

August 3, 2008 - Claremore, OK

My first experience with Oklahoma was in 1997 when an electrical engineer that I had been associated with on past electric utility projects called me from his new employment at one of that states electric co-operatives. He wanted me to schedule 2 weeks for a summertime infrared inspection for them and would arrange for my motor home to base at the State Park in their little town of Wilberton. When I arrived there in early July, temperatures were already on the plus side of 100, where they remained for the entire time that I was there. To make matters worse, the park only had 30 amp service available, which would allow me to run only one of the air conditioners in my bus. Because of very high electrical demand, "brown outs" and voltage reductions were the order of the day. When I returned, exhausted, to my RV after work each evening, I would find that my incoming voltage was less than 100, interior temperatures were in the mid 90's and the air conditioner barley blowing air. It was the worst summertime utility project that I had ever experienced.. So, the following year, when I got another call from that client, I tried to gracefully bow out, explaining the discomfort level that I had endured the previous summer. "Why didn't you say something?" my contact inquired. We service that park, and we could have provided you anything that you require. Well, I let myself get talked into a second year of servicing them. True to his word, when I arrived that same site now had a 50 amp outlet, a solid 125 volts of incoming power and a newly poured concrete pad to boot. However, outdoor temperatures were again north of 100 degrees for my entire two week stay. Luckily shortly thereafter my contact had moved onto another electric cooperative, and the following year I was up with him in Ohio during that summer's inspection. However, I will always remember the "unusual weather" that I had been assured was not the norm for Oklahoma in the summertime. Today, as I arrived in the small city of [Claremore](#), which is just 25 miles to the East of Tulsa, it was to a 104 deg. temperature, with a "feel like" of 111 degrees. "Unusual weather", I was told by the campground host. Yeah, right!

I decided on Claremore for several reasons. It is close enough to downtown Tulsa, to allow a visit to the city, without having to deal with the daily hassle of traffic---both ground and air. The [Claremore regional airport](#) has over a mile of concrete runway, and even a 900 foot grass strip between the main north/south runway and their taxiway. There is a large campground less than a 10 minute drive away, and the town was home to one of Oklahoma's favorite sons, Will Rogers. (more about him in a later posting), and its favorite daughter, 1950's era singer Patti Page (of "***How Much is that Doggie in the Window***" fame)



The main runway at Claremore Regional Apt. is paved. The grass runway that I use is the green strip that lies between the red arrows

I further lucked out when I arrived at the [Cherokee Casino](#) and horse racing track campground. This was the weekend for their annual Gatesway (a charitable foundation that helps developmentally challenged children) Balloon Festival and classic car show. After making the rounds of the cars of the 30's, 40's, 50's and 60's (I wasn't that interested in the later models), I made my way back to the airport to off load and set up the plane. In the oppressive heat, it was not a fun project, but I wanted to have everything ready for some aerial shots of the Sunday morning balloon ascension. This normal 1 hour job took a bit longer, since I had to get out of the sun every 10 minutes or so to drink some water. and catch my breath.



My campground is at the Cherokee Casino, which was having a weekend classic car show



The evening "balloon glow" was spectacular. I finished off my evening with a prime rib dinner and some entrainment. They band was pretty good, and they played both kinds of music...Country and Western (a line from the *Blues Brothers* movie).



Here balloons are being inflated for the Sunday morning "CNT" event (see text for description)

After I completed that chore I headed back to the campground for a refreshing shower and wandered over to the race-track to watch them set up for the evening's "balloon glow" By the time darkness arrived at 9 PM, a half dozen balloons were inflated and being lit from within by their burner's propane flames. It was quite a dramatic sight and lasted for almost an hour. After the show I wandered into the Casino for some "heavy gambling" on the penny slots, and finished off my evening with a prime rib dinner and some entrainment. They band was pretty good, and they played both kinds of music...Country and Western (a line from the *Blues Brothers* movie).

