

*A portrait of Zeppelin
taken in 1863, when
the count was
twenty-five years old*



ZEPPELIN in Minnesota

The Count's Own Story

Translated by MARIA BACH DUNN

Introduction and notes by RHODA R. GILMAN

THE FACT THAT Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin had his earliest experience in a balloon over St. Paul in 1863 was established beyond much question in an article that appeared nearly two years ago in *Minnesota History*.¹ Research in the St. Paul newspapers of 1863 revealed that Zeppelin had registered at the International Hotel on August 17, and that two days later a number

of captive ascensions were made from a vacant lot across the street by an itinerant balloonist named John H. Steiner. Steiner took up paying passengers, and the man who later built the first rigid airship was among them.

Still, the story of the young count's visit to Minnesota was full of question marks. In 1915 he told Karl H. von Wiegand of the *United Press* that after spending some time as a German military observer with the Union army in northern Virginia, he had

Mrs. Dunn is the wife of James Taylor Dunn, librarian of the Minnesota Historical Society. Mrs. Gilman is the editor of this magazine and the author of two previous articles on the history of aeronautics in early Minnesota.

¹ Rhoda R. Gilman, "Zeppelin in Minnesota: A Study in Fact and Fable," in *Minnesota History*, 39:278-285 (Fall, 1965).

decided to see something of the country. He had traveled by steamer on the Great Lakes to Superior, Wisconsin, and then through the woods to St. Paul, accompanied by two Russians and an Indian half-breed. His time between Superior and St. Paul was reported by one newspaper as "several days," and by another as twenty-one days. There was no clue as to the route he took, how long he stayed in St. Paul, or who his traveling companions were.

Zeppelin's biographers have supplied plenty of details, but these are less than helpful. The most fanciful account has him leaving Washington with an expedition "to investigate the three sources of the Mississippi River in Montana on the eastern slope of the Rockies." Somewhere the party lost their way (understandably!) and according to the author "They were forced to eat water rats when their food supply was exhausted. Later, when they were so short of

water that they had nothing in which to cook these animals they ate them raw. He and his companions were in very serious danger of dying from thirst when they finally found their way back to civilization."²

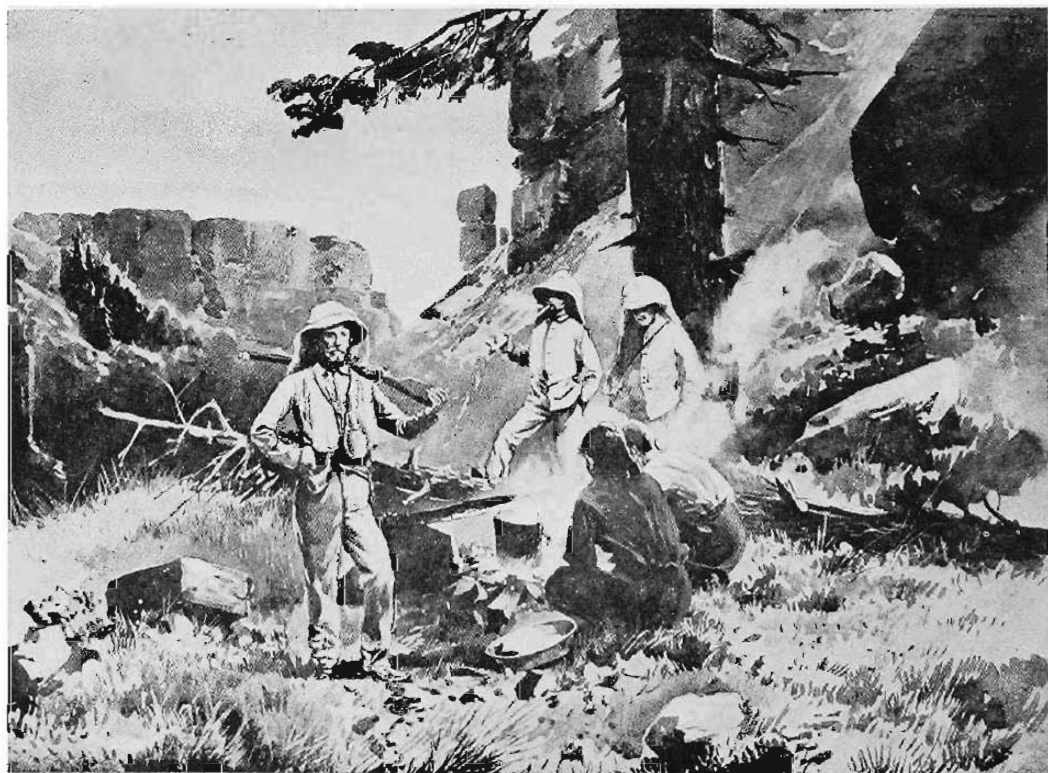
Probably drawing on this account or a similar one, another writer added a further interpretation: "It was a strange party, consisting of two not-very-bright Indians, two inexperienced Russians, and himself [Zeppelin]. The expedition ended at the point of starvation in St. Paul, Minnesota."³

One of many German biographers of Zeppelin has him experiencing his first balloon ascension at St. Paul "in Canada," then engaging in a "purely scientific" journey to the source of the Mississippi. Here also the

² Margaret Goldsmith, *Zeppelin: A Biography*, 43 (New York, 1931). The "water rats" were undoubtedly muskrats.

³ John Toland, *Ships in the Sky: The Story of the Great Dirigibles*, 41 (New York, 1957).

