Edgar Andrew Collard

Balloon festival recalls daredevil and inventor

Balloons, dozens of them, will be floating over Saint-John-sur-Richelieu (the old St. Johns). The balloon festival begins this weekend and will not end until the weekend following.

Some 30 balloonists from across Canada are taking part, with more than 50 from the United States and Europe. If the weather is favorable, from 150,000 to 200,000 spectators are expected.

The balloon has made a comeback — not as a competitor of the airplane, but as a sport. It has about it a sense of adventure.

Unlike the airplane, it is not a flying machine. No engine propels it; it cannot be steered. Its navigation depends on a skilful and complex manipulation of natural forces — winds, air currents, the heat and cold of the atmosphere.

The balloonist most often seen in 19th century Montreal was Prof. Charles Grimley (the prefix "Prof." being his own idea). Grimley was a professional showman. He could be engaged to perform at any gatherings, such as on municipal holidays, or the fund-raising picnics of charitable organizations.

Turned professional

Grimley was an Englishman from Worcester. He emigrated to the United States in 1870. There he worked in "a mercantile business." Confinement indoors seemed to be undermining his health. He took up ballooning, certainly an outdoor activity. Soon he had turned professional.

In the eyes of Montrealers he was a romantic adventurer, who had chosen a daring profession. He was good-looking, even though "considerably below medium size," and appearing, somehow, "not so young, perhaps, as his features would indicate." His ways were attractive — "very amiable in manner and agreeable in conversation — altogether most excellent company."

He told stories of terrifying landings. There was the story of his ascent in 1875 from the Exhibition Grounds in Pittsburgh.

Caught in a sudden blast, he was swept low across a deep ravine, then whirled over a forest where the basket of the balloon ripped off upper branches.

The balloon was caught in an immense oak. It collapsed into shreds. The basket plummeted 40 feet to the ground, then rolled over a ledge of rock into clay. Grimley was knocked unconscious.

Three years later, in the early autumn of 1878, he was hired by the Irish Protestant Benevolent Society of Montreal to be the chief attraction of its fund-raising picnic on the Shamrock Lacrosse Grounds. A huge crowd came — so huge that it delayed his ascent by pressing in while the balloon was being inflated by the City Gas Company.

The sun was beginning to set before Grimley shouted, "Let her go!" Gently but rapidly the balloon arose. Grimley had with him one passenger, H.A. Moulton, a reporter from the Montreal *Daily Witness*.

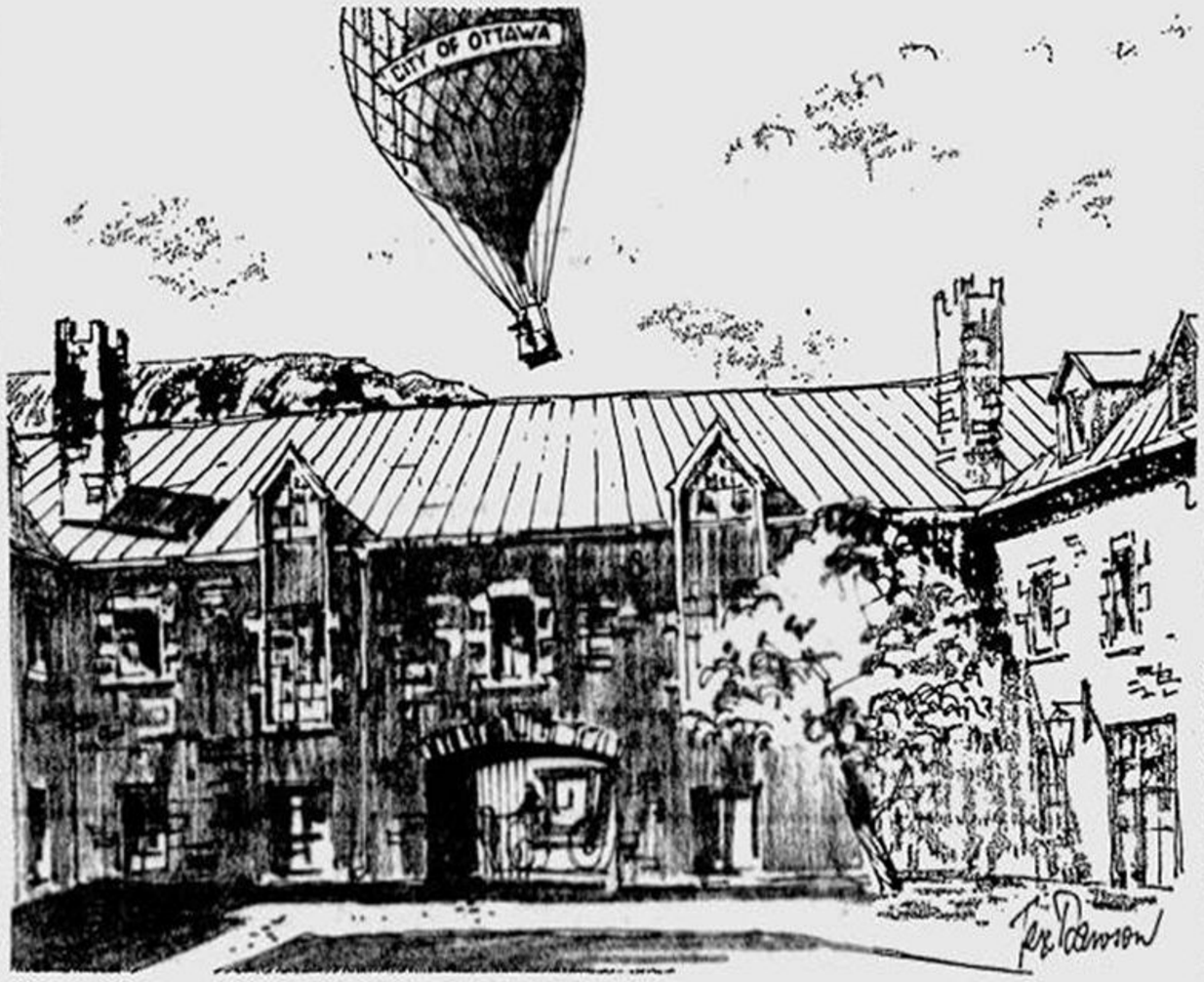
After hovering for some time in the still air above the Windsor Hotel, the balloon was carried away by wind currents. It began to deflate and descend.

