

THE WHAT CHEER about to take off from Crawford Street Bridge on a rainy Fourth of July. The skies wept as Malvern Hill, the youngest of the aeronautical Allens, ascended unto heaven and came down in Daggett's Pasture, parachuting in "exploded" bag.

## FROM THE ONE-MAN BALLOON UP TO THE "GLORY OF THE SKIES"

Saga of the Allens, a Providence family that kept the skies full of gas bags while thousands gawked and sometimes cheered. Getting down was the big problem

BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

**T**HE last of the Aeronautical Allens, the great ballooning family which dominated the New England skies in the 1880's and 1890's, is a little spry wrinkled bow-legged man living at 6 Baffin Court, Providence. He will be 83 next May. Old Mr. Allen has little about him to suggest an adventurous and high-flying past, but his two given names are a little unusual and people are always getting them wrong. He is not Melvin Allen or Malvin Allen but Malvern Hill Allen and he was named for a Civil War battle in which Father flew a balloon for the Union army.

Father James Allen sleeps in Swan Point cemetery beneath a stone carved with the silhouette of a balloon and an inscription reading "Aeronautic Engineer With the United States Army in the Rebellion. Also Brazilian Army, 1867-1868."

The Emperor of Brazil, Dom Pedro II, gave Father \$10,000 in gold for his services in the war with Paraguay, plus a passel of parakeets and monkeys who played hell with the washlines of South Providence. Father used the money the Emperor paid him for spotting enemy troop movements in the jungles to purchase a cottage on Colwell Street (later Logan Avenue), where the family based in the years when the sky was full of Allens every Fourth of July.

For Father had three sons — James K., Ezra S. and the aforesaid surviving Malvern Hill! — and they all followed him aloft to become superb and daring aeronauts.

At all public occasions which seemed to call for ballooning, the Allens ballooned — at Independence Day celebrations, at Fairs, at the opening of suburban plats, in honor of Butchers' Day at Oakland Beach and in advertisement of the Old Coon Cigar. So did their wives and daughters, usually costumed as the Goddess of Liberty.

And so, undoubtedly, would the first James Allen's grandson, John F. Allen, 74, now living at 157 Ohio Avenue, if his mother Mary (the wife of Ezra S., she broke a leg coming down in Rehoboth in 1891 and was never much good after that) had not cracked down on Pa when he arranged a parachute jump for Johnny at the age of 16.

John — he still conducts his own trucking business and drives his own truck at threescore and 14 — did his best to circumvent Ma and prove himself an Allen. Borrowing an outside "Bessie Boker" umbrella from a kindly expressman, he took off from a third story windowsill, landing unharmed in a sandpile. "You'd oughta let him be a parachuter," growled Prof. Ezra

S. Allen from the depths of his black mustache. "He's got the guts for it."

That ended the saga of the Aeronautical Allens.

Except for a footnote. In 1944 a First Lt. John T. Nangle, 145 Whittier Avenue, Providence, died in a fighter plane over Sicily. He was a great-grandson, on his mother's side, of "Captain" James Allen, first military aeronaut in the U.S. service. At the time of his death he wore the Air Medal with 15 Oak clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross. He was awarded the Silver Star posthumously. No question in the world, his great-grandfather's ghost rode with him to his last battle in the Wide Blue.

James Allen was born in 1824 in Barrington, the son of a sea captain who eventually sailed on a voyage from which he never returned. The ninth child of a widow woman, James knocked about a good deal — as plowboy, mill hand, seaman and job printer — before he took up ballooning by medical advice. A doctor told him he needed work in the open air. How about aeronautics?

That may have been just the doctor's way of being playful but young Allen took him seriously. His first solo ascent was from Exchange Place, Providence,

