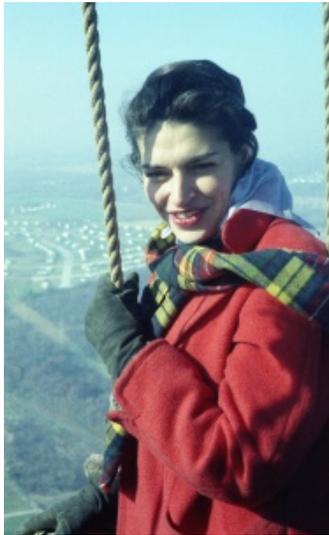


**Eleanor Th. Vadala**  
**Inducted into the U.S. Ballooning Hall of Fame on July 28, 2019**



**By the Balloon Federation of America at the  
National Balloon Museum in Indianola, Iowa**

Eleanor Th. Vadala was born at National Park, New Jersey, on Sept. 8, 1923. Her early schooling was obtained first in New Jersey (Cardiff -suburb of Atlantic and Atlantic City itself) and finally in Philadelphia (Paxton Elementary & John Bartram High School).

As soon as Eleanor traveled alone to school, she expanded her love of reading by seeking and visiting libraries, here and there, browsing, borrowing books, and spending many enjoyable hours reading, a practice that became a lifelong habit.



*High School Graduation Photo*

Through the years, she amassed a library of her own and said books are found in practically every room in her home. (She claimed that she couldn't possibly move into any community or the like, saying "What would I do with my books?") Among her ballooning books, she places great value on the ownership of "Travel in The Air" by J. Glaisher, published in 1871.

Eleanor interned at Juniata College, Huntington, PA in 1941 and graduated in 1947 with a B.S. degree. Chemistry courses were from Temple University.

The first two years of college, 1941-1943, were colored by America's entrance into the war when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941. The United

States soon declared a draft of eligible men, a rationing program and a “blackout” nationwide.

At college, she had memories of pulling dark blackout curtains across lamps-lit windows, hiding even the slightest needle of light sharing.

In 1942, as a goodly number of the male students, those classified 1A, were called to war service, the entire student body in mass saw them off at the train station. While there was an aura of excitement, there was also an undercurrent of heartfelt sadness.

Her college years were interrupted from 1943-1945, to work at Kellett Aircraft Co, manufacturing aircraft parts. (With a brother, Earl in the Air Force Service, she wanted to do her part). She noted the war marked a turning of life in America, since for the first time with the men “over there” women were having to do all manner of jobs and discovered they did them very well.

The first Atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Aug. 6, 1945, brought about the end of the war, and all defense work ceased.

Eleanor returned to Juniata College, Sept. 1945, and graduated with a B.S. degree. Chemistry courses followed at Temple College, Philadelphia, PA.

Eleanor entered employment in 1947, at the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia, PA., a museum devoted to science and a special astronomy interest. It was here, she developed her lifelong interest in astronomy. She joined the RAS (Rittenhouse Astronomy Society), one of the oldest amateur groups devoted to the study and advancement of astronomy. She was very involved in the function and maintenance of the Society, moving successively from long term Treasurer to Secretary to President. The RAS presented her an honorary life membership in the late 1980’s.

These astronomy interests lead Eleanor to make a 6 inch reflecting telescope in the ATMC (Amateur Telescope Makers) section of the Franklin Institute. It was here that she encountered Tony Fairbanks making a telescope.



*Eleanor and Tony Fairbanks*

While both were grinding their telescopes lens, Tony spoke of his effort to secure balloon envelopes, nets and auxiliary parts in order to form a group devoted to balloons. Eleanor expressed her interest, Tony kept contact and the rest is history.

