

“The San Diego Dirigible”

The wonders of this ship are almost beyond any description. Few people in San Diego realize the wonders that have been accomplished during the last few months in the construction of the Toliver airship . . . When this ship makes its initial flight in May it will make a showing that will startle the whole world.

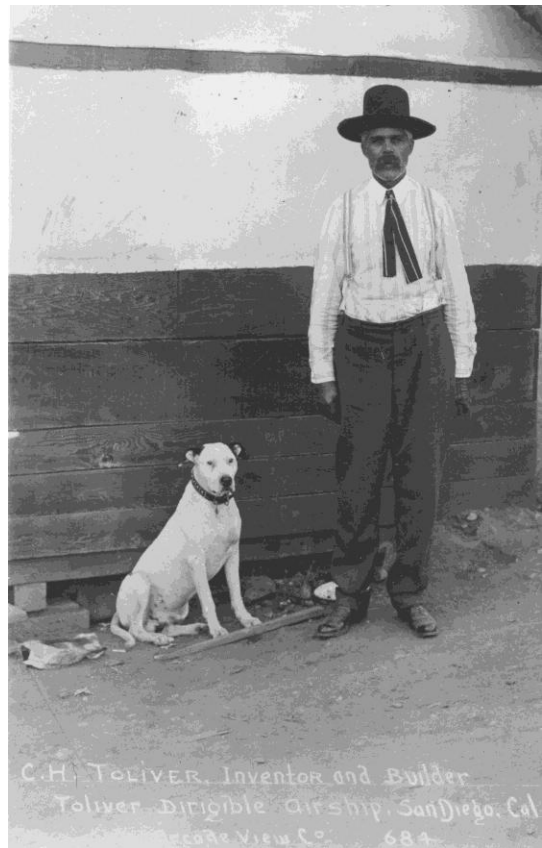
--newspaper advertisement for the Toliver Aerial Navigation Co,
April 5, 1911.

The first decade of the 1900s was the era of aviation invention. In 1903, the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Primitive airplanes soon followed. But hydrogen-filled airships, such as Germany’s “Zeppelins,” were the vanguard of air travel. In 1909, a Zeppelin became the first airship used for passenger transport.

When a 56-year-old inventor named Charles H. Toliver appeared in San Diego in 1910 and announced plans to build a 40-passenger dirigible—better known today as a blimp--the town was excited and ready to participate. Little was known about Toliver but his local public stock offering in the Toliver Aerial Navigation Company sold readily at \$2.50 a share.

Toliver’s invention, dubbed the “San Diego,” soon began to emerge from a canyon at 31st and B Streets. The airship was 250 feet long and 48 feet in diameter. The metal skeleton was covered with 5,800 yards of “metalized” silk. Power came from four, gasoline engines—32 horsepower each—which Toliver claimed would drive the airship at up to 65 miles per hour. Passengers would ride in comfortable safety in a cabin built within the giant gas envelope.

The public seemed fascinated. On Saturday, April 8, 1911, “more than three thousand” people visited the “shipyard” at 31st and B, and heard Toliver proclaim his dirigible more than 90 percent complete. The inventor also announced that stock in his company was in such great demand that the share price would now double, to \$5.00 a share.



Despite assurances of imminent completion, the construction of the blimp, now renamed “Toliver I,” dragged on through the summer of 1911 and into the fall. On October 14, Toliver promised in a public meeting at the U.S. Grant Hotel, that the airship would fly within weeks.

On November 10, a throng of excited spectators, and more than a few nervous investors, gathered at the Golden Hill construction site to watch the airship take to the skies. The gas-

powered engines started and the aluminum propellers spun. The *Union* would report: "It quivered for a few breathless moments, threatening to rise, then settled down again."

The harried inventor blamed the weather. A warmer day would have given the ship added buoyancy, he argued. Then he decided that there was too much air in the gas mixture and not enough hydrogen. Bad gas, it seems, had stopped the maiden flight.

But soon Toliver was facing other issues. Some investors complained that their shares of stock were unmarketable. One shareholder filed a lawsuit, alleging problems with Toliver's bookkeeping.

The City Health Department added to Toliver's woes when it announced that the remaining hydrogen in the airship had become "highly explosive and exceedingly dangerous" to the community. Toliver was ordered to "abate the nuisance" by deflating his airship "forthwith."

A winter storm did the job for him. On Wednesday night, December 20, high winds ripped "Toliver I" to shreds, leaving a "formless mass of wreckage." Toliver took the disaster badly, remarking to newspaper reporter: "The treatment that has been accorded me in San Diego has been unjust and cruel. This may not be the end of the destruction of that airship. Certainly the city officials have been responsible for it and certainly there should be some redress."

One more strange chapter in the saga of C. H. Toliver remained. A secretary and chauffeur to Toliver, 32-year-old Herbert G. Lewis, was a disgruntled stock investor in Toliver's company. More significantly, Lewis believed his wife Ellen had been molested by Toliver.

On Saturday evening, May 25, Lewis was waiting at the Toliver house when the inventor and his wife Kate returned home. As the Toliver's drove into the garage, Lewis emerged from the shadows with a gun and shot the couple. Mrs. Toliver staggered into the house and died with the telephone in her hand. Toliver, badly wounded, followed his wife but as he fell to the floor Lewis killed him with a butcher knife.

