

**Transcript of KMYR series on The Public Affair:  
“The Conrad Airship”**

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**Albuquerque Museum, gift of Zane Blaney**

This radio program is a five-part series of excerpts from an interview concerning Conrad Hebbin Zeppelin under construction near Phoenix, Arizona. Interview with Bill Drummond and Darwin Conrad to discuss lighter-than-airships and the development of the Conrad Airship.

*Keywords and topics:* aviation, airships, inventions, flight, funding, promotion, lighter-than-airship, fuel, travel, construction, Clarence W. Conrad, Darwin Conrad, Bill Drummond

MAN’S VOICE: Soon they have plans to build a thousand passenger airship that would cruise across the oceans and eventually have, uh, passenger airships that would be for personal transport carrying just four, three people. So we’ll soon see the sky full of these lighter-than-air ships.

MAN’S VOICE: Put this blimp down and let me off.

MAN’S VOICE: Blimp? Do you think this is a blimp? Manny.

MANNY: Contiki, Mr. M?

MAN’S VOICE: Show our amigo what Miss Gilda can do.

MAN’S VOICE: It’ll have great windows on each side, one window for each passenger.

WOMAN’S VOICE: And immediately to my right, I think you can see the enormous old-fashioned zeppelin just settling slowly into a docking position between these two historic landmarks.

ZANE BLANEY: On “The Public Affair: The Conrad Airship”.

[00:51]

BLANEY: In a farming district near Phoenix, Arizona, the only rigid airship in the world is nearing completion. The two-hundred-and-twenty foot Zeppelin Refined will be inflated with inert gas helium. C.W. Conrad [Clarence “Clare” W. Conrad] and his son, Darwin, are fulfilling a dream of creating the new generation of lighter-than-airships. Bill Drummond is an illustrator and recently visited the KMYR studios.

BILL DRUMMOND: I'm always on the outlook for different jobs since I go out soliciting my work. I was happy to find in the newspaper a small account of these men building an airship. I've always had an interest in aviation, but particularly in lighter-than-airship. So, it was a real fulfillment of a dream when I saw in The Repulse in what we call the Arizona Republic, um, a short story of two men who are Mormons are building an airship out in the desert. Naturally, I went out there right away, had trouble finding the place, and finally, uh, came to the airfield. A non-descript level dirt field, nothing to distinguish it from an ordinary cow lot. It had changed hands now and become the, uh, first field where these Zeppelins would be started building. Anyway, I found the young Darwin, who's the son of C.W. Conrad, and started talking with him and found out that they had almost no help on the project and definitely needed it. So, I was anxious to start immediately and have been drawing pictures for them up until now.

BLANEY: Why the pictures?

DRUMMOND: Well, they need drawings of the airship, um, depictions of it flying in the air before it actually is. Obviously, there can be no photographs of it, no other airships in the world exist. So, my pictures will be the first scenes, um, views of the aircraft.

BLANEY: Tell me a little bit about the Conrads and what you know of their background and how they became interested in this project.

DRUMMOND: Well the older member of the family, C.W., which stands for Clare. He, um, grew up in the great state of Ohio, where airships would constantly go overhead. Akron, Ohio, was near the Goodyear faculty that based all these gigantic lighter-than-airships that cruised in our skies in the 1930s. Anyway, he saw these constantly and, naturally, dreamed of someday building one of his own. It was common – a common imaginary thing for the, uh, whole world at the time that was swept by Zeppelin fever and, uh, finally going to great lengths looking into the history of the airships and finding out where their faults lied and, um, exactly why they came to this unfortunate demise so that he came to the conclusion that if he could build with the modern technology available to him, he could effectively start the age of Zeppelins over again. So, he transferred all this emotion to his son, Darwin, who had just come of age and was coming out of the college scene. He influenced Darwin to get into aeronautical engineering, in which he's taking his degree now. And, finally, convinced his son that the idea was practical. It was after a long period of, uh, getting his son interested in the idea that they finally drew up the first plans and then improved on the idea slowly over five years until now they started work on the project.

MAN'S VOICE: And now, voila, this is my living room, moving West at a reasonable speed and at a safe altitude somewhere over, uh --

MAN'S VOICE: Grand Canyon Heights.

MAN'S VOICE: This is an aircraft?

MAN'S VOICE: I told you I used to run a Zep show. This is the Zep. Her name is Gilda. She's triple-hulled and runs on sun-power and, like most women, is entirely self-contained.

BLANEY: And I'm Zane Blaney on KMYR.