A German illustrator's conception of Zeppelin and his Russian friends seeking the source of the Mississippi River



water rat story is repeated, but according to this author Zeppelin and his friends ate the animals raw because they had no fire.⁴

Even the most recent and best biography, written by the count's long-time friend and associate, Hugo Eckener, is surprisingly vague concerning the trip to Minnesota. Neither an exact time nor route is given. Eckener has the count joining an expedition with two Russians and two Indians "in order, if possible, to trace the sources of the Mississippi." He concludes that the adventure was more or less a failure and "meant no more than a few weeks of a trapper's existence in desert areas, involving much hardship and a constant danger of perishing from hunger and thirst."⁵ After that, he recounts, Zeppelin was so accustomed to the open air that he had trouble sleeping during his first night under a roof and had to carry his bed out of doors. Eckener also mentions the balloon ascension in St. Paul but denies that it had any major influence on Zeppelin's thinking.

Just where did Zeppelin go in Minnesota? What did he do, how long did he stay, and what was he looking for? Who were his mysterious Russian companions, and where did he meet them? Was the balloon ascension just another casual adventure, or did he already have a serious interest in aerial navigation? It was clear that these questions could only be answered by Zeppelin's own papers—letters to his family, or perhaps a diary—provided that such papers existed in

the first place, had survived a hundred years and two world wars, and were available for study.

HOW THE COUNT'S own story of his Minnesota trip was finally uncovered is a tale of historical detection involving international teamwork. It begins in August, 1965, when the Minnesota Historical Society received a letter from Chester D. Bradley, curator of the Fort Monroe Casemate Museum at Fort Monroe, Virginia. Mr. Bradley wanted information on Zeppelin's first balloon flight.

His question was prompted by an article which had appeared in the Newport News Daily Press of May 30, 1965, reporting that an airplane runway had just been built on the very site of this historic event, which, it claimed, took place near Charles City, Virginia, in 1862. The article went on to describe in vivid detail how Zeppelin, "a boy at the time, received permission from Union officers to make the ascent and while in the air he came under fire from Confederate troops." Abandoning the balloon, he had to "slide down a restraining cable and burned the flesh from his hands during the emergency descent"—an injury which prevented him from making another ascent for two weeks but somehow left him with a lifelong interest in balloons.⁶

Having been asked his opinion of this story, Mr. Bradley could only answer that according to most authorities Zeppelin had not been in the United States in 1862 and had made his first balloon flight over Minnesota, not Virginia. As a conscientious historian he did not let the matter rest there but sought confirmation and further details. The Minnesota Historical Society was able to send him a copy of the count's own statement (as reported in *Twin Cities papers*) about his balloon ascension in St. Paul and later a copy of this author's article in *Minnesota History*.

But some question still remained. When did Zeppelin arrive in the United States? One biographer said he sailed from Liver-

⁴ Franz Carl Endres, "Vom Kriegsschüler zum General," in Ludwig Fischer, ed., comp., *Graf Zeppelin: Sein Leben—Sein Werk*, 64 (Munich, 1929). The author is indebted to A. Hermine Poatgieter for a translation of the relevant passages.

⁵ Hugo Eckener, *Count Zeppelin: The Man and His Work*, translated by Leigh Parnell, 53, 54 (London, 1938). It has been suggested that the term "desert area" should be translated as "wilderness." See Wingfoot Lighter-Than-Air Society, *Bulletin*, November, 1965, p. 6.

⁶ Zeppelin was twenty-four years old in 1862. The legend that his first ascension took place on the Civil War firing line seems to have been current even in the inventor's lifetime, for in his interview with von Wiegand he took special pains to deny this. See *Minneapolis Journal*, February 9, 1915, p. 1.

pool on April 30, 1863; another claimed that he was at the battle of Fredricksburg, fought in December, 1862.⁷ Could he have been with the Union Army in the peninsular campaign of eastern Virginia earlier that year?

The final answer was provided by Miss Pearl I. Young of Hampton, Virginia, whom Mr. Bradley had also consulted.⁸ In the *New York Times* of May 7, 1863, she found "Count de Zeppelin" listed among the passengers arriving by ship the day before. He had traveled on the Cunard steamer "Australasian," which left Liverpool April 25 and docked in New York on May 6.

Miss Young's interest in Zeppelin was stimulated by her association with the Wingfoot Lighter-Than-Air Society, an organization devoted to furthering knowledge of the history, science, and techniques of buoyant flight. Its headquarters are in Akron, Ohio, but its membership is international. Through Miss Young, Minnesota's "project Zeppelin" was in turn put in touch with A. Dale Topping, editor of the monthly *Bulletin* published by the Wingfoot Society.

By an odd coincidence Mr. Topping was also working on the problem of Zeppelin's first flight. During a trip to the Twin Cities in May, 1965, he had done research in the Minneapolis Public Library, but lack of time had prevented him from visiting the Minnesota Historical Society. In September of that year — at almost the same time the Minnesota History piece appeared — he published in the *Wingfoot Bulletin* an article reviewing many of the myths and contradictory stories surrounding Zeppelin's first balloon experience and raising the question of whether such a flight took place at all. In a later issue he claimed that "my remarks in the *Bulletin* would not have appeared had I known of Mrs. Gilman's article."⁹ It was fortunate that they did, for already correspondence was arriving from the Wingfoot Society's widespread membership, and new pieces were steadily being added to the Zeppelin jigsaw puzzle.

Mr. Bradley succeeded in locating the source upon which the count's more reliable

biographers had based their stories of his Civil War experiences. This was a set of "Recollections" published by Zeppelin himself in a short-lived German periodical named *Der Greif* (The Griffin) in January, 1914.¹⁰ It covered only the time from his arrival in New York in May to his departure from the Union Army in late June, 1863; in it the count recalled his impressions and adventures, but he mentioned few exact dates or places. Miss Young meanwhile suggested (correctly, as it turned out) that one of Zeppelin's traveling companions on his trip west was a young man named Alexander Davidow, second secretary to the Russian embassy, who was acquainted with the count in Washington.

