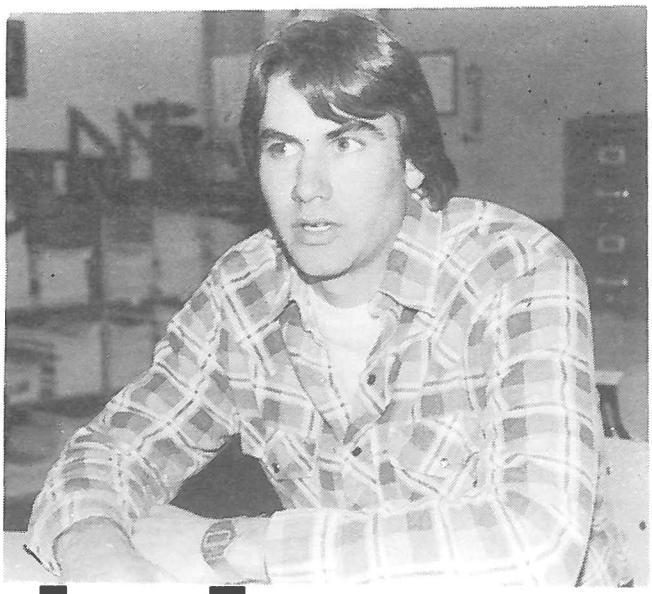
Ballooning: Joe August It will give you a rise

By Brad Kreinbrook and Bobby Guire

Bobby and I (Brad) started on our Three Wire Winter interview by riding in a hot air balloon. It felt like a Cadillac on a freshly paved road. We saw things that we have never seen before; the rooftops were neat, and we could see the Yampa River perfectly. When we landed, we had to deflate the balloon by forcing the air out, then we helped fold it and put it on the truck. After that Joe said the "Balloonists' Prayer", while we "had" to drink champagne on our knees with our hands behind our backs. If we didn't spill a single drop, we would have the "Balloonists' Luck" forever. We wanted as much information as possible about ballooning, so we talked to Joe August, a pilot and a balloonist for the "Balloon the Rockies".

Joe was born on October 6, 1957, in California. He started ballooning in 1981.

"I was born in Los Angeles, California. I went to school for twenty years in a little town called San Pedro; it's on the coast. It's a nice little fishing town, but I left the rat's race for the mice race. It seems that I've always been around balloons, here in Steamboat and other places.



Joe August

"Ballooning is a real challenge!"

People call from all over the country to ask about balloon rides in the mountains. When they are here, they can take a balloon ride through the mountains which is exciting and expensive. It costs around 150 to 200 dollars per person.

"Besides being a balloonist, I enjoy the outdoors, and I enjoy being with my family. I also enjoy skiing and traveling. For the last ten or fifteen years I've been involved in weather forecasting because I like to predict the weather. In school I took a class in 4-H, Climatology, and I used to work for the National Weather Service. I took daily readings in weather temperatures, maximum and minimum, and that got me involved in the weather aspect of ballooning. I often enjoy a good movie, but mostly I work on the balloons and creative ideas that deal with the balloon, such as advertising campaigns or different promotions."

Next Joe spoke of his initiation into ballooning. "Then I met a gentleman, Mike Bauwens, who has been ballooning for ten years. He helped me to get started flying. I flew balloons for him and another friend in town. I helped him put the balloon together and get it back on the ground. I helped crew, and it was really enjoyable to go flying. There is a lot more to it than that, but the most enjoyable aspect of ballooning is the flying and how much control you have."

"My ground school was provided by Mike, and we went through about four or five different books. I studied for four or five months, and I took my test at G.A.D.O.(General Aviation District Office) in Denver. It's a pretty tough test. I learned the F.A.A. rules for flying balloons and general balloon terminology.

"Mike Bauwens started flying in Alaska and moved to Colorado two years ago. He gave me 30 to 35 hours of help with my training. A commercial pilot must have 35 hours before he can start flying, and he can do that at sixteen. Besides the 35 hours of instruction with a certified instructor, one must have a minimum of 35 hours flying time. I had to pass ground instruction, basic balloon terminology, the technical aspects of ballooning, as well as weather and basic visual flight rules. These are the same restrictions for a certified fixed wing aircraft, so they are in the same category."

Joe explains, in a few words, how he was challenged about ballooning. "It was after I took my first couple of rides that I was challenged. I enjoyed being able to fly over the trees and streets of Steamboat Springs. We did one flight over the wilderness area in Clark, and that's a beautiful area. Ballooning is very challenging, and it keeps my mind going. I have to assess all factors in flying a balloon as to winds, weather, fuel consumption and answering people's questions."

