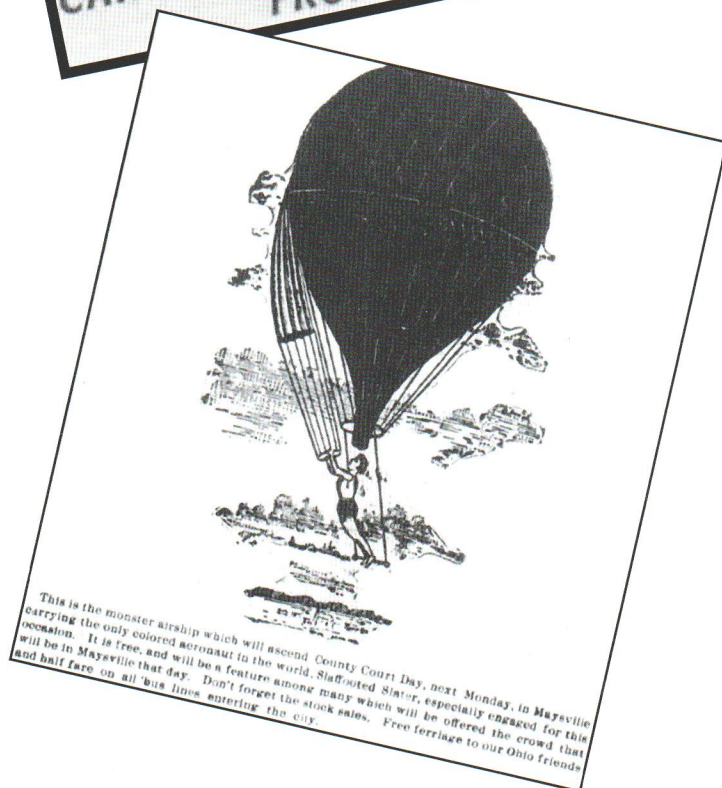


AMERICA'S BLACK AERONAUTS

They are few and too often overlooked, if not forgotten entirely by history

by John Lockwood and Glen Moyer

Engagement Extraordinary.
PROFESSOR PHILLIPS,
 The Only Colored Aeronaut in America, Will Make a
Wonderful Balloon Ascension
AT 5 O'CLOCK.
 The great Balloon will go up 5,000 Feet in the
 Air, PROF. PHILLIPS performing way above
 the Earth his Wonderful Trapeze Acts. When
 near the Clouds the Professor will cut loose and
Make the Great Parachute Leap,
 Sailing through space to the ground, or maybe land-
 ing in the Savannah River.
 'Tis Worth While to See This Great Ascension.
 Remember, it takes place **TO-MORROW, LABOR**
DAY, at LINCOLN PARK. Come out and enjoy
 the celebration.
CARS RUN FREQUENTLY
FROM THE CITY MARKET.



The invention of balloons, and later airplanes, led to a golden age of record-breaking, barnstorming, and stunt flying. Some performers flew airplanes, such as the well-known Roscoe Turner and Wiley Post.

Other performers, however, would wow their audiences by using balloons. Probably the most well-known one back then was Eddie Allen, who, among other things, hung by his toes on a trapeze attached to the balloon, and then parachuted safely to earth.

But there was one group of fliers who were just as skilled as the others with balloons and airplanes, but received comparatively little attention then, and are apparently forgotten now--what the newspapers of that day called "colored aeronauts."

The earliest such aeronaut this writer could find was an (unnamed) performer at a Rock Island, Illinois fair sometime in July 1893. He actually took off without a parachute, and later landed safely.

On May 28, 1896, a Professor Strickland, described in a Kansas newspaper as "the only colored aeronaut in the world," attempted a flight, but the hot-air balloon caught fire before it had a chance to take off.

Another African-American aeronaut at about this time was a Professor C.O. Smith. Sometime in July 1896, he ascended some 3,000 to 4,000 feet, near Scranton, Pennsylvania, performed several (not described) feats, and also parachuted to earth. After landing, he was given a "royal welcome" by the townspeople. And yes, he too was advertised, though as "the only colored aeronaut in the country."

Slabfoot Slater began his career sometime in 1899, and was advertised

in a Kentucky newspaper as “the only colored aeronaut in the world,” rather than just the country. But in fact, he did actually have an 1899 Kentucky rival, the “Black Diamond,” who at least parachuted from “the largest balloon in the country.”

Professor Phillips came a bit later. In Savannah, Georgia, sometime in September 1902, he too did trapeze stunts, before parachuting. Yes, a local paper named him “The Only Colored Aeronaut in America.”

In 1910, a Richmond paper called Fred L. Bradford and Grant C. Watkins “the only colored men in the country, so far as is known, that can perform this act.” The only exception this writer found to the “only...” rule was in a 1912 North Dakota paper, terming a Professor Ralston simply as “the negro aeronaut.”

