



Hands Across History

A joint newsletter for the White Sands Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group.



Volume XVI, Letter IV

November 2020

Editor Jumps Deeply Into Trivia Rabbit Hole

By Jim Eckles
HAH Editor

As a curious retiree with some time on my hands this year, I started thinking about the photo shown below that is usually labeled as the “first flag raising” at the new White Sands Proving Ground. The date that usually accompanies this image is July 9, 1945, the day White Sands was “officially established.”

I wrote a history piece this summer for the Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce about the 75th anniversary of White Sands. The article ended up in a chamber insert in the *Las Cruces Bulletin*. The newspaper pulled this photo out of their archive and ran it with the July 9 date. It appears that way on many websites now as well as popping up in any number of publications.

After much digging, I’ve come to the conclusion that the photo is indeed the first flag raising but it did NOT happen on July 9. The photo and another from a different angle were taken on Sept. 29, when post construction was complete and LTC Harold Turner, first commander, held an open house and public flag raising to mark that White Sands was open for business. Let me explain.

I started with a basic question. If White Sands was established on July 9, how likely was it that there would already be buildings in place that very day, a staff already on site, a flag pole surrounded by a circle of rocks, ambulances for the ceremony and spectators? It dawned on me that we are talking about magic for that to be true - the kind of thing you see in cartoons. The Army was

See First Public Notice, page 4

☞ It is time for the Foundation’s annual meeting and board election. Dolores Archuleta, Mary Beth Reinhart and Jim Eckles are up for board membership renewal. If you have a nomination to add to these, send it to Sharon Reese at nmreeses@msn.com. Because of Covid, no meeting is planned.



WSMR Foundation Update From The President

The WSMR Historical Foundation, like many other organizations has not been meeting because of COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulty in getting on WSMR. With the building for the new museum exhibit hall complete, work continues with the Center for Military History on developing the displays and reorganizing the archives and other spaces. See Gerry Veara's update in this newsletter about the archives.

The museum reopened at the end of Sept. and is open Tues – Fri from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., on Sat. from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and on Sun. from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. It is closed Mondays. It is more difficult to get to as the range has restricted access – basically, for now, you have to be a CAC holder. For info, call 575-678-3358.

Also, the museum has established a new website that Darren and Jen are taking care of. The Foundation is paying for the hosting but the new website is now completely separate from our own website.

The Foundation is developing a strategic plan that will provide direction on raising funds, providing for educational and speaker programs, working with schools to involve students and acquaint them with WSMR, and contributing to the programs established by the museum curator. We also will be soliciting comments from the public as to how we can better serve the museum. It is essential that we increase our membership and contributions to the Foundation. The Foundation raised over one million dollars which was given to the museum and resulted in the expansion, as well as providing other equipment and materials.

We need your ideas as to how we can accomplish our mission with this NEW museum. We need volunteers to serve on our membership committee. We need additional people to serve on the Board of Directors.

Our strategic plan will include programs to be undertaken to meet the interests of our members, and

the communities that surround WSMR - which we serve. We cannot do this alone. With the exciting new museum and its exhibits, which we are told will be one of the better ones in Army we need everyone's support. WSMR has been an inherent part of Las Cruces, El Paso and Alamogordo since its founding 75 years ago.

We have a brick program. Buy a brick in remembrance of a family member, loved one, a friend or for your business. You can contribute to our organization. Contributions are tax deductible. We have established a memorial fund that you can donate to in memory of a family member, friend, or someone who was a part of the missile range's operations. Because of WSMR, I was able to pay my mortgage, send my kids to college, buy my groceries and afford a vehicle. There are hundreds out there who could say the same thing.

Please consider becoming a member, contribute to our memorial fund or just send in your donation. You will find a membership (for renewal or new members) and donation form on the back page of this newsletter. Just cut it out and mail to the indicated address.

Frances F. Williams President

Please note that I have a new email address:

ffw@newmexico.com

Honor Donations

John Douds

by Jon Gibson
Frances Williams
Ron Parker

Jon Gibson

by Lawrence McFall

Gene Norman

by Frances Williams

Statement of Purpose and Membership

The "Hands Across History" newsletter is published by the White Sands Missile Range Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group (WSPG). Both nonprofit organizations aim to preserve the accomplishments of White Sands Missile Range.

