

Space: Is the final frontier all it used to be?

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In this photo made July 7, 2009, a sign marks the shopping center named Moon Plaza in Moon, Pa.. Forty years after Neil Armstrong first set foot on the moon, space occupies a very different place in the popular culture. (AP Photo/Keith Srakocic)

(AP) -- On July 22, 1969, barely 48 hours after a human being first stepped onto the moon's surface, a community in Pittsburgh's western suburbs called Moon Township had a parade, as suburban communities do.

Understandably, [Moon](#) had achieved some notoriety in the weeks leading up to Apollo 11's lunar landing. And on this day, it named Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins honorary citizens and lowered an "astronaut" from a hovering helicopter into Moon Park.

And why not? This was a time of great joy. The Pittsburgh Press was

editorializing about the "Moondust Glowing in America's Eyes." The downtown district's "Moonday" shut down offices and some businesses. The Foodland supermarket announced a sale that promised "out-of-this-world specials" to customers: "We've gone lunatic!"

Moon was also the home of Pittsburgh's airport, where soaring into the sky in a metal bird remained a romantic notion. These were still the days when, as TWA once put it, you could climb aboard "super-skyliners" that were "skyclubs by day, skysleepers by night."

We are 40 years older now, we Americans. And many things have changed.

The final Apollo mission came home before Nixon resigned. Skylab fell to Earth. Challenger disintegrated going up, Columbia coming down. Kennedy's New Frontier ethos - [space](#) as a kinder, gentler Manifest Destiny - slouched into the "Alien" catchphrase: "In space, no one can hear you scream."

Today, the reasons for Americans to pay attention to the ground, rather than the heavens, can be rattled off like a parody of a Billy Joel song. Terrorists. Global warming. Swine flu. Economic collapse. Nukes in North Korea and mass shootings in the heartland.

In Moon, the old airport is gone; its gleaming replacement opened 16 years ago, one township over. Jets still rumble overhead, but airline ads today skip the romance of the skies and emphasize workaday convenience. "Boundless free snacks," says a Jet Blue billboard on nearby I-279.

Yet Moon still hopes. In the park, adults eat in the Apollo picnic area while kids cluster in the playground around the spaceship seesaws, the rocket climber, the piece of metal twisted whimsically into an abstract

lunar lander. "Explore Our Universe," the township says, a slogan it introduced in 2004.

But is that something that Americans still desire? Is space, the final frontier, still the American place to aim for? Or when it comes to exploring the stars, was Yogi Berra right when he said that the future ain't what it used to be?

"At the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken, and unrestraint is triumphant." So said Frederick Jackson Turner, the 19th-century historian whose ideas showed Americans how important their frontier experience was to them.

"I wanted to be a spaceman - that's what I wanted to be. But now that I am a spaceman, nobody cares about me." So sang Harry Nilsson, the musician who in 1972 channeled the changing feelings about space exploration in this country.

Today, somewhere between those two absurdly different ideas, sits America's attitude about space.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, it was the vast, uncharted place where the American imagination dwelled, pushed by the fear that the Soviets would get there first. The Space Age was everywhere: Even when it was threatening, it was enchanting. Even when it was menacing, it beckoned. Even when it was lampooned ("The Jetsons") or sublimated (car tailfins), it only reflected how deeply entrenched in the culture it truly was.

But today space occupies a very different place in the popular culture.

Our visions of it have become darker, more suspicious, more

xenophobic. When a space shuttle launches, many Americans don't really notice unless something goes wrong. In a country defined by its obsession with novelty, often the response is predictably American, the thing that makes us great and weak at the same time: Been there, done that.

We have gone from stirring Kennedy oratory about "landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth" to an ad for Alexia Crunchy Snacks that promises its product is - wait for it - "a giant leap for snackkind."

We have lapped many of yesterday's visions of tomorrow. "Lost in Space" was set in 1997, "Space: 1999" and "2001: A Space Odyssey" in their own obvious years. So many American futures are now in the past.

We have traded optimism - even the more horrific sci-fi of the 1950s generally operated on the presumption that America would, should, engage with space - to the creeping menace manifest in "The X-Files," after which you ended up wishing that anything unearthly would just go away.

Pick up a fresh copy of the rebooted, reconstituted, reconfigured comic-book tales of "Flash Gordon" and "Buck Rogers" and a far more malignant vision of a spacefaring future smacks you upside the head. Even the Superman myth has been retooled, in the TV show "Smallville," to include "meteor freaks" and Kryptonians who seem more at home in a Wes Craven movie than Clark Kent's backyard.

Even in this summer's new "Star Trek" movie, the culture's most optimistic take on space travel, Dr. Leonard "Bones" McCoy's usually cheerful cantankerousness plumbs its deepest reaches yet: "Space," he grouses, "is disease and danger wrapped in darkness and silence."

What happened here?