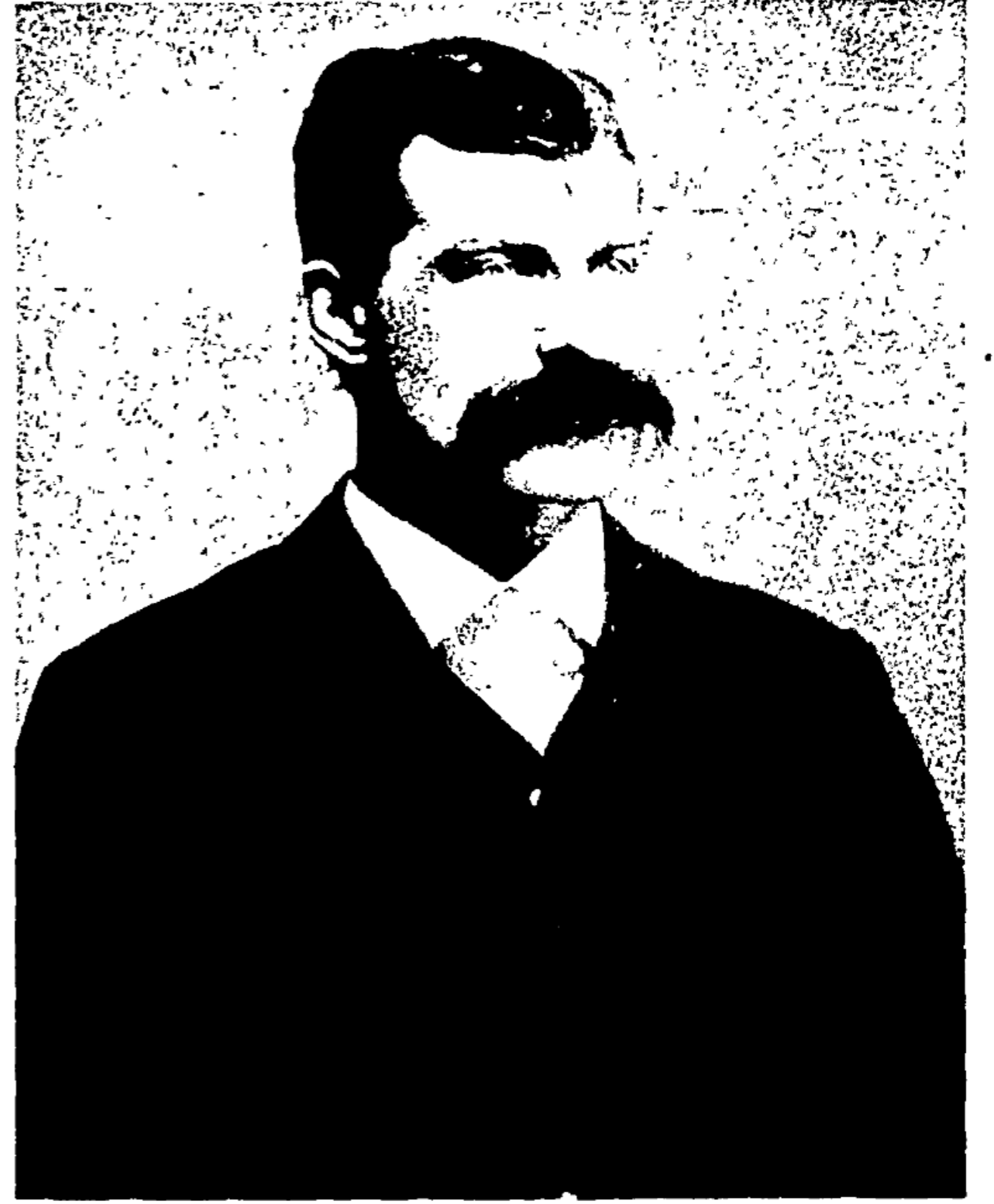
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FATHER, James Allen Sr. Military balloonist in Civil War and for Dom Pedro of Brazil.



MRS. EZRA. Wife of the eminent "Professor," Mary Francis Allen made many ascensions.



OLDEST SON, James K. Allen. A brave aeronaut and often dunked, once off Block Island.



UP IN A BALLOON. Inscription on Father's tombstone shows he was headed right way.



MALVERN HILL. Named for Civil War battle in which Father took over balloon unit.



JOHN F. ALLEN, Ezra's son, contemplates oil painting of Mother making solo ascension.

## The Aeronautical Allens

# 'Rascal,' Roared the General, 'Damnation, Sir!'

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1857, and by the time the guns of Sumter touched off the Civil War he was known all over as "the New England Aeronaut."