Morning arrived early, as the scheduled 7 AM ascension dictated that I be at the airport no later than 6:30. I circled the race-track infield for about 15 minutes, to no avail. No one was even stirring, let alone there. Perhaps I had read the date wrong. The problem with being retired, and on vacation is that time has little meaning, and you completely lose track of the date. Thank god for digital watches and cell phones. No, it was the right date and the right time. Then, off in the distance, I could see them beginning to rise. They were



Balloons landing at the Casino Racetrack infield and framed between my Highlander's wing struts

taking off from fields some 8 to 10 miles further to the southwest. I was to later find out that they were engaging in CNT, or a circum-navigational task. The goal here is to take off from a distant point, then judge the wind speed and direction, to take you back to the event's base. Helium balloons are first released, and you try to determine the best altitude you need to benefit from the ever changing wind. Once you get back to your base (in this case the racetrack infield) you throw out a weighted streamer at an large "X" on the ground. The closest one wins.

I have often wondered what happens if you overshoot your destination. I had the opportunity to see it happen that morning, and have captured some video as the balloon came down in the campground a few hundred feet from my motor home. If you would like to see that [video, click here](#). However, be forewarned, it is a large file, and may take some time to load. I wandered over to the now stationary balloon, which had landed on one of the campsites, and watched as the crew brought the thing to the ground and later rolled it up into a large "bag". I spoke to the pilot, a Gregg Sturge from Tulsa. He came from a



This balloon missed its landing zone completely a flying family. His father was a captain for American Airlines, and Gregg was introduced to flying at an early age (4 months). However, whenever he would fly in a fixed wing aircraft, be it large or small, he would always become ill whenever the plane would bank. It turned out that he had an inner ear problem that could not be corrected. Thus he took up ballooning, which requires no banking what-so-ever. As Gregg Sturge explained, "If you are banking in a balloon, you are in a heap of trouble. He told me that the top of his balloon, **Fireball**, reaches to 90 feet and that the envelope alone weighs about 300 pounds. Add the basket (gondola) and propane



Here its pilot and ground crew discuss the options for balloon deflation and packing up



As the balloon Fireball begins to deflate, a powered parachute circles overhead

Here we can see some of the activity in preparation for the evening's "balloon glow".

tanks, and you have an empty weight of 650 pounds. And his is a small balloon, capable of carrying just himself and two passengers.

I had been up in a hot air balloon twice. The last one, about 20 years ago, was very large, and it carried 4 couples, along with the pilot. We came very, very close to running into a 220 thousand volt transmission line which crossed the canyon that we were traveling down inside of, just below the rim. The pilot was paying way too much attention to staying in the middle of the canyon to notice the crossing lines creeping up on us. When I brought it to his attention, he immediately powered up both sets of dual burners, and we slowly began to ascend, missing the upper static wires by only 20 feet or so. Had we run into those main current carrying lines, it would have been the nightly TV news's disaster story. That event cured me of wanting to take any more hot air balloon rides.

After the festival was over, I took the motor scooter into town to visit the [Will Rogers Memorial Museum](#) and spent a couple of hours touring through this interesting building. While I had been aware of this cowboy, trick rider, lasso champion, movie actor, diplomat and spokesman for the American working man, I did not know that he was an enthusiastic flyer and pilot. There was one entire room at the museum devoted to his flying exploits and he ran with the best. Roscoe Turner, Charles Limburgh, Amelia Earhardt, and, of course Willey Post, who he was flying with in Alaska in 1935 when they both lost their lives in a low altitude crash. It was well worth the visit, and I learned a lot more about this elder statesman and all around "nice guy". Tomorrow I will fly over to his boyhood home, the [Dog Iron Ranch](#), which is 15 miles to the north, and which has its own grass runway.



The front of the Will Rogers Museum has a statue of him on his horse. This was a worthwhile visit and I learned much about the man.