

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

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Secret Agent Spacemobiler by Mike Benjamin. Written 2001.

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By Mike Benjamin

I was a project school flight teacher in Norfolk, Virginia when I got the call from NASA Langley in 1976. They offered me this fabulous position at almost 50% more than I was making as a teacher. Naturally I thought it was a joke that some of my friends had concocted and turned them down. But they came back with more money and I figured out that these guys were for real. I accepted the position as the first "aeronauticsmobiler" and started what turned out to be the most fun, educational and exciting two years a twenty something year old single male can have.

Unlike the spacemobilers, I had the whole country to cover, and I literally travel the four corners of the continental U.S. My itinerary was to go to all the air shows I could schedule and fill in with colleges, universities, secondary schools (and one elementary school) and aerospace companies. The program was quite successful in speeding up the transfer of technology between the educational, aerospace and the experimental or homebuild aircraft industry. Even though it has been 25 years, I still see many of the friends I met at air shows when I get a chance to visit air shows now.

The Anecdote that I tell the most is the one involving the National Park system. Since I drove all over the country, I decided I would try to see as many of the National Parks I could. When I came up to the first park, I got out my money to buy an Eagle pass which would get me into every park for a year. The ranger took a look at the NASA motor vehicle (remember it was twenty-six feet long, painted red, white and blue) and said "I don't know if I can charge a government vehicle to enter the park?" I jumped on this immediately and told him I get in free. I then decided I would try to get into as many parks as I could without paying. I managed this for over a year until I went to Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota. There the ranger knew park policy, which was if the vehicle was there on official business, there was no charge. So naturally I told him I was on official NASA business. "What business?" he asked. I said, "You know that meteor shower last night." Knowing full well that a ranger would not admit a natural phenomenon happened that he wasn't aware of. "Well, yea, I did see part of it" he responded. I said, "I don't want to alarm anyone, but it wasn't a meteor. It was one of ours. I have some special equipment in the back and I am just going to cruise around the park very discretely and see if I pick up anything." Now this ranger was really excited and volunteered to get all of the rangers to help in my search. He asked "Just what are we looking for?" I could see that this was going to get out of hand so I said, "If you see a little monkey running around the park give me a shout." He looked at me like I was crazy and said, "You have got to be kidding me." "Yes" I replied and spilled the beans about how I have been getting into National Parks all over the country. "Well" he said, "you can add another one to your list, anyone who comes up with a story like that to sneak in a giant red, white and blue NASA motor home, deserves to get in free. Wait until the other rangers hear this one."

In case you are wondering a couple of months later a ranger at Badlands National Park said, "You have no official business here, the interstate is a couple of hundred yards away and is a much more direct route. You are just a tourist like everyone else. Now pay or turn around" So I finally got my eagle pass.

But, the story doesn't end there. A couple of years later I was on a trans continental flight and was entertaining the passengers in my row with this same tale. When I finished, the gentleman in the seat behind me reached up showed me his identification. He was the director of the National Park service. "I want to know the name of that Roosevelt ranger!" Startled I said, "I can't remember his name, and if I did I would not want to get him into trouble." The director said, "He would not get in trouble, but I could see the making of a fantastic practical joke." Fortunately or unfortunately I could remember his name.