

A HOME FOR HEROES

By Rebecca Wright

When Timber Cove was established in 1958, its developers had no idea that an announcement made three years later by the federal government would impact the heart and soul of the neighborhood.

Just days after NASA named Houston as its home for the Manned Spacecraft Center, a small group from Virginia traveled to see the place where they would be a part of sending a man to the moon and returning him safely to Earth. Jack Kinzler was among those visitors from the space agency and, knowing he would be relocating, Jack scouted for prospective homesites.

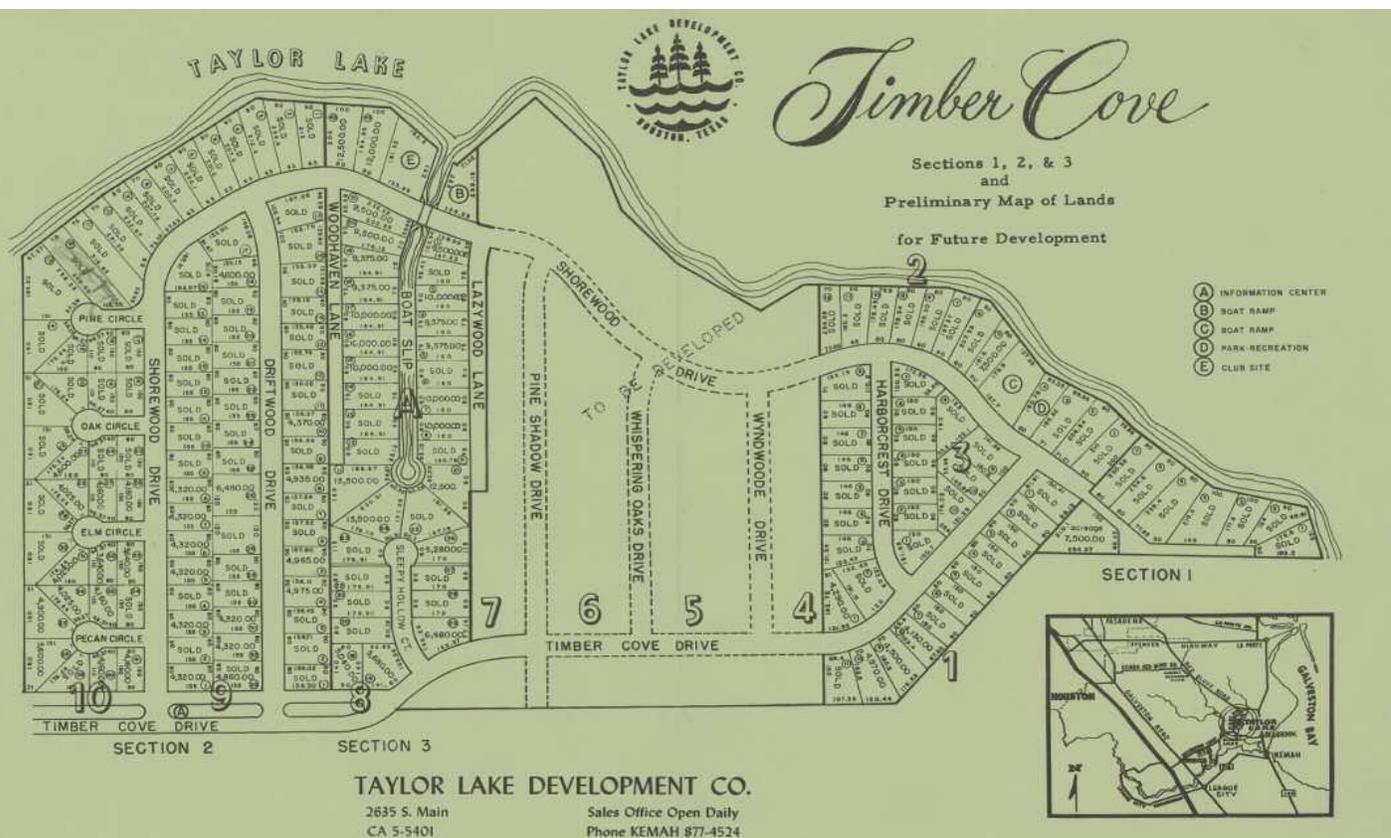
He found little housing available in the mostly undeveloped land near the proposed Center. In every direction, Jack saw devastation left by the recent occurrence of Hurricane Carla. But in his search, he located the single entrance to Timber Cove.

