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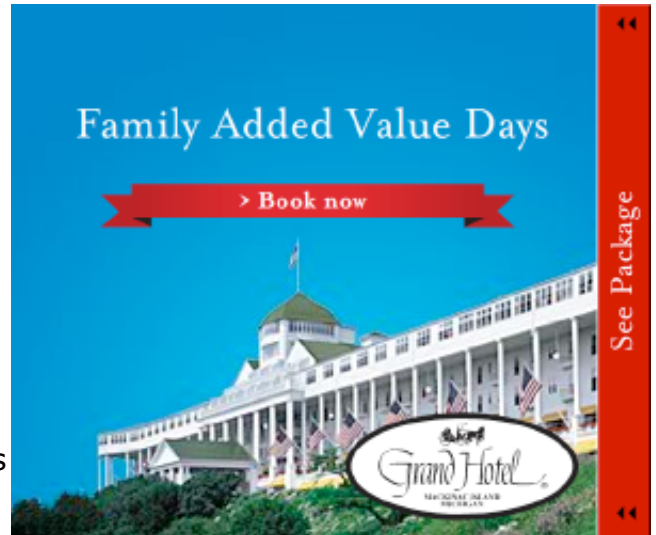
Moonstruck

July 15, 2009

On July 20, 1969, just after 9:56 p.m. Chicago time, Neil Armstrong hopped down from a ladder, planted his boots on the moon's surface and uttered the words now among the most famous ever spoken. "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind," came the faint, staticky voice from 238,855 miles away.

Yes, 40 years ago. The anniversary comes on Monday.

On every significant anniversary, the Apollo 11 moon landing has been trotted out, dusted off, and used as metaphor or milestone, to judge how far science -- even humanity -- has advanced. Or receded.



We tend to measure the moon landing by what came later. Or rather, what didn't. By the failure to reach beyond the moon. By the disappointing space shuttle, putt-putting in low Earth orbit. By the questions about what we're doing in space, whether we'll ever get to Mars, and whether it's worth the billions of dollars to try.

This was inevitable. Some 167 million Americans under 40 were not yet born when those grainy, shadowy television images riveted the world. They didn't hear the first words uttered by a human being on another world: "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed."

They missed a transcendent moment. Even stone-faced newscaster Walter Cronkite choked up. As word came of a successful landing, Cronkite, an avid space junkie, whipped off his black horn-rimmed glasses, ready to wipe away a tear. "Whew! Boy!" he said, grinning.

People were giddy. Even editorial writers. A day after the moon walk, a Tribune editorial said: "It is certainly a day for generosity and aspiration, and all of us chained to this planet must now be able to see, with fresh eyes and insight, that we are brothers in spirit and that we should be reaching out to validate what the moon journey has so convincingly demonstrated -- that the unattainable no longer exists."

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And then came ... more moon landings. A golf shot on the moon. Astronauts digging up more rocks. Bouncing around in those space suits.

It all became routine.

By 1979, the afterglow long faded, author Tom Wolfe reminded us what really mattered about

the space program. He dished up "The Right Stuff," a glorious recounting of the first astronauts and the race into space.

Wolfe told the essential human truth of the Apollo program: That these were men who set out knowing that they were taking a giant leap into hostile territory. Knowing that even after all the training, all the practice, something could, and usually did, go wrong. It didn't have to be something big to be fatal. At the fifth anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission, Armstrong said he estimated their chances at only 50-50. "I . . . was surprised every time something worked. I had a continual suspicion that the next item on the checklist would be the one that would crump out on us." The astronauts averted calamities by fast thinking and resourcefulness: A broken switch almost doomed the moon men to a slow death on the lunar surface. Aldrin jammed a pen into the circuit-breaker so the engines could fire. Still, it was so dicey for a while that President Richard Nixon prepared an address to tell Americans that the Apollo 11 astronauts had been stranded on the moon.

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All of that is now relegated to history books and documentaries.

Armstrong himself has long since retreated to his suburban Cincinnati home, rarely granting interviews about that day. Buzz Aldrin, the second man on the moon, recently said the days of American pre-eminence in space are over and that the moon really isn't all that promising as a destination for humans. Robots could do the job there, if another moon shot materializes.

Talk about a buzz kill.

No, we don't expect to colonize the moon. Or even reach Mars any time in the next few decades, no matter what NASA planners say.

So was the moon shot a waste? Of course not. It boosted the aerospace industry, ignited innovation and inspired Americans.

Americans went to the moon because the Russians lifted a capsule into space first. And President John F. Kennedy needed to answer.

Author Andrew Smith argued in his 2005 book "Moondust" that Apollo "was a performance, pure and simple. JFK wanted something to capture the global imagination, and to excite his own people, and he found it. . . . In the end, it was *theater* -- the most mind-blowing theater ever created. In fact, at around \$120 per American over the nine years of the '60s in which it ran, or \$13 a year, it was astonishingly *cheap* theater."

The curtain rose 40 years ago, as the Saturn V rockets fired and people at Cape Kennedy shielded their eyes.

Hundreds of millions across the globe watched Armstrong's leap. But there was even a greater leap in the minds -- and hearts -- of so many people who were inspired to believe, even if only for that brief, incandescent moment, that the unattainable no longer existed.

What a gift.

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