

Balloons Over Mt. Vernon returns bigger and better

There will be balloons in the sky throughout this year's Fall Fest

BY GREG PETERSON
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Be sure to look up in the sky Fall Fest weekend because balloons will be flying over Mt. Vernon. Hot air balloons will fly over Mt. Vernon on Friday, Saturday and Sunday at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport in conjunction with Fall Fest and the theme of Toons, Tunes, and Balloons.

Mt. Vernon balloonists, Jennifer and Kevin Witzel, have been front running the Balloons Over Mt. Vernon program since it started last year. With an overwhelmingly positive reception last year, this year's balloon events have grown in size and substance.

Jennifer Witzel informed that the number of balloons increased from 10 last year to 15 this year. She said that all of the balloonists from last year are returning except for one, and she said that the only reason he won't be at Fall Fest is because he is getting married.

The hot air balloon pilots are coming from nearby states that include: Illinois, Kentucky, Iowa, Indiana, and Missouri.

Though Fall Fest starts Friday, there will be a pre-flight of balloons on Thursday to get the balloon excitement going.

There will be a balloon glow Friday evening from 4 to 7 at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport. The event is free, and there will be a children's costume parade, a family area, and tethered balloon rides for sale.

Witzel said that last year they were not expecting the massive turnout to the balloon glow that they received. This year, event organizers are working with the airport as well as local police to accommodate large numbers of people as well as parking.

In addition to the extra logistical work, the Balloon glow will also have new fun features that will make the event even better.

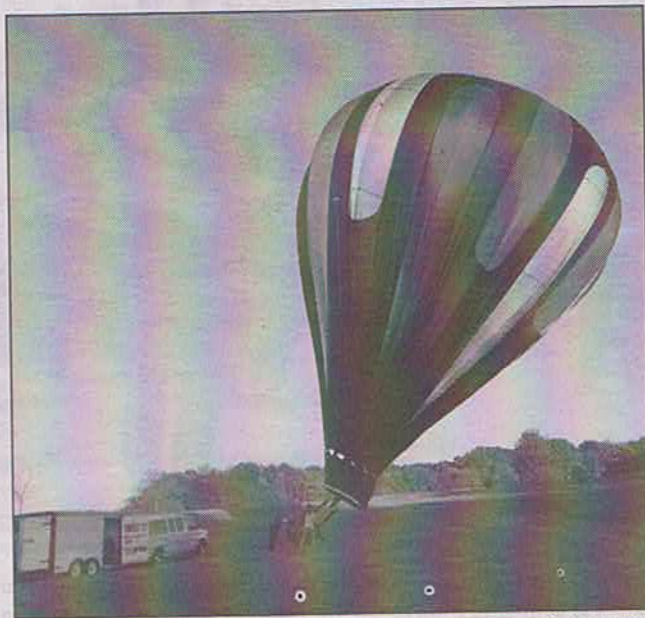
Witzel stated, "There's a lot more family friendly activities going on Friday night."

"The tethered balloon is new this year," said Witzel. She said that lots of people wanted to know if there would be balloon rides last year. She said, "We thought that would be a plus to add this year."

There will also be more vendors at this year's balloon glow. Witzel informed that there will be more food and craft vendors at the event.

On Saturday, there will be a pancake breakfast from 7 to 10 a.m. at Wilkey's Cafe. The breakfast will feature celebrity pancake flippers and contests. A balloon launch will take place and tethered balloon rides will be available.

The balloon flight over Fall Fest will be at 5 p.m. Tethered balloon rides at the Mt. Vernon football field will be held from 4 to 9 p.m.



Sentinel Photo

COMING DOWN — The crew holds on to the basket while pilot Kevin Witzel prepares for the balloon to deflate. Everything about hot air ballooning requires teamwork.

Balloons Over Mt. Vernon not only provides exciting entertainment for the community, it also helps benefit a great cause. Witzel informed that this year United Way is the net beneficiary of the Balloons over Mt. Vernon.

Witzel said that the program has received a lot more sponsors this year, which shows that people in the community are stepping up and supporting Balloons Over Mt. Vernon.

One benefit for this year's event preparation has been a Balloons Over Mt. Vernon website that a production company called Painter's Dream has made for the program.

"[The website] has taken us to the next level for getting the word out," said Witzel. "That made it grow by leaps and bounds."

Witzel said that there used to be an annual hot air balloon event in Mt. Vernon in the early '80s, and they would like to see Balloons Over Mt. Vernon continue to grow. She said, "We would like to see it grow to 20 balloons next year."

There are also other plans on the horizon for the future of the event. Witzel indicated that they would like to create a committee and get more volunteers to help the expansion. One possible addition in the future might include working more closely with the Airport to have a warbird fly-in and possibly airplane and/or helicopter rides.

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