[04:58]

[music]

BLANEY: In a converted cow pasture near Phoenix, Arizona, a father and son are building the first of a new generation of lighter-than-airships. Dave Drummond is an illustrator who is helping to promote the project and he is also the illustrator who produced the KMYR airship short.

MAN'S VOICE: Put this blimp down and let me off.

MAN'S VOICE: Blimp? Do you think this is a blimp? Manny.

MANNY: Contiki, Mr. M?

MAN'S VOICE: Show our amigo what Miss Gilda can do.

DRUMMOND: Well, the framework is completely finished, all the – all the members are in position and have been joined together. The unit has been welded under a gas so that the seams are perfect, just perfect. The seams where the aluminum tubing is joined together is actually stronger than the tubing itself so that there's strictly no chance of it ever coming apart. Anyway, the framework is completely done and only needs to be, um, going into the last stage of completion to start flying. They'll need to fit it out with the proper instruments. It'll have a sophisticated navigation system using these modern aircraft instruments. It'll have, uh, the furnishings for passengers and the crew, it'll have the individual gas cells – there'll be ten of those holding the helium. And then, finally, it'll have the covering put on. This will be a mylar, a space-age fabric which is extremely shiny. It'll be mirror-like. Anyway, it'll have this covering put on and then finally, the gas pumped into the vessel and it'll drift off.

BLANEY: How many people will it hold or be able to carry?

DRUMMOND: Twenty passengers and, uh, five crew people. However, this is just the prototype. It's a small baby compared to the larger ships of the future that the men intend to build. Soon, they have plans to build a thousand passenger airship that would cruise across the oceans and eventually, have, um, passenger airships that would be for personal transport carrying just four, three people. So we'll soon see the sky full of these lighter-than-airships.

BLANEY: What makes you think that they're going to be successful? I mean, why – why would people be interested in this type of transportation?

DRUMMOND: Well, there's three different, um, three different forces at work here. There's the natural urge to fly the easiest way and airships can provide that because they require no, uh, gigantic, uh, engines making a lot of noise and creating a lot of hassle just to keep in the air. For instance, jet engines consume an extremely high amount of fuel and air just to keep going and then piston engines are, of course, cranky and always having trouble of their own. Lighter-than-airships offer the advantage over the heavier-than-airships is that they want to fly. That's their natural desire to fly. Heavier-than-airships actually, um, depend on their power plants to keep going. Anyway, the lighter-than-airship is also superior because it can go great distances without having to stop. It doesn't have to go down to the ground to re-fuel, it doesn't fatigue its passengers because they're living onboard. The speed may be relatively slow compared to our fast piston and jet airplanes, however, that's a negligible thing when you consider the comfort and the luxury entailed in traveling. You'll be able to look down on the passing scenery, enjoy the view as it cruises underneath you. It'll be like a gigantic unwinding reel of the world below you, perfectly silent and very calming.

WOMAN'S VOICE: I'm in the torch room of the Statue of Liberty right now, one of the tallest monuments here, and immediately to my right I think you can see the enormous old-fashioned Zeppelin just settling slowly into a docking position between these two historic landmarks. Pulses of high energy are flickering and crawling all over the surface of the Zep and weird figures have appeared in the air around it. It's very close now! I can see a figure in the window! It's only about twenty feet above me --

[MAN'S VOICE SHOUTING: Hey down there! Hold this rope! Hold on!]

WOMAN'S VOICE: I think he's dropping down a rope! I think I have to hold on!

BLANEY: Holding on until tomorrow, I'm Zane Blaney on KMYR.

[music]

[09:37]

BLANEY: The Conrad Airship will have a top speed of ninety miles an hour. The C-22 prototype will cruise around seventy or eighty miles an hour and be filled with two-hundred-and-sixty-thousand cubic feet of inert gas. Again, illustrator Bill Drummond:

DRUMMOND: Inert helium is extremely safe. You can breathe it, eat it, wash in it, and do almost everything and it won't hurt you a bit because it's inert gas. It's completely non-inflammable which is its main property over hydrogen. Now hydrogen was used in all these other vessels, which brought so many to their untimely end. For instance, a single spark would send the entire flaming airship up in a holocaust with the temperatures rising thousands of

degrees melting everything, including the passengers. So, uh, naturally when the Conrads started on their project, their main thought in mind was to keep helium in the ship even though it has a slightly less capacity to lift than hydrogen.

BLANEY: Tell me a little bit about the, uh, the background of the flying ships themselves. You mentioned the end of the Zeppelin Age. What caused that disinterest?

