

SPECIAL FEATURE

The History of the Ill-Fated Dirigible *Akron* and the Discovery of a Scarce “Souvenir of Balloon *Akron*” Fabric Postcard from 1912.*By Charles J. DiComo, PhD*

In early December 2021, a colleague dropped off at my home a large box of well over 500 letters, postal cards and postcards from the Coleman and Gaskill families, longtime residents of Hammonton, New Jersey and the surrounding hamlets (e.g., Egg Harbor, Atlantic City). He was in the process of moving and found these items abandoned in an old barn and did not want to see them end up in a landfill without first being examined. Knowing my penchant for postal history and my affiliations with numerous philatelic Societies', he made sure they ended up in my care. The correspondence spanned from the early 1880s to the late 1960's. Much of this archive contained familial content: holiday cards; birth and wedding announcements; mourning covers; family photographs; as well as tax receipts, advertising and travel brochures, etc. There were also hundreds of postal cards and postcards from all across the country.

As with any archive that crosses my desk, I take my time sorting and organizing by object type, content and eventually chronologically. I also examine each and every envelope for contents, as well as their postal significance (rates, routes, cancellations, adhered stamps, etc.). After many hours over a few weeks, my efforts paid off with the discovery of a very scarce Souvenir of Balloon “*Akron*” postcard from 1912 (**Figure 1**).

As denoted on the postcard front, “This sample of fabric was cut from the Balloon *Akron*.” It further reads “which is to carry, Melvin Vaniman and party of six to Europe in October. “*Akron*” was made by The Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. at Akron, Ohio, U.S.A., in 12 weeks. The Balloon is 258 feet long and 45 feet in diameter, contains 6,000 square yards of fabric; has greatest net lifting power of any dirigible ever made – 80 people. The expedition is being financed by Mr. F.A. Seiberling, president, The Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co.”

So how and when were these fabric postcards created? As my friend Cheryl Ganz, FRPSL, Curator of Philately *Emerita* at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, shared with me in a personal communication, the cards were created by an unidentified publisher after the 1911 crash of the *Akron*. Tourists, who were eager for postcards and souvenirs, purchased the entire stock of the first printing. A second printing was later created with only the image side and required the attachment of a white paper backing mimicking the reverse shown in **Figure 2**. According to Cheryl, my example is thought to be only the fifth or sixth now known from the first printing.

It is in exceptional condition and the note on the reverse shown in **Figure 3** gives us a clue as to why. It reads: “*I will send this in the letter so you will get it all right. They often steal card like this out of the mail, Mom.*” This postcard was not sent through the mails, but found in a 1913-dated envelope to a Coleman family member. A firm reminder to check the contents of any covers we encounter – you never know what lies within.

So what of the expedition to Europe by Vaniman and his crew? Sadly, as reported by the *Western Newspaper Union News Service* on July 5, 1912, while “sailing out over the Atlantic ocean under perfect control and in view of several thousand interested persons, the great airship AKRON, in command of MELVILLE VANIMAN, with a crew of four men, exploded while more than 500 feet in the air and, shot down into the water a tangled mass, carrying to their death the daring aviator and his companions. Death is believed to have come instantly to the five men. In all the tragic history of disasters to airships or aeroplanes probably none was as sensational as that which brought to an end the greatest and most costly air craft ever constructed in the western hemisphere. Built to withstand the storms of the Atlantic, and to carry at least a dozen men across the ocean to Europe, the AKRON went to her doom in calm weather.”

Shown at left in **Figure 4** is a 1911 drawing of the *Akron* airship. In the middle, a Real Picture Postcard (RPPC) of the Air Ship *Akron* on the day of its final flight on July 2, 1912 in Atlantic City, New Jersey. On the right is a picture of Melvin Vaniman and his feline companion.

In closing, one has to wonder if members of the Coleman and/or Gaskill family were on the beach that day to witness the tragedy of the *Akron*. It could explain why they set aside the souvenir postcard as a remembrance in their family archive, which I am fortunate to be able to share with the philatelic community. ■

