

Elephant Ears, Balloons and Thunderbirds

Written By: Harry Gribnitz

One of my favorite parts of summer in Michigan is the festivals and fairs. The events come in all sizes and themes, from the traditional county fairs to the National Baby Food Festival (in Fremont) to the Coast Guard Festival (in Grand Haven) to the National Cherry Festival (in Traverse City). Growing up in Chicago, we didn't really have the space for a fair. We had carnivals in the shopping center parking lot and thought we were "at the fair". Texas had rodeos and "chili cook-offs". While a visit to Willie Nelson's place on the Fourth of July could be the subject of a future letter, it's not the same as a Michigan festival.

My favorite is the Balloon and Air Show held in Battle Creek each July. How could anything that combines Elephant Ears, Balloons and the Thunderbirds not be an awesome way to spend a summer day. Attending each year since I moved to Michigan in 1992 has become a personal tradition. This year I made two separate trips, one for the air show, and a second for an evening launch and balloon illumine.

The air show was a little smaller than normal, since so many Midwest locations had air shows over the holiday weekend. When the Thunderbirds performed as the closing act, any thoughts of disappointment vanished. Not only are their skill, discipline and training to be admired, but it is all wrapped into such an artistic presentation. Nothing sends a chill up my spine like one of the solo pilots surprising the crowd with a low level, high speed pass from behind while your attention is focus on the formation performance.

The balloons are what separate the Battle Creek event from all others in Michigan. The evening launch featured a remote launch. The balloon pilots were challenged to direct their balloons toward a target in the center of the airfield. As they got close to the target, they tossed a "bean bag" toward the bull's eye. While we watched the balloon pilot try to fly their balloons into range, we listen to the music of Hip Pocket in the background and sampled various treats from the fair's vendors. We took turns buying a treat to share with our friends. Of course I had to select the Elephant Ears (I am depending on that well know "law" of nutrition that calories don't count if you are watching balloons.)

The evening ended with the balloon illumine. At dusk, balloons while still tethered to the ground, light their burners. The glow from the line of tethered balloons, illuminated the darkening sky. Even though we had to scramble back to the truck as bad weather rolled in, the evening had been wonderful.

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Elephant Ears, balloons and the Thunderbirds, a wonderful part of a Michigan summer. If you missed the shows this year, put it on your calendar for next July. If you see me at the show stop by, I might even share an Elephant Ear.

Thanks,

Harry Gribnitz

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