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Quantum fluctuations in space, science, exploration and other cosmic fields... served up regularly by MSNBC.com science editor Alan Boyle since 2002.



Alan Boyle covers the physical sciences, anthropology, technological innovation and space science and exploration for MSNBC.com. He is a winner of the AAAS Science Journalism Award, the NASW Science-in-Society Award and other honors; a contributor to "A Field Guide for Science Writers"; and a member of the board of the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing.

Check out Boyle's biography or send a message to Cosmic Log via cosmiclog@msnbc.com.

YOUR MOONSHOT MEMORIES

Posted: Monday, July 20, 2009 7:52 PM by Alan Boyle



Courtesy of Bob Bickers

The Bickers family sits around the television on July 20, 1969, in their home in Memphis, Tenn. From left are Bob, William, Linda and Alice Fay Bickers. Robert Sr. took the picture.

Even the **highest-resolution camera** in orbit around the moon can't make out the mark left behind by Neil Armstrong's "one small step" 40 years ago - but NASA's giant leap left a huge mark on men and women around the globe. For proof, all you have to do is page through the more than 1,400 messages answering the question posed 10 days ago: "**Where were you when Apollo flew?**"

The reminiscences about July 20, 1969, came from Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, India and Australia. Some were at the Boy Scouts' National Jamboree in Idaho and remember gathering around radios and TV sets in their tents to witness history. "As soon as we heard 'Houston, the Eagle has landed,' a huge cheer from all 50,000-plus went up from all around the park, echoing off the hills, for several minutes," Dave Robertson Jr. recalled.

Some were in Europe, and basked in the adulation that citizens of other nations had for the American spirit on that day: "An Italian embraced me and proclaimed, 'Americani, Astronati, La Luna, La Luna!'" Hal Ackerman wrote.

Many happened to be on the battlefield on that day (and some were imprisoned in North Vietnam, as Sen. John McCain relates in **this "Nightly News" video**). The memories weren't pleasant. "I was in South Vietnam, slogging through the rice paddies," John Porter wrote from Arizona. "I actually didn't even hear about it until maybe a week later, and to be honest, I really didn't give a (expletive deleted), as I was just trying to stay alive."

For some, the Apollo achievement seemed to hold the promise of a "Jetsons" future that never came to pass. But for others, July 20, 1969, was a life-changing day - and not just because it was also the day they were born, or got engaged, or gave birth (or had their first period, as one woman wrote).

The experience sparked 40 years of imagination and inspiration for Bob Bickers, an artist and attorney in Murrysville, Pa., who has immortalized that day in an exhibit of paintings and photographs currently **on display** at his local library.

For sharing his story below, and the photograph above, Bickers will be receiving a copy of Andrew Chaikin's coffee-table book about the Apollo adventure, "**Voices From the Moon.**" Here's Bickers' tale:

"I was 13 in Memphis, and anyone visiting my room would think they were were in an unofficial branch of Mission Control. I had miniature models of Apollo spacecraft being tracked across huge moon maps, and a library of space books and magazines on every aspect of the Apollo program.

"I had been closely following the space race since the early 1960s, watching the Mercury astronauts rocket into space. On the afternoon of July 20, 1969, my hands sweated along with everyone else as the Eagle landed. I stepped outside the house and saw traffic on the road and was incredulous that these people were oblivious to the moon landing.

"That night, our family watched on the TV set and finally pulled a mattress into the den to watch the mission coverage all the way through. **Here's a picture of us** all around the TV that night (I am the one holding our dog).

"Years later, I never did become an astronaut. I became an attorney instead, but I also became skilled as an artist and now I have an art show and tribute to that special mission, called 'Apollo 11 - 40 Years a Memory.' More on that can be found at BobBickers.net and on **my blog**. The moon landings have fueled my imagination all these years while waiting for us to return. I hope I will see that day soon."

