

FROM THE EDITOR



To many of us old-timers

the cover photograph brings back fond memories from the summer of 1969. What a moment it was to watch Apollo 11 land on the moon. On television screens around the world, citizens of planet Earth watched in awe as the drama unfolded. The Lunar Module made its way down to the moon's surface. After a safe landing came the magic words: "Houston... the *Eagle* has landed." Then came the stunning images of the "small steps" of the astronauts onto the moon. When the astronauts successfully returned to Earth, the scene shifted back to the Mission Control Center and those of us who lived in the region felt a special joy in the celebration of our fellow Houstonians.

Forty years later, we return to the joy of that moment and the excitement of the early years of the American space program. The Johnson Space Center (JSC) has been good to the Houston area, providing jobs, technical expertise, prestige, and a global identity as "Space City, USA." In celebrating fifty years

in the history of NASA, this issue of *Houston History* focuses on the first twenty years of the space program, from the creation of NASA in 1958 to the naming in 1978 of a new group of astronauts who have flown many of the space shuttle missions. We also focus on the human side of JSC. The successes of the space program were, after all, shaped by our neighbors, not by supermen. Although a select few of these neighbors spent brief moments of their lives above us in space, for the most part, the astronauts and those who worked to put them on the moon lived among us while working and training for their missions.

The astronauts were, of course, the stars of the show. As a boy growing up in the early 1960s, near Houston, my world revolved around baseball and the space program. Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays were my heroes on the diamond, but they vied for my attention with Mercury astronauts Alan Shepard, Jr., and John Glenn. I began reading newspapers to follow the Yankees and the Cardinals, but I started to read the rest of the paper and watch the news on television to follow the "space race."

The astronauts seemed then, and now, to be "real American heroes." They looked as if they had come right out of central casting. I saw them as the equivalent of John Wayne and James Arness of *Gunsmoke* fame, but I was old enough to realize that the astronauts were not actors. They had to muster real courage to stand up to the real dangers they faced. They were the chosen few who had earned the enviable chance to be among the first humans to fly into space; yet, they seemed down-to-Earth in their enjoyment of the camaraderie of the "family" of astronauts and technical specialists at NASA.

Like most of my fellow Americans, I understood that they represented me and my nation in a struggle that transcended space. In an age of bomb shelters and "mutually assured destruction," the Cold War held the very real dangers of nuclear war for the U.S. and the world. The space programs of the U.S. and the Soviet Union became symbols of the strengths of the two competing systems. The space race obviously had far more than symbolic implications for the future of our country since it promised a new generation of technology with direct application in future wars. In this atmosphere, the early television accounts of the nation's first ventures into space were early versions of reality T.V. at its most riveting, most meaningful best.

The space program became even more exciting to me when it moved to Houston. From the announcement in September 1961 that our city had been chosen as the site of the Manned Spacecraft Center (later renamed Johnson Space Center),

Houston History focused its Spring 2007 issue on a Texas icon—the San Jacinto Battleground—and held an event at the Monument for the release of that special volume. Rebecca Wright, JSC History Coordinator, attended and, upon arrival, was greeted by one of the organizers who expressed surprise that someone from NASA would find Texas history interesting. Her response: "But we (NASA) **are** Texas history."

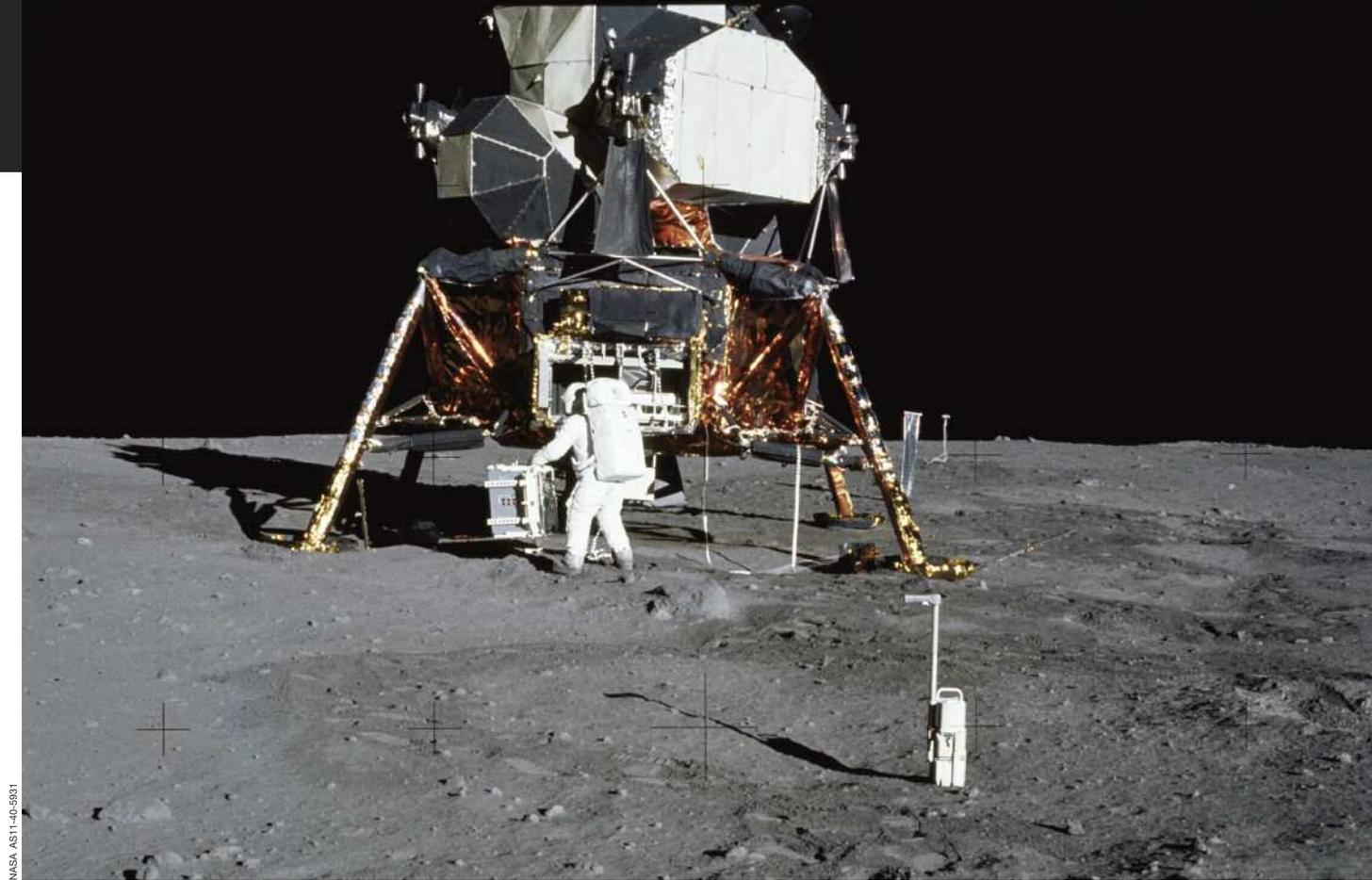
At that moment, Wright proposed the idea for an issue featuring the agency that brought "Space City" fame to Houston and would reflect on contributions from some of the Houstonians who helped create the avenue to the moon and the foundation for space history to follow.