Tucked away in the midst of wooded acreage down Old Kirby Road was property that had recently belonged to a longtime family of the Seabrook area. A road had been built on each side of two long rows of majestic oak trees, providing an

appealing pathway to the spacious lots. Convinced he had found the perfect place, Jack walked into the contractor's office and left a deposit. That was in September 1961. Less than two years later, he and his wife Sylvia moved in. They are still there, and they are not alone.

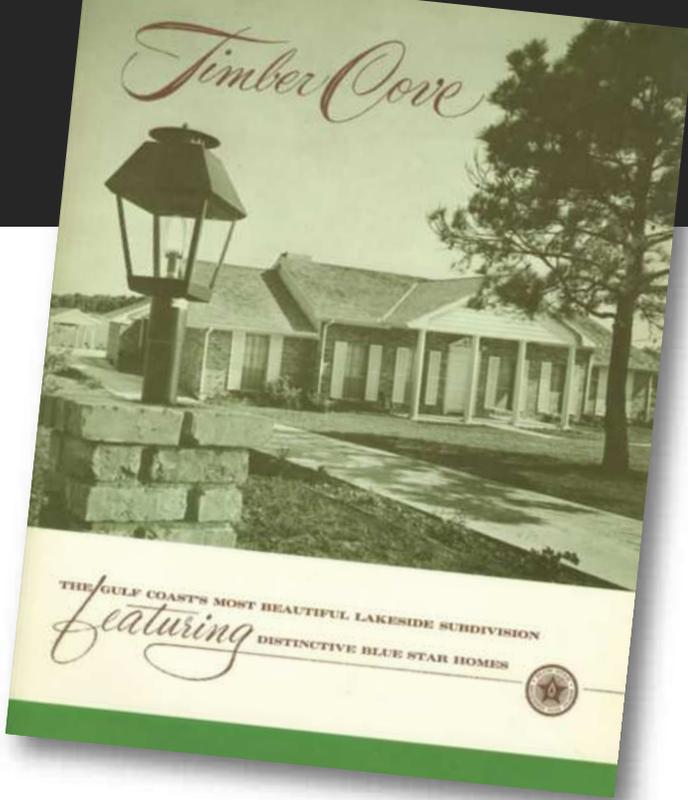
Along with the Kinzlers, other NASA employees moved into the neighborhood, including rocket scientists, engineers, spacecraft designers, and four of the original Mercury 7 astronauts. More followed and, collectively, they transformed their neighborhood. Sharing a common goal at work, the neighbors became friends; friends became extended family; and the subdivision evolved into a close-knit community.

Today, Timber Cove continues to host a number of those who purchased original lots and then spent the next forty-plus years enjoying their homes. Sprinkled in with these long-timers are about a dozen or so of those fondly referred to as the "second generation"—children who grew up in Timber Cove in the 1960s and 1970s and have returned, purchased homes, and are raising their families near their former backyards.



In the brochure released in 1958, Timber Cove developers invite potential home buyers to "live where the fun is." A number of families moving to Texas to work at the new space center moved in and still enjoy their homes today.

COURTESY UHCL ARCHIVES; TIMBER COVE COLLECTION



Why? Well, most will say they choose Timber Cove because the neighborhood reflects and retains a character instilled by the first residents who set a foundation of fellowship and trust in the midst of two hundred families. They want to preserve this connection that began when many of the neighbors shared a common goal with their jobs, a casserole on weekends, and the everyday burdens of raising children in an ever-changing world.