Joe then discussed the experience of a balloonist. "The more experience in a balloon, the easier it gets. A balloonist always has to be thinking. There is a lot to ballooning, like the weather, winds, fuel, weight and the amount of heat outside and the moisture in the air. The most difficult time may be the inflation, and the most critical time is when the balloon is coming in for a landing. If there is a lot of wind, more than 10 m.p.h. or higher, we have what's called a 'high wind landing'. This means that the balloon will come down with a little bit of a bump or at least not as smooth as a regular flight."

Joe shared his knowledge and experience of balloon history with us.

"Balloons have been around for over 200 years. The first occurrence was in 1782. We are celebrating the 200th anniversary of flight this year. The first flight was in Southern France, and the first passengers were a chicken, a goat and a rooster. The more modern hot air balloon system was just developed around 20 to 25 years ago.

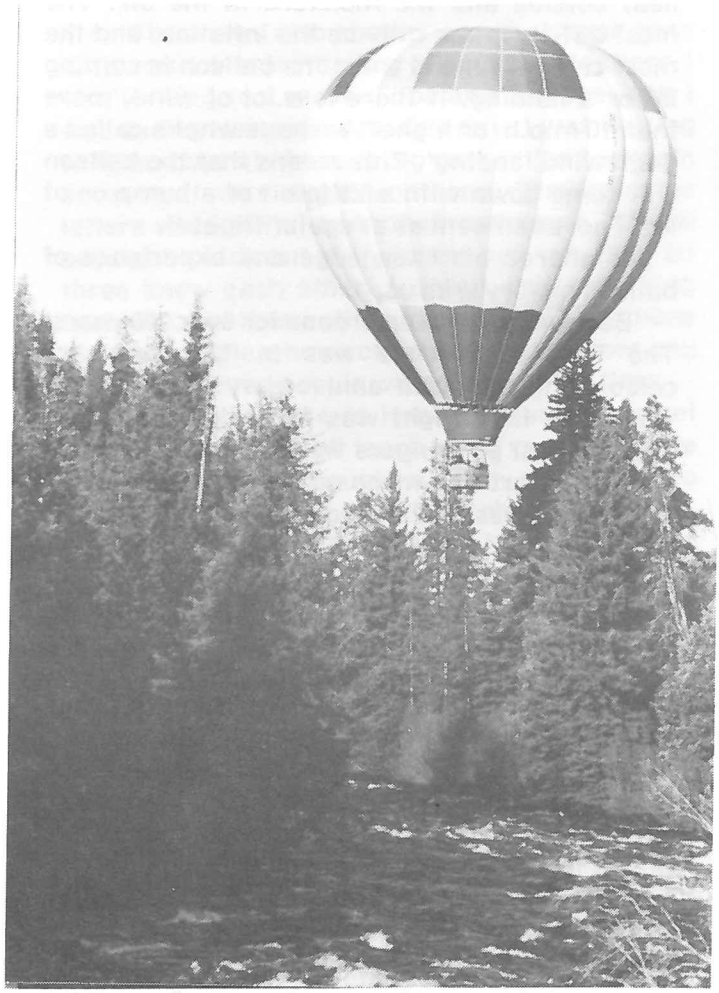
"I think curiosity was the main reason for inventing a balloon. As men watched the smoke lift off the ground, they thought: if they could trap the smoke, there would be a way to create lift, and then to fly like the birds. They tried and, sure enough, it worked. The guys who trapped the smoke were the Montgolfier brothers, Etienne and Joseph. They proved that a balloon, 40 feet and 12 metres in diameter, could lift a man if the air inside was warm.

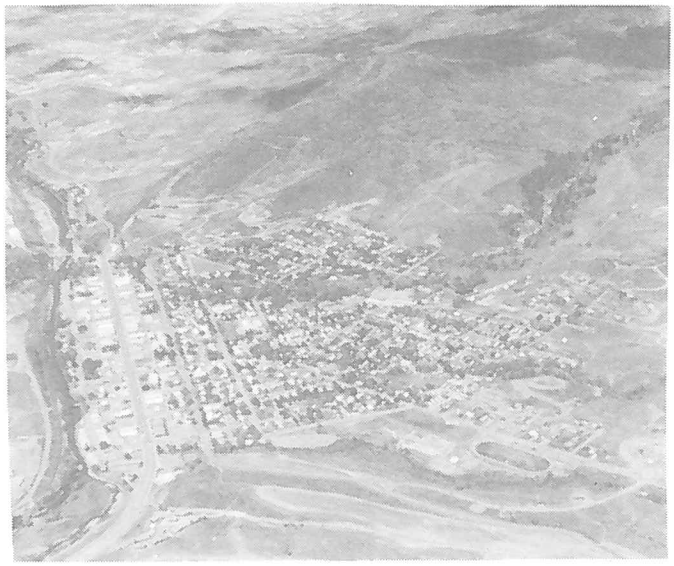
"The brothers were out by a Friday night campfire when they watched the smoke rise off the pit, and they thought that if they trapped smoke in some type of material, they could