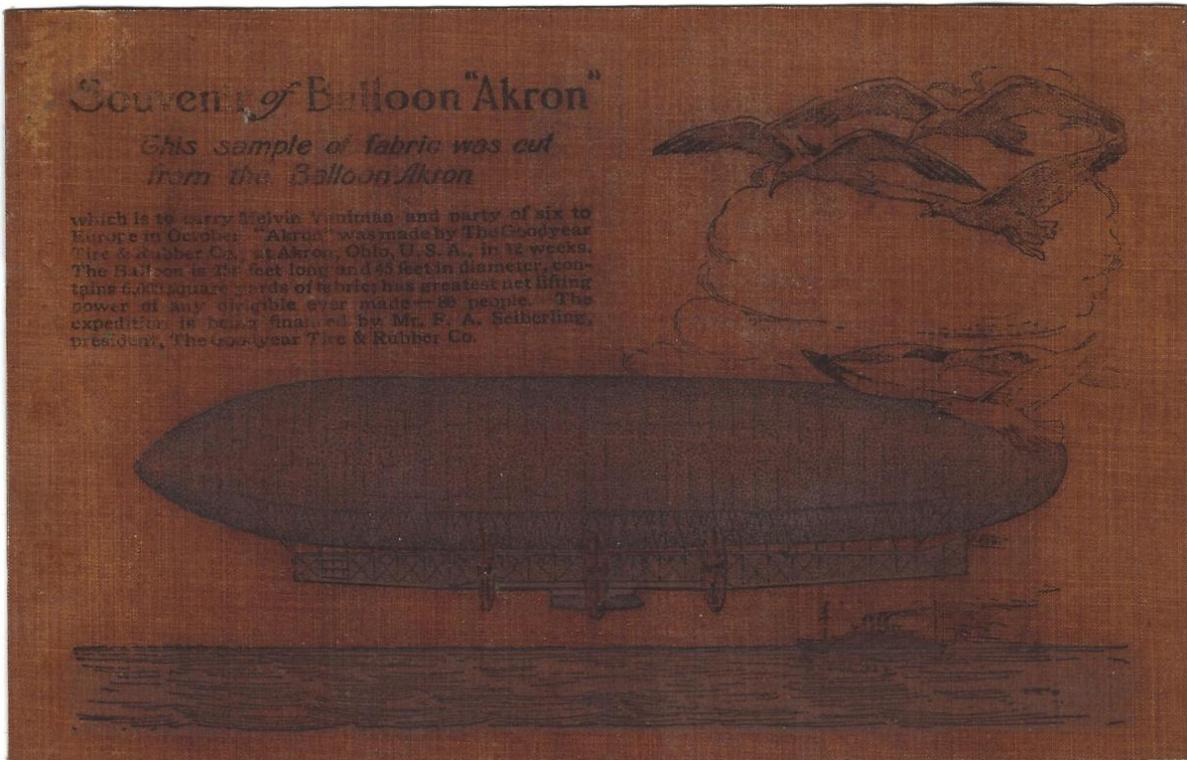


Figure 1. Souvenir of Balloon "Akron", unidentified publisher, ca. 1912, divided back printed postcard on fabric that was cut from Akron after a crash during a test flight, 1911.