The Burnside Regiment (1st R.I. Detached State Militia) entrained for Washington April 18, 1861. Allen, who was attached to the outfit as a supernumerary technician not carried on the roster, followed next day by boxcar with two oiled linen balloons, a portable windlass and 150 feet of guy ropes. You can't take it away from the Burnside boys, they were the first American troops in history to go to war under air support.

How much action Balloonist Allen saw in the Bull Run campaign is a moot question. In 1892, five years before he died, Father gave a newspaper interview in which he told quite a story about how old Burnie ordered him aloft in a high wind on the day of battle. Father refused and Burnside sternly ordered him to inflate his damned gas-bag and ascend. Somehow the balloon got away from its inexpert ground crew and went sailing, just as the Union army did a little later.

It's a great pity that this stirring martial episode lacks documentation. All the factual account of the Battle of Bull Run lacks is a Bullrunaway balloon and Burnside threatening it with brandished sword.

The facts, as presented by F. Stansbury Haydon in his excellent work "Aeronautics in the Union and Confederate Armies" seem to be that General McDowell

ordered Father's balloons into the campaign and that they exploded while being towed forward from Alexandria. Anyway, Father went back to his print shop in Providence and didn't return to the wars until he was sent for to serve under Prof. Thaddeus S. C. Lowe, the great Civil War balloonist. Brother Ezra (not to be confused with James' son, Ezra S.) joined him in the fall and they served in the Peninsular, Maryland, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville campaigns.

Professor Lowe was taken sick just before the battle of Malvern Hill and James Allen took over the balloon corps until the army was withdrawn from Harrison's Landing. Probably that is why he named his youngest son Malvern Hill Allen.

The balloon corps was disbanded during the march to Gettysburg and Father came home for keeps, except for that little barnstorming expedition to Brazil. In 1867, Professor Lowe sold his equipment to Dom Pedro II and Father went along to the jungles with the war balloons.

The stories Father used to tell about his Civil War adventures! There was the time a mysterious lieutenant appeared at James Allen's tent with verbal orders from General Hooker to ascend for a look at the Rebel entrenchments. The Allens took off and were promptly fired upon by a Rebel battery which blew itself to smithereens trying to get enough elevation to hit Father's basket.

General Hooker later denied ever giving any such order. Who could the mysterious lieutenant have been? Belle Boyd the Beautiful Spy?

