

Apollo 8 First Day Activities
by
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The Apollo 8 First Day mission went off so smoothly at Houston, Texas on May 5th, that we're still waiting for some manner of shock waves to upset everything that has been done. At the Rice Hotel all went without a hitch because of the detailed and arduous work that went into the project. All systems were "go" with the fine crew assembled by Houston Postmaster Granville W. Elder and the dedication of those who worked on the project. As a co-chairman, I was in on the entire event from its inception.

The presence of 23 active Astronauts--including Apollo 8 crew Frank Borman, James A. Lovell Jr., and William A. Anders, and Postmaster General Winton M. Blount, added spice to the First Day Ceremonies. At the luncheon, attended by approximately 1,000 Houston stamp collectors, civic and business leaders, I was privileged to sit at the head table next to Bill Anders, Jim Lovell, and Frank Borman.

The selection of Houston as the First Day city was not a matter of chance nor luck. It was the result of two years of petitioning of the POD by PM Elder and myself for a space commemorative. The fact that the then PMG, W. Marvin Watson, was a fellow Texan did not hurt either, as I'll explain. Actually Elder and I had hoped for a commemorative stamp on the past October 1, the 10th anniversary of the founding of NASA, which would have been a way of paying tribute to all involved in the space program.

For future philatelic reference we would like to record exactly how Houston was ultimately selected as the First Day City. One evening, before there was any public announcement, we received a phone call at home from a Washington, D.C. friend of ours. He said an Apollo 8 stamp had been approved by the Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee and were we aware of it. Of course not, but then again few others knew about it either. We telephoned Elder at home to pass the information along to him. The following morning we met at his office and he telephoned the PMG. Watson was out to lunch but his secretary promised the call would be returned and it was.

For the record, the PMG asked that a telegram be sent petitioning for the honor of the First Day City. With his request, Watson passed along some favorable remarks to Elder. On Friday, January 17th, at his last meeting before the end of the Johnson Administration, PMG Watson approved Houston as the First Day city for the Apollo 8 stamp. As a Texan he could do no less.

Then the wheels were set in motion by PM Elder, an old hand at the First Day business with his previous experience on the Sam Houston commemorative. He appointed me as his co-chairman to handle the philatelic phase of ceremonies and W. Marvin Hurley, Executive Vice President of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, to corral the Houston business community behind the event. Elder assigned Roy C. Cox, Director, Office of Administrative Services, to be our assistant but it turned out to in reverse fashion because of the yeoman job done by Cox. Owen O. Young, Jr., Superintendent, Customer Relations, carried out his duties, too.

Roy Blouzis, Division of Philately, was the first of many Washington DC postal authorities to visit Houston. Plans in general for the

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ceremony were set up. Who were to be the guest speakers? Would the PMG make it to Houston? Which of the Astronauts would be around to attend the program? Would it be a luncheon or a general affair? What about the First Day Program itself, what should its design be and who would do it? And where should all of this take place? These were but a few of the questions that confronted all of us.

The first crack out of the box we tried to engage the Albert Thomas Hall, which will be a Space Museum. It stretches for two blocks and was opened a few months ago. We learned with regret that the Hall was booked for May 5th. What a wonderful event it would have been to officially open the Hall. We went back to our old standby-- the Rice Hotel, with all its fine facilities, and convenience of location.

Gradually, under the watchful eye of PM Elder and the diligent efforts of Roy Cox, everything began to take shape. Blount said he would be happy to attend. Dr. Robert R. Gilruth, Director, NASA Manned Spacecraft Center, would speak and with him would come all available astronauts, but most especially Borman, Lovell, and Anders. Texas senior Senator, Ralph W. Yarborough accepted the invitation, as did Houston Congressmen Bob Eckhardt, Bob Casey, and George Bush. Monsignor Anton Frank, pastor of the Annunciation Church, and a philatelist in his own right, agreed to give the Invocation, and Rabbi Hyman Judah Schachtel of Congregation Beth Israel was invited for the Benediction. A musical interlude also was arranged.