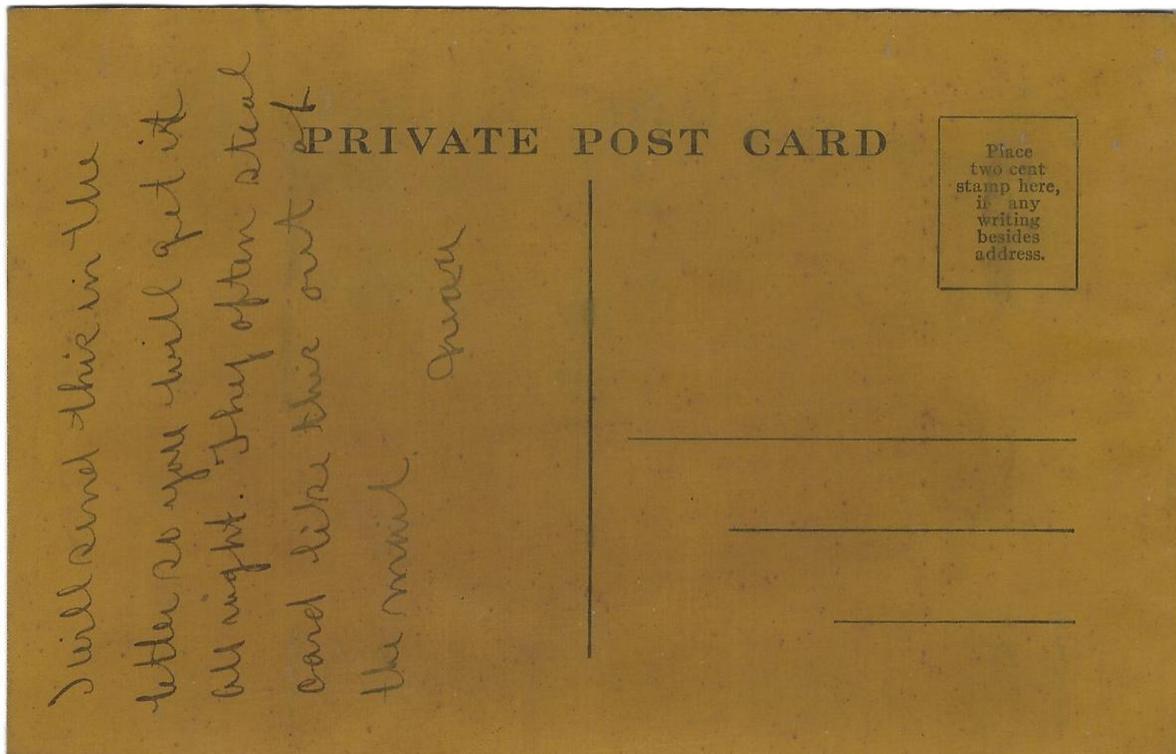


Figure 2. Reverse of the Souvenir of Balloon "Akron" fabric postcard, with printed, divided back. There is a blank space at left for a message; lines at right for the addressee; "Private Post Card" at top, and a framed-box at upper right for postage.

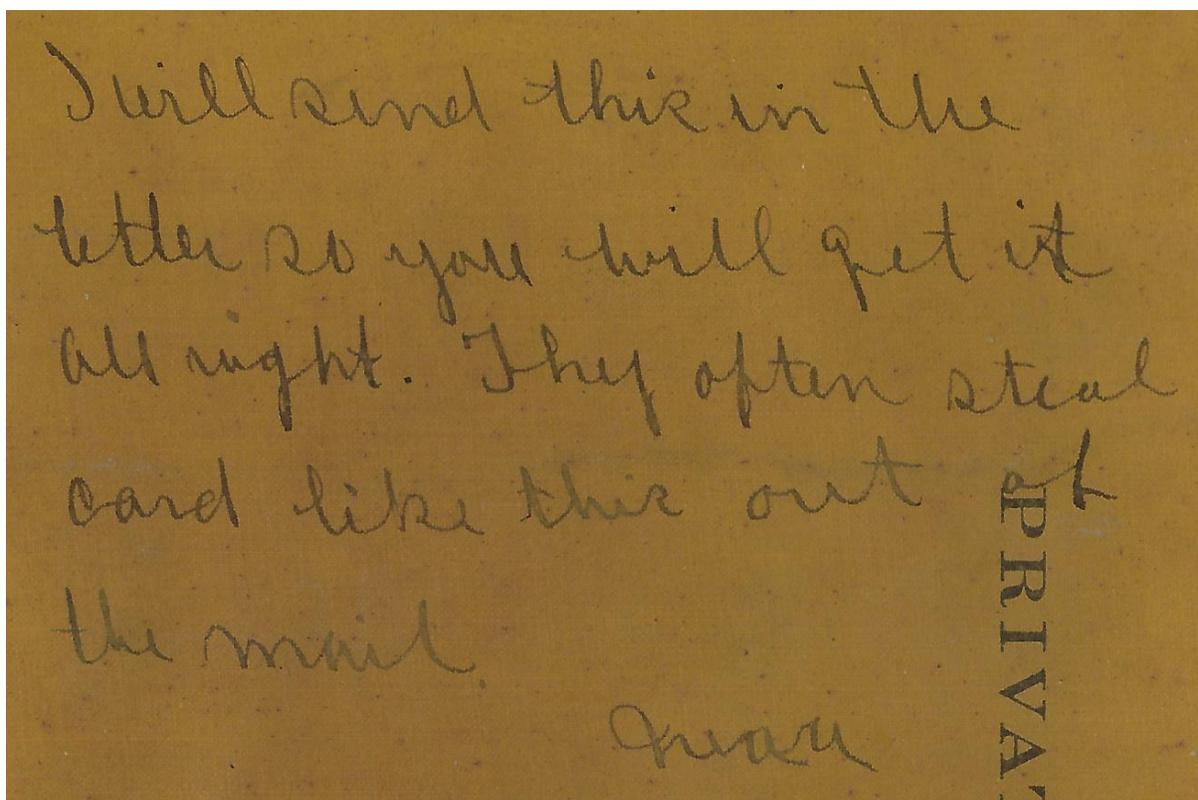


Figure 3. Reverse of "Akron" fabric postcard rotated ninety degrees clockwise to show the note the sender wrote to the Coleman family, transcribed as follows: "I will send this in the letter so you will get it all right. They often steal card like this out of the mail, Mom."



Figure 4. Left: 1911 drawing of the *Akron*. Middle: Real Picture Postcard (RPPC) of Air Ship *Akron* on the day of its final flight, July 2, 1912, Atlantic City, NJ. Right: Melvin Vaniman and his feline.

References

1. <http://www.gendisasters.com/new-jersey/703/atlantic-city%2C-nj-airship-akron-explosion%2C-jul-1912> (last viewed January 6, 2022), Airship AKRON Explosion - Airship Hurlled to the Sea. Submitted by Stu Beitler, Atlantic City, NJ, published in the Eagle Valley Enterprise Colorado, July 5, 1912.