Bendix Air Races Collection - 1933 International Air Races (Chicago), Gordon Bennett Balloon Race, Official Program

Extracted on Feb-06-2023 06:38:19

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Inflating The Racing Balloons

THE GAS used for inflating the balloons in this year's James Gordon Bennett International Balloon Races is the same gas that is used for cooking and heating throughout Chicago and outlying area. To this gas is added a quantity of hydrogen which in given volumes is considerably lighter in weight. The addition of the hydrogen improves the lifting and sustaining power of the mixture.

The gas is brought to ten convenient points on Curtiss Field through a thousand feet of special piping which taps one of the distribution mains of the local system. Most of this gas has already traveled more than a thousand miles from the natural gas fields of the Texas Panhandle before it reaches the distribution system of the Chicago Area where a certain amount of locally produced coal gas is added.

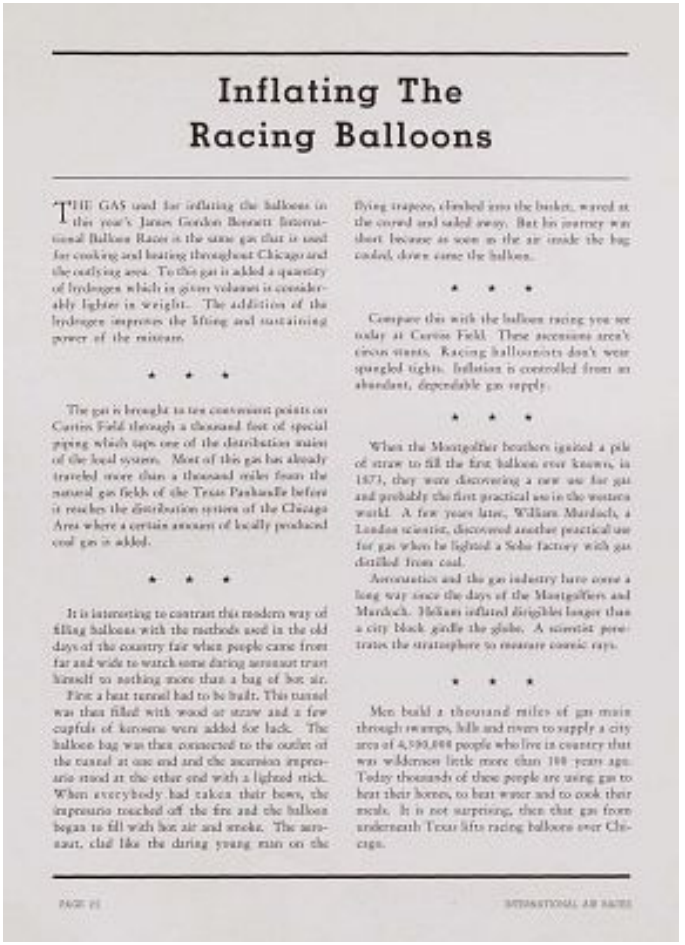
It is interesting to contrast this modern way of filling balloons with the methods used in the old days of the country fair when people came from far and wide to watch some daring aeronaut trust himself to nothing more than a bag of hot air

First a heat tunnel had to be built. This tunnel was then filled with wood or straw and a few cupfuls of kerosene were added for luck. The balloon bag was then connected to the outlet of the tunnel at one end and the ascension impresario stood at the other end with a lighted stick. When everybody had taken their bows, the impresario touched off the fire and the balloon began to fill with hot air and smoke. The aeronaut, clad like the daring young man on the flying trapeze, climbed into the basket, waved at the crowd and sailed away. But his journey was short because as soon as the air inside the bag cooled, down came the balloon.

Compare this with the balloon racing you see today at Curtiss Field. These ascensions aren't circus stunts. Racing balloonists don't wear spangled tights. Inflation is controlled from an abundant, dependable gas supply.

When the Montgolfier brothers ignited a pile of straw to fill the first balloon ever known, in 1873, they were discovering a new use for gas and probably the first practical use in the western world. A few years later, William Murdoch, a London scientist, discovered another practical use for gas when he lighted a Soho factory with gas distilled from coal. Aeronautics and the gas industry have come a long way since the days of the Montgolfiers and Murdoch. Helium inflated dirigibles longer than a city block girdle the globe. A scientist penetrates the stratosphere to measure cosmic rays.

Men build a thousand miles of gas main through swamps, hills and rivers to supply a city area of 4,500,000 people who live in country that was wilderness little more than 100 years ago. Today thousands of these people are using gas to heat their homes, to heat water and to cook their meals. It is not surprising, then that gas from underneath Texas lifts racing balloons over Chicago.



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