

Smitty the Jumper

The summer resort of Lake Bella Vista was a big hit when the Linebarger Brothers first opened it in 1917 (two years after Lake Bella Vista was created in 1915), and that continued through the 1920's. However, since they had targeted wealthy citizens from big cities in surrounding states, business began dropping off after the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression years of the 1930's. That meant the Linebargers had to be creative to increase interest in their resort, and one way they did that was to stage special activities.

In his book about Bella Vista, *From Vision to Reality*, historian Gil Fite wrote, "On some occasions airplanes provided much of the excitement....H. T. Smith, known to all as just "Smitty," was one of the best parachutists in the area and he often performed in Bella Vista...."

In his own self-published booklet, "Smitty – His Exploits of Early Day Jumping," Smitty wrote, "...with the Arkoma Airways...three pilots, a mechanic and myself went (*to Bella Vista in 1931*) to spend the summer to fly passengers on sightseeing trips. I would make a jump every weekend, on holidays and special occasions....Mr. C.A. Linebarger, who owned Bella Vista at the time, was...quite a showman....The only flat spot to land on was the golf course where the plane took off....It was the 4th of July, 1931, and there must have been 5,000 or 6,000 people on the resort, and I decided to give them a scare. I went out at 4,000 feet with the straps of my old chute in my hands, and when it opened naturally I fell from it. Then Mr. Linebarger really shook them up. "My God, he fell out of it," he shouted. I delayed until I got down behind the Sunset Hotel that sets up on a high hill, and the last time the crowd saw me I was still falling and disappeared behind the hotel. At treetop level I opened (*my second chute*). The landing on the hillside wasn't too good, but okay....I don't live too far from Bella Vista now (*at the time he wrote this, in 1966, he lived in Sulphur Springs*), and even yet when I am around Bentonville some oldster will ask me if I'm "Smitty" and start talking about that jump at Bella Vista on the Fourth of July."

His reputation became even more well known during the Benton County Fair at Bentonville in 1933 when he set his record solo jump height of 11,000 feet.

Smitty was born in North Carolina in 1898, and started his exhibition jumping career in 1928 at age 30. He continued to jump until his wife Charlotte (who grew up in Pea Ridge and met him while she was working at the cigar stand in Bella Vista) persuaded him to give it up in 1937, after over 200 jumps. After his three children were grown, he started solo-jumping again until a bad landing at age 75. However, once the tandem-jump harness was invented, he went back. By then he was living in Wichita, Kansas, and over a five year period, he made 15 tandem jumps, starting with one near El Dorado, Kansas, in 1985, when he was 87.

Smitty made his 221st and final tandem jump at age 91. He died in 1995 at a nursing home in Wichita. He was laid to rest in his trademark attire...his red, white and blue jumpsuit. He had a pull-up cord tied to his zipper and one of his jump cards in his hands. His funeral was conducted as he had requested...a group of planes flew overhead, and a flock of skydivers parachuted from the planes to his graveside, one trailing the American flag.

Picture 1: A very early picture of Smitty, probably taken in the late 1920's. Courtesy of the Burrell Tibbs Papers from the Eugene McDermott Library, University of Texas. Read more about Smitty the Jumper's life on www.wikipedia.org.



Picture 2: In 1985, at Perris Valley, California, Smitty at age 87 made a tandem jump with a partner from 13,000 feet. During the 8,000 feet free-fall, he and his partner linked up in an eight-sided star with seven members of the Coors World Champion Sky Diving Team before landing safely. Courtesy of www.skydivekansas.com.



Picture 3: Smitty in the late 1970's. Courtesy of Moe Viletto, www.blueskiesmag.com.

