

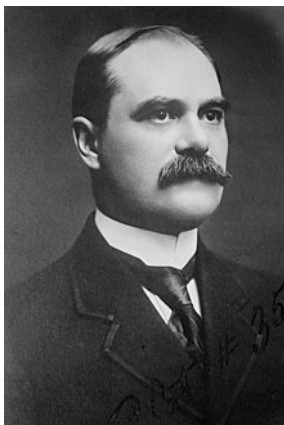
Jerry McKelvy's
WAY BACK WHEN
June, 2025

THE GREAT BALLOON RACE OF 1915
Ended in Nevada County

Back in the early 1900s, a few adventurous men tried their luck at travelling across the country in balloons. It became sort of a sport for the wealthy at that time. Contests were held to see who could travel the greatest distance in a balloon. In October, 1915, the Wichita, Kansas Aero Club sponsored such a contest. Four balloons entered the race. Each balloon was filled with hydrogen gas and had a two-man crew—a pilot and an assistant and each balloon had a name. The only way to control the balloons was to empty ballast bags of sand placed inside the basket to make the balloon go higher or to release some of the gas to make the balloon go lower. The balloon pilots “steered” the balloon by adjusting altitude to find favorable winds moving in different directions. This skill required years of experience and a good understanding of wind patterns.

The pilots, called aeronauts, entering the race were William F. Assman (yes, that’s his name) with his balloon named St. Louis I, H. E. Honeywell and his balloon named Wichita II, Paul McCulloch and his balloon named Wichita I, and John Watts and his balloon named Kansas City I. One other contestant withdrew just before the race.

The balloons left Wichita, Kansas on the afternoon of October 7 heading in a southeasterly direction with the prevailing wind. John Watts and his Kansas City I balloon only went 19 miles before landing. The balloon named Wichita I managed to go 67 miles. The Wichita II balloon traveled much further coming in second place with a distance of 232 miles. The winner of the race was William Assman and his St. Louis I balloon which traveled 363 miles landing at Lackland Springs in Nevada County, Arkansas the next day.



The pilot (pictured at left) told reporters a little about his flight. He said shortly after starting the race, they encountered reverse winds which sent them back 60 miles until the wind changed directions. People in all the towns along the flight path were excited to view the balloon as it passed over their towns. The balloon passed over Little Rock going 40 miles per hour at an altitude of 17,000 feet. The crew dropped a message over Little Rock which read “St. Louis I balloon—altitude 17,000 feet”. About an hour later, the balloon passed over Hot Springs.

The balloon soon developed problems and began to descend. They had no more ballast bags left so Mr. Assman and his assistant, Albert von Hoffman, began to lighten the balloon by discarding everything they could. They threw overboard all their tools, food, and instruments but the balloon kept falling. Everything has been discarded but their extra clothing, so they discarded that also. By this time, the balloon had descended

WAY BACK WHEN

from 17,000 feet to about 4,000 feet. Nothing more could be done but to ride the balloon to the ground, hoping they could have a safe landing.

The balloon landed in a cotton field near Lackland Springs in Nevada County. Mr. Assman said it appeared they were headed to a giant feather bed because of all the white cotton in the field, but the landing was anything but soft. It was more like hitting a brick wall. The crew was not injured from the landing and the only damage to the balloon was some rips caused by the cotton stalks.

They gathered up their belongings and the balloon and walked out to a nearby farm house and were driven in a farm wagon to Prescott, twelve miles away. After spending the night in Prescott, they boarded a train for St. Louis the next day. News of the race was published in newspapers across the country. For winning the great balloon race of 1915, Mr. Assman received the prize of \$1000 and a trophy.

This balloon race was nothing new for William Assman. He made over 100 balloon flights in his lifetime and had many near escapes. The most serious happened in 1910 when his balloon was forced to land in a small lake in Canada after a flight of 850 miles. He suffered a broken arm and a severed artery in his wrist from the landing. He and his assistant swam to a nearby island and called for help, but there was nobody nearby. After spending the night on the island, they were rescued the next day by some Indians in a canoe who paddled them ten miles to a doctor. On another flight from San Antonio, he was forced to land in Missouri in a blinding snowstorm. Another flight ended with his balloon tangled in a mess of telephone wires. On one flight, his balloon was brought down by a bad hail and rain storm at night which left him spending the night soaked to the skin next to the basket of his balloon.

William Assman was 53 years old when he flew his balloon in this 1915 race. He died seven years later. Many news articles referred to him as an amateur aeronaut, but with that many balloon flights, I would hardly classify him as an amateur.

