

Liftoff! Balloon enthusiast recalls the event's first few years

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Peter Procopio considered **FOUNDING** father of Red Rock Balloon Rally

They're the four locals that won't be soon forgotten.

Peter Procopio, Lionel McKinney, Michael Siebersma and Karl Lohmann. They are the Gallup residents credited with establishing the annual Red Rock Balloon Rally – which started out small, but emerged as one of Gallup's most successful annual tourist events.

The 36th annual Red Rock Balloon Rally kicks off this weekend, and is, thanks to its founders, is the second largest such rally in New Mexico – the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta is the first.

"It started out as a small gathering of balloon enthusiasts who wanted to put on a good event," Procopio, a retired Gallup mental health counselor, said. "It grew in interest and support over the years."

To say the least.

The idea that evolved from observing a small and since-gone balloon rally in Farmington is now one of the world's biggest in terms of attraction and number of participants. The Red Rock Balloon Rally is the second largest in the state and the world — with the Lorraine Mondial Balloon Rally in France third in terms of attendance and popularity. The France rally takes place every other year.

Procopio recalled this week in an interview with the *Gallup Sun* at the El Rancho Hotel that the beginnings of the Red Rock rally saw a small group of people meet at the old Ramada Inn on Gallup's west end to plan and troubleshoot. Procopio said the first rally saw about 50 balloonists come out and that number doubled the year after. This year there are 140 registered balloonists set to participate, which is the event's average, Bill Lee, president of the Red Rock Balloon Rally Board of Directors, said.

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The El Rancho on Gallup's East Historic Highway 66 is now the official headquarters of the Red Rock Balloon Rally. "It has grown in attraction," Procopio and Lee said. "It's not just a local event. The balloon rally attracts people from around the world."

Originally from Rochester, N.Y., Procopio has flown at rallies in Durango, Colo., Albuquerque and Monument Valley, Utah. He said two lengthy articles and photo spreads in the monthly *Harper's Bazaar*

took the rally to new heights. Writers and photographers spent nearly a week in Gallup in 2002 gathering and researching, and interviewing for the articles.

Procopio, 71, flies a balloon named "Koshare Gallup," which is a reference to a sacred clown of Native American Pueblo origin, he explains.

"It brings delight to the spectators at the many balloon rallies that it attends," Procopio said of the balloon image. "It is a very catchy design."

The Indian Capital's first balloon rally took place on the second weekend of December. Nowadays, the Gallup rally take place the first weekend in December. The Rio West Mall was the event's first location before it moved to the bigger Red Rock Park. The Red Rock Balloon Rally was cancelled in 2011 due to heavy snow and fog, which is the only down moment Lee and Procopio recalled.

"I think it's something that everyone enjoys," Lee said. "Nobody likes it when the weather is just so bad that you can't fly."

The rally has seen the British Broadcasting Cable, French TV, and the Food Network not that long ago set up shop and cooked for more than 200. And in recent years, Lee flew New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez over Red Rock Park and parts of Gallup.

"It is something that is known throughout the world," Graham Bell, 69, who hails from England,

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said. Gallup's balloon rally has attracted people from Canada and Germany and other far places over the years. "People who fly the Red Rock Rally like the scenery in Gallup. They like flying over Red Rock Park especially."

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