

Alabama's 'Rocket Boy,' others merit a celebration

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Last month I recommended we hold a colossal celebration to mark the twin milestones of the opening of the Saturn V Museum and the 50th Anniversary of "America in Space" - Jan. 31, 2008. Giving Alabama proper credit for these milestones should create a dramatic paradigm shift on how others view us.

In addition to rebranding our state, we can also tell The Greatest Story Never Told - how farm boys from Alabama worked with their German enemies-turned-mentors to build the 160-million horsepower machine that put man on the moon - the 20th century's greatest achievement.

Previously, I described the first Alabama "Rocket Boys" as typically "a farm boy, World War II veteran, first in the family to go to college." Let's take a closer look at one of them.

He was born in 1927 in Oakman, a Walker County coal-mining town of 500 souls - most of whom were "owed to the company store." His father, Tandy, walked four miles to the mines for his 12-hour shift, and then four miles back.

The house had no running water or electricity and wouldn't for another two decades.

His tireless mother, Florence, stirred the family wash in a huge kettle over a burning fire.

As the youngest of five children, he was in the fields by age 7, picking cotton at a penny a pound. His eyes light up when he mentions that he picked up to 300 pounds a day - \$3 was big money during the Depression.

His 22-year-old brother, Robert, was a freighter captain who barely survived being torpedoed and sunk in the frigid North Atlantic. Our Rocket Boy joined the Navy at 17 and was in the Pacific on VJ Day. Returning from war, the GI Bill made him the family's first college graduate - an electrical engineering degree from Auburn. A Ph.D. followed.

He joined the Army's space program and was in the blockhouse at Cape Canaveral on Jan. 31, 1958 when a modified Redstone Rocket launched America's first satellite - Explorer 1 - fulfilling Wernher von Braun's daring commitment to launch an "American Sputnik" in 90 days.

He continued as a missile expert in the public and private sector, "retiring" four times. Nearing 80, he works full time at the company he founded.

Two weeks ago in an act of great generosity - and vision - Alabama Rocket Boy Julian Davidson and his wife, Dorothy, pledged \$2 million to complete construction of the Saturn V Museum - and another \$2 million for the Art Museum.

Dorothy, a Rocket Girl in her own right, describes the Davidson Saturn V Center as "a tribute to all of the engineers and scientists who worked on the Saturn." She broadens "Alabamians" to include those from other states and countries "who relocated here - and stayed - by choice."

While more money is needed for the exhibits, the Davidsons' donation ensures the critical step of completing the building.

No Hollywood scriptwriter could have come up with a better ending than an Alabama Rocket Boy and his wife riding to the Saturn V's rescue - and then dedicating it to all who helped build it.

Each day brings new urgency to honor those responsible for putting America in space, and then on the moon. In recent weeks, three people with strong space links have passed away: Lisa von Braun, Mercury-Gemini-Apollo astronaut Wally Schirra and local business legend Mark Smith.

That is one of the reasons that I believe so strongly that we need a celebration worthy of the twin milestones of the 50th anniversary of America in space and the Saturn V dedication - and those that made them possible.

Many of the participants in those events are elderly or have already passed from the scene. Let us honor them while we still can. We can give them, and this state, the honor that is long overdue - and change forever how others view Alabama.

Alabama put America in space, and then Alabama put man on the moon, and Alabama is still leading the way forward.

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