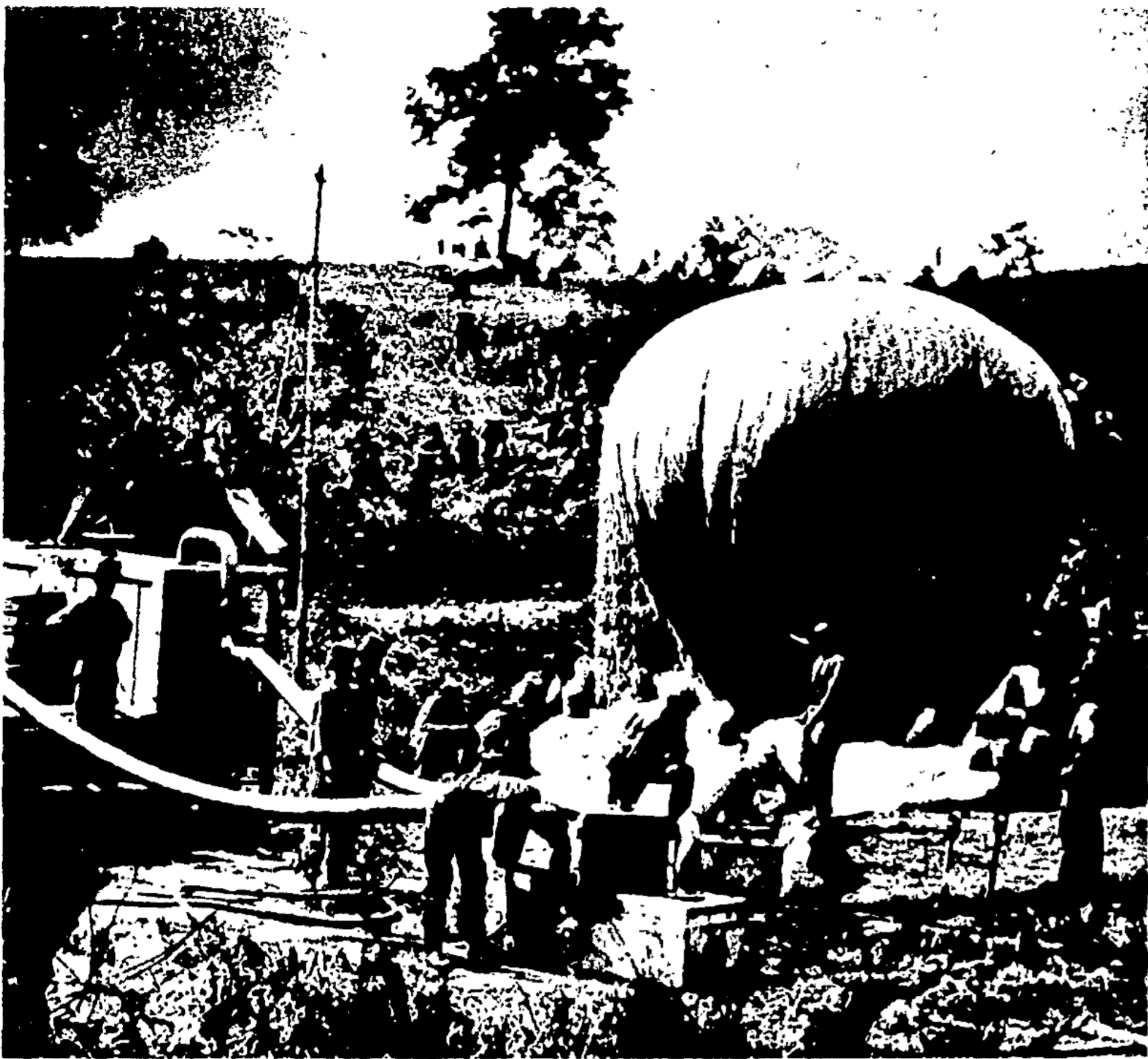
Father also liked to tell how there came to him one day a young officer from the German Embassy in Washington requesting permission to accompany him on one of his military missions to cloudland. The Allens took him up and he took notes. Know who the little squirt was? Lieutenant (later Count) Ferdinand von Zeppelin, by gorey!

Then there was the time the belaying ropes gave way and a pro-southern wind almost landed General FitzJohn Porter behind the Confederate works at Yorktown.

