

Experimental Lighter Than Air Gathering – Amherst Mass. June 3,4,5, 2005

A look at the experimental side of ballooning.

By Curtis B. Pack

My family and I arrived after a 16 hour drive from the hills of West Virginia and were rewarded with a balloon encampment upon the lawn of the Pioneer Valley Co housing Community. We had missed the weather briefing but noticed the wind was swaying the trees. Most pilots decided not to fly but with host Dan Nachbars help a sheltered area was found where Brian Boland launched the First Experimental Lighter Than Air Gathering at Amherst, MA in to the history books with a hot launch described as “perky” by one of the ground crew. Fortunately the weather cooperated in a more reasonable fashion as the next two days gave way to two morning and one evening flights in near perfect conditions. The Nachbars had the valley prepped for the balloon event so the local and not so local neighbors were friendly and receptive to their experimental ballooning invasion.

The 5 a.m. pilots meeting came early with the launching of the sacrificial PIBAL and planning of the mornings flights. Flights originated from a local school ground with spacious boundaries and no obstacles giving lazy takeoffs in the light winds. Several balloons took the opportunity, before flying, to tether their crew and the locals, spreading good energy among the public and local crew. After the a.m. flights in light winds, a trip back to the community yielded a full breakfast, cooked and served in the communities activities building. This resulted in the crew and pilots alike having wide smiles from both the afterglow of the flight and the fullness of a good meal. During mid-day Saturday, information exchange was the theme, with group and one-on-one, informal discussions on balloon building from the simple to the exotic. William Appleby presented a poster presentation on the flammability of the fabric type used in the Hindenburg giving supporting evidence that the fabric flame theory is unlikely.

Several LTA model blimps motored about. Steve Bosquettes indoor airship with no less than three motors was able to glide about the high ceilings of the activities room in control by the experienced and at times out of control by learning novice pilots. An outdoor blimp was flown by Lee Duckett with amazing dexterity in 11:00 am light winds and thermal activity with a simple control system and very nice performance.

During the daily flights, the major obstacle (or opportunity) in the flight path was the Connecticut River, allowing more than a few to splash and dash. Some had a bit more splash than others and reports are that David Tanzer, flying a hopper, is an expert at rescuing water logged, radios.

Speaking of the hopper clan, four hoppers and five pilots were active all weekend. Clayton Thomas, the eldest of the hopper pilots, was moved to describe his flight as “29 minutes of bliss” after going aloft in Eva Tashjian-Browns’ hopper. Eva’s hopper was a new Cameron setup which made other pilots lust after her system.

David Tanzers' hopper was a middle aged version and Roland Escher was flying an early (capewell) type system with Phil Mcnutts "Ran out of Pink" envelope(25,000) providing a significant performance improvement over his previous 14,000 cubic foot envelope. At least several systems of hoppers were transported in cars trunks and back seats with one entire system compactly packed in a small car top carrier including envelope, hoses, burner, tank and harness. Noah Forden presented a unique hopper design proposal using CAD drawings for a harness suspension with landing skids for high wind use and protection.

Most of the experimental systems, were in small trailers with minimal crew needed. The locals were indispensable in the chase over the flat terrain and at least one (Evan) knew a few back roads to get us to our destination more efficiently. Several pilots were using GPS to monitor winds aloft and plot projected ground tracks. Early crops were up so this required some care by the pilots in their selection landing choices.

Several publications had representatives present including Northeastern Flyer, Ballooning, and Balloon Life and the websites -Balloon-makers and Cloudhoppers were represented with many online members meeting face to face for the first time. . Even the shape world was represented at the meet. Wanda the Fish and Dork, a new flying face shape, represented the experimental shape contingent with Brian Boland giving tethers in Wanda and Dork, built by Jim of Maine, sporting an ear ring and a rats tail. An oldie but goodie, Topper, flown by Bob Sommers, was flying and looking quite photogenic.

In the "you just had to be there" category was a unique take off style demonstrated by Roland and Zack. Some hoppers have a unique rotating suspension system, which allows the pilot to rotate in flight. Using this, Zack (on the ground) pre rotated Roland (in the Hopper) resulting in a spinning take off which was a neat sight to see as Roland ascended in to the sky spinning with arms and legs out stretched. A non-ballooning event was the introduction to Moxie , the official softdrink of the State of Maine. It is either vile, medicine like, carbonated liquid or the elixer of the gods , depending on your individual taste buds. The Maine boys love the stuff !

Paul Stumpf was there providing advice for some of the newer pilots (like me- thanks Paul) and several balloons were flying with pilots like Bill Armstrong and others who have long been on the experimental scene.

Dan Nachbar hosted a wonderful get together for homebuilding,/experimental lighter than air. Next year expect to see LTA airships, more hoppers, new conventional systems along with old friends. Many new ideas and experienced tricks of the trade were exchanged over the weekend and as an outgrowth, many friendships were forged. I did not get to talk with everyone there this year and look forward to meeting the rest of the gang next year. Remember if you are planning on attending next year you must pre-register with Dan Nachbar to assist in the planning of the event (relax you have almost a whole year) . Was it big –no. Was it fancy – no. Was it FUN – YES!!!!