During World War 1 & 2, the United States trained balloon pilots, the Navy for antisubmarine service and the Army for observation service by flying free balloons manufactured by Goodyear Tires and Rubber Company. The Navy required at least 8 hours of training leading to a pilot certificate plus satisfactorily meeting other criteria. The training was conducted at NAS (Naval Air Station) Moffett, CO and NAS Lakehurst, New Jersey. The Navy declared the balloons as military surpluses. In 1952, Tony Fairbanks secured these gas balloons, nets, and accessory parts from NAS, Lakehurst, NJ, leading to the formation of the Balloon Club of America (BCA). Three envelope sizes were secured: (2) 80,000 cu ft, (2) 35,000 cu ft., and (1) 19,000 cu ft.

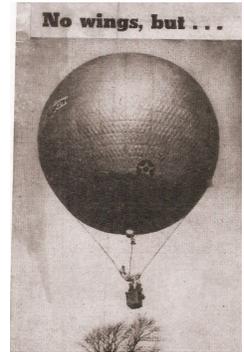
The Balloon Club of America officially came into existence July 30, 1952 and represented the entire balloon community in the United States. Five years later the second balloon Club, The Akron National Balloon Club (later name change to Lighter than Air Society) was organized.

The maiden flight of the BCA was made from Brookhaven, PA, Nov. 30, 1952.

While she missed the first flight of the BCA, she was present for most of those that followed. In 1952 & 1953, Eleanor served mainly on the ground crew, helping in the rigging of the balloons for flight, shifting sandbags, diamond by diamond and sometimes driving the chase car with attached trailer.

Gas ballooning was not a simple operation; it was labor intensive, time consuming, expensive and required a gas site. These requirements largely limited the number of yearly flights. In 1952 & 1953, two flights each were made.

Most of the flights were made using the 80,000cu ft. envelope. The combined weight of the 80,000 cu. ft. envelope, cotton net, wooden load ring and wicker basket was about 1200 lbs., resulting in the labor intensity. Even the smallest of the balloon envelopes, the 19,000cu ft., weighted more than 400 lbs.



*Article about Eleanor*

Cooking gas was used to fill the 80,000 cu. ft. balloon and the inflation took at least 4 hours. The ground crew, usually Fairbanks, Pellegrino, Shields, and Vadala, started work between 2:00 and 3:00 am, planning an early morning “take-off” to take advantage of the more stable morning weather. It required 4 to 5 hours to lay-out, inflate, and launch these rubberized cotton gas balloons. We called them gas bags.

Three gases: helium, hydrogen, and cooking gas are capable of providing lifting power greater than air. Helium, under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Mines, in the ballooning early days was not for sale. Hydrogen was expensive, costing \$1.00 for each cubic foot of gas. To fill the 19,000, the smallest envelope cost \$2,000.00 with cooking gas.

The lack of a permanent inflation site was also troublesome and included Plymouth Meeting, PA, Valley Forge Airport, Fairmount Park, PA and the Schuylkill School, Philadelphia. From 1958 most of the flights were from Valley Forge Airport until BCA moved to Wings in 1961. The gas company installed a permanent gas main, solely for the BCA use which at the time included Connie Wolf.

Eleanor made 46 gas flights, 13 made in Europe (Belgium, Germany & Switzerland). Two of the European flights were made as the American entry in these international races, St. Nicholas, Belgium.

Eleanor’s first free balloon flight as a BCA member, was made Jan 9, 1954, from Plymouth Meeting, PA, a commemoration flight honoring the first American balloon flight made at 10:00 am, Jan. 1783, by Jean Pierre Blanchard ascending from the yard of the Old Walnut Street prison, landing in Woodbury, (Deptford township) New Jersey.

Don Piccard was the pilot of Eleanor's first flight and the passengers were Kate Orensen and Francis Shields. Unlike most of the BCA flights, that headed eastward, the balloon moved briskly northwest toward New York, landing close to the State's borders of Netcong, New Jersey.