The balloon was drifting nearer and nearer to the St. Lawrence River. Grimley wondered whether they might be coming down into the turbulent St. Mary's Current near St. Helen's Island.

They swung down toward a barge behind the Montreal Warehouse Company. Grimley shouted to the barge's crew to catch hold of the dangling rope. "They've got it!" he called out to Moulton. The great floating sphere was hauled down safely to the dock, with the river only a few feet away.

When he came to Montreal the next year, Prof. Grimley had a harder time. Again he took off from the Shamrock Lacrosse Grounds. His balloon, caught by rough breezes, was hurled toward St. Hyacinthe.

In the gathering darkness, about nine o'clock in that June evening, he decided he must attempt a landing. He opened a valve. Gas poured out like white smoke from a chimney.



Prof. Charles Grimley skims Montreal houses in his 1878 balloon *City of Ottawa*.

On this trip his passenger was J. Creelman. They swung down toward an open field. Wind whirled them out of control. They were carried bouncing in their basket over the ground. The basket smashed fences, shaved tree tops.

They came into another field. The basket was now plowing a track 12 inches deep in soft ground. Grimley and Creelman tried to pick up ballast by snatching at stones or clumps of earth. At last the balloon subsided, just as it neared a woods.

Meanwhile, in Montreal an attempt to make the balloon controllable was being made in a machine shop on Saint Charles Borromée St. (as the lower part of Clark St. was then named). It was the unpretentious shop of Charles Pagé, hardly the place where an historic invention might be expected to emerge.

Pagé listed himself as "machinist and agent for the Davis verticle feed sewing machine." He lived in a flat on the same street, a few doors from his shop.

Pagé's idea was to have a car or gondola suspended below the balloon. This gondola would be equipped with two propellers. The propellers would be made to turn by hand by a sort of crank in the basket of the balloon. Actually the word "propellers" was not being used. They were called "fans" or "paddles."

It was a remarkable concept for the time. Pagé was one of the earliest machinists to evolve the idea of using propellers in the air. A balloon, so equipped, could, it was hoped, be no longer at the mercy of the winds or the atmosphere. It could be man-directed.

Pagé needed someone to back his idea with financial help. He found the supporter he needed in a Montreal merchant, Richard W. Cowan, also an enthusiast for air flight.

Pagé and Cowan were ready to put the invention to the test. Prof. Grimley agreed to use his balloon to make the experiment. An ascent was made from the Shamrock Lacrosse Grounds on July 31, 1879. Pagé and Cowan, and three others, were aboard.

At first the propellers refused to work. About 25 minutes later, while the balloon neared Belocil, Pagé and Cowan got the propellers turning.

Grimley found he had his balloon under greater control. He could raise or lower it at will. Though the strength of the propellers was not great enough to drive him forward in a straight course, he was able, with the rudder, to tack against the winds, making a zigzagging progress.

In trying to land behind the village of St. Charles on the Richelieu, they were afflicted by gusts and barely skimmed the tree tops of a forest. But zigzagging brought them to a safe landing in open pasture near the village of St. Aimé.

Primitive form

Considering their novelty and primitive form, Pagé's propellers had succeeded far enough to prove that lighter-than-air craft might be made to navigate by means of machinery. In the many years that followed, research in many parts of the world saw the need to change the spherical shape of the balloon into the cigar shape of the dirigible.

Powered navigation had at last been brought to lighter-than-air craft. In the end, however, propellers proved more efficient in heavier-than-air craft — the airplane.

But Grimley's balloon, equipped with propellers worked by hand by Pagé and Cowan during that ascent on July 31, 1879, had given the world one of the earliest demonstrations that man in the air need not be wholly dependent on his ability to cajole nature, by manipulating her winds, air currents and atmosphere.

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