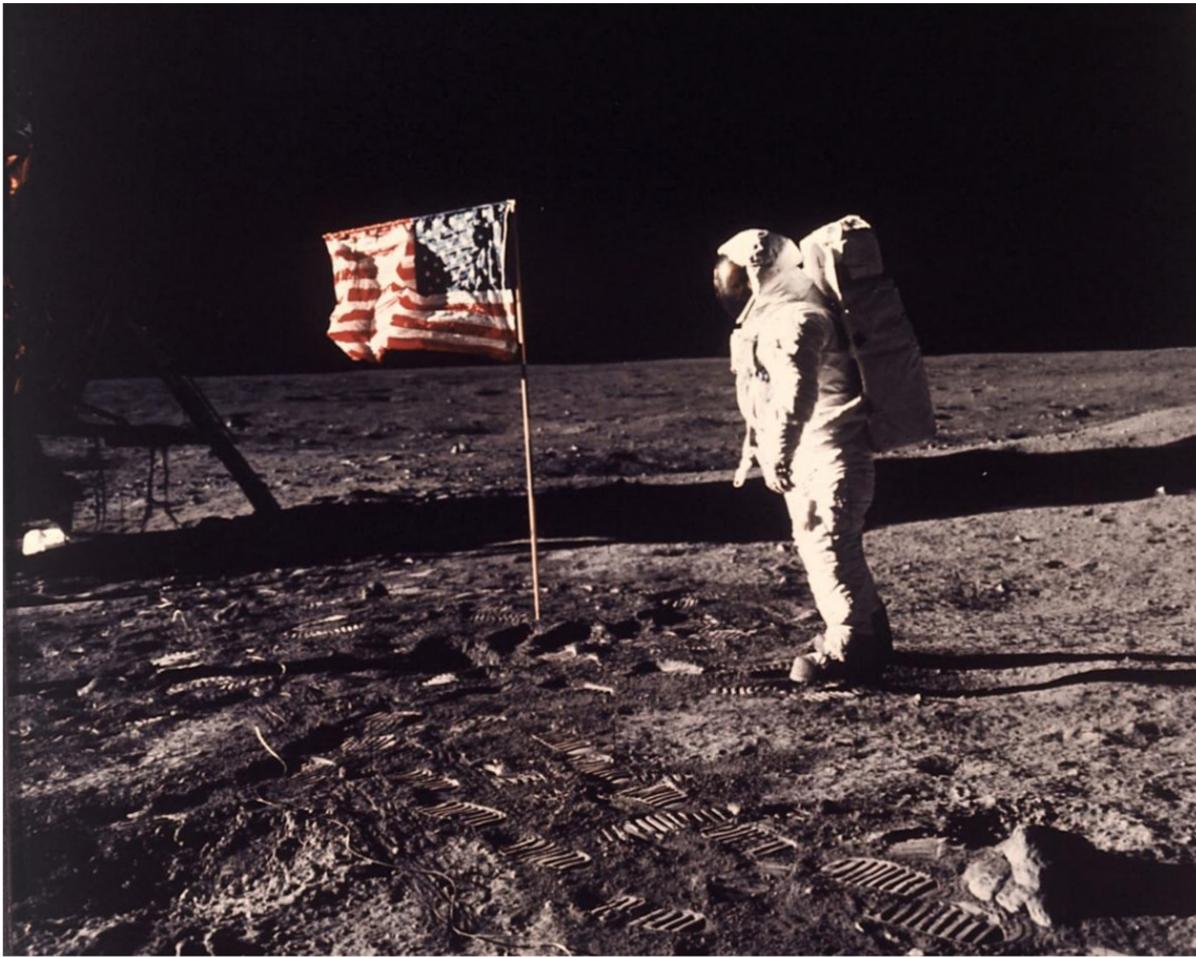


Sorrells: Moon landing extra special to Waynesboro

By NANCY SORRELLS For The News Virginian Jul 19, 2019



FILE - In this image provided by NASA, astronaut Buzz Aldrin poses for a photograph beside the U.S. flag deployed on the moon during the Apollo 11 mission on July 20, 1969. Television is marking the 50th anniversary of the July 20, 1969, moon landing with a variety of specials about NASA's Apollo 11 mission. (Neil A. Armstrong/NASA via AP, File)

NEIL A. ARMSTRONG

Fifty years ago this Saturday — July 20 — the people of earth held their collective breaths as they sat in front of black and white television sets and watched in disbelief at the grainy footage coming from nearly a quarter of a million miles away.

And when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon and uttered those famous words about a small step for man and a large leap for mankind, people cheered with wild abandon.

My family was no different than most in America at that time. I remember three generations sitting in a close semicircle around our black and white television. In those days the television was a piece of furniture—a small screen in a big upright, rectangular cabinet. Below the small screen at the bottom of the cabinet a piece of cloth stretched across a square opening larger than the screen itself. This was the TV speaker. As the ghostly images from the moon bounced across the small screen, we wordlessly leaned toward them, stretching and straining to make out the shadows while simultaneously processing the reality of what had not long ago been unimaginable.

