

by Adam Rovner

Melvin Vaniman: Forgotten Pioneer Aviator

When Melvin Vaniman peered down from his airship at the thousands of well-wishers lining New Jersey's Atlantic City boardwalk on July 2, 1912, he was at the height of his fame. Today he is all but forgotten. Yet in the decade following the Wright brothers' triumph at Kitty Hawk, Vaniman virtually invented aerial photography, engineered efforts to reach the North Pole by dirigible, built and flew the first triplane, introduced the blimp to Goodyear and launched mankind's first attempts to cross an ocean by air. Even Vaniman's cat became a celebrity. So how does a man who once seemed destined for greatness disappear so completely from memory? Vaniman, despite a run of improbable good fortune, ultimately suffered from rotten luck. And even in 1912, a gambler needed luck in Atlantic City.

Much like the Wright brothers, Chester Melvin Vaniman, born in 1866, was the product of a Midwestern family whose eyes devoutly turned heavenward. His parents, George and Louisa, were members of the Dunkards, a denomination that frowned on modernization and avoided instrumental music in their agricultural communities. As a young man growing up in a sober, practical household, Vaniman channeled his energies and aptitude toward repairing engines and other devices on the family farm in Virden, Ill. And like many restless sons from across the Midwest, he dreamed of escaping his small-town existence.

A mixture of recklessness and resourcefulness seems to have propelled Vaniman toward celebrity from the time he was a teenager, when he turned his back on farming to study music. Later, he toured extensively with an opera company as a singer and guitarist. A short man with a striking profile, reddish hair and a fiery disposition, Vaniman appeared to thrive on stage. But his musical career came to an abrupt end when a plague scare forced his company to disband in Hawaii. Lonely, broke and stranded in Honolulu, Vaniman cabled for his hometown sweetheart, Ida Loud, to join him, and they quickly wed.

Having pioneered the Hawaiian wedding, Vaniman next turned to revolutionizing photography. A steamship company contracted him to snap pictures of its well-heeled clients and their exotic ports of call, but Vaniman was never satisfied with anything but grand undertakings. He soon developed a process

for taking panoramic photos using film more than 6 feet long and requiring exposures of 2 to 4 hours.

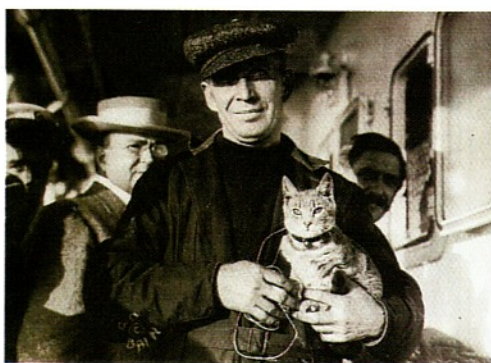
By 1902 the young couple had moved on to New Zealand, where Vaniman risked life and limb to photograph the rugged landscape from atop fixed poles and ships' masts. Eager to gain an ever-higher vantage point, the "acrobatic photographer" experimented with tethered balloons in Australia. There he produced a series of historic images including a 1904 panorama of Sydney, one of the first cityscapes taken from the air. Vaniman's antics garnered a great deal of press, and presumably income, and inspired him to experiment with the latest fad—airplanes.

He traveled through Europe and settled in 1905 in Paris, then the center of aeronautical innovation. After his bid to design and fly an airplane in 1906 failed, he came to view dirigibles—steerable lighter-than-air craft—as aviation's future, proclaiming, "I once had great faith in aeroplanes...

[but] I am firmly set in my belief that the aeroplane will never be a cargo carrier." Such misguided conviction now appears laughable but, less than 100 years ago, the dangers posed by lighter-than-air craft paled in comparison to the seemingly insurmountable difficulties of designing cargo-carrying airplanes.