Flying long distance in a balloon at that time was very risky. A flight could easily end in disaster. I can only imagine two men spending a day or two in the basket of a balloon flying over the country at high altitude. I wonder if they took turns sleeping or if they tried to stay awake for the whole trip. I don't know much about ballooning, but I would think they would have to stay alert to monitor wind changes. He mentioned throwing their food overboard near the end of the flight, so they did have food and water with them. They had no radio communication. People sometimes do dangerous things to do something never done before or to set a new speed or distance record. People who do such things could be called dare-devils, courageous, or just plain crazy. They must love what they do or they would not attempt such dangerous things. If all goes well, they may become famous, but if things go wrong, they could end up in the obituary column of the newspaper.

WAY BACK WHEN

FILLING IN THE GAPS – 1893 TO 1895

There are no Nevada County newspapers available for these years, so we must rely on other newspapers for news from Prescott. Here are some items from those papers which tell about some of the things going on in and around Prescott during those years.

Mar. 7, 1893—The Daily Texarkana Democrat

Mrs. Nannie Butcher died in DeKalb, TX. To be interred in family burying ground at Prescott.
(*Note: grave found at Moscow Cem.*)

June 20, 1893—The Arkansas Gazette

Prescott has been crowded with teachers this week attending the Institute.

July 23, 1893---The Arkansas Gazette

Born to Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Shurman of Prescott, a 12-pound boy.

Sept. 7, 1893—The Russellville Democrat

As the train pulled out of Prescott Tuesday morning, Mrs. Bradley, who is old and hard of hearing, was crossing the railroad track when she was struck by the engine and knocked down. The engineer had slowed up the train and she was not seriously hurt.

Oct. 25, 1893—The Arkansas Gazette

The gin house belonging to Billingsley & Co. burned this morning at 2 o'clock, evidently the work of incendiaries. Thirty-five bales of cotton were lost.

Oct. 31, 1893—The Arkansas Gazette

The barn of Dr. A. D. Wren, a prominent citizen living 8 or 10 miles south of Prescott was burned with all his corn (500 bushels) and between 1000 and 5000 bushels of fodder. It is believed to be of incendiary origin. The doctor and all his family were in Prescott except for his son, Willard, who had gone to a neighboring post office. No one was home at the time.

Nov. 23, 1893—Daily Texarkana Democrat

Because of the de-railing of the early morning passenger train on the Iron Mountain railway at Prescott yesterday, no mail was received over that line yesterday.

Dec. 17, 1893—The Arkansas Gazette

Mr. H. Sims, a deaf mute, passed through Prescott Thursday. He is engaged in a walking match from Houston, TX to New Orleans via Memphis, TN. The Left-Hand Fishing Club and Mr. Sims have a contract. He must leave Houston Nov. 20, 1893 and arrive in New Orleans by March 20, 1894 with \$75 in money and a new suit of clothes. If successful, he will receive \$500.

Jan. 1, 1894---The Arkansas Gazette

WAY BACK WHEN

On Christmas Day, Mrs. Katie White, beloved wife of Hon. E. E. White died at her home in Prescott after a long illness with consumption. *Note: Her grave was found at DeAnn Cem. She was 36 years old.*

Mar. 2, 1894—The Forrest City Times

The remains of Robert Steele who died in Cisco, TX were interred at Prescott. He was the son of W. T. Steele of Prescott. *Note: His grave was found at Midway Cemetery*

April 12, 1894—The Daily Texarkanian

Near Prescott yesterday morning, the locomotive attached to a south bound Iron Mountain passenger train sustained an accident which might have been serious. A front “driving wheel” broke which caused the big connecting rod to snap. The broken rod flew like an arrow narrowly missing the cab where the engineer and fireman were standing. On striking the earth, the iron sank almost out of sight.

Aug. 18, 1894—The Arkansas Gazette

Wes Delaney, father and two sons, Charles and Moses, colored, were brought in yesterday by deputies on the charge of passing counterfeit coins. The father said he won his playing high five and one of the sons said his father gave him his to buy school books.

Nov. 22, 1894—The Daily Texarkanian

Married at the residence of Mr. J. A. M. Smith, Mr. Oscar Gill of Prescott to Miss Belle Smith. The bride and groom will leave on this afternoon’s cannonball for Prescott, Mr. Gill’s home.

Dec. 30, 1894—The Arkansas Gazette

R. L. Blakely has contracted to represent Henry W. King & Co., the Chicago clothiers. His headquarters will be at Prescott.