Although noting its fiftieth year of existence, residents still find reminders of the time when this community spirit began—like the civic club that facilitates the maintenance of the subdivision, the garden club, and the Timber Cove phone book published annually—all continuing since 1962.

And then there's the neighborhood swimming pool constructed in the unique shape of a Mercury space capsule. According to Jack Kinzler, the idea came from Art Garrison, "one of our neighbors who worked at NASA."

"When asked how we would do that, he answered, 'Oh easy. We just put a pair of steps on the east end that come down. Those steps would represent the two retro rockets, and then we'll taper the pool sides to the exact matching contour of the Mercury capsule,'" said Jack.¹

Completed in 1963, the nose of the capsule serves as the deep end, allowing for one- and three-meter diving boards and a competitive diving team. The blunt-end reentry shape hosts the shallow end.² Once fully operational, the pool definitely became "the center of societal activity," said James Kinzler, son of Jack and Sylvia Kinzler.

"Summers meant the swim team was going on, so that meant, get up in the morning early and get past dragonflies and

other scary-looking bugs that were out there, to get to the pool and do swim practice," said James, who describes his childhood community as a destination neighborhood. "You'd hang out at the pool as much as possible when you weren't riding your bicycle or playing football or a little bit of tennis."

"We never ran out of things to do," said Doug Shows, one of the second-generation residents, who added that there was no better place to be than Timber Cove when he was a kid. He remembers those days when the subdivision was still under construction.

"Everything you needed was here," said Doug. Everything, including friends. "We came in from all different directions of the country. Activity-wise, the parents had to get someone on the moon, so the kids were left on their own. And that was good, because we did get creative doing things—unsupervised."



PHOTO BY DOUG SHOWS 2004

A NASA neighbor designed the community pool in the shape of the Mercury capsule, as seen in these aerial views. (1963 and 2004)



NASA SR86-51581

Timber Cove resident Gus Grissom (center) practices water egress procedures with Apollo 1 crewmates Ed White (foreground) and Roger Chaffee at Ellington AFB.

The boys made good use of nearby Taylor Lake, which was adjacent to the western shore of Timber Cove and accessible almost year-round. They recalled building a dock that reached an estimated 150 feet out into the lake. “When you have a neighborhood that’s building a lot of houses, there’s lumber. We continued to build the dock out far enough that the Coast Guard came in and wanted to know what was going on here. The kids scattered,” he said. “We were ordered to tear it down.”

“Because of the nature of Timber Cove, as opposed to being a part of a big city, our parents thought of us as being in a very, very safe place,” said James. “You went out and I’m not sure I even told anybody where I was going. I was just out running around and playing a lot of baseball in the street, or around the corner playing touch football or tackle football, a lot of dodge ball. We had a lot of johnboats and small sailboats.”

They also recall how all the adults knew each other (James said that even he knew the last name of everybody in Timber Cove, minus a few); and when not at their jobs, how the adults spent time socializing together, but still working.

“They would have parties after work, and they would design,” said Doug. “Half the designs would be on cocktail napkins. They never stopped working. They were having a blast. It was the best time of their life, and they really enjoyed

it. They all [did]—everybody in the neighborhood. You had the astronauts. You had the engineers. Everybody worked together. It was a really fun time, and the kids had a good time.”³

The time together in the evenings provided an occasion for recreation and entertainment since there were few restaurants in the local area. The “nightlife” in the cities of Houston and Galveston was thirty miles away, so neighbors looked to each other to supply the society they were accustomed to but could not easily find in their new locale. They welcomed each other to their homes. Many residents today continue to identify a home by its original owner’s name, can provide its history, and say whether the house had been owned by one of the nation’s first astronauts.