Forrest Bennett of Memphis, Tenn., told a tale that sounds too good to be

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true. I checked with the National Air and Space Museum, and the staff members there couldn't immediately find the evidence to back up his story. They'd love to talk with Forrest if he's stopping by the museum (but don't worry, Forrest, you're not in trouble):

"I was 6 years old at the time and living in the neighborhood just south of Houston that was home to most of the personnel that worked around the clock in Mission Control at Johnson Space Center. I remember my dad taking Polaroid snapshots of the television screen as Neil Armstrong stepped off of the ladder on the lunar module and onto the moon's stark surface while uttering those famous words. I also remember there being a raucous block party soon after the successful return to Earth of the Apollo 11 command capsule. Imagine if you will a couple of hundred geeks running on adrenaline and alcohol, and you pretty much have the complete picture.

"Our next-door neighbor - whose name I have long forgotten, but whose contribution to my interest in science and space will never be forgotten - was mission director of one of the later Apollo missions. He was a junior director on the Apollo 11 mission and as such had complete access to the mission plans and gave my dad a printout from the massive mainframe computer that showed in ASCII characters the flight path of the entire mission from liftoff to splashdown. Unfortunately that now-priceless document was destroyed when a pipe burst in our home years later and flooded the basement where it was stored.

"An even more poignant memory of 'Jeffrey's dad' which is how I always remember my neighbor, is when the command module returned to Houston on the back of a flatbed semi; he took my dad, his son Jeffrey and me to see the ship that had carried Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins into history. Jeffrey and I actually climbed into and all over the capsule as it sat strapped to the flatbed truck. Then, being boys, we left our own marks on history ... we scratched our initials into the carbon scoring on the edge of the heat shield and promised never to tell anyone.

"Years later, as a teenager, I visited the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum - and there in the front entrance, **encased in plexiglass for all the world to see**, sat the capsule and my initials. I broke my promise to Jeffrey at that moment and showed my dad what we had done. I couldn't tell if he was incredulous or proud or both, but I will never forget the look on his face as I pointed out the tiny scratches spelling out my initials FAB.

"Believe it or not, it's true.

"I am going to be taking my own teenager to visit the Air and Space Museum on July 20, and if I am lucky the capsule will still be there and I can show here where her dad left his mark on history."

We received several comments from people who were actually involved in the Apollo 11 mission on the ground (or at sea). Here are a couple of them, beginning with a tale from Ron Holland of Centreville, Md.:

"At the time of Apollo 11 moon landing, I was an operations control shift supervisor at the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center. Working for RCA Corp., as a contractor for the NASA Space Tracking And Data Acquisition Network (STADAN), I was fortunate to have a front-row seat not only for the entire Apollo program, but also most of the Gemini missions before Apollo.

"Being able to hear 'real-time' communications between spacecraft and 'ground' was always interesting technically and exciting personally.

"There is one part of my first lunar landing experience that I want to make crystal clear. It is what Mr. Neil Armstrong *really* said as he made his first historic step onto the lunar surface. I heard this in real-time, clearly, on a 5/5 circuit, and firsthand. He said; 'One small step for *man*...' and not, as some P.C. wonks, manipulating revisionists of history would like us to believe, '**one small step for a man.**' Good grief!

"Mr. Armstrong, whom I met and shook hands with shortly after his return, later said that he 'meant' to say 'a man,' but it came out as '*man*,' without an "A". It's a small thing, but such are the fine points of history. And to think I was there to hear and see it all as it happened. Personally, I prefer the all-inclusive and global '*man*.'"

"With a total of 35 years, working for NASA and NOAA space programs, I retired in 2003 after serving on the Hubble Space Telescope for 15 years. First, at Johns Hopkins University, Space Telescope Science Institute, in Baltimore, then planning and scheduling HST servicing missions, and finally consulting for NASA's chief engineer at NASA HQ in D.C.

"However, I'll never forget that night in July. The rest of my career was 'gravity.'"