Dec. 31, 1894—The Daily Texarkanian

Col. W. V. Thompkins, the eloquent and studious Prescott attorney is here today on business. He is not only an able and sagacious lawyer, but is also one of the finest political speakers in the state. He numbers his admirers by the thousands in southwest Arkansas.

Feb. 24, 1895—The Arkansas Gazette

Henry Brook’s building occupied by the Nevada County Picayune was destroyed by fire. Other buildings destroyed were the brick store of J. O. Howell and Hamilton, Sharp & Co. owned by W. S. Hatley. Almost every building on Block 21 was swept away in the fire.

Mar. 29, 1895—The Daily Texarkanian

Prescott has a new weekly paper, the Prescott Paragraph by Charles E. Shankle.

April 7, 1895—The Daily Texarkanian

Two killings in Nevada County—Wyatt Gentry went to John Fairchild’s home and a fuss started. One of the boys came up and Gentry began shooting. The boys (3) returned fire. Thirty-one shots

WAY BACK WHEN

were fired. Gentry was hit three times and died several hours later at John Grant's where he had been taken. B. Rodgers, cattle buyer, shot and mortally wounded Calvin Billingsley, another cattle buyer. Ten shots were fired. Billingsley received two, Rodgers one.

May 3, 1895—The Daily Texarkanian

Brad Scott died at his home from a complication of ailments. He was almost 47 and leaves a wife and two children. He was one of the best-known businessmen of the state.

Oct. 17, 1895—The Arkansas Gazette

Ad for the Wilson Hotel in Prescott—"Strictly first-class in every respect". Rates--\$1.50 per day.

CANDY BREAKING

In the old newspapers from about 100 years ago, a type of party for young people is often mentioned called candy breakings. That made me curious to learn exactly what they meant by candy breaking. I tried searching on the Internet but did not find anything. I did find an article from 1907 which mentioned "an old-fashioned candy breaking", so that made me think that these type parties must have existed long before 1907.

Candy breaking parties were usually mentioned in the local news columns of the papers. In most cases, the article just mentioned that there was a candy breaking at the home of Mr. and Mrs. _____ attended by a large crowd of young people and everyone had a nice time. I found candy breaking parties mentioned in newspapers from Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, Texas, and Louisiana.

It seems that most of these type parties were for the teenagers, but a few were held for the small children. In many cases, the party was to celebrate someone's birthday. Sometimes a girl's parents organized the party to celebrate a girl's 14th or 16th birthday and, in some cases, the girl having a birthday would invite her friends to a candy breaking.

The term candy breaking made me think it must have been something like peanut brittle that would break off into pieces. Was it home-made candy or store-bought candy? I found an ad from a store which advertised candy for candy breakings, so that made me think that at least some people purchased the candy instead of making it at home. One article mentioned that despite the high price of candy, people were still buying it for candy breaking parties. Another article mentioned that the price of admission to a candy breaking was one pound of candy.

One article I found from 1898 mentioned that 42 pounds of candy were broken at the party and many gallons of iced lemonade were enjoyed by those present. There must have been a good crowd at that party.

WAY BACK WHEN

I wish I knew more about these type parties. I did find one article from 1907 which said those present “paired off in pairs to break the candy into golden hunks and chunks of sugary sticky bliss. After the breaking, the couples paired off onto the dance floor”. It seems that these parties usually involved some type of music or dancing. Games were played and more than one article mentioned choosing the prettiest girl at the party and the winning girl receiving a cake.

Teenagers took advantage of any opportunity to get together for a party back in those days. There was school and church, but not many other opportunities for a teenager to just have fun and enjoy the company of someone of the opposite sex except for these type parties or maybe a hayride.

I was thinking of the time when I was a teenager growing up around Bluff City. I remember going to a few parties held at some of the girl's homes. Games were played and there was plenty of food to eat. One game I remember was like “Spin the Bottle” which is a kissing game. We didn't kiss, but the couple randomly chosen by the game had to walk around the house together in the dark. Most of us had never been alone with a member of the opposite sex before, so this was a big step in our social life. Looking back now in my old age, it is a wonder someone didn't get bitten by a copperhead walking around outside in the dark on a warm, summer night.

Well, I guess we will just have to imagine what happened at a candy breaking party in the old days. These parties were very popular up until the 1920s. The last mention I found in the old newspapers was in 1946 in Dermott, Arkansas in which they mentioned having a candy break and an apple bite at a party. Now I wonder what an apple bite was.