In the 1960s, Gus Grissom and Wally Schirra lived on Pine Shadows; on the next street, Lazywood, was Jim Lovell. At the end of Sleepy Hollow Court were the homes of John Glenn and Scott Carpenter, and next door to the Kinzlers, Pete Conrad and his family. As America’s first space explorers, these men were seen as heroes, and the national attention cast upon them also impacted their neighbors in Timber Cove. Residents would often see tour buses driving past their houses.

“At first, it was a real novelty. People would stop and look and want to know about the neighborhood,” said Aleck Bond, a



A home on Lazywood Lane sits nestled in one of the many tree-filled lots.

NASA employee who, with his wife Tassie, also moved from Virginia in the early 1960s to Timber Cove. “But after a while, and I don’t think it took too long, it got to be just old hat.”⁴

Others remember that, originally, Timber Cove residents moved into the neighborhood and planted their mailboxes in a row at the entrance to the subdivision, much like rural mail patrons still do today. When the word got out that astronauts lived in the community, visitors would come and look through the mailboxes to find astronauts’ home addresses. Then, these visitors would roam the neighborhood until they found the houses. No one can document that the U.S. Postal Service accommodated the astronauts’ privacy by providing door-to-door service, but the change in mail delivery did occur early in the 1960s.⁵

When the astronauts were on missions in space, the neighborhood would endure the arrival of the national and local news media.

“In the early days of spaceflight, they didn’t have the remote facilities, sophisticated like they do now. They had to come out and build a tower so they’d have a line-of-sight transmission to somewhere where they could pick it up,” said Aleck.

“You could hear the trucks coming along, and all the kids would get on their bicycles and follow them,” said Tassie. “That was the fun part.”⁶

“They’d build these huge towers so they could put the antennas on top. Being kids, we liked to climb things, and we’d climb those towers to the top, and not knowing exactly what we were doing, half the time, we unplugged the antennas, and pulled the cables out,” said Doug. “We’d scamper down and watch the news media, the technicians, go up and connect them back up. We thought that was fun.”⁷

While the community endured the intrusions by the outsiders, they became more protective of their astronaut neighbors and their families. Sometimes when inquiring strangers arrived seeking directions, the Timber Cove residents provided incorrect information or refused to answer. And, being the close extended family they were, they mourned greatly the loss of their friends when they died during their preparations for spaceflight: Elliott See, 38, who died in February 1966 when his T-38 trainer plane crashed in St. Louis, Missouri, and Gus Grissom, who perished with two crewmates during a fire on the launch pad in January 1967.

In 1971, the community felt the threat of another loss when a malfunction occurred during the mission of Apollo 13,

placing Jim Lovell and his crew in danger of not returning safely to Earth. Jack Kinzler remembers the quiet greeting given to the astronaut on his arrival back home to Timber Cove.

“The community had prepared to meet him down at the entrance,” he said. “In the most humbling situation I’ve ever seen—everyone had torch lights and flashlights and what have you, and everybody that met him at the entrance put their hand on that car and walked the car to his house. He hardly said anything except, ‘I’m glad to be back.’”⁸

This very caring community may have started fifty years ago, but the essence that characterizes Timber Cove only strengthened through the years that followed and helped the community deal, once more, with the death of another astronaut neighbor and friend. In January 1986, Mike Smith was the pilot onboard the Space Shuttle *Challenger* when an explosion occurred seventy-three seconds into the flight, destroying the spacecraft. A tree planted in his memory grows in a park near the pool.

As expected after a half-century, some aspects of Timber Cove are not the same as in 1958. No longer is it in the midst of wooded acreage, but rather it is surrounded on both sides by housing additions. Fewer lots are empty and some lots near the lake now support new expansive houses. Other changes have occurred, with families moving away and new ones arriving. Although some of the first buyers are beginning to fade away, the momentum started by those original dwellers remains embedded deep within the neighborhood. According to Cindy Evans, the evidence of their spirit continues on.