But the most exciting information came from a Wingfoot Society member in Germany — Hans von Schiller, former commander of the "Graf Zeppelin" and one of the few surviving associates of the old count. In a letter to Mr. Topping dated February 1, 1966, Captain von Schiller mentioned his acquaintance with Count Alexander von Brandenstein-Zeppelin, a grandson of the inventor, and revealed that "in his castle are stored the documents, reports, etc; all the things the old count left behind." In the course of research for a book he was writing,

⁷ Eckener, *Count Zeppelin*, 41; Goldsmith, *Zeppelin*, 42.

⁸ Miss Young has done much work in the history of aeronautics and is currently writing a biography of Octave Chanute, the pioneer aerial navigator whose experiments with gliders helped launch the science of aerodynamics. Her intensive research on Zeppelin's trip to the United States has resulted in a tentative day-by-day schedule of his whereabouts from his arrival on May 6 to his departure on November 18, 1863, and also in a detailed study of the ships, trains, and other conveyances by which he traveled. Both are in manuscript form. Miss Young has generously presented the Minnesota Historical Society with copies of these as well as other research papers she has compiled.

⁹ *Wingfoot Lighter-Than-Air Society, Bulletin*, January, 1966, p. 2.

¹⁰ "Aus dem Amerikanischen Kriegsjahr 1863: Erinnerungen des Grafen Ferdinand Zeppelin," in *Der Greif*, 1:273-286 (January, 1914). The author is indebted to Miss Young for a photostatic copy and a complete translation of this.



Two views from Mittelbiberach: Above is shown the main section of the castle and at the right, a gallery dating from the 1500s.

the captain had used many of these papers and had found among them letters written by Zeppelin from Minnesota.¹¹

BY A LUCKY chance, James Taylor Dunn, chief librarian of the Minnesota Historical Society, was at this time in Europe with his wife, Mária, who is a native of Luxembourg and is fluent in both French and German. The society at once commissioned him to contact the Zeppelin descendants and ask if copies of these papers might be obtained. Accordingly, on March 29, 1966, Mrs. Dunn drafted a letter to Count Alexander von Brandenstein-Zeppelin, and in reply the Dunns received a cordial invitation to visit the count's estate, view the papers, and discuss the question further. A week later they set out for southern Germany. The quest



took them to the town of Biberach on the river Riss — a small tributary of the Danube, flowing through the province of Württemberg.

"About five miles south and west of Biberach," wrote Mr. Dunn in a letter to the author, "is the quaint, off-the-thoroughfare farm village of Mittelbiberach. The castle and its dependencies stand half hidden by many trees on a small hill overlooking the tiny settlement. . . . Schloss Mittelbiberach — although not what one would call big, as castles go — is a veritable museum, built during the 1500s on foundations of the early

¹¹Excerpts from Captain von Schiller's letter, giving an outline account of Zeppelin's Minnesota travels, were published in *Wingfoot Lighter-Than-Air Society, Bulletin*, March, 1966, p. 9. See also the issue of April, 1966, p. 1, 6. Captain von Schiller's book, since published, is entitled *Zeppelin — Wegbereiter des Weltluftverkehrs* (Bad Godesberg, 1966).

1300s. . . . To the right off the paneled and beamed entrance hall is the library of some 25,000 volumes in a small room formerly used as a chapel. The summer kitchen, dining room, and archives are on the left through heavy ironclad doors. A wide oak stairway at the far end of the entrance hall (filled with 16th and 17th century furniture and ancient family portraits) leads to the second floor living apartments. The sleeping quarters are on the third and fourth floors.

"The count . . . is about fifty years old, moustached, and rather good looking. His wife the Gräfin, of a similar age, is most charming, simple, and pleasant. Their welcome, so unassuming, friendly, and gracious, put us immediately at our ease, and for two and a half days we were made a part of their attractive family (which consists of three boys and a girl ranging in ages from 18 to 10, and a beautiful Irish setter—age unknown).

"Most of our time at Mittelbiberach was spent in the count's combined library, office, and sitting room. It is a comfortably crowded room, located between his wife's parlor and the dining room, and its furniture shows many years of continued hard use. . . . There are family paintings all over the place, and a library of handsome, hand-tooled leather bindings. . . . Scanning the titles, I found many of them to be 17th and 18th century French, English, and Italian works on warfare and defense fortifications."¹²

In this setting, Mr. and Mrs. Dunn and the count read the letters written by Zeppelin to his father from the time he first proposed an American trip to September, 1863, when he returned to New York from his midwestern journey. After some discussion, the count graciously agreed to allow the five letters written from the Midwest to be copied and gave his permission for their publication by the Minnesota Historical Society.

THROUGH the co-operative efforts described above, the general outline of Zeppelin's activities in the United States has

become clear. Like a number of other alert young European military men, he had become convinced that much could be learned from the struggle going on in America, and he had applied to the king of Württemberg for permission to make some firsthand observations. The king was impressed with the idea and readily granted him a leave of absence.¹³

His father was not so easily won over, but at last the old count dropped his objections to the trip and Zeppelin was free to start, going by way of Ostend and London to Liverpool. After arriving in New York on May 6, he traveled to Philadelphia, where he visited for a short while, then went on to Washington. There, some time before May 21, he put up at the Willard Hotel.

Whether he already knew Davidow or first became acquainted with him in Washington is not certain. The answer to this as well as other questions lies hidden in the letters still at Schloss Mittelbiberach. It was, however, the young Russian who presented him to Rudolf Schleiden, the Hanseatic ambassador. Schleiden found Zeppelin "an extraordinarily nice little man, with a range of interests unusual in a cavalry officer," and he also noted in his diary: "The way, too, that he spoke to-day about the importance of the nobility in our day was most reasonable and liberal-minded, doing him great credit." Thus impressed, the ambassador, who had years of experience in Washington, undertook the young visitor's introduction to the society of the capital and acted as a friend and counselor throughout his stay.¹⁴

Zeppelin met many members of the foreign colony and a few American officials—

¹² Mr. Dunn's letter, dated April 22, 1866, is in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹³ The details of Zeppelin's experience with the army are from his recollections, as published in *Der Greif*, which also include his reasons for making the trip and descriptions of his interviews with Lincoln and Chase.