"The wonder has been tapped out," says Jeff Bigley, who runs a comic-book store north of Pittsburgh called Arkham Gift Shoppe (its slogan is "We have issues").

"It's kind of gotten out of the culture," says Bigley, 38. "It seems like there's no new frontier. We made it to the moon and haven't been back in years. Until they start doing more than just putting down a flag, orbiting the Earth just isn't all that exciting."

In fact, some of the more exciting prospects about space travel are coming from private industry - the so-called "space tourism" initiatives that entrepreneurs are increasingly putting forward. But publicly funded space travel? These days, Americans seem unsure.

Though Gallup polls in recent years show a generally positive attitude toward NASA, attitudes about space exploration itself are mixed.

In 2006, nearly half of Americans polled said the money spent on the space shuttle program would have been better used elsewhere. And in 2004, shortly after President George W. Bush outlined a program to return the United States to the moon and push on to Mars, 23 percent of Americans said the government should be spending less money on space exploration; 13 percent said it shouldn't be funded at all.

"With space exploration, there's no one championing this next generation," says Alex Shear, a professional collector and curator of Americana and consumer goods, much of it from the post-World War II "Space Age."

"After they went up there, there was something anticlimactic about it," Shear says. "You can't have this all on the back burner. Keep it on the

front burner. Keep the heat up. And you'll have something that's quintessentially American that we deserve to celebrate."

As it happens, there is another Pittsburgh suburb - this one a bit north of the city - called Mars.

Here, the various sports teams are named the Planets, the Meteors, the Martians, the Invaders. A flying saucer, complete with antenna and looking straight out of a Sputnik-era double feature, sits at the corner of Pittsburgh Street and Grand Avenue, just up the road from the Planet Mart.

Ask Jackie Bushee, 12, who attends Mars Area Middle School, what she makes of America's future in space and you'll get a wise answer that, as with so many Americans when it comes to this topic, mixes optimism with skepticism.

About the Apollo 11 landing she says this: "I had to study it last year in sixth grade for science. And no one really cared." Later, she adds: "Kids my age aren't worried about where we are going. We are worried about where we are right now."

But ask her about going somewhere else - Mars, say - and a different story emerges. "I think that would be really cool. The moon just seems so boring and easy to get to. Mars, that's something different."

Something different. How very American: we want to be inspired anew. We hunger for it. And though it hasn't felt urgent in many years, space remains in position to feed that American urge for the next big thing, for pushing outward, for testing ourselves and renewing at the edges.

Doubt it? Visit the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum on a Saturday morning - but only if you like big crowds.

Walk past an actual Apollo landing module and think: How in heaven did we land on the moon in something like this? It looks like a foil-and-tarpaper float built for a homecoming parade.

Marvel at the tiny Mercury Friendship 7 capsule, which carried John Glenn into orbit. And then, if you can get to the front of the circle of people ringing it, stand in front of the actual Apollo 11 command module, Columbia.

Then pause, and listen to the voices around you.

"... actual re-entry capsule ..."

"... Collins stayed in the command module ..."

"... looks like a beehive on the bottom ..."

"... can't believe someone did that ..."

In German and Chinese, Japanese and Hindi and, yes, American English, they marvel still at this conical piece of mottled metal that traveled so far. They pose for pictures, shoot video. As they suck on gift-shop candy Shuttle Pops, they reach up to touch Columbia's plastic casing as if they're touching the stars.

We can say that America's space dreams haven't felt urgent for a long time, and we'd have a point. We can say that Bush's 2004 promise to aim for Mars fell flat, and it did. But to these folks, it is all so real and can be again. The embers can be rekindled.

In a new book called "Rocket Men: The Epic Story of the First Men on the Moon," author Craig Nelson ends with a summons that insists it all still matters, that the urgency is still there and should be harnessed as it once was.

"Shouldn't a nation as rich, as energetic, as brilliant and as ingenious as the United States - a nation founded by explorers - always be ready for new frontiers?" he asks.

Sure, we can embed our space nightmares in the latest episode of "Battlestar Galactica" and our dormant space dreams in the continually reimagined landscape of Disney's Tomorrowland. But the fact remains that Americans went into space, landed on the moon and returned safely to Earth. And with that stick-to-itiveness, why not Mars? Why not beyond? Why not anything?

That's the whole point of space travel, after all, when you get right down to it.

Science benefits, defense benefits, even theology benefits. But what it's really all about - for average, non-spacefaring Americans, at least - is what it always comes back to: that immigrant drive to push outward to a place where the bonds of custom are broken, unrestraint is triumphant and many things are possible. The notion of the Next Big Thing, magnified a million times beyond any scale that even the biggest thinkers of the American story ever dreamed.

And there to contemplate the infinite, as David Bowman the astronaut did when he uttered his awestruck words in "2001: A Space Odyssey."

"My God," he said. "It's full of stars." It still is, and it waits for us. No matter how long it takes.

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