To achieve this goal, Rebecca Wright served as the guest editor for this NASA issue. Contributing the NASA-related articles were Mike Coats, JSC Center Director; Christopher C. Kraft, former JSC Director; Sandra Johnson, Dr. Jennifer Ross-Nazzal, and Jessica Cannon from the JSC History Office; Shelly Henley Kelly and Dr. Deborah Griffin from the University of Houston – Clear Lake; Burton Chapman, independent writer from Pearland.

The photos selected show the dedication and commitment in meeting technological challenges, and assisting in identifying these images was Eliza Johnson from JSC Still Imagery Repository. Putting all of the materials together in its engaging design was Perry Jackson from JSC Graphics and working closely with him was editor Susan Breeden.

A special thanks is given to the management of the JSC Information Resources Directorate who supported the efforts for this publication in numerous ways; the management of the JSC JIMMS Contract; and Duane Ross, Senior Advisor to the JSC History Office.

Most importantly, many thanks go to the thousands of individuals who, at NASA, have inspired generations to look beyond today and explore for tomorrow.



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Astronaut Buzz Aldrin unpacks experiments from the Apollo 11 lunar module, Eagle, July 20, 1969.

I joined most people in the region in welcoming the space program as a hometown endeavor. The astronauts quickly arrived here for training. Several years later, the newly completed Mission Control Center became a television soundstage of sorts, as mission after mission brought the familiar television image of this small room filled with experts in direct communication with the astronauts.

When I enrolled at Rice University in 1966, the campus bustled with space-related activities. I had never been to Clear Lake before starting college, but I remember the thrill of seeing the signs pointing the way to NASA from the Gulf Freeway on my first trip down to Galveston. In those years, students crowded into the television room in the dorm, at times, to watch reports on missions. Years later, seeing the giant Saturn rocket on display at JSC and touring the original Mission Operations Control Room was a special treat that reminded me of the excitement—and the audacity—of the Apollo Program.

JSC remains prominent in my life. In Friendswood, an old Quaker community near Clear Lake where I have lived for more than twenty years, the space program is everywhere. My wife has regularly taught the children of astronauts and engineers during her career as a fourth-grade teacher. My daughter's first soccer team, after we moved to the area, was named "Gemini" and was coached by a NASA engineer. The tragedy of the Space

Shuttle *Columbia* directly affected many in the Clear Lake area who work for NASA. By happenstance, substantial debris from the orbiter came back to Earth and landed in the pine forest in front of my grandfather's home in Hemphill, Texas.

Of course, my experience is not unusual, since the size and importance of NASA in our region make it a significant part of the fabric of life in Houston. It has been an instrumental part of the growth and diversification of the regional economy. It gave us the name of our major league baseball team and of the Astrodome, while inspiring the design used on some of the ugliest baseball uniforms in the history of sports. It has also provided a symbol of the "can do" spirit that Americans, in general, and Houstonians, in particular, embrace as a central part of our character.

Houstonians should feel a special pride when the "spirit of the Apollo Program" is invoked as a symbol of the nation's capacity to meet other major challenges: "If we can put a man on the moon, surely we can muster the ingenuity and resources and sense of unified national purpose to solve our energy problems."

Time will tell, but looking into the past, we are reminded that our neighbors at NASA set the bar very high indeed.

Joseph A. Pratt, *Editor-in-Chief*