She recounts that Jan 9, 1954 was a brisk cold morning. The flight was made in the 80,000 (license number 9071-H) and inflation was completed by 10:00 am. "Take-Off" was about 2:30 in the afternoon. Once aloft, the balloon met speedy winds that rapidly covered 75 miles in 1 ½ hrs. Winter days in January are rather short lived and as dark began to show its shadow, they began to look for a landing site. As the winds waned, a light snow began to fall. The balloonists flew over heavily forested areas. Finally, a tree lined clearing was sighted in the light snowfall, lying directly in the balloons path. As the balloon descended, the calm winds made for slow movement. Nearing the ground, one saw the boughs of the trees were light laden with snow and deer were eating the remains of grassy ground cover. The deer seemed completely unaware of the balloon presence. Nothing moved in the eerie quiet, only the swirling snowflakes. We were also motionless.

Still descending, slowly, the balloon not so much landed, as silently caressed the ground, much like a huge snowflake. The deer continued eating, paying no attention to the presence of the balloon and people. One could almost hear the quiet. The scene resembled a Currie and Ives print, peaceful, serene and beautiful. Someone in the balloon moved and the scene immediately changed. The deer, as one, all flicked their heads around, looked, leaped and were gone with the wind. Unforgettable!

Another flight she recounts made from Schleren, Switzerland Sept 15, 1959 was easily my most bazaar. Flying the 35,000 balloon were Pete Pellegrino, Francis Shields, and I.

The weather forecast called for early ground fog lifting later in the day. Arriving at the inflation site, the balloonists therefore were not surprised to see the partially inflated balloon in fog. Encircling the balloons were uniformed Boy Scouts, the ground crew, shifting the sand bags on the command "down one." Looking across the 30 ft. diameter of the balloon, the figures of the Boy Scouts seemed blurred.

When fully inflated, the balloon rose gracefully as the “hands off” call. It was quickly noticed that the rise in altitude was accompanied by an increase in fog. At 1,000 ft., the ground visibility was nil, nothing could be seen, no Boy Scouts, no other people, no trees, no houses-nothing, only fog. At 2000 ft., part of the wicker basket and balloon envelope became thickly covered with fog. At 3,000 ft., only the top rim of the basket was visible, the overhead balloon envelope was completely shrouded in the swirling fog. At 4,000 ft., everything, including the clothed bodies of the balloonists was completely obscured. Only the balloonists’ heads, seemingly severed from their bodies were visible. It was eerie! As the swirling fog continued to flow into the basket, the facial features began to become indistinct, enveloped in the fog. At last and only slightly above 4,000 ft. did the balloon finally rise above the fog level, burst out into a deep clear blue sky and brilliant sunshine radiating from the orb of golden sun. Only then, did voice power return to the previously silent aeronauts!

## **TIMELINE**

- Aug. 8, 1923 born National Park, NJ
- 1941-43 Juniata College
- 1941 the bombing of Pearl Harbor and continued attacks called male students to join the war effort
- 1943-45 Employment at Kellett Aircraft Corporation’s autogiro manufacturing plant (responsible for the first practical rotary aircraft used in the Army) on Gray’s Ferry Ave., Philadelphia. She worked quality control at the end of the production line making airplane ailerons
- 1945-47 B.S Juniata College
- 1947-1949 attend Temple University Chemistry courses
- 1947-1951- Worked full time at the Franklin Institute, the second museum in the US devoted to Science, technology, Engineering, and special emphasis in Astronomy She continued part-time for another 18 years.
- 1948-1986 Member Rittenhouse Astronomy Association housed at the Franklin Institute, served as Treasurer for 23 yrs., Secretary for 5 and President her last year. She recounts that in 1957 she was part of the Moon

Watch Team to watch and record the orbit of the Russian Satellite-Sputnik. At 2 a.m., as a single driver, she recalls...two police officers pulled her over to ask what she was doing out at that hour. After her explanation, they were skeptical and escorted her to the doors of the Franklin Institute.