¹⁴ Schleiden's diary is quoted in Eckener, *Count Zeppelin*, 53.

notably Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, at whose home he visited. An interview with President Abraham Lincoln was arranged, and after hearing the young count's desire to observe the organization and operations of the Union army, the president dictated a letter to the secretary of war and the secretary of state, suggesting that a military pass be granted to him.

Having received the pass, Zeppelin next obtained a horse and hired a Negro servant named Louis. This man, whom he probably learned of through Schleiden or some member of the ambassador's household, proved a loyal and useful follower. The count was not yet ready to take the field, however, for he found his uniform—that of a first lieutenant in the army of Württemberg—too elaborate for American military circles. He had the heavy epaulettes and gold-trimmed velvet collar removed, lest he look like a major general. This done, he proceeded to join the Army of the Potomac, then in camp near Falmouth, Virginia.

Traffic was heavy between the capital and army headquarters, and he had no trouble in finding his way by steamer and train, but when he arrived he learned that General Joseph Hooker, to whom he carried a letter of introduction, was in Washington for the weekend. Speaking little English and knowing no one, he was at a loss what to do until he was befriended by a German-speaking Swedish officer, who invited the count to share his tent.¹⁵

When Hooker returned he received the young German cordially, and for the next

month Zeppelin was associated with the general's staff.¹⁶ He frequented the canteen bar, made a wide circle of acquaintances, and seems to have enjoyed the conviviality and unaccustomed informality of camp life. But he saw no action until June 20, when he took part in a night ride with a cavalry detachment carrying dispatches to General Alfred Pleasonton. Next day he witnessed the battle of Ashby's Gap, in which Confederate cavalry led by General J. E. B. Stuart held off the Union forces under Pleasonton.

As a noncombatant he was barred from taking part in the fighting, but he did perform some reconnaissance for the general and at one point found himself hotly pursued by a band of Confederate cavalry. After the battle he made his way back, exhausted from the long hours of riding and excitement, until he reached Fairfax Court House, where he found his servant and his baggage. Louis made pancakes, and Zeppelin gulped down his first meal in two days. A short time later he apparently saw some skirmishing near Fredricksburg, but on June 27 Hooker was relieved of command, and the count must have left the army soon after that. He was not present at the battle of Gettysburg on July 1–3.

After discharging Louis and winding up his other business in Washington, he returned to New York and was there during the draft riots of July 13–15. A day or so later he boarded a train for the West. His movements from that time can be followed in the letters below, which have been translated by Mrs. Dunn.¹⁷ The first was addressed to "My Beloved Father" from Detroit, Michigan, on July 24, 1863.

You have very likely figured out from my schedule that since leaving the magnificent Niagara Falls I have advanced quite a distance westward. The railroad from there to here runs along the southern and western shores of Lake Erie at varying distances [from the water] and across an almost open plain. Lake Erie, one of the smaller of the group of lakes, still has quite a respectable

¹⁵ The officer was Captain Frederick Anton Ulrik Rosencrantz. He appears at the far right in a group of Union officers with whom Zeppelin was photographed by Alexander Gardner. The picture is reproduced in *Minnesota History*, 39:281 (Fall, 1965). For information on Rosencrantz, see Ella Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy*, 288 (Baton Rouge, 1951).

¹⁶ His presence on Hooker's staff is confirmed by *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, June 20, 1863, p. 195.

¹⁷ In preparing these extracts for publication, paragraphing has been added and a few editorial insertions have been made for clarity. These appear within brackets.

width according to the map, and its opposite shore cannot be seen. The flat shore line offers little variety, and the lake's surface has not the powerful attraction of the open sea. Yet one's soaring imagination likes to picture it as endless.

I beg you not to believe that the trip has been monotonous because of the uniformity of the landscape. During the journey, which, with stops, has up to now taken three days, I have for the first time been personally impressed by the grandeur of the American continent. After traveling so long at the speed of an American locomotive over a level countryside, one cannot but feel that this can go on and on and that there is no end to it. Only then does one realize how exposed is the uninterrupted flatland to storms born in the Gulf of Mexico which rage without hindrance northward until they finally die over the cold ice fields of the north. — This is definitely more impressive than the stretch from Biberach to Ravensburg. . . .

My principal purpose [in making this journey] was to get as many actual impressions as possible of the cultural history of this part of the world. My first real life picture: While in a [railroad] station I observed through the window something that left me with an extraordinary feeling — two [Indian] girls between twelve and fifteen years of age and a small boy offering beadwork for sale from a small basket. I have seen Greeks and Turks, Chinese, mulattoes and Negroes, but never human beings belonging to a savage tribe. I would not have expected such a great difference in appearance, at least not one so startling at first sight. These Indian children were neither ugly nor overly tall, nor were their faces disfigured by tattooing. On the contrary — all three were well-proportioned humans, their height equal to ours at the same age. Large, deep, dark eyes sparkle from copper-brown faces — pretty faces with a friendly and astonishingly intelligent expression. What was it that gave their over-all appearance the unmistakable stamp of the wilderness? I do

not know! Give a tame and a wild pigeon to a man who has never before seen either. Will he take one for the other? — Certainly not!

Another real life picture: The train travels through a dense, seemingly impassable forest. In one spot I see a man with an ax trimming long trunks of felled trees, which he will use to build a protective fence for his sheep straight through the dense forest. Farther on similar fences surround partially cleared lots where only stumps have been left standing a few feet off the ground. Here graze oxen, cows, and sometimes horses. Now follows a large plot completely stripped of timber, in the middle of which stands a small wooden house. Next to it, depending on the size of the lot, are one, two, three, or more small wooden barns or sheds. Maize and potato fields, but few wheat fields, surround the buildings. Thus the European starts to till the ground for production.

