

No hot air in this Glidden balloon

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"I had never dreamed that there was such a delightful sensation in ballooning." Thus it was that a passenger on his first balloon ascension described the flight. The date was September 17, 1908. The balloon was one filled with ordinary illuminating gas, not the hot air generated from a burner used in the balloons we see floating overhead today.

The pilot and owner of the craft, Mr. Charles J. Glidden, had as his passengers Dr. Charles T. Clifford of Lowell and Alfred R. Shrigley of Boston as he made his 19th flight. Of the 18 previous ascensions, three had taken off from Paris, France and four from Bath and London, England. Mr. Glidden had become an international figure in gas ballooning — only one of several fields in which he would distinguish himself during his lifetime. But that's another story.

While not a resident of Chelmsford, Charles J. Glidden spent considerable time here at the home of his brother, Nathaniel Glidden, and his cousin, Walter Perham. Nathaniel lived in the old Simeon Spaulding house at the corner of North Road and Dalton Road. The house was known as the Syndicate House because telephone workers employed by the syndicate that Charles Glidden had organized visited there as a place for rest and relaxation. Incidentally, Dalton Road was then called Syndicate Road.

The ascent alluded to above was made in

The way It was

By George A.
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Nashua in the presence of 15,000 people, according to the newspaper report. The balloon landed in Chelmsford near Byam's Corner (the intersection of Littleton Road and Hunt Road).

When all was ready for the takeoff, "It did not rise into the air immediately. Indeed, it looked for a moment or two as one of the passengers must give up the trip; for the car was designed originally for two men. When two or three bags of sand were thrown out, however, the balloon rose slowly amid the cheers of the crowd, and headed towards Lowell, remaining in sight for several minutes.

"It followed the river along the left bank to Tyngsboro and thence to North Chelmsford, where it crossed the stream in 20 seconds. At first it headed for one of the ponds and stood over it 1700 feet in the air, but soon took another course, passed over the reform school (Middlesex County Training School) and later crossed Chelmsford Street near the city farm (just east of the present Wang buildings), and went a mile and a half beyond Chelmsford Centre.

"At one point an electric car was stopped

that the passengers might see the balloon, and the men in the balloon waved their hats to the people below.

"The landing was made upon a farm occupied by a Greek family. The woman was at work in the yard and looked up to see the big balloon apparently coming down upon her. She gave a cry, ran into the house, and was not seen again."

Pictures of Mr. Glidden in the basket of the balloon always show him to be "correctly" dressed in his black business suit, "turned down" stiff collar, black tie, and felt hat.

He made several ascensions from Lowell near the gas holders on School Street from which he obtained the gas needed to inflate the balloon. He reported more than once that Lowell gas was the best he had found. The average specific gravity was .360, i.e. on the average it was approximately one third as heavy as air, thus providing the necessary lift to raise the balloon.

The newspaper of March 14, 1911 reported: "The first association of aeronautic pilots, of which Charles J. Glidden is president, has offered to supply the government immediately with six of the finest spherical balloons in the world, and the professional pilots to operate them." These were offered for military use out of San Antonio, Texas.

That was aviation around Chelmsford only five years after the Wright brothers' first airplane flight.

George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.



View from above

Mayor Brown stated: "We rose gently to an elevation of 2,000 feet in an easterly wind, following the Merrimack River over the grandstand of the automobile course (the dirt track along Pawtucket Boulevard), where we heard the cheering and the band playing and saw the marathon racers followed by automobiles on the course ... We passed over North Chelmsford to a point over the Fletcher quarries.

"At 3,500 feet we met the westerly wind which carried us back over Lowell. At the highest elevation we could see Boston, all of the islands in the harbor and all of the coast

cities from Boston to Newburyport.

"When nearly over Tewksbury, we descended to the 2,000-foot level where we again encountered the westerly wind and sailed back over the southerly part of Lowell and Chelmsford center.

"Ten minutes before the landing, the mayor, under instructions, took charge of the balloon and successfully brought it down at the home plate on the baseball field at Graniteville." Walter Perham, a relative of Glidden's and one of the few to own an automobile at that time, met them at the landing spot with about 3,000 people who witnessed the packing up of the balloon.

In March 1911, Glidden, as president of the International Aeronautic Pilots Association, in a letter to Adjutant General Gardner Pearson, "offered to supply the government immediately with six of the finest spherical balloons in the world, and the professional pilots to operate them." It was suggested that the balloons could be used either captive or free-flying to assist in the military operations along the Mexican border.

In an entirely different field, Glidden is credited with doing more than any other man to popularize the automobile. After he retired in 1900, he and his wife, the former Lucy Cleworth, made the first world

tour of the world by auto, travelling 46,528 miles in 39 countries.

His tour was made under a special order from the government, authorizing him to inspect the roads in the foreign countries through which he journeyed. His automobile, the first ever to be seen in many countries, including Palestine, was a great curiosity to the people of the Holy Land. Thousands greeted him when he motored up to the Jaffa Gate at Jerusalem.

Glidden was a 32nd-degree Mason and an active member of several Masonic organizations. He died in Boston on Sept. 11, 1927 following a lengthy illness.