“A Celestial Visitor” Revisited: A Nebraska Newspaper Hoax From 1884

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Article Summary: Today we would call it a UFO sighting—a blazing aerial object that crashed in rural Dundy County and scattered metal machinery over the prairie. This vividly written hoax came from the fertile brain of newspaper editor James D. Calhoun, who believed that an artistic lie was “one which presents an absurd impossibility so plausibly that people are betrayed into believing it.”

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Names: James D Calhoun, Horace H Hebbard, C H Gere, John C Bonnell, Walt Mason, A L Bixby, John G Maher

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“A Celestial Visitor” Revisited: A Nebraska Newspaper Hoax From 1884

By Patricia C. Gaster

One of the oddest events in Nebraska’s history was said to have taken place about thirty-five miles northwest of Benkelman on June 6, 1884, when a “blazing aerolite” crashed almost within view of a group of Dundy County cowboys, who found metal machinery scattered over the prairie in the wake of the mysterious object. Intense heat at the crash site prevented them from investigating much further. The Daily Nebraska State Journal’s reports of the singular event (and of the following disappearance of crash debris) have been the source of much interest and controversy ever since.1

The June 8 report in the State Journal is as riveting today as it was in 1884. Headlines announced: “A Celestial Visitor. A Startling and Curious Story from the Ranges of Dundy County. A Blazing Aerolite Falls to the Asounded Earth. It is Evidently a Machine of Human Manufacture.”2

The article was filled with names and details. A cowboy named Alf Williamson had supposedly had his face blistered and his hair singed by the heat. Williamson was taken to Ellis’s house to recuperate, and a telegram was sent to Williamson’s brother in Denver. Brand inspector E. W. Rawlins, “from whom full verification of particulars is obtained,” and others were said to have visited the crash site on June 7. Ellis supposedly intended to file claim to the land on which the remains of the mystery object then rested.3 The Journal’s “Topics of the Times” column speculated that the “air vessel” might be from another planet “[u]nless the alleged facts are greatly magnified or distorted.” The details “are given with a fullness and particularity that almost command belief” and reflected “the intelligence of the writer, who is a man that generally knows what he is talking about.”4

This strange story was succeeded on June 10 by one still more bizarre in which the Journal announced that the aerolite had completely dissolved in a rainstorm: “The Magical Meteor. It Dissolves Like a Drop of Dew Before the Morning Sun. The Most Mysterious Element of the Strange Phenomenon.” The remnants of the mystery vessel had supposedly melted with the rain into “small jelly-like pools,” which soon disappeared. The article said ingenuously, “The whole affair is bewildering to the highest degree, and will no doubt forever be a mystery.”5

The discerning might have noted that the June 10 report seemed suspiciously eager to discourage prospective visitors to the crash site by assuring them that all trace of the strange vessel had disappeared. The Journal on June 11 tried to dismiss the subject in “Topics of the Times” by turning it into a political joke, speculating that the celestial visitor had actually been a Democratic presidential candidate because of its disappearance upon contact with water. The Democrats, opposed to prohibition and its promotion of water as a beverage, in the presidential election year of 1884 held their national convention in July, selecting Grover Cleveland as their nominee from among a number of competing candidates.
Illustration from Jules Verne’s 1865 science fiction novel, *From the Earth to the Moon*. “We know a lie when we see one and the article on our first page entitled ‘A Celestial Visitor’ is a stem-winder,” complained the Guide Rock Signal on June 14, 1884. “It reads too much like a chapter from Jules Verne.”
candidates whose campaign speeches had filled the columns of American newspapers in June.6

Predating by a dozen years the wave of airship sightings across America in 1896 and 1897, this odd tale from the yellowing pages of old newspapers has been given new life by the ready availability of today’s microfilmed periodicals and the Internet. Although widely regarded as a practical joke, it is considered by some UFO enthusiasts to be evidence of early extraterrestrial visitors to the plains of Nebraska. It’s been linked with another early “crash” story, which supposedly occurred in April of 1897, when a mystery airship collided with a windmill in Aurora, Texas, leaving the body of a Martian in the wreckage.7

