

Albion **A**dvertiser

Wednesday, Aug. 19, 1998

Flying machines and balloons coming to Pine Hill expo

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BARRE – For a moment, as the basket skimmed the treetops, I was reminded of my canoe slicing through lily pads and reeds on the camp pond when I was a counselor.

Our hot air balloon pilot reached over the side and grabbed a handful of leaves from one of the trees and presented them to Bertha Wells.

“Here’s a bouquet for you,” Carroll Teitsworth, our pilot, said to Mrs. Wells. Reaching back to the treetops, he picked a “bouquet” for me. Then, with a blast from the propane jets above our heads, he took us higher up in the air and away from the treetops.

The Great Orleans Unique Flying Machine Expo and Hot Air Balloon Fest is returning for a second time to the Pine Hill Airport in Barre this Friday, Saturday and Sunday. This festival, organized by Vintage Aircraft Group, Inc., drew thousands of visitors to the small airport last summer. VAG President Tim Nizialek said he expects 20,000 visitors this year.

“At least,” he said with a sly smile, “that’s what I told the Thruway Authority.”

Balloon pilots Teitsworth and Jenny Fritton made an early stop Wednesday at the airport to demonstrate their balloons, ReMax and Amazing Grace, respectively, to Barre property owners and others who are interested in hot air balloons. With some coaxing (I am afraid of most heights), VAG spokesman Gene Haines convinced me to take my first flight in a hot air balloon.

The first thing to remember, I quickly learned, is do not look straight down. Looking instead to the horizon, I saw a wonderful view of Orleans County, across Lake Ontario and to Canada.

The basket lifted away from the ground softly, without a jarring motion. It quickly moved upward but drifted slowly, about three miles an hour. While there was no ground beneath it, the basket felt stable and did not sway under the balloon.

“They call it aerostat,” Teitsworth explained. “The air is moving around the envelope to move it along.”

As the balloon moved over the woods, a dull echo of the propane jets could be heard coming up from the ground. Teitsworth said that happens only above the trees and



not open ground. Below, a dog barked and a man came outside to see the balloon drift over his house.

After about 30 minutes it was time to come down from the sky. Teitsworth looked for an empty field and spoke by radio with his daughter and son-in-law in the chase vehicle. After turning down one potential spot because the owner was absent, they chose a freshly harvested field behind a stand of trees.

“Since we don’t know where we’re going to land ahead of time, we always hope for a friendly reception,” Teitsworth said as the balloon slowly sank to the ground. “We have a custom to give a bottle of champagne to the land owner when we land.”

When the balloon settled, Teitsworth told Mrs. Wells, her husband, Gerald, and me that we could disembark the basket.

“We defied death one more time,” he cheerfully announced. When the balloon was packed into the chase vehicle, he set about opening a bottle of sparkling grape juice for us.

“Way back in the early days of ballooning, the farmers [in France] were scared of this thing landing in their fields,” he said, filling small cups. “They literally thought they were being attacked from Mars and destroyed the balloon. So the pilots decided to carry something to prove they were France. So they carried French wine, or champagne.”

Sipping her grape juice, Mrs. Wells looked toward the trees the balloon had drifted over and commented, “It looks different from down here.”

VAG’s Nizialek said the expo will also look a little different from last year.

“We’re more well-prepared from last year because we have a year under our belt,” he said.

This summer’s show will be reminiscent of the early barnstorming days, he said.

“The old hands-on, where people can come out,” Nizialek said. “We’ve actually had to turn people down because we were over-filled.”

In addition to the flying craft and vendors, Nizialek said there will be an antique car show and live music by Black Creek on Friday and Saturday night. New this year is a hospitality tent and helicopter rides.

“There’s going to be some surprises,” Nizialek said.