And here's another inside view from Edward Brann, who was at Mission Control in Houston for Apollo 11 (and Apollo 7, 8, 9, 10, 12 and 13):

"... The oversight contract I was working on reviewed the integration of the various Apollo systems. My job was to validate the integration of the landing and rendezvous radar systems to the Primary Guidance and Navigation System on the lunar module. This also included the integration of the radar data into the navigation programs. This started my introduction to and lifelong affiliation with digital computers.

"The Primary Guidance and Navigation System was designed at MIT and built by Raytheon. It must be stated that the Primary computers on both the command module (CM) and lunar module (LM) never failed during a flight. Compared to the powerhouses we put on our desks, the computers on the LM or CM were antiques. By the time I came on board, the programming demands had expanded the computer to 4,000 words of RAM (random access memory) and 37,000 words of ROM (read-only memory).

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"I would bench check the navigation programs and if a section needed further testing, we would schedule some time on the LM simulator. We would get it 'after hours' since it was the same one that the astronauts trained in during the day. The simulator area had simulators for both the command module and lunar module, which for training purposes could be linked together. The movie 'Apollo 13' depicted this simulation area with about 90 percent accuracy.

"Sometimes a contractor goes beyond the letter of the programming contract specs because it makes sense. MIT had designed the major programs with restart check points, which saved the Apollo 11 landing on the moon. The landing guidance program was designed to run in a two-second cycle. When it was started, it would schedule itself to start again in two seconds. It would normally be finished with a cycle by the time the scheduler started it again. During the final phase of the landing profile, the computer was running at 90 percent capacity.

"During Apollo 11's final landing phase, a switch had been left in the wrong position, which caused an abnormal number of computer interrupts. This caused the computer to run at 105 percent of capacity and cause a restart. This happened about nine times on the way down, and the hard call was to either let it continue or switch to the abort computer and head back to the command module. The programmers at MIT were following the telemetry and decided that the computer was functionally following the proper landing profile, which the controllers concurred with, and the rest is history.

"Where was I during all of this? In one of the back-back rooms provided for the contractors to follow the flight on the telemetry screens on the wall. For each controller position in the main control room, which we saw on TV or in movies, there was a back room with 10 to 12 people who backed up the controller position through the head sets. Then this back room was in contact with the associated back-back room where the contractors who built or checked the systems were available for consultation.

"I had prepared a LM mission profile document that integrated the astronaut flight plan with the telemetry readouts expected during different phases of the mission. I was following the landing by cross-referencing my profile with the telemetry displays to make sure that the LM was on the correct descent profile. At about 500 feet, Neil Armstrong took over the landing phase manually (computer-aided). If you listen to that part of the landing, you can hear Buzz Aldrin calling out the feet per second down and horizontally. That was his job while Neil looked for a landing site. During that running call out of the displays, you will hear the comment 'low fuel level light.' This light indicated that the computer had calculated 30 seconds of fuel left.

"The landing phase seemed to last forever from that point until the touchdown indicator came on and they cut the engine. There were a lot of 'blue' faces as everyone - including myself - was holding his breath during those last few seconds. It was calculated after the fact that the LM had less than 10 seconds of fuel left at touchdown.
...

"A Web site readers might find interesting is [this one](#), which contains a transcript of the Apollo 11 landing phase with post mission comments by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin."

Here's how the day changed the lives of Leona T. Hill and her family:

"My future husband and I were sitting on a sofa watching the historic moment on TV. That was our date for the evening in lieu of attending the movie theatre. When the first moon step was taken, my husband made the comment that we needed to take a giant leap of our own and get married! What a romantic proposal, right? :) And so that journey we started 40 years ago continues today. Along the way we had four children, and ironically, two of them became computer software engineers for the international space station project and the shuttle program. Their wives were involved also! My husband *still* watches *all* of the NASA programs on TV and he is vitally interested in all aspects of space."

