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## Moon memories

### Apollo 11 gave Houstonians hope

By JENNIFER LATSON  
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Associated Press file

A footprint left by an Apollo 11 astronaut sat on the surface of the moon in 1969.

*On the evening of July 20, 1969, Houstonians watched breathlessly as the impossible unfolded.*

*The moon landing made a crater-sized impact on a national consciousness scarred, at the time, by years of turbulence and tragedy. In one small step, an astronaut reached the zenith of a decade's technological pursuits.*

*All the world had the same vantage as the mission played out on the celestial stage. But the stage crew that put it in motion worked from behind a curtain in our own backyard.*

*Even those who missed seeing it live on television remember where they were that day. Here are some of their memories:*

#### LINDA WUEST, executive director of the World Affairs Council of Houston

Linda Wuest was home in Houston on break from her classes at the University of California, Berkeley, and optimistic that the riots, assassinations and war that dominated her college years would give way to a better world. The moon landing helped fuel her optimism.

"It takes your breath away even to recall it," she said. "At that moment, anything seemed possible."

Wuest, now 59, watched a rebroadcast of the landing with her father, an engineer, and her mother, an attorney.

"She thought this was the natural progression of a forward-looking society," Wuest remembered. "This was what America was all about."

"My dad thought this could have gone either way. He was very somber. He knew that a lot could go wrong. He said something like, 'I hope we don't take this for granted.'"

#### BOB LANIER, Former mayor of Houston

When Neil Armstrong addressed his first words from the moon to Houston, Bob Lanier felt a thrilling surge of pride.

The future mayor had just begun to dabble in politics in 1969, but he recognized what an accomplishment the moon landing was for his country and his city.

"This wasn't 'Houston, we have a problem.' This was 'Houston, the Eagle has landed,'" Lanier said.

Despite the risks, he never doubted Apollo 11 would succeed. He compared it to rooting for a favorite sports team.

"Even when the odds are against you, you believe in your team," said Lanier, now 84. "Of course, you've got to have a good team to be that confident. I really believed Kennedy had successfully put a team together that could do it. The people I knew in Houston's space program were particularly competent people."

When Armstrong took those first steps, Lanier said, it felt like watching his team win the World Series. In this game, though, there was no losing team.

"This team was the whole country."

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President Barack Obama will host the Apollo 11 crew on Monday, the 40th anniversary of man's first landing on the moon. The event is one of only two that will feature the entire crew, Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin. The other is a lecture at the Smithsonian Institution Sunday night. - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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This team was the whole country.

#### **BUM PHILLIPS, retired pro football coach who led the Houston Oilers from 1975 to 1980**

Bum Phillips didn't get to see the first steps on the moon: Football practice took priority.

Phillips, then the defensive coordinator for the San Diego Chargers, was preparing for an evening of pre-season practice. He and the other assistant coaches had gathered around an office TV to watch what they could of the landing. Just as Armstrong began his descent from the lunar module, they were interrupted.

"The head coach came in and said, 'Time for practice,'" Phillips, now 85, recalled. "It wouldn't have taken two minutes for us to see somebody actually step on the moon, but we missed it." No one dared question the coach's decision. They didn't speak of it after the whistle blew. "Football was more important than moonwalking, according to the head coach," Phillips said.

It was still a proud day, he recalls.

"Anything that can take you away from football makes an impression on you," Phillips said. "It made me proud that our country was able to do it. I wasn't sure why we wanted to, but it made me proud that we did."

#### **JOE BLACK, retired U.S. Navy, chief petty officer**

Joe Black was taking a rare break from his post on a Navy destroyer, offshore in Vietnam, for a week of R&R in Yokosuka, Japan.

He watched the landing on TV with his colleagues in the chief's

club on base.

That day was a respite from war — a brief glimpse of good news in the midst of a bitter conflict.

"I remember how proud we were at the accomplishment," said Black, now 74 and living in Madison County. "Apollo 11 was a big boost."

#### **KIRBYJON CALDWELL, senior pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church**

At 15, on summer vacation, Kirbyjon Caldwell took less note of what was happening beyond the atmosphere than what was happening here on Earth.

Caldwell, who went on to build a small Methodist congregation into a megachurch, doesn't have a clear memory of the moon landing itself. What sticks in his memory are the reactions of his relatives and neighbors.

"I recall as clearly as if it were yesterday: My great-aunt, who was about 75 years old at the time, said, 'That man is no more on the moon than I am right now.' She would not believe it. I, of course, did, but I wasn't going to argue with a 75-year-old woman."