Cindy, who currently works at the NASA Johnson Space



PHOTO BY SANDRA L. JOHNSON

The bridge on Shorewood Drive hosts the community’s Christmas Eve caroling.

Adjacent to Taylor Lake is the park in Timber Cove.

Center, said that soon after her family had moved to Timber Cove, they traveled to the East Coast during the Christmas holidays. While there, the Texas Gulf Coast experienced a rare winter storm with temperatures cold enough to freeze the water in the house, causing the pipes to burst.

“Somehow, our neighbors found where we were staying in Buffalo, NY, and called us to tell us that they saw water flowing from under our front door. Then, they told us how they broke into the house, turned off the water, pulled out the wet carpet, and scheduled the plumbers to come in and make the repairs,” she said.⁹

In the twenty years since Cindy personally experienced this unexpected and overwhelming assistance from her neighborhood, she has witnessed plenty of other occurrences since then where neighbors have shown their concern for each other and their interest in building community relationships.

One example is a regularly scheduled, “old-fashioned,” casual evening of neighborly visiting. Every month, an e-mail with details arrives in electronic mailboxes; then, a few days later, approximately one hundred residents walk, bike, or drive to the designated home, carrying an appetizer or dessert along with their choice of beverage. This event started a couple of years ago and resembles a time in the 1960s when parties of some type were happening somewhere almost every weekend in Timber Cove. In fact, some of those attending this Friday

Night Bash are the same ones who attended the first progressive dinner started around 1965 along Shorewood Drive. This well-received holiday event featuring food and friendship was enjoyed every year until the mid 1970s. Back then, the telephone—not e-mail—was the modern mode of planning, but the exchange among friends is still genuine, rewarding, and anticipated, say those who participated then and now.

Progressive dinners continue to be one of Timber Cove’s holiday traditions, but the illumination of the entire neighborhood on Christmas Eve possibly reigns as the most anticipated occasion on the calendar. The inaugural lighting occurred on December 24, 1968, to honor the crew of Apollo 8, who aboard their spacecraft became the first humans to see the far side of the moon as they journeyed around the celestial body that night. Included onboard was neighbor Jim Lovell.

Since then, luminaries (paper bags with candles in sand) line the front lawns throughout the neighborhood on Christmas Eve. If needed, younger families help some of the longtime residents in preparing their yards by loading up children’s wagons with the materials and setting the luminaries in their proper places. Even if residents are planning to be away, arrangements are made to have the candles lighted at the appropriate time, resulting in almost 100 percent participation.

“After lighting our luminaries, we all gather at the bridge to sing Christmas carols and have some hot cider,” said Deborah Griffin, a Timber Cove resident for almost twenty years. “It’s heart-warming to see how many families are there to exchange holiday greetings.”¹⁰

Deborah repeatedly has seen the closeness of the neighborhood, not just on holidays, and has learned that volunteerism has been a fact of life carried on from the early days. She shared an example, of a time long ago, which serves as a reminder of the sharing of duties among a few that supported and assisted the community, as a whole.

“I’ve been told that, originally, the city of Taylor Lake Village consisted largely of Timber Cove and not much else. Until our community was built, there wasn’t a need for a police force. But, once the flood of new residents began in the 1960s, a local constabulary was required. Timber Cove volunteers were deputized and took turns on evening and weekend shifts serving the public as peace officers. They even shared the City’s one police car,” she said. “Most of the calls to which they responded were non-violent disagreements or kids who were



PHOTO BY SANDRA L. JOHNSON

This backyard scene reflects the terrain of the neighborhood.