July 25. Third life picture: Buffalo, Erie, Cleveland, Toledo, Detroit, are our stopping points. All are cities brought into existence as if by magic during the very recent past to satisfy the demands of traffic on the great waterways. (The small streams shown on the map, which look like tributaries, are really large, deep rivers joined by canals with the Ohio and Mississippi river system and with the Hudson.) These places appear to have sprouted overnight. Around the original location of a few fishing and boating huts, workshops and stores were first built. Then came the adjacent railroad line — a single track with a discarded railroad car as a station. I noticed these still in use at today's smaller stations. Large depots resting on slender pilings over the water's edge have now been built, to and from which boats and trains carry goods in all directions. These depots are flanked by big buildings with large painted signs advertising their grand bargains.

Toledo, its history dating from 1836, is today one of the major markets for farm produce. The principal goods are copper, iron, fruit, an enormous amount of maize,

coal, wood, salt, flour, and lumber. Cleveland, a city since 1796, has a population of 60,000.¹⁸ . . . In spite of the unusually attractive houses of wealthy merchants, their many and good schools, and their numerous stylish churches, these cities lack the cozy character of our own towns. Buffalo stands out because of Mr. Ziegele's good beer, reminiscent of Drake's rarest!¹⁹

Forgive the haste and the ending of this letter, but my time is short. At two o'clock we — Davidow and another Russian, a well-educated man with an attractive personality — are leaving on board the "Traveller" to explore Lake Superior. Then from Superior City we cross the peaceable Indian territory along the upper Mississippi [and go] by way of St. Paul — La Crosse — Madison — Milwaukee — [to] Chicago. Only from there will it be possible for me to write letters — in fourteen days or longer, God willing.

The steamer "Traveller," built in 1852, ran regularly between Cleveland and Superior, with stops at intermediate ports. According to the Cleveland Plain Dealer of July 24, it was known for its elegant accommodations, speed, safety, and gentlemanly officers. On this trip it carried an unusually large number of tourists "on a grand excursion to the romantic regions of Lake Superior." The Lake Superior Miner of Ontonogan, Michi-

¹⁸ Toledo was formed from two villages and so named in 1837. The population of Cleveland in 1860 was 43,417. By 1870 it had grown to 92,829. See *United States Census, 1860, Population*, 318; 1870, *Population*, 229.

¹⁹ Albert Ziegele established a well-known brewery in Buffalo about 1850. The count still recalled this beer in 1915, for he told von Wiegand, "It was heavy stuff. I was not accustomed to it and it made my knees so wobbly that I had to sit down on a sofa to rest." *St. Paul Daily News*, February 9, 1915.

²⁰ A clipping of this item from the *Lake Superior Miner* is preserved in the Zeppelin archive at Mitelbiberach. In it the words quoted above are underlined. The piece was reprinted in the *St. Paul Pioneer*, August 15, 1863. The third member of the party was a former Russian officer named Ponomarew.

²¹ *St. Paul Daily News*, February 9, 1915.

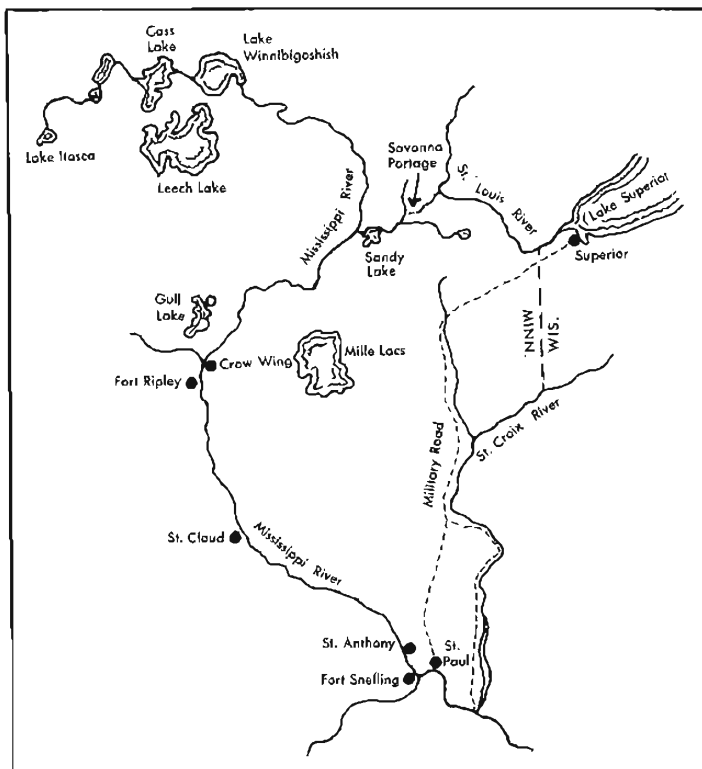
gan, noted on August 1, 1863, that when the "Traveller" stopped there every stateroom was full, and among the passengers were "Counts, Consuls, and other foreigners" — an obvious reference to Zeppelin's party.²⁰

When he recalled the five-day voyage years later, the count's most vivid impression was of flirting with "some beautiful American girls, who were as anxious to get acquainted with me as I was with them. They finally broke the ice by flipping apple seeds into my face, and then we had a jolly talk."²¹ In describing the trip for his father, however, he stuck to more dignified subjects. His next letter was written from Superior, Wisconsin, on July 30.