In addition to the POD's usual philatelic "goodies" that they pass around from time to time, we solicited the aid of three people--some of whom you may know by reputation--to provide us with a space philatelic display. They came up with 28 frames of most magnificent material. Our own Ed Olling, Space Unit NASA Consultant, came up with 13 frames, Harry L. Anderson, President of the Space City Cover Society with 7 frames and Lois Rottersman of the Houston Philatelic Society displayed 8 frames. The Houston Philatelic Society loaned their frames for the display. The display was so magnificent as to receive the close inspection of most of the Astronauts who attended, as well as the PMG.

Within 96 hours after the letters were sent out inviting people to attend the First Day luncheon, the tickets were all gobbled up. About 400 checks had to be returned. It was rumored about that one man offered \$25.00 per ticket and he needed four. Because of the unusual number of invited guests, two head tables had to be set up. The room was a sea of happy faces.

Before going into the dining room, those at the head table assembled in the Pecos Room. I had the pleasure of spending several uninterrupted minutes with our PMG as well as Anders, Lovell, and Borman. You might be interested to know that Anders is interested in stamps and like most stamp collectors has "boxes full" to prove it. At the head table we sat along side of Lt. Col. Anders, then Capt. and Mrs. Lovell, and Col. and Mrs. Borman. Mrs. Anders was in California visiting her parents. The three were most gracious in giving their autographs but after a while people began to swarm all over them and it came to a halt. I must admit that I was kept busy getting programs autographed for my philatelic and postal friends. I had met the three men a few

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days earlier at NASA and subsequently obtained their signatures for a few choice pieces.

Everything went off well at the luncheon. The after-dinner speeches were brief and humorous for the most part. (The PMG's speech appears on pages 6 and 7). I believe that the most stirring remarks were made by Senator Yarborough, himself a space collector, who described his feelings as he saw and heard the Apollo 8 mission get under way. The ability of PM Elder kept things moving along smoothly.

Meanwhile, out in the area where the philatelic display was housed, the Space City Cover Society and the Manned Spacecraft Center Stamp Club were busy selling covers to collectors as well as non-collectors. They reported it was a madhouse of activity. The POD set up a substation outside the display room and everything was cancelled that was handed to the efficient crew there. There were no apparent difficulties.

The honor of coming the greatest distance to attend the First Day ceremonies must go to Mr. and Mrs. Hans O. Groth who came from Cham, Switzerland. He is Editor of the authoritative "Philatelica" magazine which is distributed throughout most of Europe. Mr. Groth brought 10,000 covers with him which he had cancelled for the Apollo 8 event.

I have attended many First Day events throughout the country and none has yet to even come close to the show put on by Houston. The Sam Houston event on Jan. 10, 1965 was long remembered by Washington Postal officials, but the Apollo 8 ceremonies has set a hallmark which few others will ever be able to match--let alone surpass.

Recovery? Oh, we suppose in a few more weeks all of us will have recovered enough to say "Wasn't that a wonderful event, when are we going to have the next one?"

(Editor's note: Thanks to Allen Banks for this fine narrative... think you might also be interested in this from his letter... "I feel that my reward for all the work that went into the ceremony came with the wave of enthusiastic compliments all of us received from everyone. You can well imagine the charge I got when Col. Borman, in introducing me to his wife said, "Honey, here is the man responsible for a great part of this" as he waved his hand out toward the 1,000 persons who had gathered to pay homage to him and the others. I cannot remain indifferent to such tribute from a man who is one of the great heroes of our day. To sit next to Bill Anders and his asking my advice as to how to set up his collection and promising to call me when he gets a break in his schedule to get together with me--was ample reward, too. Or to have Jim Lovell and his lovely wife ask for my assistance to help obtain some First Day material for them, they made me feel a part of their group." It sure sounds like it was a marvelous experience. You will find on page 8 information on the FD program...and in the May issue date on the first day covers mentioned in this article. Again our thanks, Allen.

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