

THEY REMEMBER WHERE THEY WERE THAT NIGHT

BY DENNY GAINER

The moon landing was one of those “Where were you when?” moments in history. Here are recollections from readers as told to USA TODAY’s Denny Gainer. Ages and locations given are from 1969. Audio from these interviews and more are available at usatoday.com.

Bill Wilhelm, 26, working for Grumman at Cape Canaveral

“On the day before the launch, NASA flew in, from Hawaii, Charles Lindbergh. This was about five years before his death. It was very moving to see Charles Lindbergh. I was very glad NASA had the foresight and the thoughtfulness to bring him there. He was tall, very aristocratic-looking, very intense, and was paying close attention to everything that the NASA people were telling him.”

Brian Davenport, 26, serving in Army in West Berlin

“We were kind of upset that we weren’t going to be able to watch it because of the duty. And some of the electronic repair guys thought that they could do something about it. So they got a small oscilloscope that had a green screen on it; it was only 6 or 8 inches across. And somehow they rigged that oscilloscope up to receive a TV signal. ... It was at a small area so only 30 to 40 guys could get around to see it. And everyone was just going crazy when they actually landed and started walking around.”

Steve Brozene, 16, at a Portland, Ore., hotel

“I looked across the hotel and saw a little black-and-white TV set. It was showing Neil Armstrong walking on the moon, and I froze, staring at this little box, fixated, for hours. ... The irony of this was I had the dubious honor of working with Neil Armstrong 10 years later in the only TV commercial he did — for Chrysler, shown on Super Bowl XIII in January of 1979. I was his stand-in, doing everything he did in the commercial. ... When he was there, I always kept my distance out of respect, until one day he approached me and he jokingly said, ‘You’re making me look bad, kid. You’re too good.’ And I said, ‘Well, sir, look at it this way: I never walked on the moon, so we can call it even.’ “

Cathy Learnard, 13, Colonial Heights, Va.

“It was my 13th birthday, and we were all very excited about the moon landing being on my birthday. We all watched the lunar landing. And we waited and waited and kept looking back at the television, and wondering when are they going to take that first moonwalk. ... We were all getting a little bit concerned that it was not going to happen until after midnight, which would be July 21st. My best friend, Janet, spent the night with me, and we stayed up and kept watching and kept saying, ‘Please get out of this thing.’ And finally it was 11 something. The door opened, and Neil Armstrong started out and he took his first step. And it was still July 20th.”

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Chris Volberding, 14, Security, Colo.

“It was extremely hot, and my parents were extremely poor. Dad had actually built his very own television that barely worked. It was hard to tell what was really going on, because the television was fading in and out. Of course, all was black-and-white back then.”

“The thing that I was so awed with was that there was someone actually on the moon, and getting off of this little thing and bouncing down the steps.”

Steve Tooley, 15, Jackson Hole, Wyo.

“In 1969, my parents took my three brothers and myself on a trip across the United States. It took 49 days. As we were going across the country, the astronauts took off in Apollo 11 to land on the moon. We had gotten to a place in Jackson Hole on July 20th, and we set up in a travel-trailer campground. My dad had a large TV antenna mounted to the outside of the trailer, and he and I were aiming the antenna at a television repeater at the top of one of the local mountains. ... We thought our snowy picture was just the result of poor reception. It wasn't until we got home and saw repeats of the same picture that we realized that the snowy pictures that we got were the same kind of snowy pictures that everybody got that evening.”

Roger L. Ruhl, 25, Phuoc Vinh, South Vietnam

“I found myself wondering about our country's priorities as Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. ... Seeing the end of a fruitless war was higher on my radar screen than space exploration. Five years later, and in the serenity of peacetime, I had a somewhat different perspective. I was promotional director for the Cincinnati Reds baseball team, and we had invited Neil Armstrong to throw out the ceremonial first pitch. Fans embraced the moment enthusiastically, and I did, too, and felt great admiration for the man and the accomplishment.”

Aaron Strickland, 9, Atlanta

“I had a paper, put-together lunar module that I was holding as the Eagle was landing on the moon. I can remember being surprised when I landed the lunar module to the timer that was showing on the television set. ... It seemed like something out of a movie ... watching the fuzzy images of two men walking around on the moon. At 9 years old, my first memory of our country was, ‘Well, we can do anything, can't we?’ I was very proud of my country then, and, looking back, I still am.”

Jerry Vegter, 22, on honeymoon in Wabeno, Wis.

“We stopped at a little country store. And on this building was a big banner, and it said Moon Day.

“Diane and I had no idea what Moon Day was, so while I was making my purchase, I said to the guy behind the counter, ‘What is this, some kind of local festivity? What in the world is this Moon Day?’ He says, ‘Where in the world have you been?’ I said, ‘We've been on our honeymoon.’ He said, ‘That explains it. They just landed on the moon.’”