



It was just a little bit after 7 o'clock on an April Sunday morning in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the seven of us were already high and on our way to getting higher. The last time I used this method to get high, I was the city editor of the *Centre Daily Times* and I was with Roberta. That was 32 years ago.

To be honest, not much has changed in those 32 years, except the sight of hot-air balloons in many locales has become common place. And no place are hot-air balloons more common than Albuquerque, the home of an international balloon fiesta (Oct. 6-15 this year) and the Anderson Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum (named after Ben Abruzzo and Maxie Anderson, who crossed the Atlantic in 1978 in a helium balloon).

The pilot for my first ride in a hot-air balloon was Dennis Fleck, a Centre County native who was a member of the crew for the *Forbes* magazine-owned balloon. Malcolm Forbes had named it after his wife, Roberta.

The pilot this time is Dan Dalen, who calls himself a general contractor and who is called into service when Rainbow Ryders needs more pilots than it has on staff. With Dan are his wife, Pat, and other ground assistant Joe Gallegos. They will meet us when we land.

Land. An action verb.

Rainbow Ryders provides all passengers with a handout that advises, among other things: "The impact at landing may be harder than you expect. Hold

on tight to the handles and stay inside the basket. Stay low and bend your knees to absorb the shock. If the wind speed is over 5 mph you will probably bounce more than once and possibly drag for some distance or perhaps the basket may tip on its side when landing.”



I don't remember any of that from my initial ride in Roberta over Ferguson and Patton townships.

“When is the worst time of year to fly,” one of my colleagues, a magazine editor from Virginia, asks Dalen after we are airborne and headed south roughly parallel to the Rio Grande.

“This time of year,” he replies and chuckles. Then he explains that's because of the winds, which are forecast to pick up later in the day. I hope later won't be sooner.

We have launched from a vacant lot near the Rio Grande, and Dalen notes that balloonists are running out of landing sites because of the rapid development in Duke City, named for the Duke of Albuquerque of Spain, and now a 300-year-old city with a growing population of 500,000 and one less *r* in its name.

We are following several other Rainbow Ryders balloons, which are descending as they work their way toward the Rio Grande, there to all

but set down on the river for a moment before rising again.

Always the joker, Dalen says to his six passengers: “In the event of a water landing ...” He then reveals that he is wearing a seatbelt because he needs to keep his hands on the controls, turning on the burners to heat the air that makes the balloon rise or opening a vent to let out some hot air so we can descend.

The Rio Grande is not really very *grande* and we can see ripples because it's so shallow in many places. Ducks from a nearby nature preserve that we visited the day before seem to be walking on water, it's that shallow.

From the Rio Grande (about 5300 feet above sea level), Dalen starts an ascent of 2000 feet, where we were before dropping down to see the river. In the meantime, he explains why Albuquerque is the best place in the world to launch (and land) a balloon.

It's called the Albuquerque Box. It works like this.

During the night, cold air comes down the canyon from Santa Fe, about 60 miles away, giving balloonists a stream in which to float south from their launch sites. As the sun rises over the 10,000-foot Sandia Mountains on the eastern border of the city, it heats a higher layer of air while cold air keeps streaming in underneath. When a pilot is ready to return to his launch site or another nearby landing site, he ascends to the heated stream of air headed north. When he's close to a promising landing site, he descends quickly. Hence, a box.

As Dalen points out the sights both near and far (far being mountains 100 miles away), he and other pilots also chat on their walkie-talkies about where they might land.

Although Dalen has not said so, I can tell from the chatter and recall by reading my account of my first flight in Centre County, that almost from the minute they launch, balloon pilots are looking for a place to land. After



all, they have very little control over the direction they will go and must be alert for a landing site on short notice. We have risen to 8000 feet and are going 12 miles an hour due north. Dalen says he wants to stay at this altitude for another 10 minutes to get beyond the neighborhood below and to an area where he can land.

In the meantime he entertains us with the history of ballooning in Albuquerque, which (I learn later at the museum) began on July 4, 1882, when "Professor" Park A. Van Tassel launched the first balloon. Besides having a great surname, Van Tassel also owned a local saloon. However, he was not a professor. Saloon keepers do have standards.

Eventually, we peak at 9100 feet and it's time to land.

"We're going to start a nice descent," Dalen says, "and you'll feel it. You'll feel the wind. We're dropping about 600 feet a minute." Sure enough, it's mildly bumpy, but nothing to cause panic. I feel safer here than I do driving a car on the streets below me.

Dalen is now talking to his crew, whose walkie-talkie name is Chase 3. He's trying to figure out where he might land.

"I guess people get mad when you land on their roof," one of my fellow writers quips.

"They get upset," Dalen replies, "when we wake up their dogs." It's 8 a.m. and as we gracefully move through a neighborhood at about 100 feet, we are trailed by the sound of awakened barking dogs.

Dalen tells Chase 3 that he might land at the post office near a street named Golf Course, although he tells us off handedly we could land in one of the building lots in the development below. Perhaps a little anxious, I suggest a corner lot very near us, but Dalen isn't quite ready.

"We'll see which direction we go," he says.

"Chase 3," he says into his walkie-talkie. "We're going to descend over the post office and maybe [note the *maybe*] get a right turn and be at Golf Course and McDonald's." There's a huge field behind McDonald's. The crew parks near McDonald's and awaits further directions.

From another balloon we hear orders being given to its chase crew: "Keep coming, guys; keep coming. Get the gloves on. Look for the drop line."

Dalen now thinks we might land at Smith's, a grocery store that is part of a strip mall just down the street from McDonald's. Then Dalen decides that's not going to work and he says he might continue on to a middle school about two miles away. But without saying anything to us, Dalen changes his mind again. He is at the mercy of the wind (well, the breeze) and must make a quick decision.

"Chase 3. If I can get into that parking lot [Smith's], I'm going to land there. We're doing about 5 (miles an hour)."

Next message: "Light poles look too high. I don't think I can get in there."

I must admit that I am a little nervous. I know this strip mall because my sisters live nearby. I've never thought of its parking lot as a landing site for a balloon, just a place for me to park when I go for my *New York Times*. Dalen must get over the poles then drop quickly so we don't drift into the buildings.

A car toots its horn at us.

"Just the other side of those light poles," Dalen says. "I gotta get over those light poles by the bank," which sits at the edge of the strip mall near Golf Course.

"Just over the light poles," he yells to the crew. We are that low that he doesn't need the walkie-talkie. He warns us that there might be a hard landing and reminds us that we've been told what to do. A little bit of an adrenalin rush.

"We're only doing about three miles an hour," he tells us. "We are not really moving very fast.

"All right. Here we go. We're going to come down really hard. Hold on."

I grip my tape recorder so hard that I turn it off. But I do keep taking photos.



Dalen has thrown a line over the side and Joe has grabbed the line and is holding on for dear life. Pat is running rapidly toward him to help. Joe pulls on a loop with two hands and starts trying to sit down. Pat grabs the other loop at the end of the line with her right

hand and starts bending, face down, away from him. They are functioning as anchors. They are pulling with all their might. Joe is almost sitting. Dan is venting hot air to get us on the ground.

And then we're there. It wasn't a hard landing after all.

On my maiden flight over Centre County, we landed in a sand trap at Toftrees. Today we land near a Starbucks and some of us buy coffee and use the facilities.

As we start to pack, Dan says: "Got into the river. Got high. Did everything you're supposed to do."

We drive back to the launch site and toast our voyage with champagne. I never did get the name of the balloon, but just the same, don't tell Roberta.

R. Thomas Berner is a professor emeritus of journalism and American studies at The Pennsylvania State University. He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.