Timber Cove Celebrates Fifty Years

By Deborah Griffin

In 2007, a small group of Timber Cove residents met to consider ways to celebrate the neighborhood's fiftieth anniversary. They did not realize it at the time, but their efforts would soon blossom into more than a simple homecoming party at the pool. In the spirit of volunteerism that defines Timber Cove's existence, this group of planners—Cindy Evans, Ava Galt, Deborah Griffin, Walt Jaescke, and Kay Ann Jorgenson—rallied their neighbors in support of a weekend of events that will celebrate the community's unique history as home to families building our nation's space program. The celebration will also kick off a focused effort to capture and preserve Timber Cove's story for future generations.

On Saturday, October 11, 2008, Timber Cove will open the doors of some of its most famous homes to the public. The Tour of Homes will feature the former residences of Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo astronauts. Together with a peek at Timber Cove's famous Mercury capsule-shaped swimming pool, visitors will have the chance to experience NASA's space history from a unique perspective.

In addition to celebrating past heroes and events, Timber Cove residents are establishing a local history collection that will preserve the community's history for future use. Many longtime residents have special stories that capture both the daily rhythm of life in the neighborhood and behind-the-scenes reflections about the excitement and can-do spirit of the early days of NASA. Working with Shelly Kelly, archivist for the University of Houston—Clear Lake's (UHCL's) Neumann Library, organizers are collecting oral histories and archival documents that will become a valuable resource for social historians and American and Women's Studies scholars. In conjunction with the Tour of Homes, *Tales of Timber Cove* will give current and former residents the chance to tell their stories of life in this community and of the ways NASA's history has intersected their own, personal histories.

Besides touring homes and telling tales, Timber Cove residents are celebrating fifty years with a commemorative patch.

Reminiscent of the crew patches NASA astronauts have long designed and worn to celebrate their missions, Timber Cove's anniversary patch will serve as a lasting reminder of the event.

Working with Stuart Larson, Associate Professor of Graphic Design at UHCL, organizers offered graphic design students the opportunity to participate in a patch design contest.

The winning design, featured here, was created by Communication major Richard Willis.

In his artist's statement, Richard wrote: "When considering the original seven astronauts, immense concern was given in trying to differentiate, without separating, the four of the seven original astronauts who lived in Timber Cove. This was configured successfully through an illustration of one of the neighborhood's protective oak trees. The oak branch overhangs four of the seven stars as to purposely connect them to the community they are a part of while the other three remain above, yet not too far away."

Other UHCL students are also involved in the anniversary event. Assistant Professor of Communication Leo Chan, and his student Web site designers Laurie Perez and Homie Rowe, have created and launched the event Web site. Be sure to visit www.timbercove50.com to view their work and to learn all the details of Timber Cove's Tour of Homes.



PHOTO BY SANDRA L. JOHNSON

The oak tree-lined drive leads travelers past the entrance to Timber Cove homes.

having too much fun decorating the neighbor's house with toilet paper. After all, in the flatlands around NASA, Timber Cove's trees were just too tempting to pass up!"¹¹

Cindy and Deborah are just two of the "newcomers" living in Timber Cove who have embraced the legacy of the neighborhood and continue to learn more about the history of their community. They, along with others, are busy preparing for a homecoming event scheduled for October 11 (see sidebar).

When Timber Cove residents look back on fifty years, they will see a rich history of individuals and families who are leaving a standard for the next generations. They will find swim teams still using a pool designed by NASA employees as the space program was just beginning, and astronauts who recently traveled in space with international partners once considered adversaries of the U.S. They will also learn how the current residents who work at the Space Center are planning to send explorers once again to the moon, and then on to Mars.

As they move forward into the next fifty years, they will probably continue to identify the homes by who lived there before, while assisting the latest arrivals with moving in. They will keep finding kids being creative in activities on streets where neighbors know each other and help guard the safety of the children. And they will definitely carry on their treasured traditions, while seeking new ones to further strengthen the relationships within the neighborhood.

But most likely during the next fifty years, Timber Cove residents will enjoy preserving the aura that is distinctly theirs, while sitting in the shadow of the Space Center where history continues to be made. ★