Modern searches have been undertaken to locate the Dundy County crash site and whatever remains of the craft that may have survived its mysterious meltdown. Even when explained more than forty years after its supposed occurrence in 1884, the story refused to fade away. The later discovery of chunks of a greenish, glass-like substance with white inclusions (described by one account as resembling “lime jello with cottage cheese”) in the McCook area has fueled recent speculation that these objects may be connected with the 1884 event.8

The Nebraska State Journal in 1927 exposed the two 1884 stories as a hoax, created in the fertile brain of James D. Calhoun, then managing editor. Calhoun’s former assistant, Horace W. Hebbard, recalled the event (and its unintended consequences) for the Journal’s sixtieth anniversary edition of July 24, 1927. Hebbard, who had been associated with the Journal since 1879 and later served in his mentor’s old job as managing editor, said:

The story was written by J. D. Calhoun, managing editor, and among those who read it was Charles W. Fleming, an employee of the business office of the Journal. Mr. Fleming saw visions of a fortune if he could obtain this meteor or whatever it was and exhibit it for a fee to the curious throut the country. Accordingly he took the train for Benkelman the morning the story appeared bent on obtaining possession of the wonder and bringing it home with him. He was disillusioned when he arrived at Benkelman and found no one who had heard anything about the thing.9

Newspaper hoaxes have probably been around as long as there have been newspapers, but their popularity peaked during the late nineteenth century. Journalists sought to entertain as well as inform their readers—and fill space—with stories that were wildly exaggerated and sometimes complete fabrications. Columnists and editorial writers who could supply colorful copy that attracted readers were in demand and their writings were widely reprinted.

Calhoun, an ex-Confederate and former editor of newspapers at Brownville in Nemaha County and Bloomington in Franklin County, was well

James D. Calhoun. Courtesy of Stephen Hutchinson and Ed Zimmer.
known for his humorous tales and storytelling ability by the time he became managing editor of the *Nebraska State Journal* in 1881. Later in life he attributed his first lie to Franklin County sheriff Bill Deary, who supposedly induced Calhoun to support Deary’s story of a horse in Nemaha County that drank from a jug. In Lincoln Calhoun was the author of the *Journal*’s “Topics of the Times,” a daily column of gossipy paragraphs gleaned from exchange newspapers, readers’ contributions, and his own fertile imagination.\(^1\)

Calhoun’s rise at the *Journal*, from compositor to an editorial chair, seems to have occurred in response to the growth of the paper itself. He remarked in July of 1881 in “Topics” that the task of editing a paper the size of the *Journal* was more than one man could conveniently manage, and that in addition to well-known editor-in-chief Charles H. Gere, there were several subordinates, including Calhoun. Significantly, he added, “Much of their work appears without having been scanned by the eye of the chief.” The Republican Gere and the Democratic Calhoun reportedly got along well, despite the difference in their politics. Both were Civil War veterans (albeit from opposing sides), and worked as a team to promote the welfare of the *State Journal*.\(^1\)

Calhoun, as the author of “Topics,” soon gained a reputation for stretching the truth. In August 1881 the first of his fictional characters, Mr. and Mrs. Billhandle, appeared in the column, with their humorous account of trapping rats in their sitting room.\(^1\) A philosopher from the planet Mars, recently arrived in Lincoln “by the air line railway,” was introduced in print by Calhoun, who used him to voice his lifelong dislike for dogs.\(^1\) When reproached by the editor of the *Tecumseh Torchlight* for his departures from the truth, the “liar of the State Journal” replied cheerfully in “Topics” that he didn’t care about the supposed damage to his reputation:

Dear boy of the Torchlight, and all other boys, if you wake up someday, and find yourselves invested with a reputation, use it like an overcoat—wear it only when it is very cold, and at all other times keep it in soak for all you can get on it.\(^1\)
Calhoun's fascination with all things mechanical (reflected in his description of the remains of the celestial visitor's cog wheels, propeller blade, and inner workings) was also apparent in "Topics." He commented repeatedly on contemporary news stories on the Keely motor, which inventor John Keely claimed "can extract from a drop of water force enough to lift a ton." In August 1881 Calhoun confided to *Journal* readers that he had learned in strict confidence that a "Nebraska genius" had invented an artificial sea serpent for sale to seaside hotels to entertain tourists. Made of India rubber and propelled by two pairs of oars moved by clockwork, the serpent could be made any length from fifty to one hundred feet at the cost of ten dollars a running foot. The inventor, according to Calhoun, would soon bring out an improved model that could cruise at twenty miles an hour, raise its head, spout spray, turn its eyes in the sockets, open and shut its mouth, and dive.

Another of Calhoun's humorous tales, which he attributed in part to John C. Bonnell of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, was hatched while he and Bonnell were at the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, held November 16, 1884, to June 2, 1885, in New Orleans. According to Calhoun:

At the [boardinghouse] dinner table one day, surrounded by people from other states, Bonnell said the only trouble and labor involved in making post-holes around a farm in Nebraska was the planting of a beet seed every eight feet along the line where it was desired to build the fence. In the fall when the vegetables were extracted from the ground, there were the holes all ready for business. . . .

A curious sort of silence fell upon the company and the land-lady turned to me, “Is that really a true story, . . .?” And I replied, “Madame, it is in every respect entirely true and moderately drawn. And the only reason that portion of the beets which grows above the ground is not utilized for posts is that the vegetable as produced in Nebraska is so sweet and nutritious that the stock would eat them all to the ground and thus destroy the fences.”

Calhoun left the *State Journal* in the summer of 1886 to edit Lincoln's *Daily State Democrat*, where his editorial column “dots and dashes” featured the same comic poetry, fictional characters, and humorous anecdotes that had appeared in “Topics.” His former *Journal* column was picked up by other staffers there, including humorist Walt Mason, who took over “Topics” in the summer of 1887. When A. L. Bixby joined the *Journal* staff in 1892, he continued the column under the name “Daily Drift.” Bixby, one of Nebraska’s best-known newspaper columnists and humorists, remained with the *Journal* until his death in 1934. Calhoun counted both Mason and Bixby among his friends, considering himself an “impartial friend and foster father to both the boys.”

The *Democrat* failed financially in 1888, and by 1890 Calhoun was editing yet another Lincoln paper, the *Weekly Herald*. During his four years with the *Herald* he titled his weekly editorial column “Nothing But Lies,” referring to himself as the “chief liar of the establishment” and the “Ananias genius of this column.” He used the column to give tongue-in-cheek praise to the fine art of lying in Nebraska and to point out how lies could be made more colorful and hence more believable:

The telegrapher who sent the wild story from Florida about the panther jumping on a railroad hand and tearing him all to pieces is a tame fellow. . . . He should have had the terrible beast carry the victim to the top of a tall pine and devour him alive to the accompaniment of blood curdling howls.
Truth, he told his readers, was “the clearest expression of the best knowledge of the hour,” and hence wholly relative.22

Calhoun sold the Herald and left Nebraska in early 1894, after an unsuccessful bid to secure the Lincoln postmastership, and lived in Tampa, Florida, until his death in 1915.23 Although once called by a disgusted contemporary an unhappy combination of “heartlessness, cheekiness, cynacism, misanthropy, and distrust of human nature,” Calhoun also had the “faculty of always being interesting.” Although he sometimes addressed serious topics, his most memorable writing was laced with humor.24

Calhoun’s most enduring legacy in Nebraska may well be his two aerolite tales. His colorful accounts adroitly draw in readers, who may roll their eyes in disbelief and laugh but still read eagerly to the end. The accounts are not tall tales (actual happenings “with what we might with charity refer to as embellishments”) so much as whimsical flights of fantasy.25 As one of the state’s longest-lived newspaper hoaxes and among the most widely reprinted Dundy County stories of all time, they rival any hatched by Nebraskan John G. Maher.

