

A Good Long Countdown

A photograph of an older man with white hair, wearing a blue and yellow plaid shirt, looking up and smiling. In the background, a rocket is launching into a blue sky with scattered clouds, leaving a long, bright white trail. A palm tree is visible on the left side of the frame.

The Life and Times of
Raymond “Ray” Whitfield

Space Coast Stories



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as told to Claire Szewczyk

SPACE COAST STORIES

ABOUT THIS SAMPLE



This is a demonstration of a prose-forward legacy book — the kind that's more writing than photographs.

Raymond Whitfield is a fictional composite, invented to show how a real life becomes a book you can hold. The places are real: the Space Coast, the Cape, the launches, the layoffs, and the small towns along the Indian River are all as they were. The man is not. He stands in for the hundreds of real people whose stories deserve to be kept this way — in their own voice, while there's still time to ask.



CHAPTER ONE

Red Clay



I was born in Ellijay, Georgia, in the spring of 1938, in a house my daddy built with his own two hands and not much else.

We didn't have money. Nobody up in those north Georgia hills had money then, so it never occurred to me to feel poor. We had a garden, a milk cow named Pearl, and a mama who could stretch a chicken across a week of suppers. The mountains came right up to the back of the house, close and blue and always there, like a wall the world had built to keep us in and everything else out.

My first memory is the smell of red clay after rain. I can still call it up if I close my eyes. That, and the sound of my father's boots on the porch boards before dawn.

Daddy worked timber and did a little of everything else. He was a quiet man who said more with his hands than his mouth. I watched him fix a truck engine once with a piece of wire and a pocketknife, and I decided right then that I wanted to be a man who could fix things. Who could look at something broken and see the way back into it.

I didn't know it yet, but that was the whole rest of my life, decided at eight years old on a red clay road.

We were poor and we were happy, and I've spent a lot of years since trying to explain to my grandchildren how both of those can be true at once. I'm not sure I've managed it. You had to be there, in the cool of a Georgia evening, everybody on the porch, nobody in a hurry, to understand that we didn't know we were missing a single thing.



CHAPTER TWO

The Glow to the South



I came to Florida in 1960, chasing a rumor.

The rumor was that down on the east coast, on a spit of sand called Cape Canaveral, they were building something that would put a man in space, and they needed hands. Not just engineers with their college degrees. Hands. Men who could wire a panel and read a schematic and not panic when the countdown got down to the short numbers.

I was twenty-two, and I had a high school diploma and a toolbox and no idea what I was doing. I drove down in a Ford that burned more oil than gas, and I still remember coming over the last rise before the coast and seeing it. That flat, wet, endless green, cut through with silver water, and off to the south, a glow.

That glow was the Cape, lit up all night like a city that never slept, because it didn't.

I got hired on as an electrical technician. I'll be honest with you, I bluffed half of it in the interview. But I learned fast, because you had to, and because I'd been the boy who wanted to see the way back into broken things. Turned out a rocket is just a great many things that can break, all stacked on top of each other, pointed at the sky.

Florida was nothing like Georgia. No mountains, no red clay, no cool evenings. Just heat and mosquitoes the size of your thumb and a sun that came down like a hammer. I hated it for about a month. Then I stood on a gantry at three in the morning, a hundred feet up, with a rocket humming beside me and the whole dark Atlantic spread out below, and I fell in love with the place and never fell back out.

MEN WALK ON MOON

ASTRONAUTS LAND ON PLAIN; COLLECT ROCKS, PLANT FLAG

Voice From Moon: 'Eagle Has Landed'

By HENRY K. SMITH
Science Editor

HOUSTON, July 20—Men have walked on the moon.

Two Americans, astronauts from the United States, landed their spacecraft, the Eagle, in a lonely area of the lunar surface today and walked on the moon.

The landing was the climax of a triumph that has taken more than eight years and billions of dollars.

Neil A. Armstrong, 38, of Wapakoneta, Ohio, and Edwin E. Aldrin, Jr., 39, of Montclair, N. J., touched down gently in the Sea of Tranquility at 4:17 P.M. EDT, after a flawless descent.

"Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed."

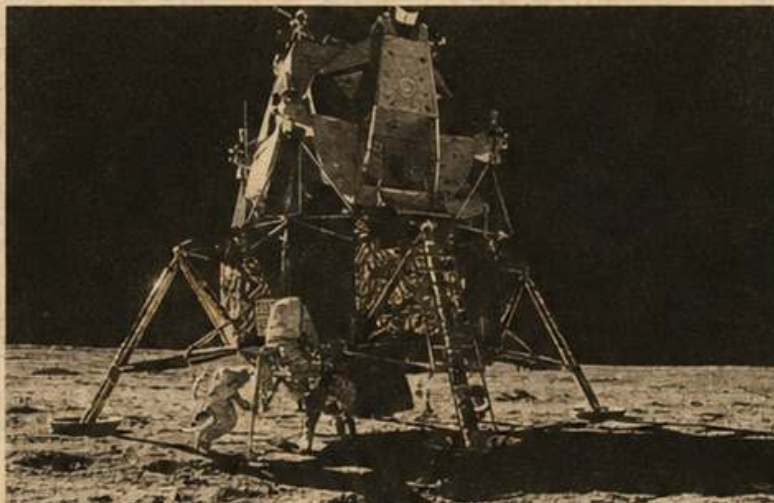
The words came from Mr. Armstrong.

