

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

Oklahoma State University-Stillwater, Oklahoma

Remembrances of Spacemobile by Robert Jones. Written 2001.

Remembrances of Spacemobile

By Robert Jones

First, thank you for the opportunity to share some remembrances about the fantastic program that I knew as Spacemobile. I can honestly say it changed my life not once, but twice. I am probably not unique in this situation but I did serve two different tours with Spacemobile. In between I put in a stint at NASA as a contract representative and a civil servant. Therefore, while many of us left Spacemobile to go to work for an aerospace contractor or NASA itself, I left NASA to return to Spacemobile. I would ask this question, did anybody else do this? I doubt it. Let me tell you how it happened.

When I first went to work on Spacemobile, the initial contract had just ended and Unitec had taken over the operation. Under Unitec management, I saw the operation change from a small, almost family atmosphere, to a business. There were a lot of retired military personnel when I arrived, and three years later when I left Spacemobile to become a consultant to the new Manned Flight Awareness Program at Manned Spacecraft Center, most of the military presence was gone from Spacemobile and there was an infusion of young, dynamic aerospace educators. I saw this change, experienced it and embraced it. Traveling across the country and giving students hands-on opportunities with the space program was exciting.

During the three years I was onsite at MSC, I stayed in touch with Spacemobile and as I completed my management internship with NASA, I met Ken Wiggins. This meeting really changed my life. As I look back tonight, how could one single person talk me into leaving a mid-management, lifetime career, civil service appointment with the most glamorous government agency that ever existed? I don't know how, but Ken Wiggins did it for me and I resigned from NASA to return to Spacemobile.

What can I say about Ken, Oklahoma State, and what has become the Aerospace Education Services Project? First, you need to understand that I hold a B.S. in Engineering Mathematics from the University of Oklahoma and played varsity golf against the hated Oklahoma A & M Cowboys from Stillwater. I had also taken many Coors-influenced vows as a Sooner to never set foot in Stillwater unless I was there for mischief! Somehow Ken persuaded me to throw away not only my lifetime NASA appointment but my blood-sworn allegiance to the Oklahoma Sooners. He convinced me that becoming a member of the OSU aerospace family was the right thing for me to do. I jumped at the chance to go to graduate school at OSU and I had a great time.

The Spacemobile Legacy

On balance, the big change I observed in Spacemobile came with the stability and the university association that Ken Wiggins brought to the program. As we all know, he is a fantastic human being and he loves Spacemobile. I was fortunate to be there when Ken and Spacemobile came together. Twenty-seven years later as I look back on my career at the university, my experiences with Spacemobile have been a constant source of support and inspiration in my work and it's a result of my time at OSU. We worked hard at OSU both in support of Spacemobile and in research and development as part of our

doctoral programs. From my vantage point, this is one major element of the Spacemobile legacy, the basic research and development that was funded, supported and disseminated by the doctoral program Ken Wiggins established and directed at Oklahoma State University. We as graduates of the program left OSU and spread across the nation. I came to Houston and started the Aerospace Institute. During the next 18 years more than a thousand teachers would spend two great weeks each summer at the space center immersed in aerospace technology and its implications for education. What a multiplier effect the OSU program had! I'm sure you'll hear some of the other stories, there are many.

An Anecdote

Finally, there are too many interesting anecdotes to remember, some very funny, a few sad. Getting detained by police in South Dakota for being in a bar with a Sioux Indian after midnight was a low point. Having to borrow two cents to get back across the bridge from Juarez at dawn was laughable. Throwing liquid oxygen on the snow after the Spacemobile had been impounded by police in Lincoln, Nebraska was a hoot. I told them never to tow one of these vehicles again, they all carried rocket fuel. They promised they wouldn't and I gave them astronaut pictures.

Of all the memorable experiences on Spacemobile, my favorite was the week I spent with Madame Jeannette Piccard in South Dakota. Madame Piccard of the famous Swiss exploration family was a friend of Bob Gilruth, the Director of Johnson Space Center. Her husband, Jean, had been Dr. Gilruth's major professor in college. I met her at a conference held at JSC and although we got off to a rocky start, we became friends and I enjoyed listening to her stories about her family and particularly about her own high altitude balloon flights. I remember she was limping around because she had broken her leg in a balloon flight that spring. It was with great surprise at the end of the week when my supervisor called me in and told me Madame Piccard would be joining me in South Dakota for a week on Spacemobile. A couple of weeks later, I picked her up at the Rapid City Airport and we spent a great week visiting and making presentations to local schools. Well into her 60's, Madame Piccard was full of energy and we got out early, worked hard and stayed up late. One night, after dinner, we went to the movie theater to see the 1960's remake of Beau Geste. After the film, we had a drink and discussed the film. I told her, "You know, I saw the original with Gary Cooper, Ray Milland and Brian Donlevy." She smiled and replied, "Bobby that was the second one, I saw the original silent film of Beau Geste starring Rudolph Valentino."

The night before she left, there was a light snow falling and she asked me to drive her out to the large natural bowl outside of Rapid City. There we got out of the Spacemobile and walked over to the monument where she told me the story of the air force officers who ascended from this site, breaking the altitude record she and her husband had held. It was a touching moment for both of us and I have a picture of her looking at the monument. She told me that week, she had one dream left and that was to become the first female member of the Episcopalian clergy. I did not think much about this at the time but many years later, I picked up a newspaper and there was a picture of Madame Piccard in all her regalia being inducted into the Episcopalian priesthood; what a lady! Jeannette Piccard had ascended to 57,559 feet in a pressurized gondola and truly was the first "Woman in Space." The date was October 23, 1934, three years before I was born and I keep her picture on my desk for inspiration.

I met and associated with many famous engineers, astronauts, writers and celebrities during this time and I enjoyed them all. Some of them are still good friends. However, that one intense week with this great lady always comes to the top when I revisit those days in my mind.