

ISCHUA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

TERRIBLE TRAGEDY AT THE FRANKLINVILLE FAIR

The races at the Fair were completed and the band was playing its final selections. The crowd began to move toward the meadow where Beatrice Van Dressen would ascend into the skies on a hot air balloon. The original time had been set for 2 o'clock in the afternoon. However, the huge black balloon had required numerous white patches to be added before the ascent was possible. It was 10 minutes to 5 before the balloon was launched.

Beatrice had become enamored with hot air balloons at the age of 15 and had trained with Professor Carl Myers. Her first ascension as a balloonist was at Schenectady, New York. Later she performed in Utica. She was so full of reckless daring that Professor Meyer would no longer keep her in his employ. When she ascended at Schenectady she threw out all her ballast against his warning, and when she came down she struck a lake in the Adirondacks. Beatrice was rescued by a boatman. After Utica she traveled through the air 70 miles and landed at Northville in Fulton County. Afterwards she made ascensions for various aeronauts and had spent the past summer at Sylvan Beach performing. When the season closed she made a tour of the county fairs. She was a bright and vivacious girl and made many friends and admirers.



Beatrice Van Dressen

This was to be her 13th and final ascension. On October 20th she planned to marry William Clark of Philadelphia. While waiting for the balloon to be prepared, Beatrice became chilled and seemed exhausted. Her mother begged her to reconsider and cancel the event. Her daughter refused to disappoint the crowd of approximately 2,000 people who had looked forward to the event.

She climbed on the trapeze and the balloon drifted to the northwest. Beatrice had planned the descent for Mount Prospect Cemetery. The crowd cheered and waved handkerchiefs. Suddenly they noticed that she had slipped from the trapeze while she was trying to release the parachute. At first some of the crowd thought that it was part of the show. She was hanging on by one hand while desperately trying to get both hands on the trapeze.

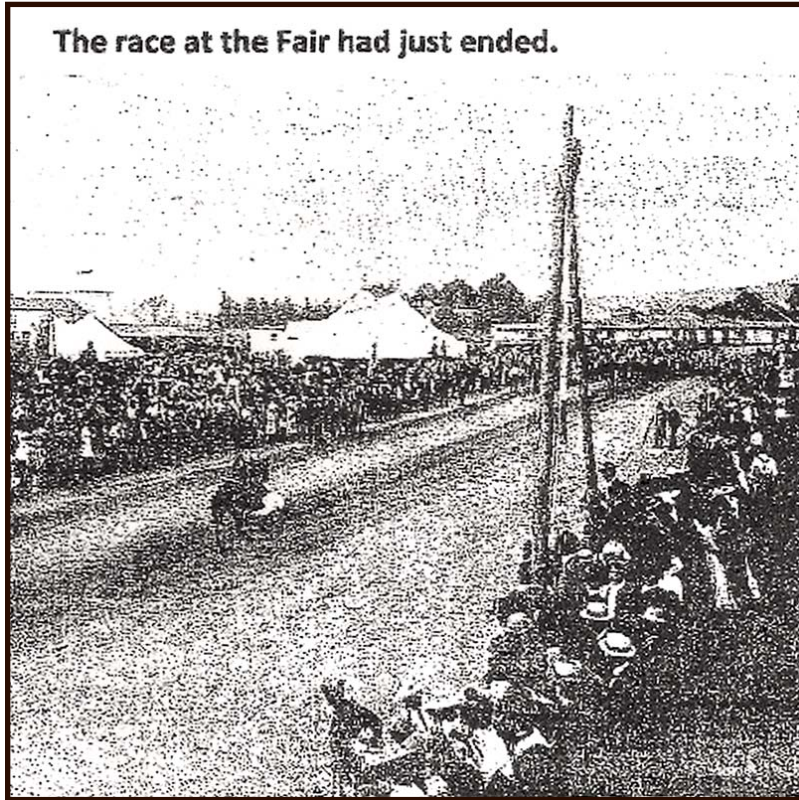
The crowd began to scream and women fainted as Beatrice hurtled through space. The fall took 8 seconds and someone calculated that the fall was approximately 1,600 feet. The body landed on the farm of William Kissock on Kingsbury Hill and the force resulted in a 12 inch crater. The balloon had started a rapid descent and had she been able to hang on a few seconds more could probably have survived the incident. Her body had suffered multiple fractures and instant death. Curiosity seekers took dirt, twigs and stones from the spot where the body had fallen. They even took her small ring and broken tooth as souvenirs.

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She died on October 6th, 1894 a week before her 18th birthday. She had been born in the Old Hotel in Cadiz in 1876, the only daughter of Maggie and Milton Van Dressen. She was the granddaughter of Joseph Ransbury. Reverend G.W. Varnum conducted her funeral services at the ME Church in Cadiz. Her remains were then taken to Frankfort, New York where the family had moved. However, they had always maintained close ties with the Franklinville area.

Some people wondered whether the number 13 had played a part in her tragic death. This was her 13th ascent at the 13th Annual Franklinville Fair. Her birthday was on October 13th and the day of Beatrice's death was the 13th anniversary of her grandmother's death. This catastrophe has always been associated with the Franklinville Fair and the newspaper questioned whether she had paid such a high price just to provide the crowd with entertainment.



Tightrope Walker at the Fair