July 20, 1969, was also a doubly special day for Rick Sciapiti of Roseburg, Ore.:

"I was flying back on the 'Freedom Bird' to CONUS [continental U.S.] from the Republic of Vietnam. Landing in Japan for refueling, I, along with all the other returning soldiers, got off the aircraft. In the lobby of the airport, we saw people standing around looking at a television of Neil Armstrong standing on the moon's surface. I had just spent 366 days flying close aerial combat support with the 114th Assault Helicopter Co. as a crew chief and door gunner. I was completely out of touch with current events, and when I saw the image of Armstrong on the moon, I was speechless! I had no idea Apollo had taken off and was on a lunar mission. Today is the 40th anniversary of my return from the War in Vietnam."

David Kamerath of Salt Lake City sent along this memory, plus a picture:

"July 20th, 1969, was hot and miserable in the rice paddies and murky canals along the Mekong River in Dinh Tuong Province, South Vietnam. I was on a combat mission with an infantry security force consisting mostly of Vietnamese Regional Forces. I halted the patrol long enough to press a small Sony battery-powered radio to my ear and listened to the first lunar landing.



Courtesy of David Kamerath

David Kamerath on duty in South Vietnam in 1969.

"I was so very proud at that moment and I wondered at the beauty of such an accomplishment. For me, that was an exciting and an encouraging event. In the midst of the heat and misery of a combat patrol, I was hearing one of the most significant events to date in modern history. I was so very proud then, as I am now, of the privilege it is to be an American citizen.

"NOTE: The attached photograph was taken at about the same time and place, but was probably not the same day as the lunar landing."

Several commenters posed the question, "If we could land a man on the moon, why couldn't we win the Vietnam War?" Here's an example from John Clay in Virginia:

"I was on a denuded mountaintop in the Northern I Corps of Vietnam overlooking the DMZ, wondering if they could accomplish a trip to the moon, why couldn't they end the war?"

Kay Sorensen of Salem, Wis., had a different twist on the "if we could land a man on the moon..." question:

"We were visiting my sister and brother in law in Hammond, Indiana. When they landed on the moon, my husband declared that if they could land on the moon, he could stop smoking. He opened the door and threw out his pipe and never smoked again. The moon landing and quitting smoking will always be indelibly linked for our family."

Here's another life-changing story, from Greg McCauley of Indianapolis:

"I was a high school senior in a small Midwest town and was overcome by the magnitude of that event. Two years later, in April 1971, my best friend and I quit college, packed a suitcase, and, with \$100 each, flew off to get a job at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston. Everyone thought that we were totally nuts and that you had to be a rocket scientist to work for the Apollo lunar program. They thought we would fail and eventually come back home to live out normal lives like everyone else. We swore we would not come home until we were working for NASA.

"Seven months and many odd jobs later, we both got jobs in the Mission Planning and Analysis Division at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston. We were 21 years old, had secret clearances and were absolutely in the middle of it all for Apollo 15, 16 and 17. We worked on exciting projects and even witnessed the launches from the floor of Mission Control.

"Those were very exciting times in our lives and proved to us that the American Dream is still alive - you can do whatever you set your mind to doing. Today, as a private business owner, I believe in the power of the human spirit. Anyone can achieve their dreams if they just have the courage to pursue them."

The event was an inspiration to people in other countries as well, as illustrated by Remigius Dias' story:

"The year that man landed on the moon, I was in the final year of finishing high school. Schools in most parts of India at that time did not infuse much enthusiasm in students about the wonders of science. Just that science was one of the subjects which had to be covered to go through school and enter college.

"My interest was to listen to music and news programs over the radio. TV was not introduced in Bombay, India, at that time. Newspaper reports too lagged behind some of the U.K. and U.S. papers, but they did report preparations of the Americans to overtake the Russians in their bid to land a man on the moon. ... That historic day, I did not attend school but was glued to the radio receiver hearing live commentary from VOA [Voice of America]. Although the reception was not so good, with many breaks in between, it was a great way to participate in this historic event.