Maher’s reputation as a hoaxter emerged during his work as a western correspondent for the New York Herald. His inventions included the supposed discovery of a prehistoric petrified man near Chadron; bogus sea monster sightings in a Sandhills lake; and the fanciful account of Maher’s discovery of the perpetrator of the Maine explosion in 1898. He once warned Nebraskans of the threats of British reprisals on O’Neill and the Irish population of Nebraska for their supposed support of a Fenian invasion of Canada. According to Maher, the British planned to send warships up the Mississippi River system, navigate the Niobrara, capture Valentine, and send a party overland to take O’Neill.26

Contemporary newspaper reaction to the State Journal’s two aerolite stories in 1884 was mixed. No Dundy County paper mentioned it, because the county’s first such publication, the Dundy County Pioneer, edited by Frank Israel, was not established until the next year. (Calhoun noted its advent in “Topics,” on May 2, 1885.) Although the county had been organized in 1873, in 1880 it was still unsurveyed, with a sparse population.27

The Schuyler Sun reprinted only the June 8 item from the “Topics” column that called attention to the supposed dispatch from Dundy County announcing the fall of the aerolite. The Omaha Daily Bee, which covered southwestern Nebraska news, considered the stories a joke. “If the heavenly visitor had only struck the name of the town,” the Bee said in a gibe at the spelling of Benkelman’s name, “what a millennium it would be for postoffice clerks et al.” Several days later the Bee remarked: “That meteoric story from Dundy county is worthy of the latest creations of Mulhattan’s imagination.”28

The Bee’s reference to Joseph Mulhattan, a well-known newspaper hoaxter, undoubtedly recalled to readers Mulhattan’s famous Texas meteor spoof from the year before—a yarn with which Calhoun as a newspaperman was almost certainly familiar. Supposedly a giant meteor had fallen in Brown County, Texas, hitting a ranch where it killed several head of cattle and destroyed the home of a Mexican herdsman. The meteor was embedded two hundred feet deep in the earth and towered seventy feet above ground. The Bee’s article on the event from April 19, 1883, was headlined: “A Monster Lie. The Most Gigantic Fiction of the Century. The Author Buried Two Hundred Feet Under Ground. Texas Takes the Bakery.”29

The McCook Weekly Tribune linked the 1884 meteor incident with a slightly earlier hoax from southwest Nebraska about a waterspout that supposedly swept away eleven cowboys during a roundup near the Frenchman River. The Tribune on June 5 ridiculed the extent to which the bogus waterspout story had been reported in the regional press, noting on June 12 in a brief mention of the even more fantastic aerolite tales that “southwestern Nebraska, and Benkelman, in particular, has been prolific of wondrous things recently.” The Nebraska State Journal Building at Ninth and P, Lincoln, sometime after 1881. NSHS RG2158-248
waterspout hoax, said by a Sidney newspaper to be the product of an “able-bodied liar,” may have attracted Calhoun’s attention to sparsely settled Dundy County, suggesting a locale for his own invented tale shortly afterward. A follow-up, tongue-in-cheek mention by the Tribune on June 26 said: “Since the cloud-burst and aerolite struck the range, riders are becoming suspicious of the high, mountainous peaks of the Blackwood [Creek].”

The Daily Boomerang, published at Laramie, Wyoming Territory, reprinted both articles on June 12, but on June 14 recognized the political joke implied by the incident:

The Lincoln Journal says “it is believed the aerial visitor that recently descended from the sky in Dundy county, Nebraska, was the democratic candidate for president the bourbons have been looking for. Its dissolution by contact with water would appear to support the theory.” This is a cruel stab at the old party of “time-honored principles.”

The Boomerang may have been more disposed than other newspapers to print the tales. It was established in 1881 by Bill Nye, the author of many humorous yarns of frontier life that first appeared in the Boomerang. After he left the Boomerang, Nye went on the lecture circuit. Calhoun met him in 1888 in Lincoln at a February 23 reception given Nye by local newspapermen after his evening lecture at the Funke Opera House. Calhoun described Nye as “celebrated . . . . a great success” but considered Walt Mason, then employed on the State Journal, to have more talent.

