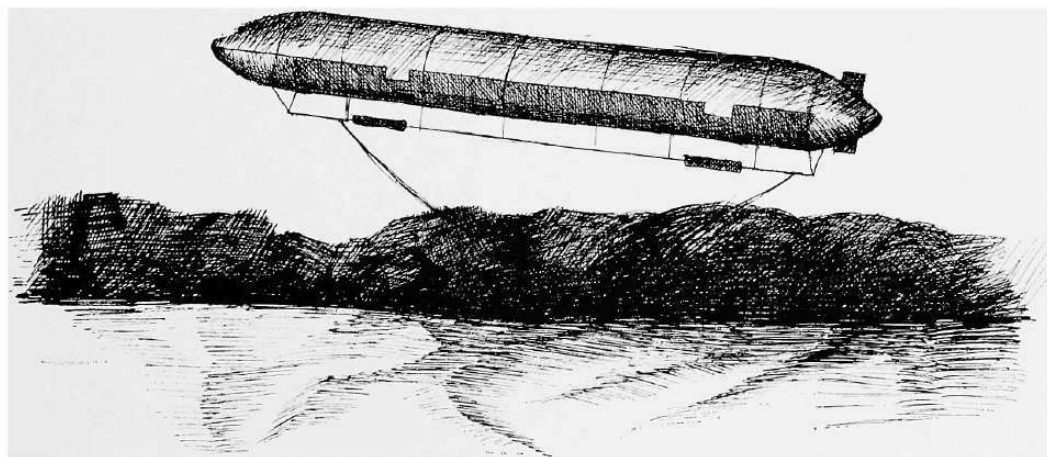
<sup>21</sup> The only other Minnesota incident that Zeppelin recorded was having his picture taken by a St. Paul photographer.

THE SKETCHES below and on the title page are by Jeremy G. Welsh. The original of the photograph on page 281 is in the Library of Congress. All other illustrations are from the picture collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.

"he had just received twelve barrels of iron filings and was busy arranging his machinery to make hydrogen gas. He isn't going to depend on gas companies as he did once." This investment may have heralded a new turn in Steiner's career, for he later patented several improvements in gas generators. The *Press* reporter concluded: "It will be many a long day, I fear, ere we will have any more attempts at aerostation in St. Paul." He was right.<sup>20</sup>

Nothing in Zeppelin's account indicates how long he stayed in Minnesota, but he returned east by way of Milwaukee and eventually departed for Germany.<sup>21</sup> The vision of him as a paying passenger in a tethered balloon a few hundred feet over Seventh and Jackson streets is a tame one. It lacks the drama of a daring young military attaché soaring off the Round Tower beneath an experimental gas bag. Nor does it have the romantic overtones suggested by a German count "barnstorming" with a balloon under an assumed name. Yet for all that, the incident may have had large consequences for the history of aeronautics. As to whether or not it did, Zeppelin himself is the only possible witness. His own words were: "While I was above St. Paul I had my first idea of aerial navigation strongly impressed upon me and it was there that the first idea of my Zeppelins came to me."

ZEPPELIN's first airship, tested over Lake Constance, Germany, in 1900







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