

Historical Threads

Looking Back at the First Men on the Moon, July 20, 1969

By Jay M. Jones

Sunday, July 20, 1969 was the landing of the first two astronauts onto the moon. At 8:56 p.m. Mountain Daylight Time, Neil Armstrong became the first man to set foot on the moon, and he uttered the famous words "That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind" as hundreds of millions around the world watched on television.

Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins were the astronauts aboard Apollo 11 that launched on July 16, 1969 from Cape Kennedy in Florida. Four days later, Armstrong and Aldrin descended to the moon in the Lunar Module while Collins remained in orbit around the moon in the Command Module that would return them to earth at the completion of the mission.

I asked a few people before the 4th of July Parade in Cedar City to relate what they remembered of that event 50 years ago.

Jim, originally from Austin, Texas, was serving in the military in Germany. He remembers Armstrong's statement and a feeling of pride. Meanwhile, his daughter watched the event from her grandmother's home in Ohio.

Gary watched on a black and white TV in Delta, Utah as a nine-year-old. He remembers Walter Cronkite describing the events, and a feeling of pride in America more than the specific details of the occasion.

Jeanette, then 6 years old, doesn't remember many details, except that her dad pulled her out of bed to watch it on TV. (My cousin, about the same age, was upset that her dad didn't let her watch it because it was past her bedtime.)

David, now from Enoch, was just out of the army as he watched it on TV.

George watched on TV in American Fork, where he was working at Goodyear Tire. He had graduated from Panguitch High School and BAC (now SUU) and had served in Korea with the National Guard. He remembers the event as "really something."

Cletus from Enterprise remembers it was wonderful having all of the family together watching the first steps, and that it was really a big thing. Paul and Karen were a young couple in Cedar City with 3 kids, and it was really exciting watching the landing as a family.

I remember my grandmother's brother came over to my family's home to watch because he didn't own a TV. He was born in the horse and buggy days, before the development of the automobile. He was amazed as the automobile, the airplane, radio, television, and other technologies advanced over the years, but that night he repeatedly stated that he could not believe that he had lived long enough to see a man walk on the moon.

Not everything went according to plan during the lunar landing mission. On their landing approach, Armstrong and Aldrin noticed that they were passing landmarks on the moon a few seconds before they were expected to. Armstrong noticed that instead of a smooth flat area planned for landing, they were heading toward a crater with large rocks and steep slopes. He took manual control and guided the Eagle (the name for the Apollo 11 Lunar Module) to a better landing site. Information available to the crew indicated only 25 seconds of landing fuel left after their safe set down.

Upon arrival, Armstrong radioed Mission Control, "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed." Charles Duke at Mission Control responded: "Roger, Twan - Tranquility, we copy you on the ground. You got a bunch of guys about to turn blue. We're breathing again. Thanks a lot."

Many things are known today that were not publicly known at the time of the first manned lunar landing 50 years ago this month. For a fascinating account looking back at this amazing accomplishment, see <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-you-didnt-know-about-apollo-11-mission-fifty-years-ago-180972165/>



United States postage stamp issued in 1969 to commemorate the landing of the first man on the moon.