President Nixon, in a telephone call, congratulated the astronauts.

Millions of television viewers saw the first pictures from the moon transmitted to Earth.

Mr. Armstrong descended the ladder and stepped onto the lunar surface at 10:56 P.M. EDT.

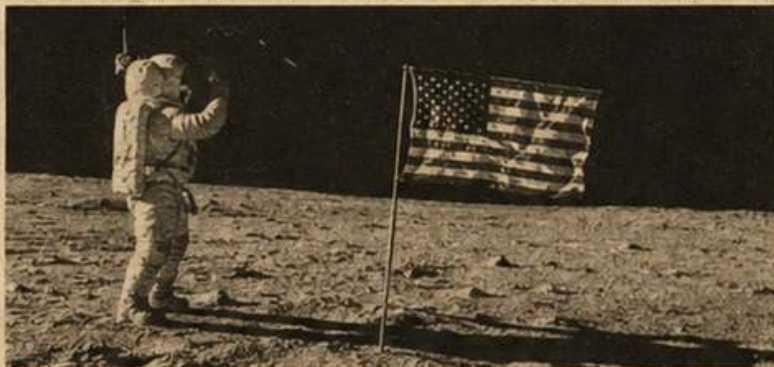
"That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind," he said.



THE EAGLE stands on the surface of the moon after a perfect landing in the Sea of Tranquility.



NEIL A. ARMSTRONG descends the ladder to become the first man to set foot on the moon.



EDWIN E. ALDRIN, JR., salutes the flag planted in the moon's soil.

A Powdery Surface Is Closely Explored

By JOHN NOBLE WILFORD
Staff Correspondent

HOUSTON, July 20—The surface of the moon is covered with a powdery material, somewhat similar to fine gray sand, the astronauts reported today.

Neil Armstrong said the material appeared to be fine and deep, but that his foot did not sink in very far.

Astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin collected rock and soil samples and placed them in containers to be brought back to Earth for analysis.

They planted a flag of the United States and a plaque bearing a message from Earth.

The two men worked for about two and one-half hours outside the spacecraft.

The moon, bare and forbidding in appearance, offered no difficulties to the explorers.

The whole world was the spectator as man, through knowledge and skill, reached out to touch another world.

The Apollo 11 astronauts will spend the night in the Eagle. They are scheduled to lift off Tuesday and rendezvous with the command ship Columbia, piloted by Michael Collins, who has been circling overhead.

VOYAGE TO THE MOON

- ★ July 16—Saturn V rocket launched.
- ★ July 19—Spacecraft enters lunar orbit.
- ★ July 20—Eagle lands in the Sea of Tranquility.
- ★ July 21—Astronauts walk on the moon.
- ★ July 24—Eagle to lift off for return to lunar orbit.
- ★ July 24-25—Return trip to Earth.

Text of Message To Moon Carried

The plaque left on the moon by the astronauts reads:

HERE MEN FROM THE PLANET
EARTH FIRST SET FOOT UPON
THE MOON JULY 20, 1969, A.D.

WE CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL
MANKIND.

PRESIDENT PRAISES 'MONUMENTAL ACHIEVEMENT'

WASHINGTON, July 20—President Nixon telephoned the astronauts from the Oval Office tonight to congratulate them on their "monumental achievement." He said the landing in the Sea of Tranquility "marks the greatest week in the history of space."

"The whole nation is proud of you," the President told them. "Your courage and devotion to duty and skill and determination have made it possible."

CHAPTER THREE

The Morning the World Held Its Breath



People ask me about the moon landing like they expect me to say it was the proudest day of my life. And it was close. But the truth is a little different, and I'll tell it to you straight, because you asked.

By July of 1969 I'd been at the Cape almost ten years. I'd worked Mercury and Gemini, watched good men sweat through their shirts in the blockhouse, seen a launch go perfect and seen one go wrong. I knew what all that fire cost, and what it could take.

The morning of the launch, I wasn't in the famous rooms. I was where I usually was, out closer to the hardware, doing the unglamorous work that has to be right or nothing else matters. My hands had touched pieces of that machine. That's a strange thing to carry, knowing your work is riding up there, that a connection you made in the dark is either going to hold or it isn't.

When it lifted, the ground shook so hard it came up through my boots and into my teeth. It always did. You never got used to it, and you never wanted to.

I watched it climb until it was just a bright dot, then nothing, then a memory. And I thought about my father, back in Georgia, who'd fixed a truck with a piece of wire, and I thought, *Daddy, look what these hands are doing now.*

That was the proudest I ever was. Not the landing, days later, on the television. The launch. The moment it left the ground and my part of it held.

