

Balloon festival a big success

By Gary Hanlon

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MISSOURI CITY - "Beautiful", "breath taking", "great" are only a few of the adjectives used to describe the 1988 Missouri City Balloon Festival.

More than 70,000 spectators were on hand for the four-day festival which concluded Monday afternoon with an awards banquet at Lake Olympia, despite strong winds which grounded three of the scheduled flights.

An estimated 15,000 people attended Friday's night festivities - a Moonglow Benefit for the Richmond State School. A like number started arriving at 5:30 a.m. Saturday for the first full flight of 37 balloons.

"We were very pleased with the turnout," said Andrew Choy, president of Lake Olympia Development and host of the festival. "There were some people disappointed because not all of the balloons were able to fly Saturday night."

Strong winds grounded most of the balloons, but three pilots were able to get their craft airborne Saturday evening.

"We felt we owed the public something," said Al Muir, one of the founders of the festival. "The winds were high, but the more experienced pilots opted to fly."

Muir, owner-operator of Pretty Balloons Unlimited and pilot of KKBQ's 93Q balloon, was one of three pilots to fly Saturday evening.

Things weren't a whole lot better Sunday morning, as only a handful of pilots launched their balloons because of low cloud cover and strong winds. Sunday evening no balloons were able to take off.

Muir, however, inflated his balloon on one of the Lake Olympia peninsulas while 20 people struggled with the tethering lines.



The Moonglow Benefit was one of the highlights of the Missouri City Balloon Festival.

"We were disappointed more balloons were not able to fly," said one festival goer. "But we felt like we got our money's worth. The laser and fireworks show were worth the price of admission alone."

A laser show and fireworks exploded in the Missouri City skies nightly as the sounds of Neil Diamonds' "Coming to America" filled the festival grounds.

"This year's festival drew a lot more people than last year," said Sammy Foteh, of the Missouri City Business Association. "We have been working on this festival for several months and a lot of people have put in long hours to insure a successful event."

"I haven't heard anything but positive reaction to the festival," Foteh added. "There were a few glitches in the system, but there will always be a few mistakes made in something of this magnitude."

Foteh said next year the festival organizers hope to improve on this year's event. "There's one thing we can't control and that's the weather."

It was *deja vu*, as last year's festival winner Dan Sherrill was once again the top point getter in the balloon competition. The Austin aeronaut walked away with a trophy and \$2,000 cash prize.

Joe Heartsile and Bobby Grahner tied for second and split the \$1,500 purse while Robert Ambeau was fourth and collected \$500. Muir and Leonard Furth tied for fifth place and split \$200.

Several of the sponsors of the this year's event have already agreed to support next year's balloon festival. There is even talk of holding regional competition, enroute to the National Championships, in Missouri City in 1991.