

Sky Rider: Park Van Tassel and the Rise of Ballooning in the West

Gary B. Fogel

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At a time when the West was still wild, an aspiring businessman opened a daring new travelling attraction, with gas balloons capable of carrying humans into the sky. He broke records across the West and, eventually, the world. His feats are covered in Gary B. Fogel's exciting *Sky Rider*.

In 1882, Park Van Tassel, an enterprising saloon owner who'd made his way to Albuquerque via Central California, took to the New Mexico sky for the first time in a balloon. The accomplishment followed considerable delays and was marked by some consternation from the crowd. Still, it was the first manned flight of any kind in the state, and news of it was widespread. Excitement around the aeronaut's exploits grew. A year later, Van Tassel made history again in Salt Lake City; he was the first to ascend in a balloon in Portland and Hawaii, too.

But between these triumphs were plagues of inexperience that threatened to derail Van Tassel's nascent career, including burst balloons, false starts, grumpy creditors, and imprisonments. He fought crowds for compensation, dealt with a saloon shootout, and showed up for flights drunk. More than once, he perched on the edge of a descending basket, down to his last scraps of clothing, choosing to be lightweight over decent. He added aerialists to his show for crowds who thrilled to see humans dive from the clouds; he dropped advertisements from above. At home, he married and remarried; on tour, he took his spectacles global, setting out for Asia and the South Pacific.

Park Van Tassel's escapades and innovations fascinated crowds in the late nineteenth century, and Gary B. Fogel's renditions of those tales do the same. *Sky Rider* is thorough in its coverage of a showman who made a lasting impression on the American West, and on the sport of ballooning.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2021)

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