

The Great Beebe Balloon Ascent

Between 1910 and 1914 the Beebe Balloon Company - along with its larger-than-life American manager, Mr Vincent M. Beebe - barnstormed around New Zealand attracting immense crowds.

Beebe's two hot-air balloons - *King Edward VII* and *President Roosevelt* - were accompanied by 'The World's Most Sensational Aeronauts' - Australian, Albert Eastwood and Spaniard, Christopher Sebphe.

Fetchingly clad in red tights, Eastwood and Sebphe made daring 'folded parachute' descents from trapezes beneath the balloons. Sometimes they used three 'chutes of different colours (red, white & blue), the first two of which they cast off as they were opened in turn during the descent. Each balloon also had a lead weight sewn in the top so after the 'aeronaut' jumped, the balloon turned over and the hot air was released. (Ewing & Macpherson, 1986)

Firms such as Hayward's Pickles, Hudson's *Balloon Brand* baking powder and Whittome, Stevenson & Co's jams and pickles fought to sponsor the popular carnivals and the balloons were then used as aerial advertising hoardings.

THE "SURATURA" TEA
BALLOON CARNIVAL
at
NEW PLYMOUTH,
on
THURSDAY, 24th NOVEMBER.

You need to be right on the ground. Then you can witness the inflation and really see

The Great Balloon Ascent

The Public are
NOT CHARGED FOR ADMISSION
provided they present at the gate an empty package, with label intact, which has previously contained

"D" QUALITY
of
SURATURA TEA.

For Adults :: Empty 1lb "D" Pkt.
For Children, Empty ½lb "D" Pkt.
REMEMBER SURATURA "D"
Then you get in free.

The Great Balloon Ascent
Taranaki Herald 23 November 1910

The publicity and hype surrounding the 'sensational balloon ascent' would not be out of place at a present-day Rugby World Cup....

'The public are reminded that the ballooning exhibitions given by the Beebe Company are entirely different from anything of the kind previously seen in New Zealand.and to watch them preparing for an ascent is about as exciting and interesting an entertainment as one could possibly wish for, to say nothing of the scientific and educational features of these preparations.'
(TH 23 Nov 1910)

A tour of several North Island towns - promoted by Suratura Tea - was made in late 1910. Taranaki's programme included a single ascent in both Hawera and New Plymouth. Admission was one shilling for adults and sixpence for children - but free entry was allowed if people brought along an empty Suratura Tea packet.

Hawera's ascent was made from Bayly Park on 16 November and the 'aeronaut', Sebphe, landed in "the show grounds in close proximity to a boxthorn hedge." (H&NS 17 Nov 1910)

On 24 November, *King Edward VII* - the larger of the two balloons - was taken to the Pukekura sports ground where it was inflated with hot air from 'a specially constructed furnace' and with members of the public assisting to hold down the balloon.

Watched by five or six hundred people from terraces, the inflation began and 20 minutes later, *'like a living thing, the balloon was straining at the ropes, and at a preconcerted signal - a pistol shot - all hands let go and up she rose...'* The 'aeronaut', in this case Christopher Sebphe,

Ron Lambert
Senior Researcher Puke Ariki

BALLOONING EXTRAORDINARY!
SURATURA TEA BALLOON
CARNIVAL.
SPORTS GROUND, NEW PLYMOUTH
TO-DAY

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 24.

By Special Arrangement with
THE BEEBE BALLOON COMPANY,
The World's Most Sensational
Aeronauts.

"KING EDWARD VII." and "PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT."

The Largest Hot-air Balloons on Earth
GRAND BALLOON ASCENT AND
FOLDED PARACHUTE
DESCENT.

The monster balloons will be INFLATED from a specially constructed furnace in full view of Patrons, and is the most exciting and intensely interesting feature of the performance.

Admission: Adults 1s, or FREE on presentation at gates of an empty 1lb Suratura "D" Tea Packet. Children under 12. 6d or ½lb Suratura "D" Packet. Gates open at 2 p.m.

Advertisement:

Suratura Tea Balloon Carnival
(*Daily News* 24 November 1910)

rose to 4400 feet (1340 metres) then jumped with a 'beautifully designed and gaily coloured parachute' to land in the racecourse near the deflated balloon. (DN 25 Nov 1910)

'The whole proceeding was a complete success, and, on returning to the [sports] grounds, Sebphe was accorded a salvo of applause.' (DN 25 Nov 1910)

The *Taranaki Herald* reporter did, however, record that '...Mr Sebphe can tell some thrilling stories as he points to the numerous patches on his structure, but he seems fairly to revel in the work.' (TH 25 Nov 1910)

Reference: Ewing, Ross & Ross Macpherson *The History of New Zealand Aviation*, 1986



King Edward VII being inflated at the Sportsground, 24 November 1910.
Suratura Tea is prominently advertised.

(Note the members of the public assisting by holding the bottom of the balloon.)

Photograph: T D Charters
PHO2009-328, Puke Ariki Collection