The newsletter is intended to keep

White Sands Pioneer Group
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members of both groups informed about current events and share information of common interest. The editor is Jim Eckles. He can be contacted by email at nebraska1950@comcast.net or at either address below.

Membership to either organization is open to anyone who shares their goals.

White Sands Historical Foundation
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Miscellaneous Notes

LIKE FAMILY

Sir,

I am writing you to let you know I received the August 2020 letter and enjoyed the story on Tom Shaw and the Rockets at White Sands as it brought back memories of seeing live baseball for the first time. It was particularly enjoyable to read the names of my father (Gabe Brillante) and Mr. Haggard in connection to Mr. Shaw's association with the Public Information Office.

I remember times when some GIs from the Public Information Shop, along with our family, would travel up to Ruidoso on weekends and holidays to enjoy the cool comfort of Ruidoso and stay in a cabin owned by Mr. Haggard in exchange for doing repairs or some landscaping projects. We children thought of the guys from the PIO as our uncles and have fond memories of those days. I remember one particular weekend when the work was done and we went to Rainbow Lakes, some stocked ponds in Ruidoso, where, at 10 cents an inch and no "throw backs," it must have cost my father a bundle for our fishing experience. The bunch from PIO was more family than an office staff.

Michael P. Brillante

PLAYED SOFTBALL

Dear Jim,

Your newsletter has become something really special. This latest one took me back to things I remembered about WSPG on arriving after the XMAS holidays in 1954 - 1st Sgt Russ Gearou and Detachment 2 and WSPG baseball.

Russ was my 1st Sgt who I also came to fear and very much respect. I was from Philly and a huge ML baseball fan and I loved the fact the Ft. Bliss had a baseball team with professional minor and major league players that had been drafted into the Army. WSPG in 1955 had a pretty good team and they played Ft. Bliss. As I recall it was a close game but we didn't win.

I played on the WSPG softball team and I agree our field was not a great place to play but I loved playing especially when my platoon mates

came to see me screw up. I almost never did. BTW, WSPG was one of the harshest place to serve weather wise in the US Army in the middle 50's. Forgive me for going on, but every good thing that has ever happened to me in my fairly long life, I owe to the 2.5 years I spent at WSPG as a RA G.I.

Jim , when you have time , look up Sam Jones who was stationed at WSPG when I was. He played basketball and became a NBA HOfer for the Boston Celtics. He was a favorite at the WSPG service club and very down to earth. Maybe you have already written something about him in the past. (*Editor: John - I have. I feature him on page 231 of Pocketful of Rockets. The Celtics sent me the photo I used.*)

John A. Bayer

DONATION IN JON GIBSON'S NAME

Dear Foundation Friends,

Please accept my enclosed donation in honor of Jon E. Gibson. Jon and I are natives of the community here in south-central Virginia on the Dan River named Danville. We have never met but I have admired his dedication to WSMR since receiving my 60th anniversary booklet, *Making History Every Day*, some fifteen years ago. It appears Jon is about 3 years my senior and I do hope that one day we will meet.

Thanks for the great work all of you do for the Foundation.

Lawrence McFall

WHITE SANDS PIONEER HONORED

Gil Moore, a White Sands pioneer from the 40s and 50s, a man who saw V-2s fly, has been given the *Lifetime Achievement Award* by the Small Satellite Conference this year.

Because of Covid, the conference was held virtually and Gil accepted the award on line. That means the presentation was recorded and is now available for viewing at the conference's website.

If you'd like to see it and learn more about Gil's monumental contributions to the satellite field go to: smallsat.org and scroll down the page.

First Public Notice — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

certainly good at construction by the end of WWII but there is no way they could accomplish all of this in a few days.

Now look at the second photo, below, taken at the same ceremony but from a different angle. This one shows what looks like a complete post with buildings everywhere, power poles in place, a large crowd with lots of civilians and, if you look closely at the right side near the hutment, there appears to be a band. It really would have been magic for this photo to be taken on July 9.

Some naysayers will probably propose that construction simply took place at the post in the weeks and months before July 9. The reality is that there was no construction then. From newspaper reports we get some idea how work on the post began. On July 1, 1945 the *Las Cruces Sun-News* reported that contracts for construction had just been awarded to local companies. *The Sun-News* quoted Lt. Col. R.E. Cole from the Albuquerque Corps of Engineers office on June 30. According to the paper, Hayner and Burn of Las Cruces were awarded a contract worth \$238,510 for installing a water system for the new camp. Work was to begin immediately. The article doesn't mention it but that included a sanitary sewer system. It is difficult to have water going into kitchens, bathrooms and other facilities and not do something with it when it comes back out.

