

Hoppers and Topper, homebuilts and an airship renew spirits in unique Amherst event

By Bill Armstrong

It isn't so unusual for a young person to make a commitment to ballooning upon completion of a first flight. But when that person is 83 ½ years young, and makes an immediate commitment to a new kind of flying, folks take notice.

Not that Dr. Clayton Thomas, M.D., hadn't already been committed to ballooning. He's been flying balloons since 1968 (Charles MacArthur taught him in hot air and Ed Yost taught him in gas). He's held a Single Engine Land rating for years. He was into parachuting before he took up ballooning. When he was in his late '70's, he earned his helicopter rating.

He has flown every commercial brand of balloon over the years. But until early June, when he went to Dan Nachbar's "Experimental Balloon, Cloud Hopper and Airship Gathering" in Amherst, Mass., the venerable octogenarian and mentor to hundreds of students had never flown a cloud hopper.



Eva Tashjian-Brown, right, checks to ensure that Clayton Thomas is comfortable in her Cameron-Padelt hopper "Sven"



Dr. Clayton Thomas, 83, lifts off on his first hopper flight, while David Tanzer prepares his hopper at Amherst, Mass.

His first hopper flight — in a borrowed balloon — changed his whole outlook.

Three pilots brought their cloud-hoppers and a dozen others brought their unique homebuilts to Nachbar's gathering on a perfect spring weekend. The event evoked shades of the wide-open creativity and free spirited innovation of the Brian Boland festivals at Post Mills Airport in Vermont. Indeed, Boland himself offered Nachbar tips on staging the event, and then showed up with a passel of his own creations, including the airship/special shape "Wanda the Fish."



Nachbar had scheduled the event to coincide with the debut of a stunning new thermal airship he is building. Alas, the airship needs a few more months work, but the innovators flocked to his community for a sneak preview and a weekend of flying.

Another veteran homebuilder, Paul Stumpf of Andover, Vt., gave the event his approval. Other familiar names in the ballooning world appeared, too. Scott Caplan, son of Don Caplan and the late Nikki Caplan, showed up just to crew. Jim Rodrigue, a shipbuilder from Bath, Maine, showed up with his “Dork,” a huge face on an envelope, which he guides from two-thirds of a Balloon Works basket (he cut out one corner

Host Dan Nachbar organized the



gathering at his co-housing community in Amherst, limiting invitations to experimental balloons.

of the famous triangular basket and wove it back into an oblong shape).

But the hoppers drew the most attention. Roland Escher of Washington, D.C., publisher of the website myairships.com, is now returning to flying after a hiatus to earn his law degree. He brought the oldest system, an original Colt bottom, recently fitted with a new envelope named “Ran Out of Pink” built by Phil McNutt. David Tanzer of Charlotte, Vt., brought his “Luke.”

Eva Tashjian-Brown, a retired attorney now living on a farm Charlottesville, Va., had been anxious to return to active ballooning. She brought “Sven,” a 28,000 cubic foot Cameron bottom with a Bert Padelt envelope that she had just picked up three weeks earlier. She flew “Sven” twice and then strapped in her old friend Dr. Thomas for a morning flight.

Thomas said he came to the experimental gathering expecting to meet different types of balloonists. “These folks are not much into competition. There’s a big sociability factor here,” he said

“I had not flown a Cloud Hopper because I never was there when they were available. There are not ubiquitous, you know.”

“What I found was that you’re right out there, close to the earth,” he said after a one-hour straight-and-level flight.

“There’s an intimacy with the earth. And this system is unbelievably responsive. I never burned more than two seconds at a time.

“It was such a good experience that I will want to do it again. In fact, I liked it so much that my daughter Wendy will go back home and start building a cloud hopper for me right away.”

Roland Escher



Noah Forden had been showing hopper designs on his laptop the night before. The Thomases sat around and picked a design.



Topper takes a sip of the Connecticut River



Brian Boland's "Wanda the Fish" and Roland Escher's "Ran Out of Pink" share the sky over Amherst farmland.

Forden, 36, a former Raven Industries engineer now living in North Kingston, R.I., came to collect and share ideas for the hopper he is building with his cousin Zack Windel, 22. He wants to build a 14,000-cubic foot hopper that he can carry aboard an airplane with the envelope stuffed into a propane tank. Eventually he'd like to build a 28,000 cubic footer.

"A hopper has less applicability in congested areas," Dr. Thomas said, "but I would suggest that all balloonists try it. It certainly makes getting into the sport simpler."

Clayton has long been concerned about the issue of how to get more young people involved in the sport. Having thoroughly enjoyed the simplicity and efficiency of the hopper, Clayton said he believes that hoppers can become one of the keys to introducing the sport to young people.

"Cloud hoppers are a start," he says. "Very few young people have \$15-20,000 in loose change to buy a new balloon. The ideal way to get into anything is a club — I've talked about this for 20 years. Ten people join, but only a few will actually participate and fly."

The hopper is different.

"Cloud hoppers take away the complexity of the sport," said Thomas, who has been a Designated

Pilot Examiner for more than 30 years. "You don't need much of a chase crew, you don't need an exam, and you don't need to register with the FAA."

All in all, the weekend of flying was magical. The Connecticut River valley offers scenic flying along its entire length, and a magnetic allure that invites pilots to go for a river dip, as did many in Amherst. David Tanzer took a chest-high plunge in his hopper, and emerged soaking and smiling.

Finally, no Northeast experimental rally would be complete without Topper, the distinctive red-white-and-blue balloon shaped like a Phillips light bulb.

Bob Sommer of Waterbury, Conn., brought Topper, the elongated experimental now flying in its 30th consecutive year — the oldest continuously touring balloon in the country, he claims. It had been built by Bob and Dottie Batcheller in 1975, and modified over the years by Brian Boland and the Heable brothers.

Nachbar said the event succeeded, and that he plans to offer a similar invitation-and-registration gathering next year -- with his airship on display and flying.



The lure of the Connecticut River was too much for some pilots to pass up. David Tanzer and his hopper "Luke" took a refreshing dip during in the Amherst gathering. Photo by Vic Hoyt