It is fun to go back and read *The News-Virginian* in the days before and after the successful moon landing. Saturday, July 19, 1969, was the day before the *Eagle* landed on the moon. The top headline that day said “Apollo 11 Enters Moon’s Shadow, Target Sighted.” A smaller headline noted that the moon landing would be “television’s finest moment.”

The actual moonwalk broadcast live on television took place the next day, on Sunday. The *News-Virginian* did not publish on Sundays back then, so it was up to the local paper to shout its celebratory headlines to the world on Monday, July 21. One can’t help but smile at the subtle way the editors changed the dateline at the top of the newspaper right under the banner to “Moonday,” July 21, 1969”. There was no subtlety at all, however, in the all-caps headline that screamed: “SPACEMEN PREP FOR RETURN; WORLD APPLAUDS EPIC WALK”.

The day after the moon walk was Monday (Moonday). President Richard Nixon suggested that the day be a holiday. Waynesboro officials apparently agreed. Schools were closed and Vice Mayor J.B. Yount III, acting for Mayor Ben Cooper, declared the day “A holiday for the employees of the city of Waynesboro in accordance with President Nixon’s wishes and in honor of the significant and historic occasion of the anticipated moon landing.”

At the bottom of the front page on Moonday, the local reaction was summed up in an article titled “Wonder, Disbelief, Awe Mark Reaction in Area.” “It was an unbelievable thing,” said Waynesboro businessman T.W. Shiflet. Waynesboro Police Chief I.S. Whitlock said that the streets were “unusually quiet” on Sunday because so many people were glued to their television sets. Ruth Zimmerman, who lived on New Hope Road, said “It was wonderful. I’m just glad we were the first to get there,” while Stuarts Draft’s Steve Humphreys exclaimed “I just couldn’t believe what I was seeing.”

On Tuesday three space headlines marked the Waynesboro paper’s front page: “Spacemen Streaking Homeward,” “Door of Space Frontier Now Open Wide,” and “Au Revoir Eagle, Brave Moon Bird.”

The next day, Wednesday, the top headline proclaimed that the “Spacecraft On Perfect Path Home.” By that day, too, the magnitude of the accomplishment had set in. Celebration was replaced by pride, especially in Waynesboro where many in the area had a personal stake in the lunar mission’s success. The headline on Wednesday, July 23 said as much: “Three City Firms Play Role in Moon Mission.” Those three firms? DuPont (now the Lycra Company), Virginia Panel, and G.E.

What I remember of that summer day and what my family felt was no different than others felt around the world, but here in this area, there were many who were, perhaps, even more on the edge of their seats and their hearts must have swelled just a little more than most with pride because of their personal role in the moon shot. There were dozens of DuPont products used in the Apollo 11 mission, but two of the textile fibers were developed by DuPont’s Benger Lab in Waynesboro and one of those two was actually manufactured in the city. The first product was Nomex, a high-temperature Nylon used as a comfort liner in the spacesuits. Although it was developed in Waynesboro, it was actually manufactured at DuPont’s Richmond Plant.

The second product, Lycra-Spandex, was developed and manufactured in Waynesboro. The fiber was used to make the lightweight undergarments worn by the astronauts under their spacesuits. Both man-made, high-tech fibers in the astronauts’ spacesuits protected them from extreme heat and cold as well as radiation while they were on the moon.

Virginia Panel Corporation of Waynesboro contributed the specialized computer panels that created the ability to switch multiple circuits at the same time. Virginia Panel President John E. Taylor Jr. said that there were only three companies in the world that made such panels. At the time of the moon mission, the company had 85 employees and was named the Small Business Subcontractor of the Year by the U.S. Small Business Administration – the first Virginia business ever to receive such an honor. The circuit panels produced in Waynesboro were in use at both Houston and Cape Kennedy during the Apollo mission.

According to a NASA spokesman, Virginia Panel’s equipment was the “nerve center of the Houston mission control. We could not hope to send men to the moon without the role played by such firms as this one.”

The third Waynesboro company with a stake in the mission was General Electric whose electrical relays were used in the lunar module. The locally-produced equipment allowed for the distribution of the lunar module’s electrical power. G.E.’s connection to NASA went back many years. In fact, Astronaut Michael Collins, who was the Apollo 11 pilot, had visited the Waynesboro factory in the fall of 1964.

Waynesboro's lunar module program employed more than 100 people and featured a special "clean room" where exhaustive testing took place. "Here in Waynesboro we must test equipment under conditions that exceed the flight condition extremes," said H.S. Sechrist, manager of G.E.'s Aerospace Electrical Control Business Section in Waynesboro. By Thursday, the excitement was dying down, but the lure of the moon still grabbed the newspaper's top headline: "MOON HEROES RETURN SAFELY."

By the end of the week, the world had returned to normal. The Vietnam War still raged on, and within a few weeks Waynesboro and the surrounding area would have other things to think about as Hurricane Camille came to town. But the events that had taken place during July of 1969 changed the world. Science and Technology were now pointed toward an unimaginable future, but it was a future that was built, at least partially, on the innovation, ingenuity, and inspiration, that took place in Waynesboro, Virginia.