Others were skeptical, not of the event, but of its significance.

"Folks were trying to figure out, 'OK, what's next? Are we going to move people to the moon?' They weren't sure about the other shoe that was about to drop."

#### **DAVE WARD, KTRK (Channel 13) anchor**

Years of covering NASA's Gemini and Apollo programs as a television reporter made Dave Ward keenly aware of everything that could go wrong. The year before, he had watched Neil Armstrong eject from a simulator just moments before crashing. And that was on Earth.

"I didn't think they had a chance of landing that thing on the moon," Ward, now 70, recalled. "I really didn't."

Ward, who was in his second year as anchor at KTRK, was grateful he didn't have to speak as the station aired NASA's live footage of the lunar landing. He couldn't.

"With those guys coming down on the moon, and we hear them giving fuel warnings, and their computer overloaded in the last few seconds: I was literally holding my breath. We were all holding our breath.

"When he came on and said, 'The *Eagle* has landed,' everyone went berserk."

Forty years later, it's still the most momentous news story Ward has covered. He assures conspiracy theorists that he wasn't broadcasting from a sound stage in the desert.

"I guarantee you that."

#### **BERTHA RODRIGUEZ, administrator in Halliburton's Law Department**

Bertha Rodriguez was 12 years old when she watched the moon landing on the black-and-white TV at her grandfather's Houston home. The event exposed a philosophical rift between her science-minded father and her conservative grandfather.

"He just could not believe it was happening," Rodriguez recalled of her grandfather. "He said it was not true: The media was making fools out of us, and we were fools for believing it."

Rodriguez's father just laughed. She followed suit. Her grandfather was so offended he asked them both to leave.

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"My dad always felt historical events were a great part of the educational process," she said. "He felt it was very important that I sit and watch this event."

She never discussed it further with her grandfather.

"My grandfather, bless his heart, passed away believing that piece of history never happened."

**BRENT SPINER, actor best known for *Star Trek: The Next Generation***

In 1969, before Brent Spiner traveled through space on the Starship Enterprise, he was making his professional theater debut in the chorus of a Houston musical.

That July, the Bellaire High School grad came down with mononucleosis and took a hiatus from rehearsals. When the lunar module landed, Spiner's temperature was pushing 105.

"I was in bed and then kind of woke up in a delirium," he said. "The television was on and Neil Armstrong was walking on the moon. I watched it for a few minutes and then sunk back into unconsciousness."

For all Spiner knew, the moonwalk could have been a fever dream.

"I wasn't sure I had seen what I had actually seen," he said. "It was about two days later that I finally found out it had happened."

Spiner, now 60, was too sick to appreciate the momentousness of the occasion; his pain was more pressing at the time.

"Tears did come to my eyes," he said, "but mostly because my throat was so sore."

**LAWRENCE CURRY JR., professor emeritus of history at the University of Houston**

Lawrence Curry was a year into his teaching career at UH, where his signature course then was the same as now: U.S. history, post World War II. In it, he teaches that the goals of the moon landing were more political than scientific.

"After Sputnik, the U.S. had a depressed feeling that we weren't the best in the world anymore. The Soviet Union seemed always to be getting a jump on us. This was an effort to pump up the American spirit, and it succeeded."

Despite a seasoned skepticism, Curry, now 74, remembers being awestruck in the moment. He even took photos of his TV screen as Armstrong took his historic steps. "I had two young sons; they were 7 and 5. I remember my wife and I waking them up to look at the TV. They didn't seem to think it was particularly important. They also didn't appreciate being woken up."

Forty years later, he is still occasionally astonished it was possible.

"I can remember looking at the moon when it was full, and thinking, 'I cannot believe we sent somebody up there, who got off a spacecraft and walked around on that surface. Maybe if I were an engineer, and not a historian, I would have understood it better.'"

**ANITA GRAY, Houston legal secretary**

Anita Gray was fixated on the moon that night. Even at 9 years old, she knew something big was happening. Her mother switched the TV on and off all day, anxiously watching the news feeds. When the astronauts landed, her mother called her in to watch. "We both sat glued to the set while this unimaginable thing transpired before our very eyes," Gray said. "It was like being in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*."

She had already learned that her hometown was called "Space City." That day she understood why. Afterward, she raced outside to see if she could spot the rocket, or the men, on the moon's face.

"It was just a strange feeling to know that somewhere — way, way out there — there were men on the moon."

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