

# The Day the Balloon Landed

## A reminiscence with Deets Styles

By Peter Fritz, Chair  
Delanco Historic Preservation Advisory Board



For Virginia “Deets” Styles, the event still seems like a scene from a movie; Mike Todd’s epic “Around the World in 80 Days” to be exact. Deets shared with me her memories, several crinkled articles, and two photos detailing the day the balloon landed across from her front yard on Coopertown Road in Delanco in 1968. Although the event occurred 40 years ago, the surrealism of the day lingers in her mind.

On that day, two intrepid balloonists, Peter Pellegrino and Francis L. Shields, President of the Balloon Club of America recreated the first air voyage in America, which took place in 1793 in Philadelphia. Here is the news account of the first flight from Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser; January 10, 1793:

*MR. BLANCHARD THE BOLD AERONAUT, agreeably to his advertisement, at five minutes past ten o’clock yesterday morning, rose with a balloon from the Prison Court in this city, in preference to an immense concourse of spectators, there assembled on the occasion... Mr. Blanchard was dressed in a plain blue suit, a cocked hat and white feathers. As soon as he was in the boat, he threw out some ballast, and the balloon began to ascend slowly and perpendicularly, while Mr. Blanchard waved the colors of the United States and those of the French Republic, and flourished his hat... After a few minutes, the wind blowing from the northward and westward, the balloon rose to an immense height and then shaped its course toward the southward and eastward. Several gentlemen gallop’d down the point road, but soon lost sight of it, for it moved at a rate of 20 miles an hour.”*

Our latter heroes, both members of the Balloon Club of America, recreated the historic flight on its 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary, January 9, 1968.

Wearing multiple layers of clothing, the men were braced against the 14 degree temperature on the ground at launch. Pellegrino wore a knit ski cap but Shields preferred a simple dark beret in deference to the

heritage of Jean Pierre Blanchard. The pair launched from Front and Walnut Streets in Philadelphia, near the site of the first ascent, at 12:20 PM.

The colorful balloon, named “La Coquette”, measured 31 feet in diameter and was filled with 19,000 cubic feet of helium for the trip. It was one of the smaller balloons owned by the balloon club.

Painted in bold primary colors with a sunburst motif and hung with bunting, on a sunnier day it would have been dazzling to behold.



The modern crew brought with them a wicker picnic basket containing eight chicken salad and baloney sandwiches and two bottles of domestic burgundy, gifts from Old Original Bookbinders restaurant, a box of city souvenirs, and credentials from the Mayor of Philadelphia to be presented to the first person the balloonists encountered upon landing. Many local dignitaries were on hand, along with the entire membership of the Penn Towne Historical Society, and a press corps of about 50

photographers. The Police and Firemen’s Band played on, in a scene much like the Parisian balloon launch depicted in the film.

On this day in 1793 the weather was unusually mild with a temperature in the 50s. President George Washington was on hand with a small crowd as the balloon lifted off. Though technically a solo flight, Mr. Blanchard brought with him his small black dog, which became airsick during the flight. The balloon crossed the Delaware River and eventually landed in Woodbury, New Jersey about an hour later. Mr. Blanchard reported on the landing in his journal:

*“I landed at last and set my foot on the ground at 10 h. 56 m. AM... I heard a noise which informed me of the presence of some person near me. It was indeed a countryman, an inhabitant of this neighborhood, who having seen an extraordinary phenomenon in the air, had advanced toward the spot... He seemed to be frightened... Recollecting that the exhilarating juice of the grape was always amongst mankind the happiest sign of friendship and conciliation, I showed him a bottle of wine. So much eagerness on my part inspired him with confidence... I then drank first and he followed my example.”*

In 1968 Mr. Shields reported that his flight conditions were quite different. Besides the bone-chilling cold at 2,300 feet, the flight took place under a low grey ceiling that smelled of snow. After clearing Society Hill Towers, the balloon followed the winds aloft to the north-northeast following the Delaware River upstream. The balloonists planned on a one hour flight.

Finding a lull in the winds aloft, they descended and landed at 1:36 PM in a snowy open field in Delanco’s sanitary landfill, now the Winzinger property, on the north side of Coopertown Road across from the Styles nursery, Greenwood Acres. The first person they met was George S. Adams, Sr. a municipal employee who worked at the town dump. It was reported that George received the souvenirs and credentials, but none of the Burgundy.

Bud and Deets Styles and their son Kenneth watched the descent from their front window and ran to assist. Within moments the crowd had grown to about 50 residents; “Out of thin air,” Deets recalls. A short time later the balloonists’ chase crew arrived and began packing the balloon and its wicker basket for the transit back to Philadelphia.