DRUMMOND: Well, it seems that people came to the realization that these machines were just a little bit too dangerous and it took them, I don't know why it, uh -- the world can be so foolish in this instance because it took them ten years to realize these airships were flying tinderboxes. Not only that, they were structurally unsound. Their rigid shape was, um, very complicated. They used wires on the inside to hold all the parts in perfect alignment. They used girder arrangements of a, uh, aluminum derivative called duraluminum. And, uh, because of the construction in a very stiff storm, for instance, um, a hurricane-force storm, then all the rivets would pop out just like zippers unzipping and, uh, they'd pop out all along the line and the airship would, of course, come apart. Its back would be broken. So the demise of perhaps three hundred airships that were built were almost all violent and catastrophic disasters.

But, um, the history of airships in general goes back way to the seventeen-hundreds when the first balloon was sent into the air. Then they grew into the intense desire to go higher and further and set records of travel. Well, that's when the airships started using hydrogen gas. It would be enclosed in a big balloon with a netting over it, holding the gondola underneath. So, these balloons would grow to such immense proportions that at one time there was a balloon having a two-story house slung underneath it. Yeah, it would carry thirty or forty passengers. It had a dining area, had a little garden, the whole bit. And, uh, it went about fifteen, twenty miles until it was dragged across some trees and the whole wicker house came apart. So out of that came the desire to navigate. Well, naturally, um, a Brazilian named Santos Dumont, he designed a dirigible with a rigid keel. The balloon itself was completely, um, non-rigid, it was flaccid, but the keel was rigid and had fins on it and a primitive engine. Things like oars to push it along. With this, showed the world that if you could navigate by lighter-than-airships, you had the world in your hand. So, here's the rigid airships coming off and the first primitive ones were bullet-shaped. They had a cylinder with pointed ends and they would be, uh, just a flying joke because their engines would stop, they'd conk out, you couldn't steer them so well, but yet they did cruise in-between the German cities, showing that, uh, air travel was just on the horizon. Well, out of those, the first Zeppelins were started. Well, in the World War I, they were used for military purposes and thus gained the experience of, uh, navigating great distances carrying big loads, going through fierce weather, and just a general operating of lighter-than-airships. So the crews were experienced and ready to go up to the next ladder-step, which was international flight, and that's where what we would consider these, um, giant airships, the Graf Zeppelin, the Hindenburg and such, they're part of that class. The international globe-trotters.

MAN'S VOICE: Stardate 3.1428579 – ah, forget about it. This is Captain Quirk on the Starship Intercourse, thrusting its way through space on another penetrating mission.

MAN'S VOICE: Captain, captain, all the stars have gone out!

MAN'S VOICE: No, you fool, you've leaned on the button. Turn the viewer back on.

BLANEY: And I'm Zane Blaney on KMYR.

[music]

[14:59]

BLANEY: The Conrad Airship is not a commercial endeavor, although numerous commercial concerns have their eye on the project. The expense involved has been tremendous and the completion of the vessel depends in large part on the success of future funding schemes.

DRUMMOND: They've blown their entire life savings on the project, now they've, uh, spent perhaps a hundred-thousand dollars getting the very expensive aluminum needed. And the, um, specialized equipment needed to weld the seams together and the rent, of course, on the field itself. All the incidentals have added up to a bill that's broken their financial back. As it is now, they work in the daytime as electrical contractors and then at night work on the airship. They've decided to go public and issue shares in their private corporation which they own, and, uh, thus build up enough money to finish the project. They need two-hundred-thousand dollars.

BLANEY: That's an incredible amount of money. How much with the ship ultimately cost?

DRUMMOND: Well, all in all, just three-hundred-thousand dollars. They've made a one-third of the investment needed, however this one-third has permitted them to actually build the entire framework as you can see in these photographs. It's finished and just needs to be fitted out before it will fly. The rest of these accessories are very, very expensive. The gas itself will be the most single expensive item. Anyway, they need the rest of the money to, uh, go ahead and keep on the project, but as it is now they do the minor detail work they can do without any funding at all. C.W. is always anxious to hear from anybody interested in the subject and is always looking for supporters and help on the project.

This whole situation is called The Airship Field, approximately five miles outside of Chandler, Arizona, on the, uh, Williams Field Road. I can predict that if the funding, which already has started coming in, keeps up at its present rate then the airship will be flying by the end of this Summer, certainly. So, before the year turns into 1976, we can have, uh, an airship in the air again.