INVENTOR AND WIFE SLAIN BY CHAUFFEUR

Mr. and Mrs. C. H. Toliver of San Diego, Cal., Victims of Former Employee.

USES PISTOLS AND A DAGGER

"If I hadn't Done It Some One Else Would Have Had To," Says Murderer in Confession.

SAN DIEGO, Cal., May 26.—Bert G. Lewis, former private secretary and chauffeur to C. H. Toliver, an airship inventor, peered through the barred door of his cell in the city prison to-day and admitted to Captain of Detectives Myers that he alone shot and killed Mr. and Mrs. Toliver at their home last night.

"Yes, I killed him," said Lewis, referring to Toliver. "He ruined my home; if I had not done it some one else would have had to."

Lewis showed a desire to aid the public administrator in the effort to learn which of the two had died first. "Mrs. Toliver died first," said Lewis.

The body of the woman was found near the telephone, where she had fallen last night after she had been twice mortally wounded by Lewis. She had tried to send in a call for the police, but the desk Sergeant at the station heard only a groan, and she died before she could tell of the murders.

Developments show that Lewis planned his work carefully. A pet dog which followed Toliver and his wife everywhere was caught by Lewis early last night. He led the dog a block or more from the house and tied him to a post.

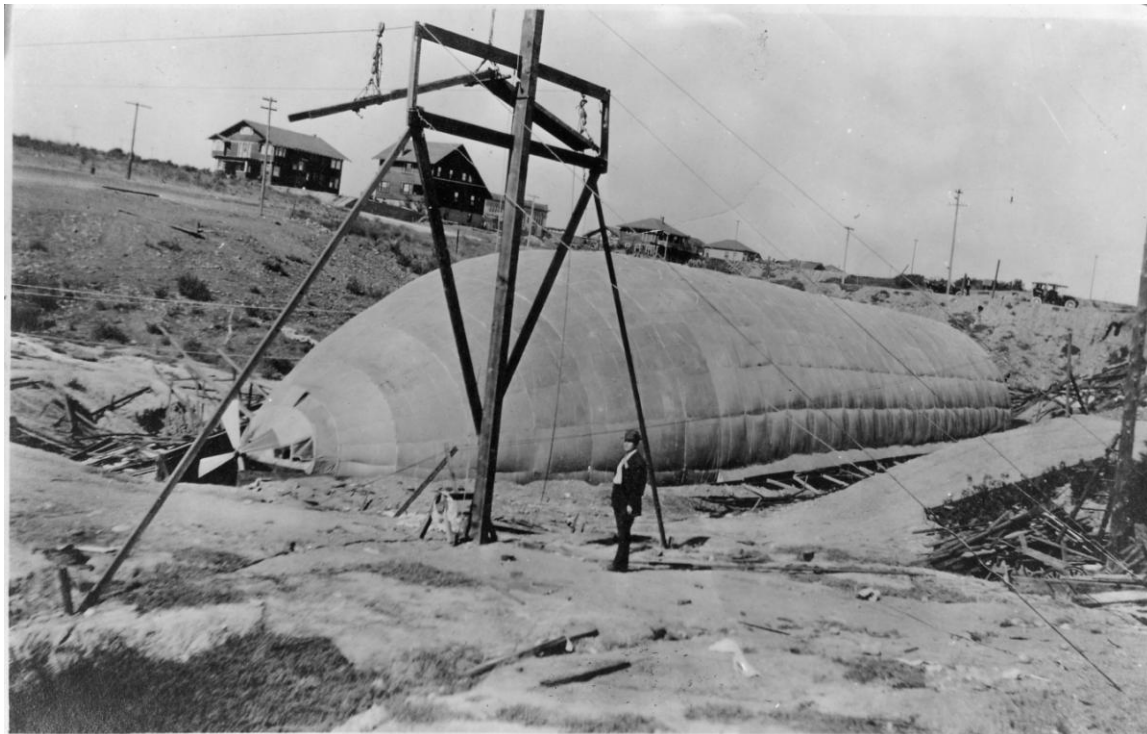
Then, armed with two pistols and a dagger, he returned to the Toliver home and waited. The police do not believe he had planned to murder Mrs. Toliver. As Toliver and his wife rode up to their home in their automobile, Lewis opened fire. Those who heard the shooting say he fired nineteen times. Mrs. Toliver was shot in the mouth and in the head. Both wounds were fatal, but she staggered into the house, reached the telephone, and tried to call the police.

Toliver, his body riddled with bullets, followed his wife into the house, Lewis close behind. The wounded man fell in

New York Times, May 27, 1912

“I guess you’ve got the man you want,” admitted Lewis after the police captured him. “He ruined my home; if I had not done it some one else would have had to.”

The case went to trial in February 1913. The jury returned a verdict of “not guilty by reason of insanity.” Another jury then deliberated and decided Lewis was now sane. Set free by the court, Lewis and his wife departed for Los Angeles and faded into obscurity.



Toliver I at the construction site at 31st and B Streets. *Courtesy San Diego Air & Space Museum*

From “An Airship or a Lead Balloon?” by Richard W. Crawford in *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011), p.99-102.