Sitting with Deets’ in her spacious kitchen, she shared with me some photographs she took of the landing. She said she invited Mr. Pellegrino and Mr. Shields to join them that day for some hot coffee and cookies. She remembers getting out the good china, but it soon grew into an impromptu party of twelve as the chase crew arrived.

A contemporary article from the Philadelphia Daily News, lovingly kept by Mrs. Styles described it this way,

*“There followed much hilarity and conviviality, and Virginia Styles showed such great happiness, for she managed to dispose of an exceeding residue of Christmas cookies.”*

The balloonists returned to a gala testimonial dinner in Philadelphia later that evening sponsored by the Aero Club of Pennsylvania, where they were toasted long and loud.

J.P. Blanchard described a similar scene 175 years earlier:

*“Accustomed as I have been, to the pompous scenes of numerous assemblies, yet I could not help being surprised and astonished when... I turned my eyes to the immense number of people... this people naturally serious and reflecting, whose mirth is so much more true and rational, as it is not apt to give away to the transports of the moment, showed from all parts of the most unequivocal marks of astonishment and satisfaction, I for a long time... could hear the cries of joy which rent the air; I thought myself carried on the vows of their hearts.”*

As I sat in Deets’ kitchen reading and listening to the accounts of these two journeys, it occurred to me that Jean Pierre Blanchard, Peter Pellegrino, Francis L. Shield, and yes, even Blanchard’s bewildered little black dog would have been very comfortable there together munching on Bud and Deets’ Christmas cookies.

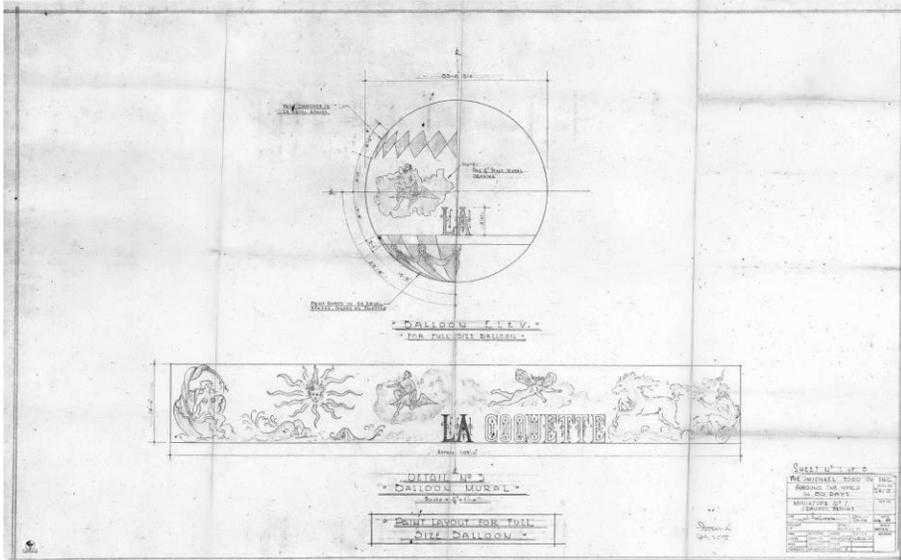
## **“La Coquette” – Celebrity Balloon A footnote**

The balloon, itself, may have actually had the greatest celebrity status that day. It had seen significant screen time in the 1956 Academy Award winning film, “Around the World in 80 Days,” starring David Niven, Cantinflas, and Shirley McLaine based on the 1873 novel of the same name by Jules Verne. The film walked away with five Oscars that year. “La Coquette” became emblematic of the film and its image was used for program covers, posters, record albums, and coffee mugs.

The balloon was originally military surplus, previously used by the US Navy in New Jersey. It was acquired by the Balloon Club of America, headquartered in Philadelphia.

When Mike Todd selected Jules Verne's classic, he was faced with many technical challenges in telling the tale of Phileas Fogg's journey around the globe. Sequences involved elephants, wind sledges, steamboats and cross country trips via rail, however, Verne's 1873 novel did NOT include a balloon flight. Todd felt it would be a great addition to the story and added a sequence for a balloon flight over the Alps. Verne did write an earlier popular novel called, "Five Days in a Balloon", so Todd was on solid ground with his decision.

Todd's organization contacted the Balloon Club to lease the balloon, which was shipped to the West Coast for "makeup" and filming.



In July of 1955, Todd's art department created the design for painting the balloon and requested permission to do so. They planned to use water-based paint, but the Balloon Club insisted it be painted in more durable oil-based paint. The result was both garish and wonderful, and "La Coquette" became a star of the show.

We have learned that, in the making of the film, the balloon was only filled with air and was suspended by wire from a crane for shooting.



We were all enthralled by the scenes of the balloon flying over the alps, which were made of papier mache.



The balloon traveled around the country promoting the film and was featured in Easter parades in Disney Land in Anaheim, CA. and a celebration of the film in Madison Square Garden in New York.

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