My Father's Legacy -- by Don Mathis

On Father's Day, I think of my dad; Daniel H. Mathis, 1921-1991. He used to tell me that a short pencil is better than a long memory. So, rather than rely on a long memory to recollect my life's experiences and thoughts, I am taking up a short pencil to write them down.

Dan Mathis was simple in many ways – but he had a deep appreciation for science, for technology, for nature, for all of God's creation.

When I was little, Dad would see a floodlight in the night sky and he would gather the family and go search for the source – like looking for gold at the end of a rainbow. We would find the origin of the giant spotlight and we would ooh and aah at the new car dealership or whatever it was.

If it was a carnival at the foot of the floodlight, he might treat us kids to a ride in the bumper cars. But more than the amusement park thrill, I like the fact that Dad would look into the

WAY BACK WHEN

night sky in the first place, notice the unnatural light in the distance, have the curiosity to wonder what it was for, and then act on his impulse.

Daddy loved trains – and he would sometimes travel a thousand miles just to ride on them. “The destination is not important,” he would say, “the journey is all the fun.” Was it the movement of the rails beneath his feet that compelled him, like a moth to the flame, to seek it out?

We rode the Southern Pacific Daylight to Del Rio, Texas, and watched the back yards of the city turn into throngs of people gathered in each small town to wave at the famous train from the West Coast – and we would wave back, happy as kids in a candy store.

We rode the Chihuahua al Pacífico choo-choo through the Copper Canyon of Mexico and enjoyed days of changing scenery – from the desert, to the mountains, to the Gulf of California. And we enjoyed the ambiance and personality of every place we went.

One of our locomotive thrills was when I took Daddy and his brothers to ride the Eagle, the miniature train in San Antonio. One buys a ticket at the Brackenridge Park station but can get on and off at the stops for free. Uncles George and Winford laughed and laughed that we “hopped a train like a couple of hobos.”

Daddy loved trains, but he loved planes too. He used to take the family out to the airport when I was a kid – just to watch the jets take off and land. It was what we did on a Saturday afternoon.

He would watch the huge passenger planes take off so slowly in the distance and marvel at the engineering that could make that happen, the ascent of man into the atmosphere. And after a while, his enthusiasm would infect me and I would beg for the binoculars to watch the wonder.

Dad’s appreciation for nature took him on countless camping trips but sometimes only to the front yard when it rained. He would stand in his London Fog slicker, overalls tucked into rubber boots, and he would water the lawn with a hose, squirting an errant leaf this way or that, soaking a brown patch of grass, but mostly just enjoying the rain.

Maybe in some metaphysical sense, he became the rain. Daddy became immersed in the rain as if it would whet his appetite for life.

In the same way with water, Daddy would play with fire. He would squirt a big bunch of lighter fluid on the charcoal, ostensibly for a bar-be-que dinner, but I think he just loved to watch the flames.

One time, when the coals didn’t catch, and he began to fan the flame with a Frisbee, I playfully suggested he use his leaf blower. He laughed, went into the garage, and came out with 50 feet of extension cord and his leaf blower.

WAY BACK WHEN

The flames shot up in no time but he kept the blower on it until the coals were nearly exhausted. This combined the best of nature and technology. He would play with fire but he did not get burned.

Daddy loved science and nature programs on television. We would watch Wild Kingdom and my brother and I would screech and scratch like little monkeys. Later, when cable TV came out, Daddy would watch the National Geographic wildlife specials. My other brother called it “The Monkey Channel” for all of Dian Fossey’s gorillas and Jane Goodall’s chimpanzees. Daddy loved nature.

For years, Daddy subscribed to Popular Mechanics magazine. I don’t think he ever built any of the projects in the periodical but he would marvel at the thought of a self-propelled thingamajig or a flying contraption – and he would dream.

He was not an engineer but for years he worked on his own cars. He was not a scientist but he loved contemplating the possibilities of biology and technology.

I went to see the largest train in America 25 years after his death – and I saw the ghost of my father, some old man smiling in his overalls admiring the Big Boy locomotive. I know my old man would have enjoyed that.

I get caught in a rainstorm on my bicycle and think, “What would Daddy do?” I smile at the memory of him and ride on in the rain. I make a bar-be-que and in the flames, I see my father’s happy face, and send my memories of him to him on the rising smoke.

I assimilated my father’s value of wonder, his interest in physics, his appreciation for nature, and his love for being in the moment. Thank you, Dad, for the inheritance.

