

OSU/NASA Education Projects: Aerospace Education Services Program (AESP) Archive

Oklahoma State University-Stillwater, Oklahoma

Spacemobile Recollections by Kerry Joels. Written 2001.

Spacemobile Recollections
By Kerry Joels

Many stories come to mind when I reflect on my times working for OSU in the service of our nation's space education efforts. Bill Nixon made me aware of the OSU program when I took my college astronomy class to the Cape on a field trip in March of 1970.

I contacted Dr. Wiggins and was invited to Washington D.C. for an interview that June. When I arrived, and had spoken with Dr. Fred Tuttle and Ev Collin, Dr. Wiggins offered me a job based on my "Master's degree and three years of teaching experience" –the first time I had hear of that requirement. Whoops! I had only two years experience and no job! The good Doctor offered my an assistantship on the spot to get my doctorate at OSU. Then left the room. Jerry Miller who had accompanied Dr. Wiggins to Washington on that trip was there. I asked him: "is this a good deal?" The deacon looked at me in a fatherly way and said: "Son, you'd be a fool not to take this offer." Thank you Dr. Miller, you were right.

It is gratifying to know that I brought some enjoyment to my colleagues as well. At OSU I reported to the Quonset hut that housed the graduate students and was given a desk. It was decided that the "new guy" could not really be a spacemobiler until he could handle one of the old stick shift Chevy trucks – the "Blue B%##&hes" as they was affectionately known. So, to the entertainment of all, I had to learn to back the truck through the maze behind the huts. There was much shaking of heads and laughter before they told me about the nice new automatic Ford Econolines we actually used.

Then there was my training. I was sent out with Bobby Jones to a local Stillwater elementary school to observe and learn how to set up. At the next program, I gave about five minutes of the presentation. The third day Bobby told me to meet him at another school. If he was a bit late, just get the setup started. He never showed. I was a spacemobiler.

I could share other memories of lessons learned and people who became good friends and others I've known through the years, Bobby Jones, Ron Oines, Jerry Miller, Harry Herzer, Dennis McLaughlin, Larry Bilborough, Steve Marks, Clarice Lolich, Garth Hull, Mike Donohoe, Bill Horvath, Ben Cassados, George Pope, Jack Bannister, Ransom Ritter, Louis De La Vina. Ah yes, Louis. I decided to do a Spanish aerospace lesson for one of my television directing projects. Louis was going to use the manned launch vehicles and walk around a TV stage stopping at the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo launch vehicles and describe the missions. The program was to be 15 minutes long. Louis was given two stage directions. One – like pulling taffy would tell him to stretch out his remarks. A hand twirling like a lasso meant speed it up. Each of the three rocket models was to take about five minutes of airtime. Well, Louis spent 12 minutes on Mercury. So when he got to Gemini, with only three minutes left, the stage manager was waving his lasso signal wildly to get him to speed up. Wrong move. Louis went into his "Speedy Gonzales" mode and the camera chased him wildly for the next three minutes. At the end, he looked into the camera with wild eyes and smiled.

No reminiscence would be complete without a few words about Ken Wiggins. No one who attended his retirement dinner in

Washington could fail to be awed by the number of lives he touched, and the good he has done. He was a politician, a mentor, a father, an advisor, a counselor, a therapist, a taskmaster, a leader, a manager, and a scholar. In the citation for his lifetime achievement award from the Board of Governors of the National Space Club, it was noted that the program he directed reached tens of millions of students and hundreds of thousands of teachers.

He also built a huge body of research around the impact of aerospace on education, and produced a phalanx of people who have contributed significantly to our country's efforts to encourage more people to support and join our nation's technology enterprise. We have all heard the stories of people who saw a school program, or attended a teacher workshop and went on to a career involving science or technology. All of those stories would have been impossible but for the leadership style of Dr. Wiggins.

"The Wig" found creative people, and let us run with things. He would provide the resources, and let us rise to meet the challenges. He would fight the political and administrative battles, and let us do "our thing". He was always willing to help, to understand, to support, and to push. When I wrote my dissertation preface, I quoted a Russian proverb I heard from my grandmother: "Love is not a potato." I cited that the people who helped me with my dissertation, especially my advisor proved that whatever love was, it was definitely not a potato!. Later, I found out that there was a second part to that quotation: "Love is not a potato, you can't throw it out the window," You can't just discard relationships. They have to be built, nurtured, and allowed to grow on their own. Certainly Ken Wiggins has done this for so many of us.

Thank you, Ken.