The short time that remains before the ship's departure does not permit me to make a report telling you about the grand and remarkable things I have seen in a wilderness a thousand miles from civilization. It is not completely wild, however, where man has discovered beneath the unproductive soil exciting treasures like iron, copper, or silver. Generally one comes upon a settlement in a charming harbor where nature has placed great quantities of densely growing grass. Here can usually be seen several large buildings where cast iron is beaten and the metal washed and melted, a number of wooden dwellings, and, yes — the church.

My hand trembles as I write, since at the same time my traveling companions and I are packing our necessary baggage. The rest of it will be sent back by boat. Tomorrow or the day after we will go with two Indians up the St. Louis River in my canoe. In ten to fourteen days we should be in St. Paul on the Mississippi. Until then, apparently, we pass through only one human settlement. . . . I feel enormously well and am, I am told, obviously growing heavier.

THE CANOE trip took longer than expected, and it was not until eighteen days later, on August 17, that Zeppelin commenced a letter from St. Paul.



*The area of Minnesota
and Wisconsin
visited by Zeppelin*

This time of remarkable and delightful events has been troubled by the thought of leaving you for so long without news. But how should I have forwarded my letter? Three weeks ago, while already within the edge of the wilderness, I encountered the last mail carrier: an Indian paddling down the St. Louis River. His speed and haste were such that he did not hear the warning calls and almost capsized our light birch-bark canoe. Three days ago in Crow Wing, the highest point on the Mississippi, we saw the first newspaper.

You can imagine our excitement when we read about Russia's sharp answer — so sharp that Austria, France, and England were about to present an ultimatum. Strangely enough, we read that war was inevitable, pending additional discussion. For three days we have been living in uncertainty.²² Probably you are laughing! — May God grant that it be so! — at our gullibility, but imagine our position: we lack all connecting links, all news about develop-

ments during the past four weeks, from mid-June to mid-July — and if that much heat has accumulated, little is needed to set the house afire. I am burning with eagerness to hear definite news. The surroundings here have somewhat lost their charm for me — my thoughts are abroad with you.

August 18. Still no news! Do not scold me for not having mailed yesterday's letter. You would not have received it any sooner. Tonight I am adding only a few lines; the oppressive heat and traveling by stagecoach have made me too tired to accomplish more. Tomorrow this letter accompanies me by

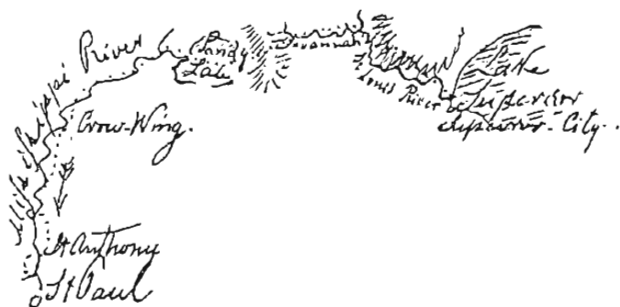
²² This incident was reported in the *St. Paul Pioneer* of August 11, 1863 — probably the paper that Zeppelin read in Crow Wing. It grew out of Napoleon III's intervention in a Polish insurrection against Russia, which had begun in January, 1863. Joined by England and Austria, France presented Russia with certain demands on behalf of the Polish revolutionaries; these were summarily rejected. Though tensions mounted, the war which some thought "inevitable" never developed. Napoleon withdrew his help from Poland and the insurrection was eventually crushed.

steamboat to La Crosse. From there it will continue its journey to the seacoast, while I will find my way to Chicago. . . .

I regret I cannot give you a description of our fortnight in the wilderness—the experiences are too many, the impressions too varied! There is the feeling you have when you know you are all alone in the midst of primitive, unspoiled nature. You can laugh, cry, shout, shoot, throw yourself into the rushing current of a river; you can set fire to the woods, and no human soul cares about it. You are alone with the Creator in his magnificent temple. There is the soil on which you walk, the vegetation, the animal life inhabiting the forest—from the bear to the much, much worse mosquitos [sic]. There is the strange way of traveling by canoe, and when the highest ridge of land is reached, of carrying it across over your head. There is the rocky island in the midst of a rushing stream, as described by [James Fenimore] Cooper in his novels, and the stillness of a lake on whose shore the Indian erects his fleeting wigwam. The swampy savanna is there with its high grass. There are the hardships of the march: heat; thirst, when water is lacking because of the unusual drouth; hunger, when am-

munition and provisions come to an end. Because of the lowest water ever, we traveled at a slower pace [than planned].²³ Today my Russian companions are still claiming that a water rat is a good dish, although for my part I did not enjoy it! Through the thick forest there are the Indian paths not any wider than a hand. Only a skilled eye can find them. Above all, there are the Indians themselves—their ways and customs; their wild calls and songs; the strange war stories; their dwellings; their skill (one of our guides shot a duck in flight at sixty paces with one shot and one bullet); and what is more, there is the [Indian] language which can create the word "Schingkubabo" for eggs.²⁴

Where we hit the Mississippi it is rather wide but very shallow. Here I draw a sketch to help you trace our way on the map:



Crow Wing is a small town of about two hundred people who trade with the Indians. We found a tavern there but its condition was such that we preferred to continue sleeping in the open. That brought me around to adding up and realizing that since I started this trip I have slept a full ten weeks outside a house—three on boats and railroads, four in a tent, and three under the open sky. It took us two days to travel by stagecoach from Crow Wing to St. Anthony. From there we went in our own [hired] carriage to St. Paul, so that [on the way] we could look at Minnehaha Falls and Fort Ribley [sic] (against Indians).²⁵ Once again we are enjoying civilization. I have made the acquaintance of the famous aeronaut

²³ In crossing from the St. Louis River to the Mississippi, Zeppelin's party followed the historic Savanna portage route, used by Indians and fur traders from the earliest times. By 1863 it was little traveled, since almost all traffic between Lake Superior and the Mississippi went by way of the military road, opened in 1858. The Savanna portage was widely known as one of the worst in the region because of its length, mud, and mosquitoes. The summer of 1863 was a season of widespread drouth in the upper Midwest, and low water probably made longer portages necessary, thereby delaying the party. For information on this route, see Irving H. Hart, "The Old Savanna Portage," in *Minnesota History*, 8:117-139 (June, 1927).

