

## Balloonists float over scenic Nebraska fields



The sight of deer bolting from thickets, bounding over snow-blanketed fields and leaping over fences renders a person momentarily speechless.

But seen from 1500 feet in the air while floating in a hot air balloon, the sight takes on added indecruity.

Farmhouses look like carefully constructed miniatures, fields appear as patchwork quilts carpeted in white,

and the total quiet is broken only when someone decides to talk or a cow below decides to moo a warning about the beast passing overhead.

Most balloonists let their hot air equipment hibernate for the winter, but not Wayne Halling and Loren Nansel.

The 23-year-olds say winter is as good a time for ballooning as summer, if not better. The air is thinner and provides a better buoyancy for the balloon.

"Our toes get cold sometimes," Halling said, "but that's about it."

The temperature while in the balloon is actually 10 to 15 degrees warmer than on the ground, Halling said, because of being above the air's inversion level.

Halling and Nansel bought their multi-colored balloon, the *Eclipse*, 1½ years ago.

The pair charters their balloon for any occasion, giving student discount rates and holiday rates. A Valentine's Day special is being planned.

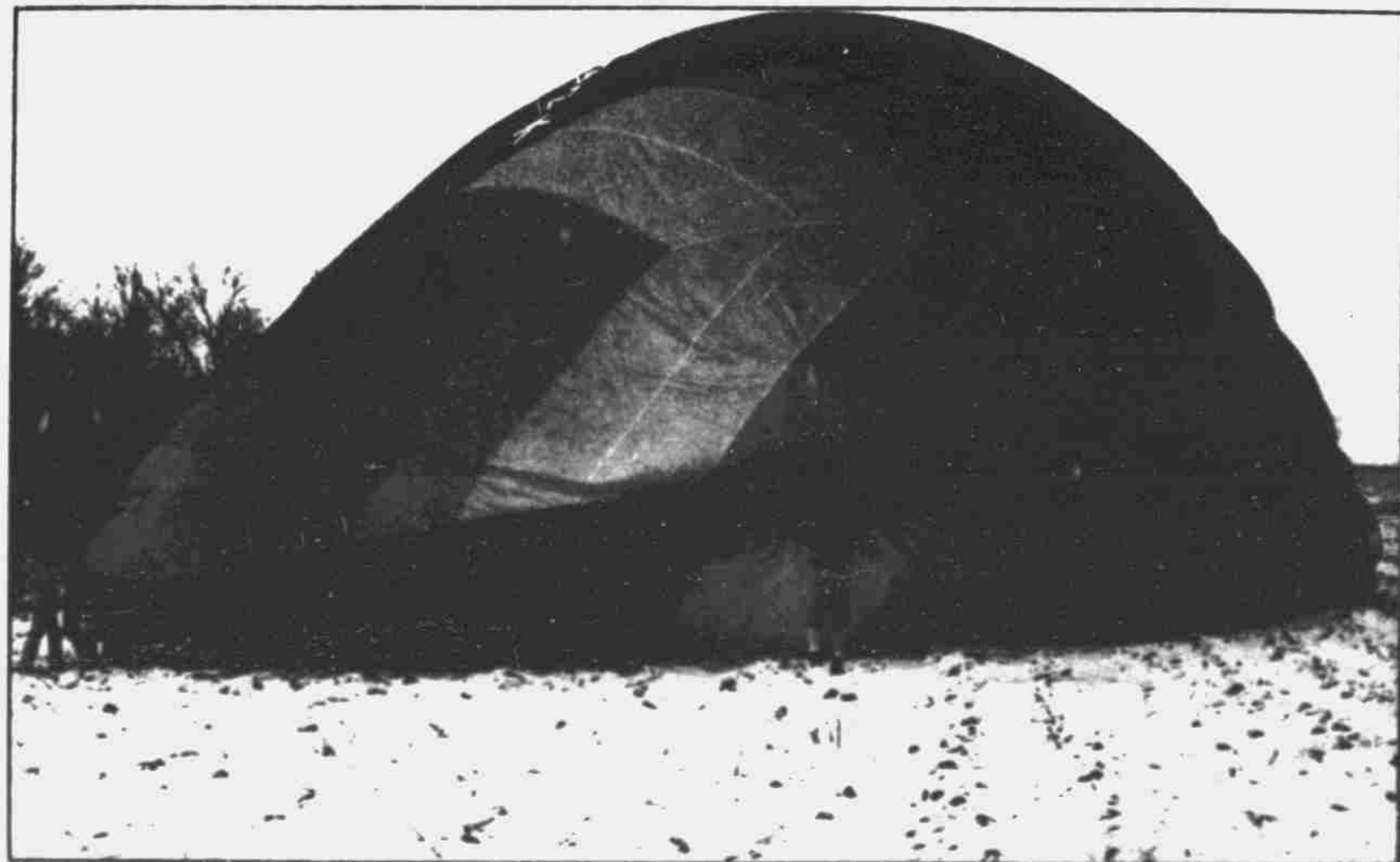
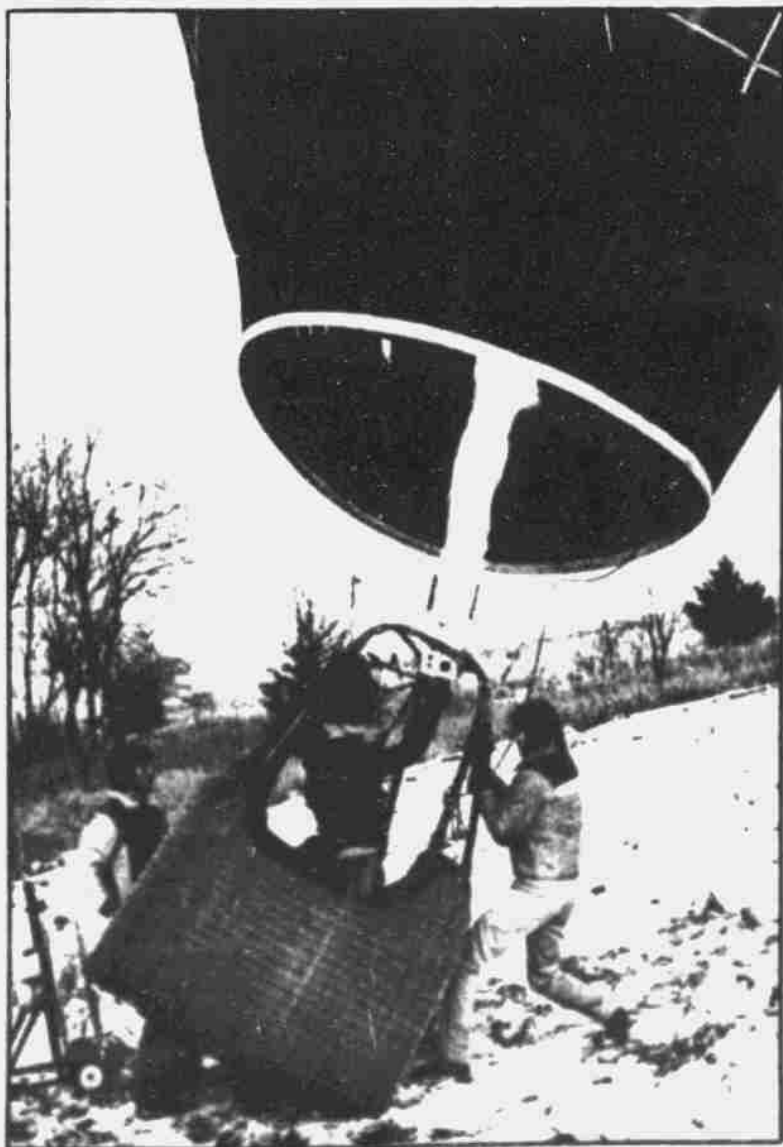
All charter flights, which last an hour or more, include instruction on balloon operation before and during flight, and a traditional champagne ceremony upon landing.

After each flight, the crew gives champagne to the landowner in whose field the balloon landed. The tradition started in 18th century France when farmers became angry about balloons damaging their crops during landing, and the king decreed that balloonists give them champagne as appeasement.

Halling, a balloon pilot certified by the Federal Aviation Administration, said a chase car is provided to retrieve passengers after landing and that radio communication, between the balloon and the car is kept up to ensure safety.

Ballooning is impossible to shake once it gets in your system, said Halling and Nansel.

"We never get tired of it," they said in unison.



Story by Reid Warren  
Photos by Jon Natvig