Unfortunately, even if African-American stunt flyers could break the racial barriers in their profession, white society at large was still steeped in racial prejudice.

In 1915, for example, a Minnesota paper chose to quote Professor Ralston in a caricatured dialect, instead of standard English, about a runaway balloon: “Dat confounded bag never will come to no good end, an’ das jes as sure as yo’ bo’n.”

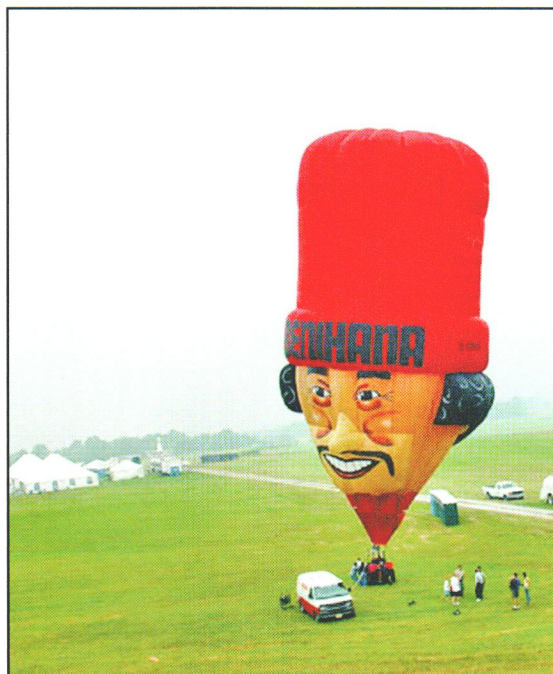
This was, after all, during the time of segregation. In September 1916 one New Mexico newspaper paper stated about Professor Phillips: “Phillips, on account of his color, has had to be exceptionally daring and spectacular in his work in order to attract attention and win recognition.”

The re-making of American society by the civil rights revolution was still a long way off.

More than a century later and today, American society has been changed by integration and the civil rights movement but in some ways, the more things have changed, the more they have stayed the same.

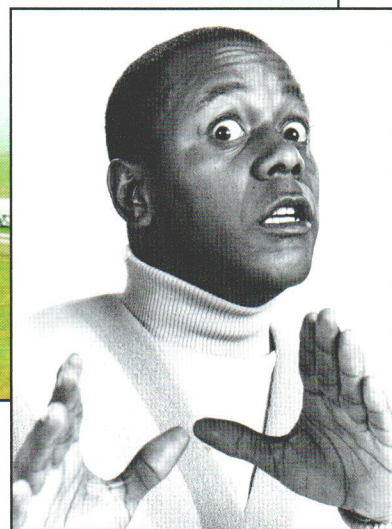
The modern era of ballooning has continue to see only a minimal involvement by black Americans. One of the most notable, not because of his ballooning but because of his celebrity, was the late comedian and TV star Flip Wilson.

Wilson was close friends with restaurateur Rocky Aoki, founder of



Flip Wilson was close friends with Benihana founder and balloonist Rocky Aoki and often appeared at balloon events with the Benihana balloon team.

Balloon photo courtesy US Flag Balloon team. Wilson photo NBC-TV/Public Domain



Opposite page: Top: The Savannah Morning News, August 31, 1902, Public Domain

Opposite Page Bottom: Daily Public Ledger, Maysville, KY, April 7, 1899, Public Domain

Benihana. Aoki was involved in both gas and hot air, he was part of the Double Eagle V team that were first to cross the Pacific Ocean, and for years had a Benihana special shape hot air balloon that toured the USA. In the 1970s and 80s Flip Wilson was often part of the team, including the years when his TV show was enjoying huge national popularity, leading his presence on a balloon field to surprise many.

Wilson was signed off for his LTA certificate by veteran balloonist and event promoter Bob Waligunda and afterwards was a regular at many of Waligunda's events.

Like his friend Aoki, Wilson also had an interest in gas ballooning. A September 4, 1982 article in “The Oklahoman” details how Wilson was one of three students and an instructor pilot who landed their gas balloon in the small town of Mooreland, OK, to the amazement of a nearby construction crew. The flight had launched from Amarillo, Texas.

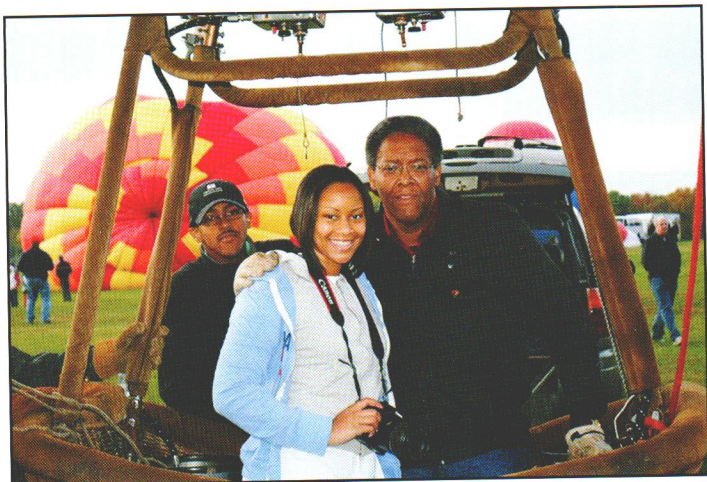
A United Press report of May 9, 1983 recounts how Wilson's wife, Cookie, broke both of her legs in a