²⁴ The Indians encountered by Zeppelin were Chippewa. The word for egg in the language of this tribe is "wánan," according to Frederic Baraga, *A Dictionary of the Ojibwe Language* (Cincinnati, 1853), or "wáhwun," according to Edward F. Wilson, *The Ojebway Language: A Manual* (Toronto, 1874). The term quoted by the count may have been coined by one of the guides.

²⁵ Zeppelin apparently refers to Fort Snelling, whose name he must have confused with Fort Ripley.

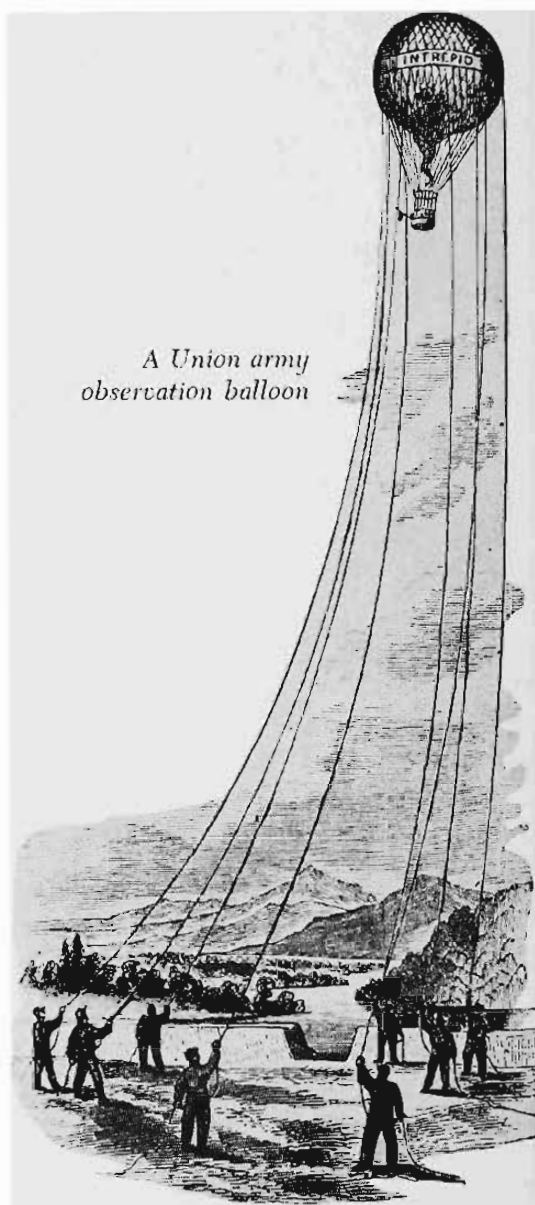
Prof. Steiner, who has invented a new kind of balloon suitable for military reconnaissance.

For some reason Zeppelin postponed his departure from St. Paul for at least one day — probably because he wanted to make a balloon ascension with Steiner, and the weather on the 18th was unfavorable. In a postscript to his previous letter, dated August 19 and written on the stationery of St. Paul's International Hotel, he told his father of the experience.

Just now I ascended with Prof. Steiner, the famous aeronaut, to an altitude of six or seven hundred feet. The ground is exceptionally fitted for demonstrating the importance of the balloon in military reconnaissance. The Mississippi with St. Paul [is in a valley], and westward of the latter a mile from the river, lies a ridge of hills running parallel with it. This forms a very good defensive position against an aggressor marching up through the valley. There is no tower, no elevation high enough to study the distribution of the defender's troops on the gentle, open slope behind his battle line. From the high position of the balloon these could be completely surveyed. Should one want to harass with artillery fire the troops deployed in reserve on the other slope, the battery could be informed by telegraphic signals where their projectiles hit. The above technique has at times been used with great success by this country's armies. No method is better suited to viewing quickly the terrain of an unknown, enemy-occupied region.

Seldom is the situation of two opposing armies similar to what it was during the past year near Edward's Ferry, [Maryland], where Steiner was able to make a free flight, moving over the entire enemy position, and through good binoculars could recognize every single man. He finally descended again on his own ground. The disadvantages, though, are that smaller bodies of troops protected by woods can remain undiscovered by the balloon and that a

strong wind could endanger the reconnaissance flight. Steiner, however, believes that he has overcome the latter disadvantage by reducing the balloon's capacity until it is just enough to lift the weight of two persons. He has given it a very long, thin shape. Furthermore, he has added a strong rudder and in that way the balloon is hindered less by wind and it will reach its destination more smoothly and more surely. Following



*A Union army
observation balloon*

a recent call, Steiner will return now to the army and make test flights with his newly improved balloon. If those tests bring good results he will go to Europe (Paris first) in two years.²⁶

ZEPPELIN'S next letter was commenced in Chicago on August 23. There, to his great joy, he had found several letters from home. These had been forwarded from New York according to directions he had left with Leopold Bierwirth, the German consul there. His first pages were devoted to answering questions put by his family, and for this reason he returned briefly to some of his army experiences.

I admit that my Negro was riding a service horse during the marches. I had to turn that one in because of the lack of horses. My own mount was limping, so I felt these were reasons enough to leave the army somewhat sooner than I first intended.