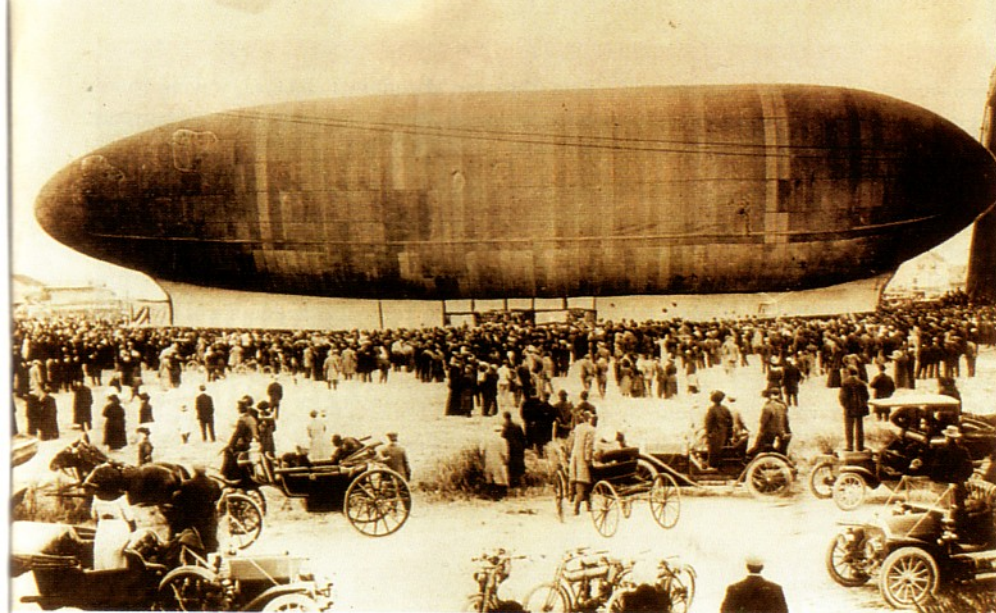
In its infancy, aeronautics was an often fatal game of chance as much as a science. Each week brought reports of aviators dashed to their deaths. Yet the self-taught Vaniman possessed boundless confidence in himself and faith in technology—the right stuff to tempt fate. His boldness caught the attention of publicity-hungry reporter Walter Wellman. In an early bit of gonzo journalism, Wellman cast himself as the best hope to reach the North Pole and glorify the United States and his friend President Theodore Roosevelt. The top-hatted Wellman hired Vaniman to enlarge his sausage-shaped airship, *America*, which had been built for a previous attempt on the Pole. For months, Vaniman toiled in his stained mechanics overalls and peaked cap to extend the dirigible's flexible, hydrogen-filled gasbag.

When completed, *America* ranked as the second-largest aircraft ever built, and it signaled a challenge to the German Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin's airships. On September 2, 1907, *America* set off from just below the Arctic Circle in Spitzbergen,



Melvin Vaniman poses with his celebrity mascot Kiddo. The dirigible *America*'s navigator claimed Kiddo was "more useful to us than any barometer."

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Designed by Vaniman, the ill-fated airship Akron (left) was Goodyear's first "blimp" and America's largest airship in 1912. Vaniman and his triplane (above) were Paris sensations in 1908. Before his aviation exploits, Vaniman pioneered the art of panoramic photography while in Hawaii (below).

Norway. Although the airship performed well initially, the weather turned violent and the crew and their 10 sledge dogs crashed ignobly onto the ice.

Vaniman's dreams of lighter-than-air flight were temporarily punctured. But he wasn't grounded for long. Combining his previous airplane experiments with the experience he gained engineering Wellman's failed polar voyage, Vaniman designed a sturdy triplane with a framework of steel tubing. Dazzled attendees of the First Paris Aeronautical Salon in 1908 gawked at his "three-decker," which took off under its own power and flew a distance of 492 feet, the first triplane to make a really successful flight. Despite the early promise of Vaniman's triplane, Wellman lured him back to the Arctic, this time accompanied by Russian pilot Nicholas Popov, a reported acrophobic.

The crew left Spitzbergen aboard a repaired *America* on August 15, 1909, for the North Pole, some 700 miles distant. For several hours they soared over the polar ice until the airship lost ballast and rose to frigid heights 5,000 feet above the frozen landscape. Vaniman wrestled with the gas valves and brought *America* under control less than 100 miles from their base. The airship hovered above the sea until a passing ship steamed to their rescue. Amazed sailors watched as Wellman "coolly [lit] a cigar," while "just as coolly" Vaniman launched *America's* lifeboat beneath 250,000 cubic feet of explosive hydrogen.

After Admiral Robert Edwin Peary reached the North Pole,

Vaniman and Wellman turned their attention to higher stakes. They proposed crossing the Atlantic by air, a journey almost twice as long as their failed round-trip polar flights. At the time, no aircraft had made an uninterrupted flight of even 500 miles. The numerous perils of the voyage, as an editorial wryly put it, "discourage[d] levity." Yet the ever-buoyant Vaniman believed *America* "had nine chances in ten of crossing in safety." One of the nation's leading aeronautical figures, Dr. Albert Zahm, echoed Vaniman's optimism, even suggesting that the site of *America's* Atlantic City hangar henceforth "be called Airport"—the first recorded usage of the word.

Crew members seemed unperturbed by the danger of explosion and brought along cigars and a plumber's blowtorch for cooking. For safety, such as it was, they harnessed an "unsinkable" lifeboat containing supplies and a Marconi wireless apparatus beneath the nacelle, the sturdy steel car that served as *America's* bridge. Vaniman hoped to transmit telegraphic dispatches in Morse code to sponsoring newspapers, boasting to reporters that the crossing would take only a few days: "I don't think we will race with any of the transatlantic liners. I believe we would outclass them."

