

# IU student volunteers to take the plunge, breaks ankle

It was a foolhardy thing to do, but in the incident Harry M. Riddle, a junior at Indiana University, learned a lot about volunteerism. Hopefully the young man profited from that particular experience back in 1922.

It all started when a man by the name of Grant Watkins was injured in a parachute landing at a local fair. As the *Bloomington Evening World* of Oct. 14 put it, " ... Watkins suffered a parachute spill on Wednesday, (and) landed on a house, and broke a bone in his ankle."

His backup in the aerial stunt was a man by the name of "Shorty." After Watkins' accident, Shorty would have nothing to do with being a "stand-in." The newspaper reported that " ... Shorty, who substituted for Watkins, the injured balloonist on Thursday, felt that his 'luck' was against him at the last minute and declined to take the trip in the clouds."

The trip was in a hot-air balloon for the entertainment of the fairgoers. Enter Harry Riddle. The scene was the square downtown, and from a chair on the courthouse lawn Watkins gave Riddle directions about the finer



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

points of the feat.

The *Evening World* described the arrangements for the ascension. "The big gas balloon filled, and Riddle was strapped in his seat on the bar with a linesman's belt ... It was also arranged that when the balloon had reached a sufficient height to make the parachute drop safe, that one of the police would fire a revolver, and Riddle would then jerk on the rope that released the parachute."

The ascension was uneventful and looked fine, according to the newspaper. When the balloon was slightly north and west of the square, the officer fired his pistol. What happened next must have been alarming to all of the onlookers.

"Riddle jerked the rope, but a tangle pre-

vented the trip from working. The bystanders saw Riddle rock back and forth and tried to get the parachute to fall. Watkins, watching from the courthouse yard, saw that something was wrong, and it was a critical time for him, for he feared that the balloon would begin to descend, and that Riddle would trip the rope and the balloon would be too near the ground for the parachute to open, which would probably prove fatal."

At that point, Riddle was about 2,000 feet in the air. Although details for the hot air mechanism were not mentioned in the article, there is the impression that 2,000 feet was the intended maximum altitude for the stunt.

Anyway, the balloon hovered in the air for a short interval, and then, as the air inside it cooled, it began to come back down. It was also getting smaller.

The *Evening World* reporter described what happened next. "The crowd then began to realize that Riddle was not to drop in the parachute, and a race of automobiles began out North Walnut Street and College Avenue, followed by people on foot who expected to

find Riddle fatally hurt."

The balloon came to earth in the Cascades area. He was dragged over a barn whose inhabitants were startled by the strange intrusion.

Finally, the balloon and Riddle came to rest in a corn field. As for his condition, the newspaper said he was "badly shaken up but otherwise unhurt."

Afterward, Riddle was able to gather his wits together enough to make a statement to the reporter. "I have always wanted to make a parachute drop and then to find that the thing would not work when the moment came, made me mad. I would be willing to try it again."

Watkins was not willing to let that happen. He said that if there was to be an afternoon flight, he, himself, would do it, even if it meant having a cast put on his ankle, " ... he did not want to take the chance of hurting someone."

As for Riddle, his collegiate career at IU was also over. There is no record of his having graduated from the university.

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