According to "White Sands History," a document generated in 1959 by the missile range to cover the history of White Sands during the first 10 years, six shallow wells were to be drilled. At the beginning of July, the only well water available came from one of James Cox's wells used to water his livestock east of his ranch headquarters. It was, however, conveniently located near the main gate but didn't produce enough water for a modern military base.

Drilling wells and installing the casings, pumps and the pipelines to carry it from place to place and to a storage tank located on some high ground took weeks to accomplish. Initially, for the water needed for grading and smoothing the desert landscape, building roads, etc., non-potable water was pumped from abandoned mines near Organ and hauled to the site in tanker trucks.

That same *Sun-News* article on July 1 also said a contract for \$219,069 was awarded to R.E. McKee of El Paso for the construction of housing and an electrical distribution system. On July 8, the newspaper reported this work was starting.

I also found that construction on a real road from Highway 70 to the new post didn't start until July 7. Before that road would be completed, everything had to come in via the Cox ranch road. Large trucks delivering building components

See It Was Chilly On Sept. 29, page 5



It Was Chilly On Sept. 29

would have had a difficult time using it.

If the two ceremony photos were taken on July 9, it would mean the post was ready for occupation. However, in August, Turner was quoted in the newspaper as saying they should occupy the new post sometime in September. Also, he said he had a few troops on hand assisting in construction.

It turns out these two photos are nice records of the public open house and “official flag raising” that White Sands held on Sept. 29, 1945. The evidence is clear because *Sun-News* advertised it and covered it.

By the end of September, the initial post was pretty much complete and ready for business, as predicted by Turner. Offices were furnished with desks and chairs, barracks got cots and lockers and mess halls were set up for the officers and the enlisted men. To mark the occasion White Sands invited the public to attend a flag-raising ceremony at noon on Saturday, Sept. 29. The invitation ran in the *Sun-News* on Sept. 24 and Lt. Col. Turner said “with the official raising of the flag, the camp takes on the regular rules and regulations of Army establishments.”

Not only was the public invited to the flag raising, they were invited to come out early and look around. Also, members of the Ft. Bliss band played a variety of music before the ceremony as entertainment for the crowd.

Also during this week leading up to the flag-raising ceremony, the *Associated Press* ran a story announcing the proving ground’s first test that would require a roadblock on Highway 70. It was going to be conducted on Oct. 9 and the highway would be blocked from 6 to 10 a.m. That WAC Corporal launch was eventually delayed by weather considerations and finally accomplished on Oct. 11.

On Sept. 30, the *Sun-News* reported extensively on the first flag-raising ceremony from the day before. Turner spoke to the crowd and announced a different schedule for Highway 70 roadblocks from what was originally said. In fact, during the first months of operation, White Sands management had to change their roadblock procedures several times. The article also mentioned

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that there were about 50 scientists and technicians working on “rocket bombs” at the facility.

Another clue to the ceremony actually being conducted on Sept. 29 is how the people are dressed. Many have real coats on and the sky in both photos is overcast.

When I looked at weather records, I found that July 9 was a typical summer day with a high around 92. Not a good day for coats. However, on Sept. 29, the region was in the middle of a cold wave that blew through the day before. There was snow up north and rains in southern New Mexico. The low in El Paso on Friday night was something like 45 degrees. People went to the ceremony dressed for chilly temperatures - not exactly arctic but, with the obvious breeze, a little cool.

As in any story more than a few years old, this one has a variation. When Gerry Veara found good copies of these two photo in the WSMR Museum Archive for me, he found a piece of paper for the one on page 4 that indicates the ceremony was on Oct. 29, 1945. Holy cow, now what?

The piece of paper is a caption that was written for the photo when it ran in the *Wind and Sand* newspaper on Aug. 2, 1957, on page 4. The caption notes that the ceremony is the official opening of White Sands and shows Army personnel, civilians and specifically points out the dog.

Being an author and newspaper / newsletter editor for years, my first thought, given all this other evidence, is that it is just a typo. It is amazing how my mind will think “mind” and my fingers will spit out “mine.” It happens all the time to everyone.