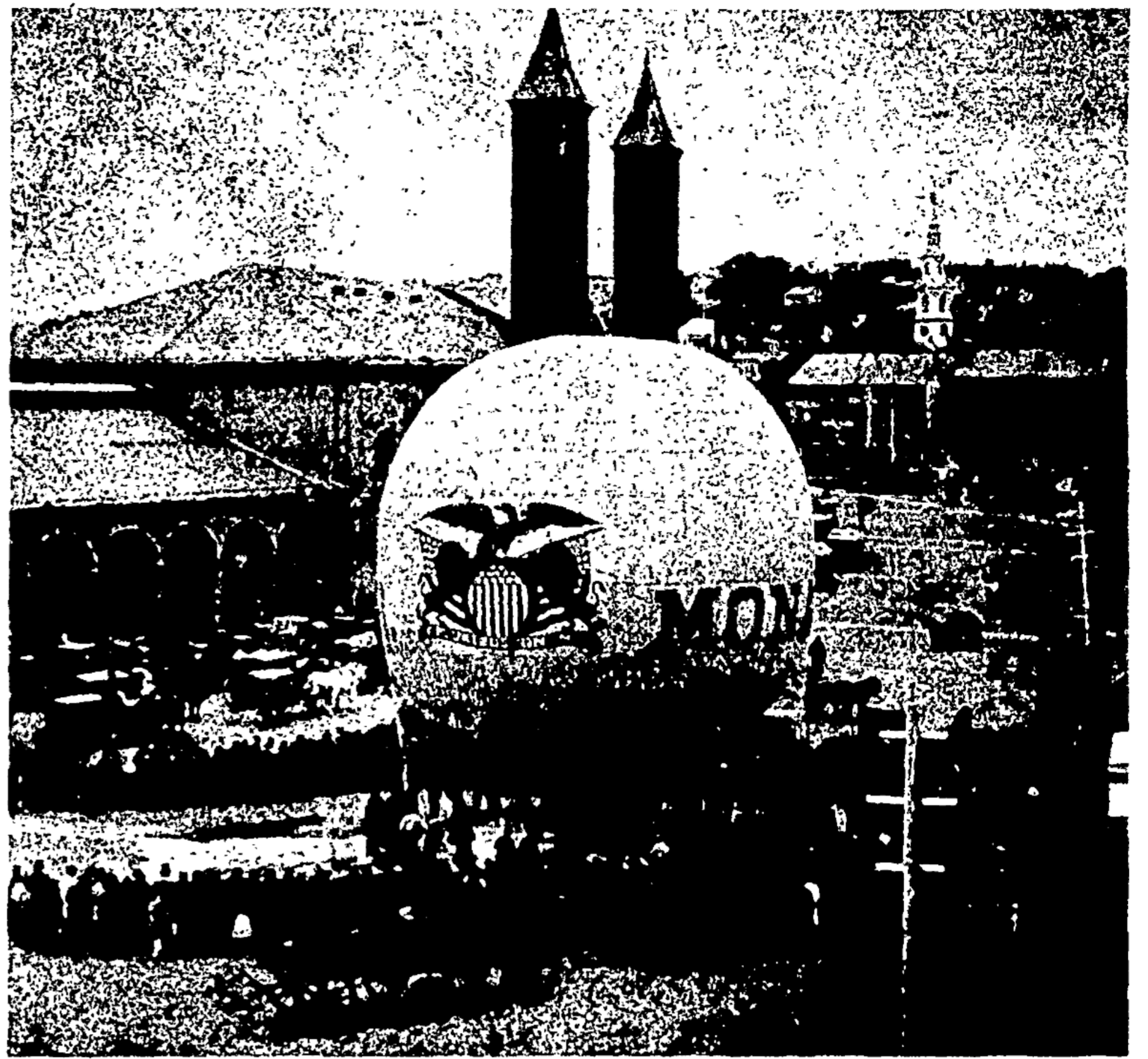
"Rascal!" roared the General. "Must I be taken prisoner because of your rotten cordage? Damnation, sir!"

"Throw out more sandbags, General," was Father's cool reply.

His deeds of war accomplished, Father devoted himself to a peaceful career of exhibition ballooning and the raising of a family of distinguished balloonists, all of whom assumed the title of "Professor" as soon as they were big enough to climb into the basket. James K. Allen, the oldest boy, made his maiden flight (with Father) at the age of eight. Malvern Hill first saw the earth drop away beneath him at a Fourth of July



AT THE FRONT. Rare Brady photograph of Civil War balloon unit with which Father served, inflating Professor Lowe's gas bag at battle of Fair Oaks.



1866 ASCENSION. Before taking off for Brazil, Father made this flight from old railroad station here in "Monarch of the Sky," a magnificent balloon.



BRAZILIAN GOLD bought this cottage. Left, Prof. Ezra S. Allen in characteristic pose. Right, Father. Next to him, Mrs. James Allen Sr. Malvern's wife in white.



BALLOON WEDDING at Fitchburg, Mass. Principals unknown, also sky pilot. Bride and Bridesmaid look unperturbed, groom as if his stomach was in pawn.

celebration in Elk County, Pa., he being then 11 years old.

The older Allen boys grew into tall, stalwart men, pallid of face, black of mustache. Malvern Hill, shorter and stockier, now peacefully pattering at occasional carpentry jobs in his back-yard workshop at 6 Baffin Court, is described as "a young man of great physical strength, quiet self-possession, and iron nerve."

Prof. Ezra S. Allen (father of John F., the Ohio Avenue Allen of the famed Bessie Boker Bumbershoot Drop) first soloed at the age of 19, in Bath, Me. Fearing that the water gas from the Bath Common main would not lift him, he wired his misgivings to Pa, whose answering telegram grimly bade him proceed with the completion of his contract. Ezra obeyed — basketless and clinging to the hoop depending from the net — but it cost him his shoes and his "cutaway knife" and only the desperate jettisoning of a cud of tobacco weighing two ounces finally got Ez off the Common.

Never, in all their aeronautic history, did the Allens fail their public, no matter what the sacrifice.