be able to leave the ground. The balloon has to hold hot air to lift a small basket and four people. This might heat the air over the maximum operation temperature of 250 degrees even before we get off the ground. Just before the balloon takes off we need enough air for the balloon to be tight. We have an idea on how much weight we can lift, but I haven't ever been in a balloon that has had too much weight in it."

Next, Joe talked about the inflation of a balloon and how one has to put cold air in first. Joe explains, "The cold air is part of the inflation. The inflator fan is used to fill the balloon three quarters full with cold air. That will give enough room to heat the other air with the burners. A couple of our crew holds the balloon open, so there's a chance for the flame to get inside the mouth of the balloon at that time. So, we fill it with cold air on the ground, and that gives us a stable balloon and enough to heat the air to complete the inflation."

Joe then explains about accidents. "I am happy to say I have never been involved in an accident. We do have times which we call a high wind landing, when the wind speed is anywhere from 15 to 20 miles an hour. The balloon comes in rather fast, and it may hit with a bump. That is a kind of landing one will remember. I especially remember in 1981, the GORDON BENNET Balloon Race, in California. There was a high





A bird's eye view from a balloon

wind at the launch site, about 20 mph, and balloons should not launch if is close to that. It's not safe to fly if the wind speed is more than 6 or 8 knots. At this particular balloon race one was up in the air and did not have enough heat. It was moving so fast across the ground before gaining altitude that it hit the side of a building. There were some damages to the building, but no fatalities.

"Once we had a flight over Emerald Mountain. Anytime we fly over an area where there's no access for landing, it can be very technical. We were flying from Emerald Meadows on the south side of town to Twenty Mile Road. We were halfway over Emerald Mountain when the wind decided to change. Our fuel was still at a safe level of half a tank. When we landed on the other side of the mountain we had 10% of our fuel left. It was a little tight, but it was a beautiful filght. We saw quite a few elk and deer up there also."

Now Joe expostulates about the importance of ground crewing. "Ground crewing is an important part of ballooning. The crew has to watch during the flight and stay close by. It is very important that the crew is present at the landing to help steady the aircraft. The ground crew's main responsibility is to set up the balloon with a cold air inflation. When the balloon comes in for a landing, they have to deflate the balloon and pack it. At the take off, the ground crew turns into a chase crew, and they follow along on the ground in the truck to recover the balloon wherever it may land. We radio the ground crew before landing. I helped with the ground crewing many times. That's where I started. I have been complimented quite often. For example, if I choose a landing site, I'll tell the passengers at the beginning of the flight what I am planning to do. If I land close to the spot I have chosen they

The Balloon, up and off

usually compliment me. I also like to contour fly just over the trees and drop down to pick some pine cones as little souvenirs for the passengers."

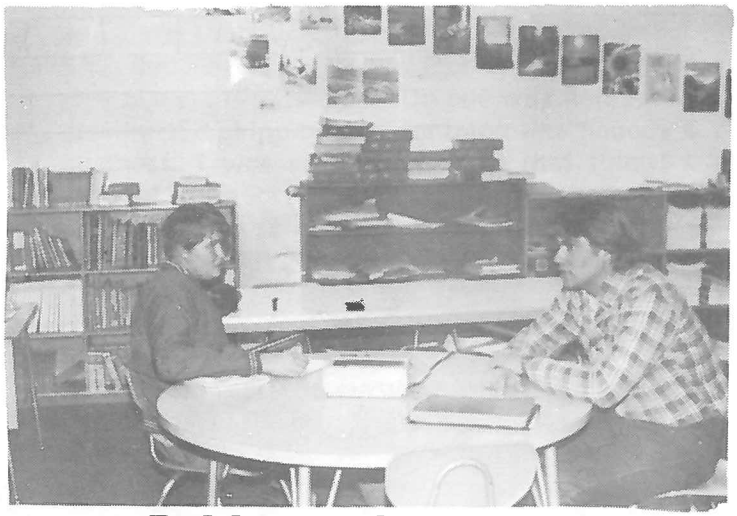
Joe's next oratory is about the places one can land a balloon. "Probably the nicest places here in Steamboat are big open fields. Before we make an attempt to land, we ask permission from the property and land owners. The chase crew also asks permission to go onto the property or they ask them if it's all right to land. We stay in contact with the chase crew with two way radios, and we don't land near plowed fields, grazing cattle, horses or housing, unless we're low on fuel and it's absolutely necessary."

