

Thomas Baldwin's "Aerial Rowboat" Could Do About 4 MPH on a Calm Day

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Because Baldwin was too heavy to pilot his airship, he hired L. Guy Mecklem to row it aloft. After six months, Mecklem felt he was just a "flunky," and the two parted ways. (California State University Dominguez Hills)

Thomas Scott Baldwin, known for his balloons and parachutes and, in 1910, his Red Devil airplanes, was the first to debut an aerial rowboat. Baldwin had already built the California Arrow, the first U.S. airship to make a controlled circular flight, when he won a contract with a Los Angeles amusement park to exhibit a dirigible that could be rowed through the air like a boat. In 1905, Baldwin came up with a 38-foot-long hydrogen-filled gas bag with a kayak-shaped frame underneath. In lieu of an engine were bamboo oars with paddles made of silk. A canvas bag filled with sand maintained neutral buoyancy.

Baldwin's non-rigid dirigible could do about 4 mph on a calm day, but even a slight headwind would stymie it. Because Baldwin was too heavy to pilot the craft, he hired 23-year-old L. Guy Mecklem. On the craft's maiden voyage, Mecklem became stranded 2,000 feet

above the crowd with a broken oar and a malfunctioning safety valve on the bag. "The sun got hotter and the hydrogen expanded and nothing I could do...would stop it" from rising, he recalled. After the sun set, Mecklem was able to land in an orange grove.

The next day, Baldwin strung a 300-foot-long wire between two poles and attached a guideline to the aerial rowboat so it could slide along the wire. Mecklem spent the next two weeks practicing how to row back and forth.

"We could put on a pretty good show," Mecklem recalled in his unpublished autobiography. Ascending a few hundred feet, he bombed his audience with bags of peanuts. He'd also throw his handkerchief overboard and paddle down to retrieve it. His favorite stunt was aiming the tip of the gas bag at a girl in the grandstand and rowing away at the last second as she tried to dodge it.

Baldwin's aerial rowboat proved a remunerative attraction, though a short-lived one: One night its hydrogen inexplicably ignited, destroying the craft.

That didn't deter Alva L. Reynolds from launching his own version at nearby Fiesta Park the same year. Thirty-four feet long and 14 feet in diameter, Man Angel had a four- by 10-foot wooden gondola, a 3,000-cubic-foot gas envelope, and a weight of only 18 pounds. Like Baldwin's craft, it was propelled by oars.

Reynolds claimed that just about anyone could operate Man Angel. To prove it, he allowed 17-year-old Hazel Odell to take the helm. According to a reporter at the Los Angeles Herald Examiner:

"Miss Odell entered the car and...raised herself to 100 feet. After slight effort she was able to propel the airship in any direction and control its ascent and descent at will. When asked for her motive for performing the feat Miss Odell said: 'Why should I not? Other people have done it and I was not afraid.' "

Reynolds built six Man Angels and leased them to fairs in Kansas, Arizona, and Texas. He also opened a flying school, where he gave twice-daily demonstrations.

That October, Reynolds challenged Baldwin to an airship race. When Baldwin's pilot, the balloonist Roy Knabenshue, asked for \$20,000 in expense money, Reynolds said Knabenshue was "afraid to race." In 1906, to keep up interest (and revenue), Reynolds challenged an automobile to a 30-mile race from Chutes Park to Pomona. So confident was Reynolds that Man Angel No. 6 would win, he gave the Herald Examiner \$1,000 to hold as prize money. On the day of the race, Man Angel faced such strong head winds it was handily beaten. In a subsequent race, the airship got caught on a telephone wire and crashed into a treetop.

Reynolds never raced Man Angel again. He returned to inventing, and found a method for generating electricity from ocean waves. Baldwin went on to sell the U.S. Army its first powered aircraft, a 95-foot-long non-rigid airship, for \$10,000, and in 1914 designed the U.S. Navy's first dirigible, the DN-1.