Father retired in 1888, after 308 recorded ascensions but his sons carried on and were carried up on innumerable heavenward hoistings by balloons manfully blazoned *Monarch of the Air*, *Royal Sovereign*, *Queen of the Clouds* and *What Cheer*, descending in cedar

swamps, forest clearings, cow pastures and the Atlantic Ocean. They were never fazed by the perils of their calling. "Shall I explode her?" cried an assistant aeronaut as the *Wanderer*, plummeting into a cornfield near Worcester, was being dragged at blinding speed straight for a stone wall, "No, no!" cried Professor Ezra S. Allen. "I want to use her in Boston!"

Ezra was repeatedly dunked in Boston Harbor and rescued by police boats and steam launches. James K. was once picked up by a fishing schooner off Block Island. On Malvern Hill Allen's famous local ascent, achieved from the Crawford Street Bridge July 4, 1889, the explosion cord of the *What Cheer* got fouled with the valve cord and when Malvern yanked the latter he plunged earthward, watched calmly by his sister-in-law, Mrs. Ezra S. Allen (Mary F.) who had just ascended from the Dexter Training Ground in her *Queen of the Clouds*. She wasn't worried and neither was Malvern, who came down okay in East Providence, the exploded balloon acting as a parachute just as it was supposed to do, but the folks on the Crawford Street Bridge thought he was a goner for sure and a *Providence Journal* reporter nearly founded a bug-gy getting to Daggett's Pasture.

At 82-going-on-83, old Mr. Allen is still a little puzzled by the fuss they all made. "I just pulled the cord," he told me, "'cause I figured I was going up too fast."

I suppose after you've made about so many hundred balloon ascensions and piled about so many score years on top of them, your recollection of particular flights gets a little blurry. The one old Mr. Allen remembers best was made from the Fitchburg ball grounds quite early in his career.

"I came down," Mr. Allen recalls, "in a woods near Pelham, N.H., in a circular clearing about 200 feet in diameter. It was the only unwooded spot in miles and it's funny how I happened to hit it."

Malvern Hill and his nephew, John F. Allen, both recall how the Allens used to make their own balloons at 25 Colwell Street out of "ducking" stitched on a Wheeler & Wilson by John's mother, Mary, who died in 1905. "We had a bench longer'n this whole court," Malvern says. Then they'd boil a big cauldron of linseed oil and the kids helped soak the balloon envelope in it and spread it out to dry.

Ezra made all his own nets. His wife was the No. 1 feminine balloonist of the family, although all the Allen women made ascensions, including sister Minnie. Mary's first ascension was made at Narragansett Park in 1887 at the opening of a real estate development just across Elmwood Avenue from Roger Williams Park. It was a rope ascension and little John went up with her and watched Mama scatter leaflets, one of which entitled the catcher to a house lot. Mother soon after made an appearance at the Westminster Musee and

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## The Aeronautical Allens

# The Bride Came Down in a Bog

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shared billing with the Hairy Family of Siam. Later she made a lot of cutaway solo ascensions until she broke her leg against a stone wall in Rehoboth the same day Captain Bragdon of the Boston Police snaked her husband Ezra out of the briny, off Winthrop.

Enough of peril and adventure. Let peal the wedding bell, let blast the wedding band for blissful couples topping off the sacred rites with an "aerial honeymoon."