Louis, the Negro, is also a good cook. After our regular cook, a former French soldier, sailor, captain in the United States Army, and finally a cook, ran away for fear of an upcoming battle, the Negro was asked: "Louis, can you cook?" — "Oh no, Sir!" — "Can you prepare anything at all?" — "Oh no, Sir!" — "You cannot boil eggs?" — "Oh yes, Sir!" — "Can you brew coffee?" — "Oh yes, Sir!" — "Can you make beefsteak?" — "Oh yes, Sir!" — "Can you fry a chicken?" — "Oh yes, Sir!" — That fellow had observed so much in Dr. Schleiden's good kitchen, that we did not rejoice at all when, after several days, our runaway cook, sensing the battle less imminent, suddenly reappeared from behind a bush and took over his chores as if nothing had happened.

The reports we heard in Crow Wing have

²⁶ The balloon described may have been in process of construction or may have been only a design in Steiner's mind. There is no record of experiments made with it. It was certainly not the balloon that Steiner used in St. Paul, since this had a capacity of 41,000 cubic feet and a basket large enough to carry four to six people. See *St. Paul Pioneer*, August 20, 1883.

been confirmed, but they were exaggerated in stating that the outbreak of war was inevitable. We now know that Austria, England, and France, because of Russia's negative answer, will send a mutual note to Petersburg [sic]. Its meaning can be nothing short of an ultimatum. Indeed, Russia cannot and will not retract. With the delays of diplomacy, however, I do not see how war can break out before next spring, as much as they would like it. I repeat, God grant that you may laugh at my politics!

You yourself, though, give proof of how difficult it is to judge things from afar, as in your letter of July 15 you wrote about a peace settlement here, with the help of European influence. In the meantime the picture has changed, but a reconciliation cannot be thought of yet. The only thing which could bring about a quick ending would be an uprising of the blacks, or possibly a war with England, and so on. If no such unforeseen, powerful events should occur, the war could be prolonged without important decisions until November of next year, when a new president and along with him a new era in politics will emerge from the contest between the parties in the North. Either a more determined war strategy will then come, which would give the already weakened South the last blow; or concessions will be made to the secessionists. In any case, it will still be a long, long way to a solution of the troubles underlying this war.

Chicago is living evidence of the fast, powerful development of the West. Thirty years ago there was nothing here. Today the city numbers more than 160,000 inhabitants. Railroads and canals cross the bustling streets in all directions. The characteristics of a higher level of civilization are more plentiful here than in the other places newly created by commerce. In Chicago churches, theaters, museums, large hotels, and splendid stores are numerous. Only art does not set up its workshop amid the hurrying and pushing; the Yankee's heart has no room for it!

America is definitely a land of contrasts. Everything aristocratic is in opposition to its fundamental ideas, yet nowhere is so much fuss made about a simple traveling count. Everybody rushes to be first to oblige with an invitation. If one is pleased to accept, a large gathering appears in frock coats and low-cut dresses to take a look at this wonderful little monster. Occasionally a fine little man, clever and knowledgeable, comes along; he asks in roundabout ways, "where to?" and invites you to have a drink; finally he presents his card in friendly remembrance. You cannot but give your own in return, and the next day your name and titles appear in the newspaper followed by the remarks you made. Indeed, I could reconstruct from the newspapers my full journey through America as a "distinguished foreigner." I will bring with me several articles. Even if one pays no homage to such humbug, he cannot escape being taken advantage of by it.

In Europe people generally speculate in making a good match; here they speculate in everything but that. The ability to profit from others is considered a vital characteristic. However, my own experience, confirmed by others, leads me to think that nowhere in the world is so much reliance placed on the word of a man in business matters.

New York, September 1. My intention was to hold back this letter one or two days after sending the other one written in St. Paul; ship schedules have delayed it a week. Meanwhile I have passed through beautiful and noteworthy places: Chicago — Cincinnati — Harpers Ferry — Baltimore — Philadelphia — New York. After arriving here last night I could find no time before the mail was closed to rush over to Mr. Bierwirth to ask for the longingly awaited letters. Since your letter 13 of July 16, I have had no news from you. As things stand over there, I know, of course, that I will have only a short time more to stay here. I suppose you have not handed in my petition for a furlough? In two days we should know the content of Russia's reply.

Zeppelin remained in the United States more than two months longer. He visited Newport, Rhode Island, though for how long is not known, and he undoubtedly returned to Washington at least once. Through the French ambassador there he received permission to travel aboard the French gunboat "Tisiphone" to Charleston, South Carolina, to observe the military operations connected with the blockade of that port. Embarking on the "Tisiphone" on October 10, he returned aboard the steamer "Arago," reaching New York on October 31. Nineteen days later he boarded the Cunard liner "China" for his return to Europe.²⁷

At home again, he found the crisis that had so alarmed him during the summer to have passed. But already the tensions were mounting that less than three years later brought on the Austrian War, and in 1870 the Franco-Prussian War. From these conflicts a united Germany emerged as a world power.

Zeppelin served with distinction in both wars and continued to pursue his career as a cavalry officer until his retirement with the rank of general in 1891. During these years he had little time for the wide-ranging interests that Schleiden had so keenly noted. At last, however, when nearly sixty, he started the aeronautical experiments that made him a world-famous twentieth-century inventor and a German national hero.

²⁷ In the recollections published in *Der Greif* Zeppelin mentions visiting a wounded army friend who was convalescing in Newport. His presence aboard the "Tisiphone" is documented by an order dated October 9, 1863, instructing the captain to take Zeppelin as a passenger to Charleston. A photographic copy of this, supplied by the French Ministère des Armées (Marine) is in the possession of Mr. Bradley. The count's name appears in the passenger lists of the "Arago" and the "China," as reported in the *New York Herald*, October 31 and November 18, 1863. The newspaper references were located by Miss Young.

THE PICTURES on pages 265 and 266 are from Ludwig Fischer, ed., comp., *Graf Zeppelin: Sein Leben—Sein Werk*. The sketch on page 276 is from Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial History of the Civil War in the United States* (Hartford, n.d.). The photographs on page 269 are owned by Mr. Dunn.



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