

SC's Daring Young Men On Flying Trapeze

By Margaret Koch
Sentinel Staff Writer

Balloons and parachutes went together around the turn of the century. So did acrobatics, performed in mid-air while descending via the same parachute.

Santa Cruz balloon watchers had one thriller who performed in a red devil suit complete with a stocking cap with horns attached yet.

And if he landed in the bay—or the top of a tree—or in a bramble bush—why that just gave the ladies a chance to scream and wring their hands in delicious dismay.

If his parachute brought him down too fast or dragged him into a fence or over a roof-top and banged him up some, the ladies could always faint dead away.

Balloon watching was an exciting sport. As an old newspaper account candidly states: "No one would walk around the corner to see an empty balloon go up. But, gruesome as the inference is, it is inevitable: It is the chance that the balloonist will be killed that draws people to an ascension."

Occasionally a balloonist did die in a sickening smash into terra firma. But more often he escaped by an exciting hair's breadth to soar again . . . and again.

Plain hot air balloons were used first. The balloons were made of silk or cotton fabric sprayed with rubber to make them airtight. Hydrogen gas was first used by a Frenchman, J. A. C. Charles, in 1783.

George Washington actually watched the first ascension in the United States when in 1793 Francois Blanchard went up in a balloon in Philadelphia.

Ballooning caught the public's fancy and racing balloons also were popular. Balloonists called themselves "aeronauts" and usually tacked the appendage of "professor" onto their given names.

Several kinds of balloons were sent up from Santa Cruz beach as summer and July 4th attractions. For an "on the spot" story we talked to Virgil Macy of 541 26th avenue. In the days when he was a small boy, about 1909, balloons were on an equal footing with circus elephants. But instead of filling water buckets, boys helped fill the balloons with hot air.

Macy always knew when balloons were about to go aloft because his father, Tom Macy, had a transfer business.

"His teams and wagons went all over town and we always knew what was going on," explained Macy. "The ascensions usually took place on the beach in front of where the Fun House stands today."

First step in preparing for an ascension was to fire up the brick furnace built into the sand, lined with bricks and topped with sheet metal.

"It was three or four feet long and a terra cotta pipe ran from it about 15 feet with the last three or four feet turned up into the air," Macy said.

Kerosene, rags and excelsior were commonly used to make a quick, hot fire. The balloonist kept throwing dippers of kerosene on the flames and the neck of the collapsed balloon was placed over the upturned pipe. The boys held it there, "billowing" it to let the hot air into it. It took about a half-hour to even partially fill the big balloon and "every kid who helped hold it got sooty and dirty."

When the balloon was filled

enough to stand erect, it was held down with ropes. Then the balloonist really "poured on the heat." Once in awhile a spark would catch the cloth bag on fire and Macy recalls that the balloons were usually patched.

The "red devil's" balloon was about 50 feet tall and 25 feet in diameter when filled. It took 10 or 15 people to hold it while the "devil" climbed into a trapeze and checked his trailing parachute and ropes. One extra-long trailing rope was a safety precaution in case he got hung up in a tall tree somewhere.

Then the great air-filled bag would start to rise. Sometimes on the way up, the "devil" would throw out handfuls of flour-like puffs of smoke, for a dramatic effect.

Finally, when the balloon was so high that he was a mere dot, he would cut loose from it. Freed of his weight, the balloon would scoot around like crazy for several minutes before starting down to earth, according to Macy.

In the meanwhile, the "devil" in his dyed long underwear, would stunt his way to earth via the parachute and trapeze.

Another type of balloon was

used as "daylight fireworks" on the beach. Used, that is, they almost caught the tow fire.

"Those were colored—usually striped—hot air balloons. They were much smaller, five feet tall. They were made of oiled paper of some kind and were sent up from the end of 'Pleasure pier,' Macy said.