"The day after Armstrong and Aldrin landed on the moon, the Free Press Journal newspaper carried only a single headline on its front page something about two inches in size in red: 'Man Lands on Moon.'

"I can proudly say that was what motivated me to take up science after my schooling, although I didn't pursue higher studies, but managed to qualify as an audio/video engineer. Wish I was in the USA, where opportunities abound to fulfill my dream of studying space science and being useful to the space program. ..."

I just love this message from Emnang Cletus in Ogoja, Nigeria:

"I was right in my village without a TV to watch the shuttle. But I dreamt man was constructing a railroad in the sky. Years later, I realized it was a vision of Apollo 11 that I saw. As a 7-year-old, I was perplexed how man could construct a railroad in the sky."

John Spring Hill, who lives in Florida, remembers an alien world on Earth:

John Spring Hill, who lives in Florida, remembers an alien world on Earth:

"I was in a naval hospital in Guam, getting my body fixed from being shot up in Vietnam. It was a lot scarier than the moon. But if you were near the DMZ, some areas looked like the moon. 2/9 ... Semper Fi."

Elizabeth Braun Andreini of Naples, Fla., had a sunnier memory that makes me wish I were there (I remember all those songs, by the way):

"I was in Kennebunkport, Maine, age 19, Summer of Love, for sure. We walked Kennebunk Beach that night, my Greek paramour and me (my first lover). Back home in Poland, Ohio, my older brother Doug and his girlfriend Margie were preparing his VW camper for Woodstock. Doug would not let my mother serve rice as it reminded him of Vietnam. Both my brothers were spared Vietnam, thank you, God. The Fifth Dimension 'Aquarius' was No. 1 on the charts, Gary Puckett and the Union Gap were No. 85 with 'This Girl Is a Woman Now,' and Sly and the Family Stone gave us 'Hot Fun in the Summertime.' I could write a book about that summer! Wow, thanks for asking!"

I definitely could write a book based on all the where-were-you comments we received as of today. Instead, I'll [point you toward the full item](#), and invite you to leave additional comments below. One additional note: I've edited the above comments, but I just haven't had time to clean up the spelling for the hundreds of other comments we've received. So as you page through the reminiscences, please forgive any errors you might see.

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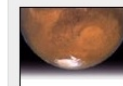


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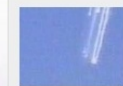
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Science

Asia will witness 21st century's longest eclipse

Millions of people across Asia will witness the longest total solar eclipse that will happen this century, as vast swaths of India and China are plunged into darkness Wednesday for about five minutes. [Full story](#)

Science, religion is theme in Galileo book

Apollo 11 anniversary



Courtesy of Bob Bickers

Moonshot memories

NEW It wasn't just the day men landed on the moon. It was also the day that people's lives were changed back on Earth.

Apollo 11 40 years later

After 40 years, get the back story behind that 'one small step' [Full story](#)



Tech and gadgets



Cooler features in digital cameras

These point-and-shoots have features that ratchet up the wow factor.

Free mobile TV coming soon



[above] Photo of the Bickers family gathered around the black & white television on the evening of July 20, 1969 in our home in Memphis, Tennessee. On the left is my brother, William, then me holding our dog, Tiger, and on the other side of the TV is my sister, Linda and my mother, Alice Fay. My father, Robert Bickers Sr. took the picture. My father took a number of pictures of us watching the Apollo 11 moon walk, but when he got a good image of the people, the TV screen was overexposed and blank. When he got a good image of the TV, the people came out too dark. Eventually my mother kept the pictures of the people and many years later I added the image of the moon walk to accurately portray what was actually on the screen when we posed for this picture. At right is a picture of my father taken in 1971.

-- Bob Bickers