Also, by Oct. 29, the proving ground had already blocked Highway 70 for rocket launches. This was a sensitive issue at the time and Turner went out of his way to assure local businessmen, the chambers of commerce, the public and travelers that the Army wasn’t eliminating Highway 70. It was only going to be closed for a few hours for a few tests.

It makes no sense whatsoever to have an open house and official post opening after you’ve started this controversial action on Highway 70.

See Hey, No Flagpole in August, page 6

Archive Gets Upgrade As It Moves Up To Museum Proper

The WSMR Museum archive is moving from its current warehouse in building 1833 to the museum. The warehouse has been hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and dusty all the time. It has been a less than optimum environment for our volunteer archivists and more importantly, a lousy environment for the thousands of documents and photographs in the collection.

As the museum prepares its exhibits for the new wing, it has made space available for the

archives at the east end of the old exhibit hall.

The first phase is to move the technology, tools, and work tables used by the archivists. The work stations and network server have already moved into the museum. So that archivists can start work ASAP, the technology will be closely followed by the collections that are currently being archived.

If you are interested in finding out more about helping in the archive to help preserve our history, call the museum at 678-2250.

Hey, No Flagpole In August — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

Also, I looked at issues of the *Las Cruces Sun-News* from that last week in October. There is absolutely no mention of a public open house or official flag raising ceremony on the 29th. The photo is attributed to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory so either someone there or someone in the Public Information Office got their wires crossed.

In addition to all of the above, the photo at the bottom of this page helped eliminate the July 9 date for the first flag raising because of what is missing. In the process, I think we now have a reasonable date on this aerial photo and the matching one that is looking west across the new post.

I've seen these aerial pictures around for decades with dates ranging from late 1945 to sometime in 1946. Based on a few details, I'd say the photos were taken sometime in the first two weeks of August 1945.

For starters, obviously the post is almost complete. However, missing from the front of the Headquarters Bldg., the one above the hanger, is a flagpole and its stone circle. That means that the flagpole for the ceremonial opening of the post was erected sometime after this photo was shot.

The other thing missing in this photo is all the

V-2 material (240 train cars of it) that was hauled from Las Cruces to the post in early August. We have later photos of V-2 tail sections, fuselages, noses and propulsion units stored all around the hanger building. None of that is present.

In a national *Associated Press* story dated Aug. 19, Turner was quoted as saying the V-2 material had already been moved to White Sands. Ergo, the aerial photos were taken at least some days before the 19th. Anytime after the move and the yards would have been full of material.

Given that the post is almost complete, indications are that the photos were taken after Aug. 1. That is how I came up with a two-week window. It should be pointed out that McKee Construction did a remarkable job putting all those structures together in a mere six weeks or so.

Of course, if you have evidence that I'm all wet, please let me know.

If you'd like to read a more detailed story about the few months before July 9 and what happened through mid-October, look for my article in the *Southern New Mexico Historical Review* in January 2021. The *Review* is published annually by the Dona Ana County Historical Society.



Astronauts Viewed First Little Joe Apollo Test

By Jim Eckles
HAH Editor

It may be difficult to make out what is going on in this photo but it is quite interesting. First of all, it is a photo of the successful Little Joe - Apollo test on May 13, 1964.

The Little Joe II was a jury-rigged vehicle composed of several motors tied together to create a cheap and expendable booster. The real test was conducted by NASA and involved seeing if a mock-up of an Apollo capsule could be safely blasted away from a malfunctioning booster during launch. It was called the Launch Escape System (LES). Other NASA program escape systems have been tested at White Sands since the Apollo tests in the early 1960s.

So, the Apollo astronauts had an obvious

interest in these tests at WSMR. For the May 13th one, Charles Conrad, Gordon Cooper, Jim Lovell, Alan Shepherd and Deke Slayton were on hand to watch. Those five autographs are on the side.

The photo is dedicated to Maj. Gen. Frederick Thorlin who was the WSMR commander at time.

There is another name on the photo and it is the autograph of Bob Gilbruth. Today, very few people know who he was. At the time of this test, he was the director of NASA's Manned Spaceflight Center, now the Johnson Space Center. In other words he was those five astronauts' boss.

