

No hot air in this Glidden balloon

June 18, 1987

"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.
Parkhurst



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.