We had heard of balloon competition, and we wanted to know more. "The neatest place I've seen a balloon competition is probably in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I saw from the air over 100,000 people on the ground as we took off. The balloon festival is quite a sight. Another interesting place is the Continental Divide flight; that's when we fly over the Divide from Steamboat to Walden. We usually drop down at Fish Creek Reservoir, and we like to troll for trout. It's quite an adventure! We enjoy watching wild game; it's extremely illegal to shoot from the air, according to the Department of Wildlife.

"Another nice competitive race is the GORDON BENNET BALLOON RACE. James Gordon Bennet started a balloon race in France in 1906. Ballooning became an international sport shortly after World War II. Gordon Bennet was a newspaper editor from way back, and they still have a gas balloon race every year. Our balloon is hot air, so we're not in that category, and I can't say we've won that race, but there's been a variety of winners."

We researched some information from Encyclopedia Britannica. Interest in ballooning as a sport was greatly increased by James Bennet (1841-1918) who offered a trophy and a substantial money prize to the winner of an annual long-distance race. The trophy was won several times by Belgians. A Belgian pilot, Ernest Demuyter, won the race six times. From the 1950's sport ballooning greatly increased, spurred by development of balloons made of new light weight materials and equipped with propane gas burners. Many balloon clubs have been formed throughout the world with competitive events. Another type of competition is "spot landing" races. These are annual events in several locations. When races or individual events are held under sanctioned conditions, the duration, distance and altitude are measured. There are classes based on size, air and gas categories, although gas balloons are no longer in great use for sport. Records are kept for duration, distance and altitude.

"The last Bennet race was in California. This has been the 200th year of flight, and just a few months back in France they were celebrating the first flight. I'm not sure who won the Gordon Bennet this year, but that occurred in France.



Bobby and Joe

"The Federal Aviation Administration has authority over the balloonist and regulations for flying. "Some people call the balloon the safest aircraft registered by the F.A.A. The balloon would come down like a parachute if no heat were added, which means about 1,000 feet per minute or like jumping off a 13 foot building. Any aircraft has danger involved, but as long as it qualifies, and as long as the crew is always

thinking about the flight in progress, it is a lot safer. The F.A.A. regulates aircraft, that makes flying safe in the United States. They often have 1,000 aircraft in the sky at one time, and they check radar and control towers and things like that. This morning we talked about how the F.A.A. was pulling licenses in Denver for pilots who violated F.A.A. regulation and flew below minimum altitudes. Pilots are not allowed to fly below a certain altitude, as far as the populated areas, 1,000 feet is the minimum. This applies to the town of Steamboat."

At the begining of this story, Bobby and I were really enthused about going up in a balloon. Now that our story is finished, we know a lot more about ballooning than when we started back in September. The first time we met Joe August, he was really anxious to help us get started. As time went on, Joe became more of a friend, and he helped us out tremendously by giving us information about balloons, how to get a license, of what balloons are made, and so much more. He visited us here at school two times, but the best part was when we went up in the hot air balloon for no charge. Bobby and I enjoyed that very much.

Now that we're finished with the story, I (Brad) am positive that I want to get my student's pilot's license, and in the future, own and operate my own balloon. The reason I want a balloon is for the pure excitement of flying and to let more people have the thrill of observing the mountains. I have visions that I will have my own red and white balloon. I imagine the night of Steamboat High School's homecoming game, and I put a banner on the balloon which says, "GO SAILORS". I picture flying all over town that whole day. I want to share my hometown in a beautiful hot air balloon. We encourage you to call "Balloon the Rockies" to get a ride in a balloon, and believe us, you will enjoy it as much as we did.

Balloonist's Vocabulary

Instruments — Altimeter, Compass, Pyrometer
Operation — Inflation, flight, landing
Flight — Free lifts, steering, wind directions
Landing — Cruising, appropriate site, rate of descent
Weather Conditions — Sunrise, sunset, light winds
Number of People — Three people to inflate the balloon