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Spacemobile by George Johnson. Written 2001.

Spacemobile
by George Johnson

When I came to the Spacemobile in the early 70s, the space program was still held in awe. This was especially true of young people and the scientific community. Coming off the success of Project Apollo moving into Skylab and Apollo-Soyuz, NASA had the interest of students everywhere. Unfortunately, that interest and enthusiasm did not extend to the US Congress or educational leaders. As the nation struggled with Viet Nam and other events of the 70s, space exploration took a back seat. The schools changed focus away from the sciences and math toward the social sciences. Congress was more interested in social programs than The Space Program. The Spacemobile job became more difficult. We were put in the position of justifying the one-percent of the federal budget that NASA spent. Rather than presenting space science as advancing knowledge and The Space Program as Man's Greatest Adventure, we were forced to justify NASA projects as to benefits here and now. Thus we came to "spin-offs". Fortunately, we had a group of people who were up to the task.

Bob Workman in Houston and Dr. Wiggins at OSU hired me in the summer of '73. I came to the program with five years of science teaching experience, a pilot's license, and great enthusiasm. However, I soon learned that I was really a naive kid from southern Colorado. My first commercial airline flight was to Houston for an interview. The second trip was to NASA HQ in Washington, D.C. This was real culture shock when compared to Canon City, Colorado.

Spacemobile was about people. We took the space program to people in the classroom, in auditoriums, at the Rotary and Lyons club luncheons, in the planetarium, at the shopping mall, on radio and TV, in prison, and even, on occasion, at the bar. Anywhere that people wanted to know about space, Spacemobile was there. Although we were treated with deference on military installations, space science specialists knew no rank. We talked with kindergarten students and governors, talk show audiences and United States Senators, all with ease. The numbers were all important to our people in Washington, who had to justify our existence. To this day the joke is to give mileage and audience numbers when I call Jim Poindexter. My first words are two million and 75,000 miles. In those days, out of the Johnson Space Center, each of us talked to 30,000 to 35,000 people per month. The largest live audience I ever addressed was the cadet wing of the United States Air Force Academy.

The people we met along the way made our presentations possible. Many of these educators, students, and community leaders are friends to this day. One of these stands out in particular, my wife Maureen. When some one from Houston had to give presentations in the Kansas City area, I received the honor. The reason was that I was the junior member of the group and no one wanted to go to Kansas City. It was on this trip that I gave the Spacemobile presentation at the school where Maureen taught. Maureen not only became my wife but also a friend of the rest of the "Houston crew."

If Spacemobile was about people it was also about travel, lots of travel. How long does it take to drive a government issue Dodge van from Houston, Texas to Minot, North Dakota? Where is the motel run by the Indians? Where did we get the

great corn beer soup? Have you ever driven an U.S. Government van to Wounded Knee? Is there any place to stay in Lemmon, South Dakota? Why did the specialist carry pipe wrenches and Lysol disinfectant? Jim Poindexter, Nelson Erlich, or Tom Hill can answer all of these questions.

Then there were the models! We carried models of launch vehicles, The Space Shuttle, Skylab, various aircraft, telemetry, Landsat, and space probs. The models made up the heart of the presentation. However, some were not made for travel and were quite fragile. Many hours and gallons of glue were used to keep the models together. Landsat was especially difficult to keep from falling apart. Many times on the road specialists would get together on weekends and repair "the models." Nelson was the expert on model repair.

The Space Science Specialist is a very unique person, someone who works very hard but also plays hard. The long drives to locations that are not even on most maps were offset by trips to launches, Community Programs, Airlifts and "the conference." The conference was an annual gathering of all those associated with the project. It was rotated among the various NASA centers. The stated reason was so we could learn more about each center's projects. Probably, no one could handle the group two years in a row. There are many stories associated with these gatherings. Some are best left in the memories of those who were there. But others are now considered classics. Mike Donahoe was awarded The Rip Van Winkle award for his great performance during a presentation on ball bearings at The Lewis Research Center. There are several great stories about the teachers' airlift out of Oklahoma. We left most of the Oklahoma Air Guard's C-124s disabled around the country. George Pope tried to buy gunpowder in the Washington DC area in the late 60s. When asked why he needed it his answer was "for a demonstration." The one that we enjoyed the most was the arrest of Tom Hill during a planning meeting for a community program in Tulsa.

We will never forget John Donaldson's steaks. Tom Hill's practical jokes are remembered with mixed feelings. Jim Poindexter seemed to know everyone on site from Chris Kraft to the janitor who swept the floor in building 2. We all recall Berta's great concern for "her guys." Nelson Erlich's drive to have everything just right and the models in good shape became a kind of legend. Dennis Ammon brought pure enthusiasm to Spacemobile. Fred Kubesch was always "just glad to be here." Like Fred, I am just glad that I was there!