- 1948- Volunteer Travelers Aid
- 1950-1986 Amateur Telescope Maker
- 1951-1989 Employed as a civilian in the research and development of synthetic laminated materials for aircraft applications. In Materials Department at the Naval Air Development Department at the Philadelphia Naval Yard. Later she was relocated to Naval Air Development Center in Warminster, PA. She was one of a few trained on the Instron Machine developed by the Navy used to evaluate laminated light weight material for use in aircrafts.
- 1952 Met Tony Fairbanks while grinding a telescope lens at the Franklin Institute. Before balloons were in tow, he invited her to join in a new venture called the Balloon Club of America
- 1952-1954 served as crew; the members including Pete Pellegrino, Francis Shields, Don Piccard, Tony Fairbanks, Connie Wolf, John Dura and Jerry Burns.
- 1952 First balloon flight of the Balloon Club of America
- 1954 (Jan 9) Eleanor's First Balloon Flight, same day as the first balloon flight in America with Don Piccard as Pilot (see story) She says of that flight that it was perfect, just like your first true love.
- 1958-1961 Volunteer at Independence National Park
- 1956 the Balloon Club of America and the National Lighter than Air Society of Akron merge and fly together, the first and only time.
- 1961 The 2 clubs then formed the Balloon Federation of America; Pete Pellegrino named himself President, Francis Shields, VP and Eleanor Valada Secretary.
- 1963 (July 13) received Pilot certificate #1968955 at age 31, she credits both Tony Fairbanks and Francis Shields as



*Eleanor*



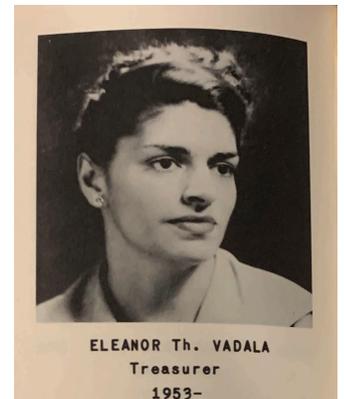
*Wingfoot Lighter than Air Society*



*Prelaunch Prep*

her instructors as well as just immersing herself into flight characteristics and balloon mechanics she learned from crewing.

- 1953-1963 With over 43 hours in gas balloons in Europe (Switzerland, Belgium and Germany) as well as the US (see stories/photos)
- 1965 Eleanor is asked to do a material check of the remaining military gas balloons housed at Lakehurst, NJ as the leading authority on aircraft materials. According to airworthiness standards of the day, she had to declare to gas bags unsafe for flight. They were immediately destroyed.
- 1963-1972 served as instructor for gas balloons
- 1967 Philadelphia Navy yard asks Eleanor to organize a gas balloon launch to commemorate their 50th Anniversary- Eleanor, pilot in command, and Tony Fairbanks and Naval Midshipmen crewed. La Coquette, the balloon flown in the film, "Around the World in Eighty Days" starring David Niven and owned by the BCA. Of this she says, fitting that "a lady flies a lady" (see story)
- 1950's 4 term as a Board member of the Geographical Society of Philadelphia
- 1957-2007 Sigma Delta Epsilon, President, Treasurer
- 1961 Balloon Club of America and Lighter than Air Society joined together to form The Balloon Federation of America (BFA).
- 1961-1976 As a balloonist, Eleanor did school presentations about ballooning to other organizations
- 1972 into the 80s served as instructor for hot air balloons.
- 1972 Joined a hot air balloon club and became part owner of a hot air balloon (Malcolm Forbes asked to join).
- 1973 Instruction flight with Bob Sparks in La Coquette; Logbook entry, "we went like the wind landing in a flower covered field, beautiful flight! (Allentown to Schooley PA)
- 1984 (age 61) She married longtime friend and fellow Astronomer, Edwin Bailey. After his death, she founded the Edwin Bailey Scholarship fund for aspiring astronomers at Villanova University where he taught astronomy.
- 1984 to 1996, Deacon and elder in her Church



*La Coquette*

- 1989-1991 Employee at Philadelphia Zoo
- 2014 Volunteer Delaware Literacy Society- teaching Immigrants to read, write and speak English
- 2017-2018 She participated in the 2017 and 2018 Chester County Balloon Festival representing gas ballooning in their pop-up Balloon History Museum.
- 2018 She spoke at FAVIA's 225 Pioneer Dinner during the BFA convention in Philadelphia, PA.



*Eleanor speaking at FAVIA standing next to Mick Murphy*