Thomas H. Hyde’s Daily Evening News, published in Lincoln, was openly dismissive of the 1884 aerolite’s fall to earth. After paraphrasing the first article from the State Journal, Hyde wrote on June 9: “This wonderful affair smacks something like the old moon story that set the world agog some years ago,” comparing it to a famous newspaper hoax perpetrated by the New York Sun in 1835 in which a series of six articles announced the supposed discovery of life on the moon. Hyde went on to speculate whimsically that the machinery scattered at the Nebraska crash site might have come from a comet that caught its tail on a horn of the new moon or that the craft may have been sent to earth by the man in the moon on an exploring expedition. A bulletin appended to Hyde’s main article announced that the “wonderful piece of mechanism” was in reality a portion of the McCormick Twine Binder, “no improvement on the kind sold by Hovey & Peck at 285 and 287 North 10th St.”

S. B. Newmeyer, editor and publisher of the Guide Rock Signal, agreed with Hyde that the story was suspicious. He reprinted both articles about the fall of the meteor and its dissolution on the Signal’s front page on June 14, but noted on the editorial page: “We know a lie when we see one and the article on our first page entitled ‘A Celestial Visitor’ is a stem-winder. It reads too much like a chapter from Jules Verne.” Perhaps in an effort to soften his words, he added that farm readers could still gain something useful from the stories: “Don’t leave your implements exposed to the weather.”


The Nebraska Nugget, edited and published at Holdrege by Thomas M. Hopwood, was equally colorful. E. S. Sutton, author of Sutton’s Southwest Nebraska, published in 1983, recalled seeing in the 1920s an early copy of the Nugget that included the story under the headlines: “STRANGE PHENOMENA—Has Auld Nick’s Aerial Bicycle Made a Lunge? And Escaping His Hands Fallen to Earth, This Mundane Sphere? A Red Hot Machine From the Nether Element? The Startling Find of Some Dundy County Ranchers.” Sutton remembered the newspaper’s date as sometime in May 1884, but a review of the weekly Nugget’s files for May and June, on microfilm at the Nebraska State Historical Society, yields no mention of the incident, which was almost certainly published in the one issue missing during these months—that of June 11. Editor Hopwood, like others, probably put the relevant issue aside as a souvenir—or perhaps deliberately removed it from his backfiles to avoid future embarrassment. The Phonograph at St. Paul, Nebraska, used identical headlines, probably lifted from the Nugget, in its June 13 reprint of the now familiar story.

Hebbard, in his 1927 admission that “Calhoun’s Meteor” was a hoax, noted that fiction writing when news was scarce was not uncommon among newspapermen in the early days when newspapers provided entertainment as well as information and were always looking for whatever made good copy. It was best, said Hebbard, that when a startling story appeared as news, “to take it with several grains of salt, altho this was not always done.”

Calhoun
himself some six months after the 1884 aerolite stories explained to *State Journal* readers in “Topics of the Times” his concept of an artistic lie as “one which presents an absurd impossibility so plausibly that people are betrayed into believing it, when a careful examination would be sufficient to cause its rejection as absurd.” Any other kind of lie, he said, “does not show the touch of genius.”

Calhoun’s touch of that genius as a storyteller lives on in his two fantastic tales of a mystery object that fell to earth in Nebraska in 1884. They briefly seized the imagination of newspaper readers, beguiling some of them with detailed descriptions of the remains of a wondrous flying machine, and amusing others, who appreciated them only as entertaining stories.

Reader interest lagged when no further stories immediately appeared to explain the celestial visitor or its subsequent disappearance. But the tales remained in the backfiles of the *Nebraska State Journal*, waiting to be rediscovered and spread by a new generation of readers with access to historical newspapers on microfilm and the Internet. Curiously, their exposure in print as a hoax in 1927 by the same newspaper in which they first appeared, never achieved the circulation of the original 1884 “news” stories, which continue to intrigue modern readers.
The James D. Calhoun house in Lincoln, a two-and-one-half-story frame house built about 1889-90, is now on the National Register of Historic Places. LC13: C06-304