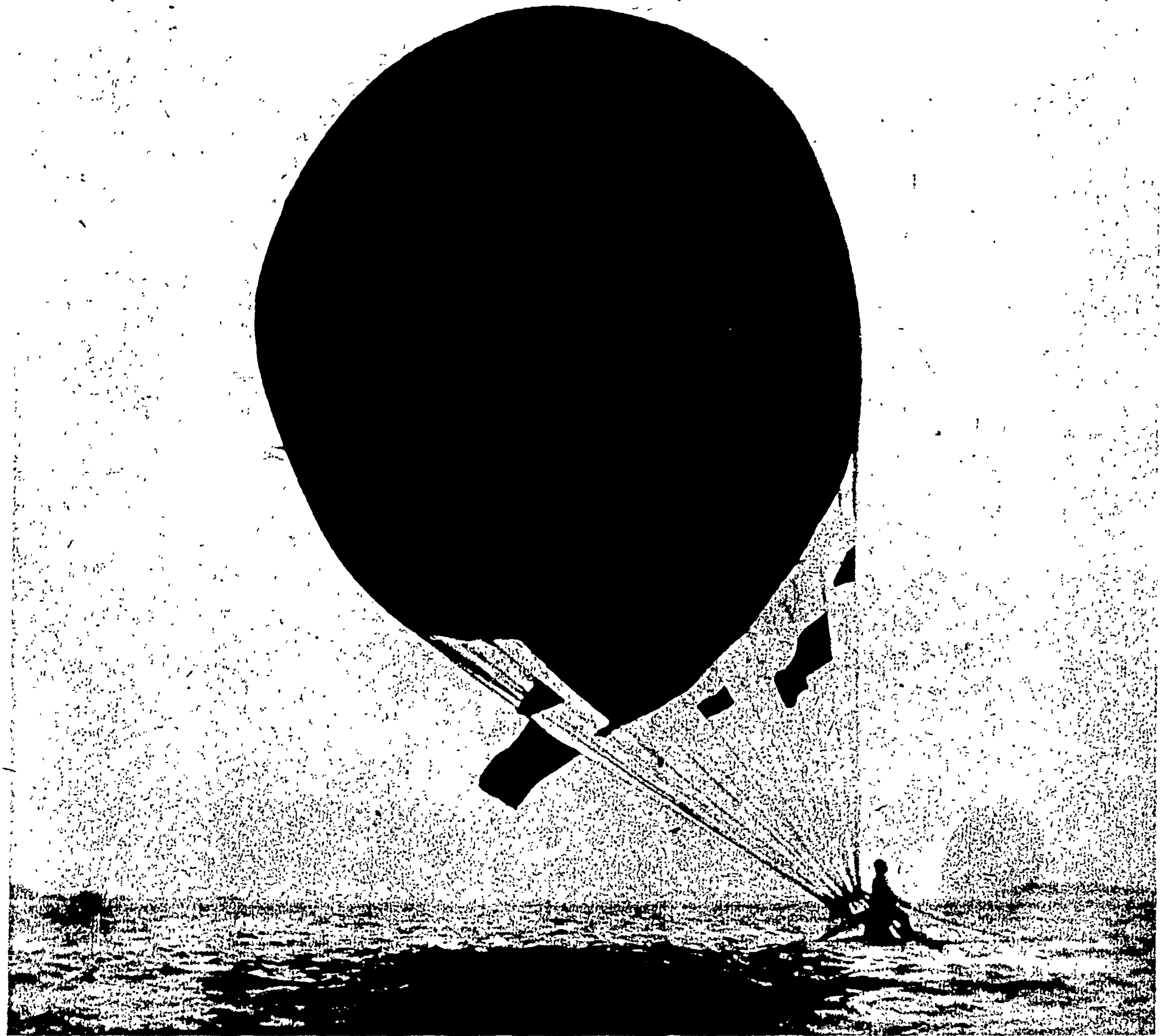
*Up in a balloon, boys, up in a balloon!*

*Sailing through the little stars,*

*All around the moon!*

The Providence bands always played it. And they played it with particular verve at Narragansett Park on Sept. 28, 1888, the day Prof. James K. Allen and the Rev. E. D. Hall, pastor of St. Paul's M. E. Church, collaborated in the wedding of Miss Maggie Buckley and Mr. Edward T. Davis. Forty thousand people attended, the press around the staging was terrific. "Gentlemen, we can't have the ceremony unless you give us room," pleaded Professor Allen, and punched an inebriated young gentleman in the nose. He retired to sleep under the wedding platform which collapsed on on him and the bride wore cream watered silk and came down in a bog near North Easton, Mass.

THE COVER PICTURE shows 1887 crowd at first solo by Mrs. Ezra S. Allen at Narragansett Park, to celebrate opening of real estate plat. A Westminster Musee banner bravely flew and Mrs. Allen scattered leaflets from aloft. One entitled catcher to lot.



Old pictures from Malvern Hill Allen and John F. Allen.  
Present-day photographs by Edward C. Hanson.

JULY 4, 1891. This was the way Prof. Ezra S. Allen's flight from Boston Common ended. He came down off Winthrop and a Harbor Patrol boat rescued him. On same day Mrs. Allen broke her leg.