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NASA in Florida: A Journalist's View

by Pat Duggins

Apollo and Walt Disney. Those were two of the names making newspaper headlines when my family and I arrived in Florida in 1971. My father was an Air Force Chief Master Sergeant, and his last tour of duty would be at Patrick Air Force Base in Brevard County. The primary rocket launch site for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA), and Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom theme park made indelible impacts on Central Florida. It is also interesting to note how both projects almost by-passed Florida in favor of other locations.

While the Disney Company was considering sites in St. Louis and Niagara Falls for its new amusement park, NASA was shopping for a new launch base to beat the Russians to the moon. It was the early 1960s and Project Apollo was heating up. The massive Saturn five rockets that would carry the astronauts to the lunar surface needed a home with plenty of acreage. Engineers would be handling huge chunks of hardware to build and launch the rockets, each as tall as a forty story building.

Cape Canaveral, in Brevard County, was already well known as an Army launch facility. In the 1950s, engineers would rebuild V-2 rockets taken from Germany following World War II and conduct test firings. There were also launches of American made missiles that blew up most of the time. The list of rockets includ-

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ed one type called the Navajo, which bemused locals nicknamed the “never go.”

Despite all the space-related traffic coming out of Florida, NASA was not completely convinced the “sunshine state” was right for Apollo. Kurt Debus, a close colleague of rocket pioneer Wernher Von Braun, assembled a committee to pick the departure point for NASA’s trips to the moon.

Debus and his colleagues considered potential launch sites, including California and Texas as well as islands off Georgia and the Bahamas. A spot with a large body of water to the East was preferable. Both Apollo, and the later Space Shuttle, would drop spent stages during the trip to orbit. NASA did not want to shower its neighbors with falling rocket parts over dry land. NASA eventually settled on the area around Merritt Island, Florida, for what would become the Kennedy Space Center. It was an isolated nature preserve as big as Connecticut or Rhode Island, which afforded the elbow room NASA wanted.

If Disney World had gone elsewhere, vacationers would have followed. Florida’s tourism industry would have continued with attractions like our beaches and parks like Weeki Wachee and Cypress Gardens. However, the loss of NASA’s launch facility to another location would have been a much bigger loss for Florida. Before Apollo, Brevard County was known for citrus groves. It was a place to stop for a soda and restroom break while driving from Jacksonville to Miami. Soon, an estimated 25,000 highly skilled engineers and designers would leave their mark on my new home town while they labored to conquer the moon, and later to launch the Space Shuttle.

The impact of the U.S. space program on Brevard was almost immediate. NASA personnel complained about having to drive to Orlando just to buy groceries. Roads, homes, and businesses would have to be built just to keep up with the needs of the space program. Some local businesses built before NASA’s arrival, quickly became part of Apollo lore. The astronauts stayed at the Starlite Motel, and Russian Cosmonaut Alexei Leonov was a regular at a Cocoa Beach restaurant called “Bernard’s Surf.” Leonov drew sketches during the Apollo-Soyuz mission in 1975 which decorate the walls of the “Surf” to this day.

NASA would also impact the local educational system. Brevard Engineering College was created in Melbourne in 1958 to provide classes for NASA workers. It would later evolve into the Florida

Institute of Technology. In 1963, Florida Technological University in Orlando was founded. That school would become the University of Central Florida in 1978.

This was all adult stuff to me in 1971. As a kid, I had to buy a ticket to go on the rides at Walt Disney World. Having NASA as a neighbor meant I could stand in my backyard for a show that was free of charge. I watched Apollo 14 soar to space on a column of white flame. The mission to the Fra Mauro region of the moon became famous after astronaut Alan Shepard whacked golf balls on the lunar surface. For me, Apollo 14 was just a nifty light show on launch day.

Pioneer 10 lit up the nighttime sky aboard an Atlas-Centaur rocket in 1973. The little space probe was beginning a lonely trek past Jupiter on a path that would make it the first manmade object to leave the solar system. Bolted to its side was an aluminum plate engraved with greetings from Earth. It was sent as an interstellar calling card in case some future intelligence found the derelict space probe coasting aimlessly between the stars.

Again for me, Pioneer 10 was just more fireworks courtesy of NASA.

Between launches, my school chums and I would travel along streets with names like "NASA Boulevard" to destinations like "Satellite Beach." The rivals of my high school football team were the dreaded War Eagles of "Astronaut High" near the Kennedy Space Center. That was life in the region known to the world as the "spacecoast."

