

# Farmington man up in air over his ballooning pastime

By ED BAS

Floating along on springtime evening breezes, the treetops, meandering river and tiny white mobile home rectangles gave way to small talk.

"I took my wife up a few times," said balloonist John Kenney. "She didn't really like it."

"Of course, that was the time I filled up with propane from some farmer's tank and it had water in it. The flame kept going out and we almost slammed into the side of a building."

We talked while chasing the "hare" balloon in Sunday's Highamers-Avon Hills Lions Club race. "I've got a million stories," Kenney said.

Kenney has been at his expensive hobby for five years. A Farmington resident, he'd talked about balloons and learning to fly for so long that his mother got tired of it and told him to go out and learn. Not everyone is so understanding.

"One kid I was teaching to fly had a mother that refused to watch him ever go up," he said.

THERE was the time Kenney set

his balloon and gondola down in a city junkyard. It was locked at the time and only a citizens' band radio (which he no longer carries) managed to flag down a policeman, who found the junkyard operator with the keys.

Our takeoff was uneventful, if expensive. Kenney said he used one whole tank of propane in getting aloft and switched tanks over Avon Road. He carries three tanks. The race was held on the grounds of Michigan Christian College, near Avon and Rochester roads.

To pay for his new-found hobby, Kenney began flying promotions around the country. A new Raven balloon costs \$8,000. For inspections, three to four per year, Kenney has to pay \$600 including shipping.

Kenney was accompanied in the race by a one of our staff members and Jan Chinoski, co-owner of Rochester Telephone Answering Service, one of the balloon's sponsors. The other sponsor was Shelton Pontiac-Buick.

It was Chinoski's first flight. Outside of the "ooohs and ahhs" over some breath-taking scenery, the one question that kept popping up was "How hard will we land?"

Now, that's a tough question, Kenney admitted. When I mumbled something about feeling helpless in chasing the hare balloon, Kenney said he felt about the same way. You don't have all that much control from up there.

EACH LANDING is different. Even the winds blow differently according to altitude. The flight itself was smooth, rock-steady.

"My first job was in Tennessee," he said, "where I took up a deejay so he could broadcast from up there. Well, we ran into some trees and his radio went dead. You can imagine what everybody thought when all of a sudden he stopped broadcasting. I also got lost and came down in the mountains. A helicopter pilot spotted me or I might still be there."

Kenney wasn't trying to be terrifying. He was just talking about his hobby.

"It has its good points and a few bad ones. I remember one race I was in like this one. We had to drop a bag of corn meal down where the hare balloon landed.

"I was right over it when I remembered the corn meal was in the glove box of my car. So I dropped a glove instead. They gave me a nice consolation prize."

Kenney for the most part ignored his gauges and flew by sight. But he kept a watch on his propane tanks.

"Down below 20 per cent you don't really have the pressure to fly," he said. "Once I forgot to shut one tank off as I opened a new one. The full one drained back into the empty one and what you wind up with is two empty tanks, or two without enough pressure."

Kenney thought we had a good chance of winning, if only someone found our grass-seed marker. But we came down in a field north of Auburn Road in Avon Township with only one other balloonist in sight. It was 45 minutes before our chase crew caught up with us.

The landing, though we caught a couple of tree branches on the way down, was a soft one. Kenney seemed to make the balloon hover and set her down gently.



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