gas balloon landing in a wildlife area near Denver, Missouri. The report also identifies Nikki Caplan as a “passenger” on board the balloon who suffered back injuries. Two others on board were not hurt. Caplan was in fact piloting the balloon. Flip Wilson meanwhile was on board a second gas balloon that landed safely in Bedford, IA.

It's unclear if Wilson ever achieved a gas rating and while he may not have left an indelible mark on the sport, he certainly did on society. In 1972 “Time” magazine named him “TV's first black superstar.” His TV show was once the 2nd top rated show in America. His tag lines “the Devil made me do it” and “What you see is what you get” became national catchphrases. The later was adopted by the computer industry in the form of “WYSIWYG.”

Clerow “Flip” Wilson died of liver cancer on November 25, 1998 at the age of 64.

A March 2018 article in the Philadelphia Inquirer, promoting the then coming BFA National Convention and FAVIA referenced BFA member Bill Costen as “the first black commercial



At the 2010 Adorondack Balloon Festival pilot Bill Costen prepares to take his daughter Chantal and his son Jarrell for a balloon flight. Chantal is working on a film documentary of her father's life. Photo by Laura Russotto

hot-air-balloon pilot" and further referenced a 1977 Ebony magazine feature on ballooning that counted Costen as "one of two black pilots in the country."

Indeed Costen is a pioneer in the modern era of ballooning, possibly the most accomplished black aeronaut in American history, and yet is

often overlooked. A retired NFL player for the Buffalo Bills, Costen got into the sport in 1975 when there were few pilots, of any color, in the country. Originally earning his license while in partnership on a balloon with his cousin Larry Webster and four friends, that same year Costen bought his own balloon and launched a commercial business, Sky Endeavors, offering rides, instruction, promotions and balloon sales. Webster continued to fly for only about another year. Sadly he passed away just a few weeks ago. Costen however made the sky his home for decades to come. He and Waligunda are very close friends and Waligunda, ever the promoter, was the one who dubbed Costen "the first black commercial hot air balloon pilot" for obvious marketing purposes.

In 2016 Costen was awarded the BFA's Ed Yost Master Pilot Award honoring his four decades of safe flying. Many years earlier, Waligunda has introduced Costen to Yost and the two had flown together. Waligunda says because of his friendship with Yost, Costen treasures that BFA award above all the other accolades he has won.

Despite his substantial achievements in ballooning, even Costen is at a loss as to why the sport of ballooning is not more racially diverse, telling the Enquirer in 2018, "If I've taken 15,000 people (for flights) only about 40 have been black."

Today Costen has retired from



Above: Bill Costen with just a portion of the exhibit he has compiled on ballooning history. the exhibit was on display at FAVIA/BFA National Convention in Philadelphia in 2018.

Right: Hall of Fame pilots Troy Bradley (left), Bobby Sparks (center), are joined by Ed Yost Master Pilot Bill Costen at the Connecticut Lighter-than-Air Society 30th anniversary celebration in 2018. Photo by Keith Sproul

Sources:

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- Daily Public Ledger(Maysville, Kentucky) – April 7, 1899, page 1.
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- The Topeka state journal (Kansas) – May 28, 1896, pg 5.
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- The times dispatch (Richmond, Virginia) – October 23, 1910, page 11.
- The Scranton Tribune (Pennsylvania) – July 14, 1896, page 8.
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flying balloons but he is a member of the board of the New England Air Museum, a member of the Connecticut Lighter-Than-Air Society, a working photojournalist, and curator of a unique traveling collection of rare photos, ephemera, memorabilia and collectibles called the Costen Cultural Exhibit. A historian of note, Costen also has created a traveling exhibit on the sport of ballooning. It was displayed at FAVIA and perhaps someday will find a permanent home in a museum.

More than a century has passed since the first known ascents by black aeronauts in America. But as is often the case in history, the more things change, the more they stay the same. In 1896 a Professor Strickland was said to be "the ONLY colored aeronaut in the world. Today, almost 125 years later, Bill Costen is the ONLY black aeronaut to receive the Ed Yost Master Pilot Award.



Costen and his daughter Chantal promoting her documentary about his life. The documentary is in the official selection for the Festival International du Film PanAfricain de Cannes 2020.

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Saturday, April 25, 2020

- Offered in pre-recorded video segments
- Any BFA member may view the sessions at no charge
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Pilots \$60
Crew \$35

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