Back then, I had few memories of the dangers associated with spaceflight. In 1967, when I was five years old, I recalled the expressions on my parents' faces during the televised funerals of astronauts Gus Grissom, Roger Chaffee, and Ed White. They died as the result of a fire inside their Apollo 1 capsule during a routine launch pad test.

Nineteen years later, seven astronauts would be killed aboard Space Shuttle Challenger. Now, I was an adult about to be indoctrinated into the world of space journalism.

I was a rookie reporter at WMFE, the National Public Radio station in Orlando. Few news organizations gave much coverage to the new Space Shuttle program at that time. It was just too "routine."

On January 28, 1986, I was working on an unrelated story in an audio production booth when a co-worker dashed by. I stuck my head out and asked, what was wrong?

"The Space Shuttle just blew up," she responded.

"Right," I shot back incredulously before returning to my control board. A few seconds later, I checked the production room next door. That was where co-workers had been recording the liftoff of Space Shuttle Challenger over a telephone line. The routine countdown had turned into talk of rescue and recovery. The ashen faces of the people in the room prompted me to grab a tape recorder and the keys to the station's news car. I followed the mushroom cloud down Highway 50 from Orlando to the Kennedy Space Center. When I arrived, pieces of wreckage from the spacecraft were still raining down in the Atlantic.

The experience of covering NASA's first shuttle disaster prepared me for the second one. That occurred when Columbia broke apart during the fiery re-entry into Earth's atmosphere, sending flaming wreckage tumbling down onto East Texas in 2003. I spent three hours reporting "live" from Kennedy Space Center on NPR's *Weekend Edition Saturday*, which host Scott Simon later recalled as a sad, sad day for the nation. Children at Columbia Elementary School later remembered the lost crew by planting seven trees on school grounds, one for each of the astronauts.

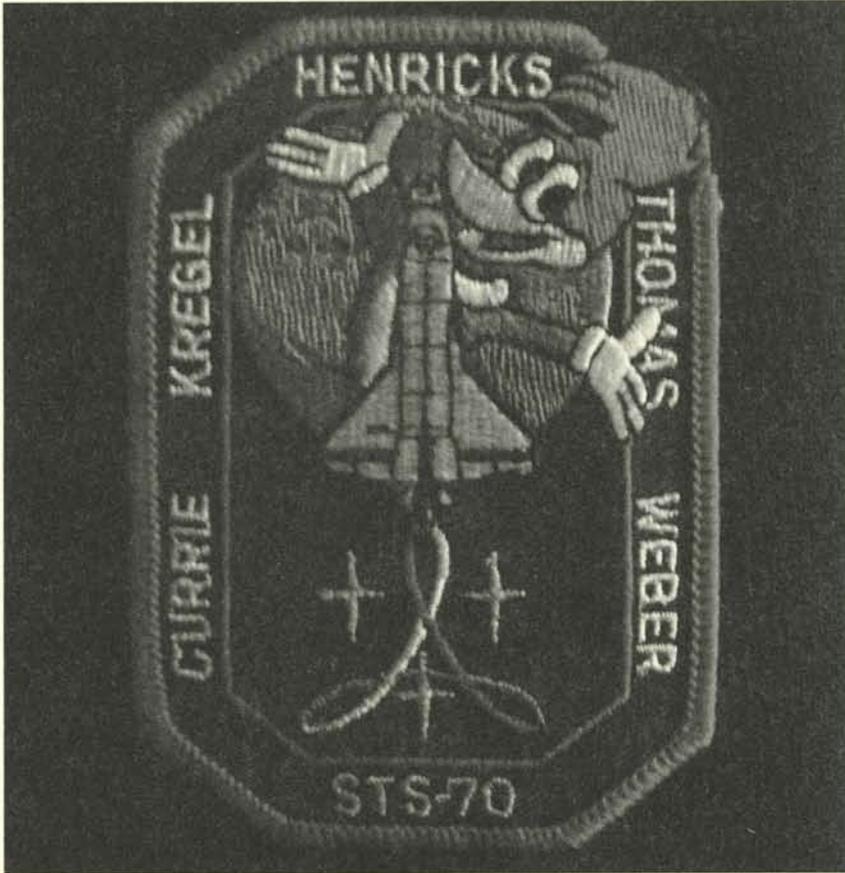
On balance, there are more good memories than bad associated with the Shuttle program. Some border on the farcical.

Take the attack of the wayward woodpecker for example.