America departed Atlantic City on October 15, 1910, with a crew of six men and one reluctant cat, Kiddo. Thousands gathered in "awed silence" as the massive airship drifted out of sight. The first telegraphic message ever relayed from the air soon



reached an eager public: "We're going northeast by east, still foggy, everything fine." At first, the trip did go smoothly, but as night fell, the crew noticed sparks shooting from the engine's exhaust. Vaniman assured them the moisture-laden canvas would not ignite. The fearful crew had no option but to trust him as they drifted over the open sea enveloped by a ghostly mist. With visibility near zero, *America* emerged from a coastal fog bank above busy shipping lanes, traveling at about 15 miles per hour. Sailors aboard a schooner below spotted the trail of sparks and raised the alarm at the looming phantom. *America* jammed hard to starboard and just cleared the topmast. Only the red-hot fireworks spewing from the engine had saved them from being speared like a cocktail olive. "I wonder what those poor devils are thinking down on the schooner," Vaniman joked at the time, "they...will begin to doubt whether they really saw...a ship in the air."

For two days, *America* staggered along in steady winds that battered the vessel and threatened to break it apart. The fore and aft motors proved too weak to propel the ship and, with the escape of gas, *America* lost altitude and plunged dangerously close to the waves. Kiddo howled as *America* heaved and pitched. British navigator Murray Simon warmed to the animal, writing: "You must never cross the Atlantic in an airship without a cat. We have found our cat more useful to us than any barometer."

America's eight-cylinder aft engine proved far less useful; it failed and the airship drifted wildly off course. Vaniman ordered the engine dumped overboard piece by piece. Knowing their transatlantic voyage could not succeed, the crew sought to reach Bermuda's shipping lanes. When they spotted the Royal Mail

steamer SS *Trent*, Vaniman abandoned *America*, waving fondly as it sank beneath the waves. But the trip was far from a failure.

Vaniman's dirigible set world records for distance traveled (1,008 miles) and time aloft in a powered aircraft (71½ hours)—figures that shattered Zeppelin's achievements. Wellman later hailed Vaniman as "a great mechanical genius, of lion heart, equal in intrepidity and resourcefulness to any emergency." Cheering crowds feted the crew in New York, and Kiddo spent the night as a guest of the Waldorf-Astoria.

Like Kiddo, Vaniman seemed to have nine lives. The harrowing journey proved too much for Wellman, however, who never again left terra firma. Vaniman remained fixed on the skies, prophesying a future in which air travel "will be the most comfortable, most safe and economical way to visit distant countries, when the voyager will sit in an easy chair...and watch the world moving beneath, as if solely for his pleasure."

To raise funds for a new transatlantic venture, Vaniman exhibited Kiddo in a gilded cage at New York department stores. More important, he found a patron in Frank A. Seiberling, co-founder of Goodyear. Vaniman's new dirigible, financed by Seiberling and christened *Akron*, became the first Goodyear "blimp" and reigned as the largest airship ever constructed in the United States. The Vaniman-Seiberling Transatlantic Expedition hoped to cross the ocean "before the German aspirants can come from the other side."

While *Akron* underwent trials, Vaniman dreamt of a new "fire-proof and lightning-proof" fabric that would solve the problem

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of escaping gas. He described his vision of a rubberized "cloth of web-like steel piano wire as the woof and cotton as the warp." Vaniman even had Goodyear experiment with rubber and silk woven through with vanadium steel. Perhaps Vaniman provided the seed for steel-belted radials, which would not be introduced in the United States for another half-century. But the impatient aviator could not wait for his wire-wound cloth to be perfected.

At 6:20 a.m. on July 2, 1912, Vaniman, his brother Calvin, and three others boarded *Akron*. Vaniman's wife and a crowd of 3,000 swarmed Atlantic City's boardwalk and cheered. Witnesses saw Vaniman pilot the 258-foot-long airship from its metal shed and sail over the breakers toward open water: "[T]he cream-colored ship with the white line beneath stood out against the blue sky as a thing of marvelous grace and light." Then *Akron* shot up to 2,000 feet. Loud reports rent the air "as though a sail had been suddenly struck by a hurricane." The airship fluttered skyward; the nacelle plummeted toward the waves trailed by a spiral of black smoke. All hands were lost.

The New York Times eulogized Vaniman as "a young man who cannot be easily spared." *Scientific American* reassured readers that "the nation which harbors such characters as Vaniman...will carry off the victory in the battle of nations." An investigation into the disaster proved inconclusive; either the balloon had ruptured due to rapid gas expansion, or the nacelle's suspension ropes had snapped. Goodyear would not launch another such craft for more than a decade. No one would cross the Atlantic by air until U.S. Navy fliers accomplished the feat in 1919.

Atlantic City possesses no monument to Melvin Vaniman. Even high-rollers flying into the resort's Bader Field, America's first municipal airport, will find no mention of the pioneer aeronaut whose efforts directly led to the creation of the very word "airport." Vaniman gambled his life on the conquest of the skies, but his quest for immortality ended in a watery grave. His remains still lie somewhere beneath the shallows that today reflect the casinos' neon glare and the blue vault of his aspirations. □