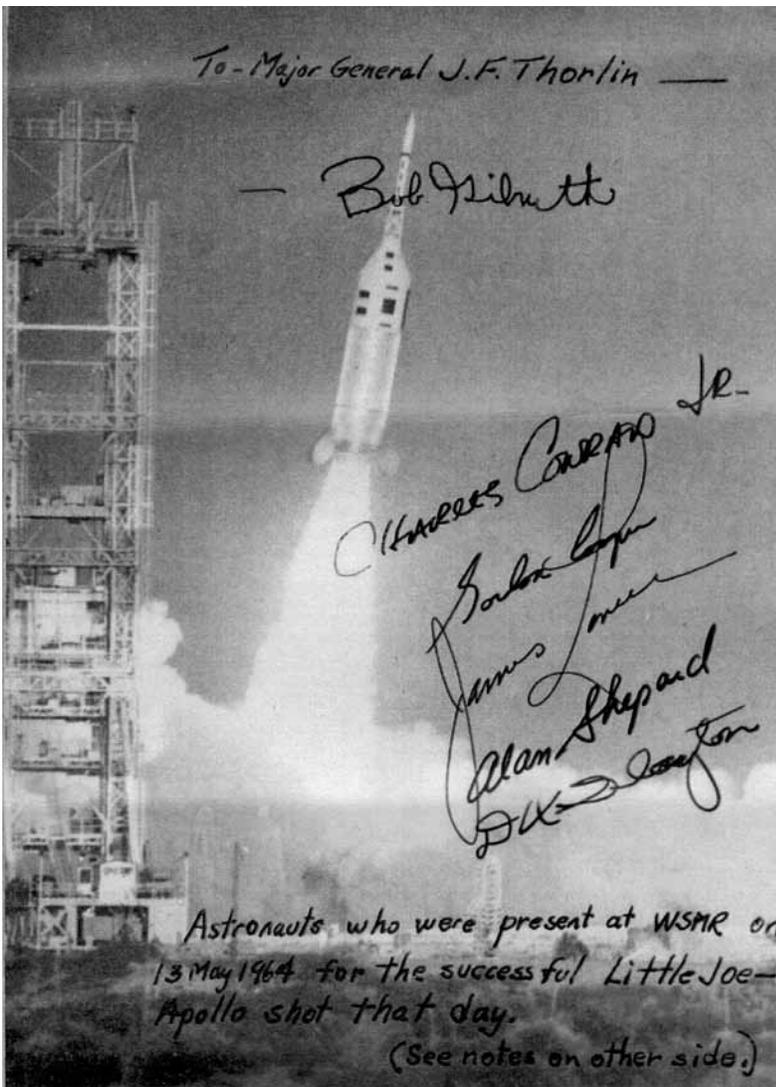
I've cropped the photo back but in the original you can see that this photograph was made by photographing an original that is matted and framed. Unfortunately we don't know where the original framed image is located.

Beside the photo in the frame and under the same matte are some handwritten notes that were originally on the back of the photo. The sheet lists the astronauts and relates little bits of personal information - some of it is not what you would see coming out of NASA HQ. For instance, Gordon Cooper is described as "small" and "shy" while Alan Shepherd is said to be "affable" and "fairly tall."

We don't know who penned these notes but my money is on one who knew the astronauts well and would be interested in showing his thanks to the commander at White Sands - Bob Gilbruth.

According to Charlie Moss, this copy of a photo of the framed image comes from Bob Reed who was a military policeman at WSMR 1963-65. He rescued it from the old MP station where it was tacked to the wall. Moss was a fellow MP at that time. About 15 years ago, Charlie sent a copy to the WSMR Museum Archive so there is a copy on file on post.

But where is the real original in its frame? If anyone knows what happened to that, let me know.



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White Sands Missile Range Historical Foundation



Membership and/or Donation Form

Please join the Foundation as a member or consider making a tax-deductible donation to help us tell the missile range's unique story.

Name: _____
Address: _____
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Annual Membership Categories

- Trailblazer.....\$25 - \$99
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Business and Corporate Categories are also available.

Checks should be made out to: **WSMR Historical Foundation**

Donation Amount enclosed \$ _____
My donation is on behalf of: _____

Please send this form to: **WSMR Historical Foundation,
P.O. Box 171, White Sands Missile Range, NM 88002.**
Contact Jon Gibson at 575-382-8292 if you have questions.

Members receive a quarterly newsletter entitled *Hands Across History*. It is sent out via the postal service or by email. Email has the advantage of being in color and arriving 3 weeks before the other. If you are joining, which do you prefer? _____

*The White Sands Missile Range Historical Foundation
is not part of the Department of Defense.*