Space Shuttle Discovery was on the launch pad in 1995, ready to carry five astronauts and a NASA communications satellite to orbit. That's when a woodpecker decided the soft foam insulation of the spacecraft's big external fuel tank would be a suitable place for a nest. The bird pecked a nice hole in the foam and moved in, much to NASA's dismay.

The space agency was later inundated with friendly suggestions from bird lovers and naturalists on how to gently evict its feathered guest. A combination of airhorns and inflatable balloons covered with scary owl eyes to mimic a predator did the trick, and the bird departed. NASA commemorated the event by redesigning the cloth crew patch the astronauts would wear on their spacesuits. Along with the image of the Space Shuttle was the face of the cartoon character "Woody Woodpecker."

People frequently ask me what it's like is to have covered the space program this long with no end in sight. It does have its drawbacks. For example, constant exposure to NASA means I've been



"Woody Woodpecker" Patch for STS-70. Image courtesy of NASA.

conditioned to see things in movies and television shows that other people do not notice.

For example, the 1966 James Bond film *You Only Live Twice* makes me grimace. In the movie, the evil organization SPECTRE tries to hijack American and Soviet spacecraft for some dark purpose that agent 007 has to foil. During a scene of the triumphant launch of a Russian capsule, the moviemakers used footage of a U.S. built Gemini spacecraft launching on an American Titan rocket. Most moviegoers do not catch that. I do.

In the 1989 episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* called "The Royale," Commander Riker, Mr. Data, and Lieutenant Worf are trapped inside what appears to be a 20th century gambling casino. It turns out that their surroundings were created by aliens to

accommodate an astronaut stranded on their planet. The big discovery comes when the Enterprise crewmembers enter the astronaut's room to find him long dead. Mr. Worf reaches into the closet and pulls out the man's silver spacesuit. Stitched on the sleeve is the embroidered crew patch of Apollo 17, NASA's last manned moon landing, and not some fictional spaceflight gone wrong. Most viewers do not catch that. I do.

If this does not leave you with the impression that I have been covering the space program too long, there is always the story of my dry cleaner.

Everyone seems to have that one laundry service that gets the starch in your shirts just right. For me, it's Parisian Cleaner, a little place on Virginia Avenue near Lake Ivanhoe in downtown Orlando. The proprietor and I operate on such an informal basis that I do not even look at the paper claim ticket with each load. I just show up on the agreed upon day.

That was the pattern, until recently.

I had just dropped off some pants and a jacket. Once I was home, I wanted to confirm when my order would be ready. When I checked the paper slip for the pick-up date, I noticed two words on the line for the customer's name.

It read "NASA guy."

Clearly, I have been at this a while, and I am not the only one.

Soon, Brevard County may only have memories of the space program. Many of the landmarks of that era are slowly vanishing. Salt spray from the Atlantic Ocean has worn away some of the original seaside launch pads lost to corrosion. Construction and development in the name of progress have erased other NASA related landmarks in Brevard.

The "Moon Hut" restaurant was one example. The eatery with the huge moon shaped marquee sign was once a spot where friends say you could get great Greek food and a pretty decent breakfast. I never ate there and now I will never get the chance. It's gone by the way of the wrecking ball.

The Starlite Motel was known as the "home away from home" for the early astronauts before liftoff, and was featured in the movie *The Right Stuff*. It is no longer there. For chronic space fans, the loss of a store called *Beach Souvenirs* in Cocoa Beach is poignant. Along with the usual knick-knacks you might expect from a Florida gift shop, *Beach Souvenirs* had the most impressive collection of space patches for sale in Brevard.

NASA routinely creates embroidered cloth patches to symbolize its space missions, payloads, and experiments. Apollo 11's crew patch had an American Bald Eagle majestically landing on the moon. That one is easy to find. *Beach Souvenirs* had the rarities.

The patch for the European built Spacelab could be found here, along with the Ariane rocket, the Voyager space probe, Project Mercury, and many others. In some cases, collectors could find scarce patches with the name of an astronaut who was later reassigned to another flight. Not even the gift shop at the Kennedy Space Center headquarters building came close to the patch inventory of *Beach Souvenirs*. A drug store now occupies the spot where this hallowed destination for space fans once stood.

That is why this issue of Florida Historical Quarterly is particularly significant. In the pages that follow, you will read about NASA, its impact on Brevard County, the astronauts, and the role of women in the space program.

Enjoy and remember.