

# RIF balloon is real high flier

By MIKE SCANLON

It was a long time ago when Isaac Newton rubbed a sore spot on his head and theorized that what goes up, must come down.

The modest scope of old Isaac's experiments, however, pale in comparison to recent tests of his theory at these suburban elementary schools.

Newton's apple, after all, didn't come down to Connecticut. Jeff Sexton's balloon did.

In October, students at Douglas, Henry Ruff and Memorial elementary schools in Garden City released about 1,500 balloons with postcards attached as part of the Reading is FUNdamental (RIF) program.

Repiles are still drifting in, and so far about 130 have been returned.

Most came back from Ontario. But at Douglas, where the balloons were released on a different day than at Henry Ruff and Memorial, 100 cards have so far been returned from New York, two from Massachusetts, and Sexton's serendipitous sphere held out until Southington, Conn., before floating finally to earth.

More specifically, before floating into the backyard of the five-year-old nephew of that town's chamber of commerce director, Scott Brainerd, the five-year-old can't write. So his seven-year-old sister, Jennifer, replied and included a packet of information on Southington supplied by Elinor Silva, the Brainerds' business-minded

aunt. Also included was a clipping from a local newspaper about the incident.

"He's tickled to death about it. He wrote the girl a letter last week," said Sexton's father Ron.

Jeff himself didn't have much to say about the feat.

"I don't know. My mom wrote it, and I wrote it over," said Jeff, who says he's 9 1/2 years old.

"All in all, it was a super activity," said Donald Watkins, principal at Henry Ruff. The farthest traveling RIF balloon came down "just a little bit this side of Toronto," said Watkins.

The balloons from Douglas school were released Oct. 27, and some of them made it to the east coast faster than you could drive there. One balloon turned up in Bernardston, Mass., one day after it was released here, Sexton's balloon landed in Southington the same pre-Halloween weekend.

Mostly, though, the cards came from children, which may say something about the willingness of adults to mess around with treasured helium balloons.

Considering the Atlantic-coast location of Connecticut, there probably won't be any replies coming back from points farther west.

Unless, of course, a farmer's kid named O'Toole is out proving the back 40 in County Cork right about now and he's just spotted a bright yellow balloon . . .



The daily ritual begins with Biscuit peering through the window, looking for the postman.

## Call it puppy love

By TERESA BANAS

You've heard of the Pied Piper of Hamlin. Well, how about a backyard counterpart?

Jerry O'Leary has been a letter carrier in Redford Township for more than 10 years. But it was only two years ago that he acquired a "special friend" who has added companionship to his mailing work. And it came as a total surprise.

At that time, O'Leary was delivering mail on his regular route—on Garfield between W. Chicago and Joy—when he spotted a small, white dog trailing behind him. As it turns out, this overwhelmingly energetic poodle performed some near-Olympic feats just to join the letter carrier.

A neighbor recalls the story. Catherine Muggen says the poodle runs out of his back yard as soon as he sees O'Leary near his home. But it's no simple task.

Biscuit, the poodle, scales a four-foot fence whenever he hears the carrier approaching. The mere changing of a mail box sends Biscuit bounding over his backyard fence.

Biscuit then trots a few yards ahead of O'Leary, occasionally stopping to make sure the man is still nearby. He follows O'Leary to W. Chicago and back again.

Biscuit's owner, Sharon Gabriel, says her pet's antics frightened her at first.

"At first, I got scared," she says. "So I got in my car and followed after him. But he (Biscuit) wouldn't come to me."

"I don't know if he (O'Leary) likes it," she adds. "But he says, 'Ah, it's alright, he just wants to go for a walk.'"

Mrs. Gabriel says Biscuit is really a shy dog who would walk with no one else.

"He's even afraid of the baby's toys, and yet he's real friendly—with the mailman."

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Jeff Sexton's RIF balloon traveled for nine days before landing in a Southington, Mass., backyard. Jeff, a student at Douglas Elementary School, was among several youngsters who received letters from the balloon finders. (Staff photo by Bob Woodring)

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