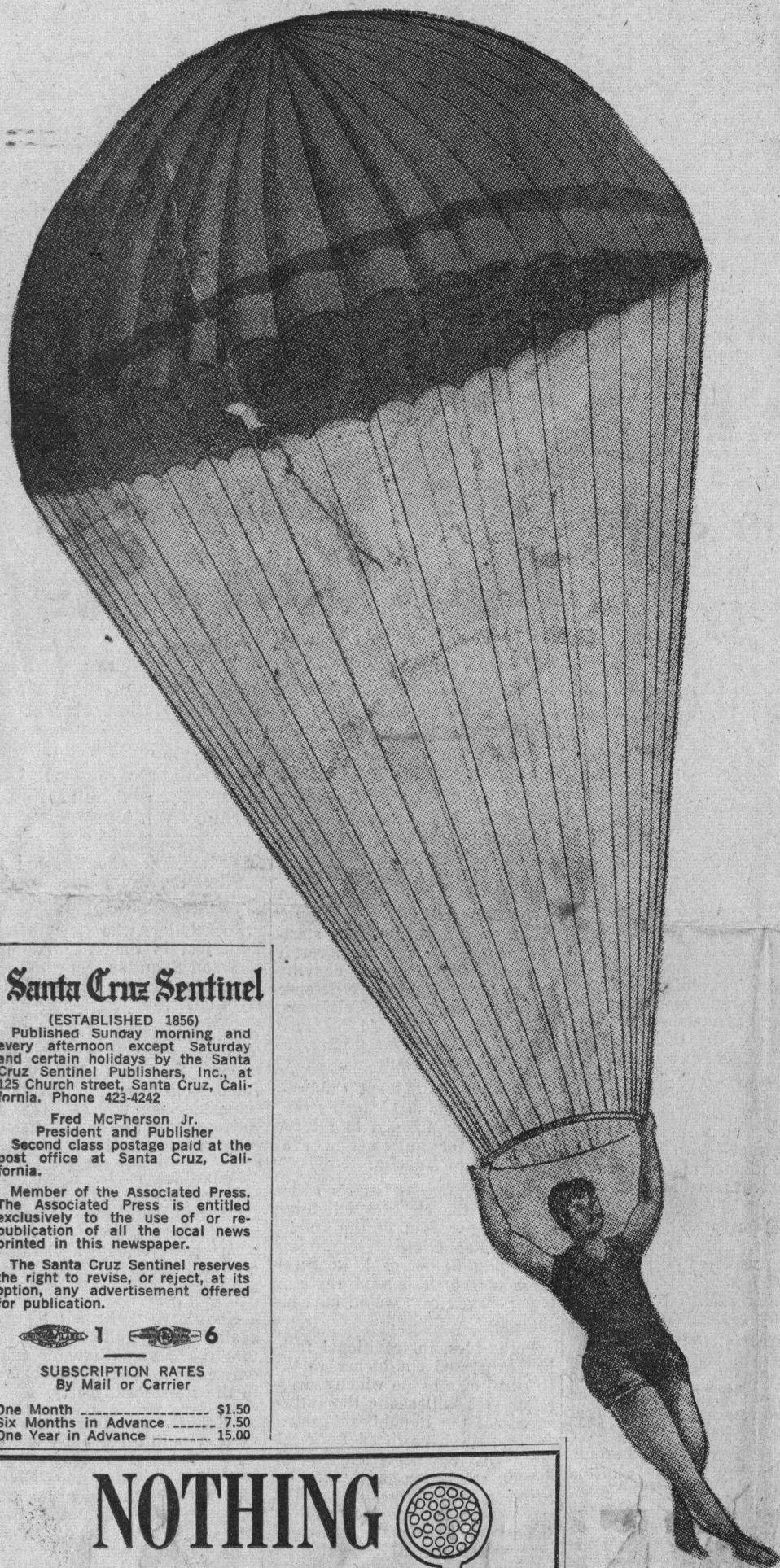
These gay-colored balloons were a wad of excelsior saturated with paraffin attached to the rim of their necks. This was set on fire to provide the hot air for ascent.

"Once the wind changed it blew one over Beach Hill where it burned some trees. Another time one blew over town and caught some cypripedium trees on fire," Macy noted.

That ended that particular balloon project—in a hurry.

Whatever happened, it was exciting to the wide-eyed who took it all in. They were eager to help with all of it. After all, what were a few burn holes in a shirt—or soot all over a pair of pants?

The kids got paid, too. They got free tickets to the "wheel of fortune" which used to be where the Fun House sits today.



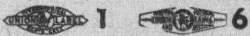
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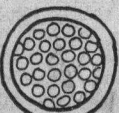
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This isn't the way they used to do it at Santa Cruz beach—the balloonists here did their stunts on a trapeze fastened to a parachute which was released from the balloon at great heights above the town. This old cartoon is from the collection of Roy Boekennoogen and dates from the 1890s and early 1900s when "ballooning" was a popular publicity gimmick in this country.

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