We did something impossible, and most of us who did it were just ordinary people. Farm boys and mechanics and fellows who were good with their hands. I want you to know that. History remembers the astronauts, and it should. But it was

built by regular men and women who packed a lunch and drove to work and did the impossible on an ordinary Tuesday.



CHAPTER FOUR

Loretta



I met your grandmother at a fish fry in Titusville in the fall of 1962, and I have not had a boring day since.

She was standing by the sweet tea in a yellow dress, laughing at something, and the laugh is what got me. It came all the way up from the bottom of her. I told my buddy right then, that's the one, and he told me I was a fool, and we were both right.

Loretta was a Florida girl, born and raised, and she found my Georgia accent hilarious. She'd make me say words just to hear them. "Say *wire* again, Ray." I married her in the spring of 1963 in a little church off Garden Street, and her daddy pulled me aside after and said, "You take care of her." I said yes sir. I've spent sixty years trying to keep that promise.

We bought a small block house in Titusville, the kind they threw up fast in those years because the whole town was filling with Cape families like us. Three bedrooms, a carport, an orange tree out back that Loretta swore she'd never get to fruit and then couldn't get to stop.

We had three children in that house. Danny first, then Susan, then little Ruth, who came late and surprised us both. I'd work the night shift and come home at dawn, and there'd be Loretta with a baby on her hip and coffee on the stove, and the sun coming up pink over the river, and I remember thinking, more than once, that no man in history had ever been as rich as me. And I meant it. I still do.

The launches would rattle the windows and wake the babies, and Loretta would fuss about it, but she never once asked me to find a different line of work. She knew what it meant to me. She knew whose hands were on that machine.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Quiet After



Here's the part people don't put in the history books.

After we won the race to the moon, the country sort of lost interest. The money dried up. And starting around 1970, the Cape that had been hiring everybody in sight started letting people go instead. Thousands of us. Whole neighborhoods of Cape families, all at once.

They called it the aerospace downturn. We called it the layoffs, and we said the word quiet, the way you'd say the name of a sickness.

I got my notice in 1971. I was thirty-three years old, with three kids and a mortgage and a skill set the world had suddenly decided it didn't need. Titusville emptied out. You could buy a house on my street for almost nothing, because half of them sat empty, the families gone north looking for work. There were fellows I'd stood on the gantry with, good men, selling their furniture in the front yard.

I won't pretend it wasn't the hardest stretch of my life. It was. There were nights I sat at the kitchen table after Loretta went to bed and did the math over and over and couldn't make it come out.

But we didn't leave. Loretta wouldn't hear of it. "We came here for a reason," she said, "and the reason's still here." So I did whatever there was. I wired houses. I fixed air conditioners, which in Florida is close to being a preacher. I pumped gas for a while and wasn't too proud to do it. We ate a lot of what came out of that garden.

And I want you to know something, because it's the most important thing I've got to give you. Those hard years were when I found out what I was made of. Not the moon launch. The layoffs. Any fool can stand tall when the work is good and the checks clear. It's when they don't clear that you find out who you are. I found out I

was my father's son. I could look at a broken thing, even a broken life, and find the way back into it.

The work came back, eventually, when they started building the shuttle. I went right back to the Cape, and it felt like coming home. But I was never the same man who got laid off in '71. I was better. The quiet years made me better.



CHAPTER SIX

What I Want You to Know



I'm an old man now, telling this to a woman with a recorder because my Loretta and my children thought somebody ought to write it down before I forget it, or before I'm gone, whichever comes first.

I've thought a lot lately about what I actually know, after all these years, that might be worth handing down. It's less than you'd think, and simpler.

I know that work you do with your hands, done right, is a kind of prayer. I know that the impossible gets done by ordinary people who show up. I know that the hard years teach you more than the good ones, and that you shouldn't wish them away even while you're begging them to end.

I know that I married so far above myself it's a wonder Loretta never noticed. And I know that the pink sunrises over the Indian River, with a baby crying somewhere in the house and coffee on the stove, were the actual point of the whole thing. Not the moon. That. The ordinary mornings I almost didn't notice I was living.

I didn't get famous. There's no plaque with my name on it out at the Cape. But when you watch the old footage, when you see one of those rockets climb up off the pad and the ground shakes and the crowd goes quiet, some of what you're looking at is mine. A connection I made in the dark, that held.

That's enough. That's more than enough. A man doesn't need a plaque if he's got grandchildren who'll know his story.

So here it is. Here I am. Raymond Whitfield, from Ellijay, Georgia, who came south chasing a glow and found a life. When you miss me, and you will, come read this. I'll be right here, on the page, in my own words, with the ground shaking and the countdown running and everything still ahead of me.

Don't be sad too long. I had a good long countdown, and a beautiful launch.
Now go live yours.



This sample was created by Space Coast Stories to show what a written legacy book feels like to read. Every real one is different, because every life is.

If you'd like your own family's story captured this way — in their own words, while there's still time to ask — visit thespacecoaststories.com.

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