BLANEY: Bill Drummond and the Conrads may be contacted by writing C.W. Conrad, 1614 East Second Avenue, Mesa, Arizona, 85204. I'm Zane Blaney on KMYR.

[music]

[17:36]

BLANEY: The story of the Conrad Airship would be incomplete without talking with the men responsible for building the craft, so we called Phoenix, Arizona, and talked with C.W. Conrad's son, Darwin. C.W. Conrad had just left Phoenix on a trip to the West coast.

[phone ringing]

DARWIN CONRAD: Hello?

BLANEY: Mr. Conrad?

CONRAD: Yes?

BLANEY: Zane Blaney.

CONRAD: Yes.

BLANEY: KMYR.

CONRAD: Yes, sir.

BLANEY: Did your father get off?

CONRAD: Yeah, he left.

BLANEY: What's he doing in California?

CONRAD: He's found four suppliers over in the L.A. area for gas material and the outside covering material and he's going to check and see what the prices are and see if they'll take – handle the qualifications we need for them.

BLANEY: What do people say when, uh, you tell them that you're building a Zeppelin-type airship in the Phoenix desert?

CONRAD: Most people say, "An airship? What's that?" and then the second reason, "How come an airship?"

BLANEY: Okay, how come an airship?

CONRAD: Oh the basic reason is, you know, uh, for so long people have been worried about how fast they can get something going and how big and they've just about gone as far as they can with the, uh, 747 and C-58, but the biggest problem is that right now people are really fuel-

conscious and economy-conscious and ecology-conscious. Well, with the rigid airship, it takes no energy at all to get them up in the air. And the only energy it takes is to push them through the air and for, um, quite a bit less fuel, you can do the same job.

BLANEY: Who will be the first pilot?

CONRAD: My father is a pilot. Um, I've flown. We have an engineer that's worked with us as a pilot with the Air National Guard. We have had some response from the, uh, pilots of the Goodyear. They've said they'd like to come over and help us test fly it. So, we've got quite a few people. Um, when we first get the thing ready to take off the ground, we'll tether-test it. In other words, we'll just leave it, uh – it's right now, it's pinned between two towers and we'll turn on the engines, we'll do all the tests, we'll make it lighter-than-air, everything just right there at the towers. Just test equipment to determine its lift and the speed and all these other things. Just like, basically like a simulator. We'll run it like that for about two weeks till we get -- to familiar ourselves with it and then we'll take it out and fly it.

BLANEY: Bill Drummond seemed to indicate that the ship would begin a new era of lighter-than-airships. Uh, do you foresee this happening?

CONRAD: Yes, there's been a tremendous amount of people saying why not bring the airship back? With the new techniques we have a tremendous amount of helium available now with the, uh, -- we have stronger materials. Right now, our basic goal, my father's and I, is to take and try and help bring back the lighter-than-airship. We have this two-hundred-and-twenty foot airship that, uh, Bill Drummond told you about. You probably have the picture of it, and it is basically a prototype. It'll carry about forty passengers and travel about a hundred miles an hour. And, like I say, it'll basically be to show people we can build it and do a lot of test work with it. However, we do have right now a plan in the design stage, and we're getting the designs and the development work done on it right now, a seven-hundred footer and it is about a hundred-and-twenty feet in diameter and it would be able to carry about a thousand passengers and have a top speed of about a hundred-and-twenty miles an hour. Of course, with this, you can see that, uh, it would take about one-twentieth the amount of fuel as your 747 and carry, what, four times as many people. Of course you wouldn't be going the speed, but you'd be traveling lower to the ground, a beautiful visibility for anyone to see out and we could charge probably about one-half to one-third the cost of what your average airliner charges you.

BLANEY: Coffee, tea, and milk, um?

CONRAD: [laughs] The whole ball of wax. This first one that we have right now. We have all the framework finished, we're starting to put the other things – we hope to have it off the ground sometime this Fall. Now, I don't know. This depends on the financial backing we get from it and how things go. But from what we can see right now, we hope to have it flying in about five to seven months.

BLANEY: And, uh, we're hoping that you'll book Albuquerque on your first big flight.



CONRAD: Well, we sure hope to. [laughs] We would like, as soon as we get the thing done, to maybe make a – and all of our tests done on it – to make a nation-wide cruise. Travel to all the big cities of the United States and hopefully this would be around the first of the year. Sometime for the Centennial celebrations.

BLANEY: Very good. Well, those of us at KMYR want to wish you all the luck in the world.

CONRAD: Thank you very much.

BLANEY: Bye-bye.

CONRAD: Bye.

[music]

[22:38]

[end]