

"Lucky" Linden Harding, Rochester balloonist, pilots a rainbow-colored airship.



Balloonist Linden Harding has a high-flying business

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You're floating in a wicker basket 300 feet over, say, greater Rochester; the balloon billowing above you like a rainbow-colored sail.

Looking down, the shops and houses seem as small as toy towns kids set up round their Christmas train sets.

Through the cool mist of a winter afternoon, you can see wide stretches of water landscape, the ground mottled in white, the trees clumped together, dipped in silver.

That's just a glimpse of what it's like to take a trip in a hot air balloon on a winter's afternoon. To the novice, it's magic. But to Linden Harding, Rochester's balloonist extraordinaire, it's just another day's work.

Thirty-year-old Harding is owner of High-America Ballooncenter, which he believes to be the only full-service hot-air balloon operation in the state.

The center, which recently relocated from Leach Road in Avon Township to 312 Main St. in downtown Rochester, is the place to go for beginners and long-time enthusiasts of the whimsical sport.

THE CENTER SELLS balloons, made to order, or type-certified models from Picard, the most established name in ballooning.

While a brand-new balloon costs about as much as a foreign sports car, Harding's firm helps get ballooning within the reach of people of more modest means.

Licensed, but balloonless pilots, may rent an airship from Harding, and the curious may go on piloted trips. Beginners

may also take lessons at the center.

Aside from services, the center is headquarters for Balloon Pilots of America, a club made up of balloonists of varying degrees of skill.

This holiday season, Harding's firm is offering a novel solution to the problem of buying a present for the person who has everything—a gift certificate, redeemable next spring, for a free-flight balloon ride.

The firm also is offering an on-the-ground balloon navigation class for beginners through Oakland University's continuing education program.

Harding, an eight-year veteran of the high-flying sport, left a job as a designer with General Motors to start his company four years ago.

His looks and background, however, fit the part of someone who makes a living through something as romantic and unconventional as ballooning.

HE'S HANDSOME, soft-spoken with a Western twang, and holds a degree in art from Art Center in Los Angeles. His father and a brother are airline pilots.

Originally, Harding looked down on bal-

To him, half the fun of flying is watching others' reactions. Often, he swoops down to trade jokes with some earthbound onlooker, recently a surprised steamshovel operator. "How's the weather up there," the hardhatted workman called. "Super!" chorused the balloon's passengers.

looning, but became interested in it after making a bet—which he lost—with a friend that the friend couldn't make a balloon that would fly. Harding lost the bet.

Though he recently took up a reporter and a photographer in his three-person balloon to give them a taste of flying, the balloonist says he doesn't ordinarily fly this late in the year.

"Spring and summer are the main ballooning seasons," he says. "The scenery's much prettier then. And more people are out to do it."

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"Super," chorused the balloon's elated passengers.

THE BALLOON PILOT CONTROLS his craft chiefly by going up—inflating the balloon larger and lighter with air heated by the attached propane burner—or down—opening a vent in the body of the balloon and letting float out.

Short of its ability to skirt trees and telephone wires, the balloon mostly drifts along at the whim of the breeze. Cautious balloonists won't take their airships out when the wind is moving quicker than 15 miles an hour.

Since the chances of returning the balloon to its starting point are virtually nil, a balloon pilot needs at least a one member of his crew on the ground. That's the person who tracks the flight in a van to pick up the balloon and crew after it lands.

A careful captain, Harding says that, despite the height, ballooning really is quite a safe sport.

"It's safer than flying in a plane, or even driving down Rochester Road. The balloon itself is made out of the same material as a parachute and, if the air in it were to cool, would act as a parachute and lower the gondola slowly to earth."

According to Harding, ballooning's popularity has burgeoned during the past decade, but the growth has leveled off in recent years.

THE SLOWDOWN, the balloonist believes, is the result of the recession. For it's clear to him that the appeal of the sport is still strong. Wherever he and his fellow fliers take off, crowds congregate.

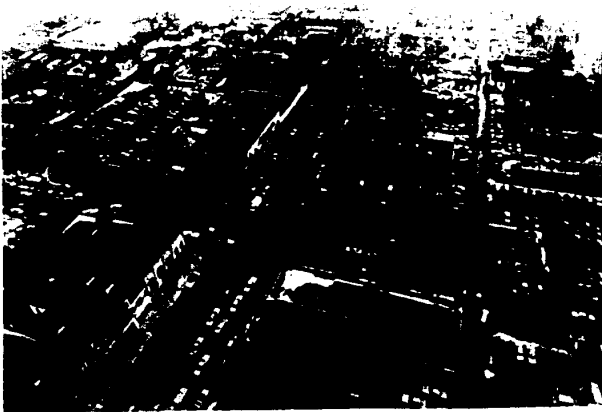
Ballooning's attraction, he theorizes, stems from an association with childhood. "Most people remember balloons from their younger days, from county or state fairs. To them, the brightly-colored balloons remind them of fun, like Christmas."



Alight on a winter's afternoon: The landscape looks splashed with silver.



Attached propane burners propel the balloon's ascent.



A view of downtown Rochester, from a wicker basket at 300 feet in the air.



Harding (left) toasts another successful journey's end with associate Steve Corbin (right).