

Bro. Gordon Cooper, Jr., Astronaut, Western Coloradan, Mason

By WB Lee Anderson



Fifty years ago, on July 20th, 1969, history was made when 2 men stepped on the surface of the moon. One of the 2 was a Mason, Brother Buzz Aldrin. But, our story would begin 10 years earlier and it has a West Slope connection.

Leroy Gordon Cooper Jr. was born in Shawnee Oklahoma on the 6th of March, 1927 to Leroy Gordon Cooper Sr. and Hattie Lee Cooper. His dad was a lawyer in Shawnee and his Gordon's family's story plays a very important part of young Gordons Fabric.

The senior cooper left high school in the middle of his senior year. He joined the Navy to avoid being drafted into the Army in World War I. He was sent to Washington D.C. and served aboard the U.S.S. Mayflower, the Presidents yacht. After the wars end and his release from the service, he returned to Shawnee to finish high school. Upon graduation, he married one of his teachers. Now, I wonder how well that would play out in todays world?

He put himself through college receiving a Degree in Law and returned to Shawnee to begin his practice. In time, he would be appointed a District Court Judge.

Shortly after returning to Shawnee he also joined the Oklahoma National Guard where he would learn to fly. He had purchased a Curlis Robin, and at the age of 8, after his dad had added blocks to the rudder pedals and making a special cushion for him, young Gordon would learn to fly and soloed at 12.

At the opening of World War 2, Gordon Sr. was called to duty to the Judge Advocates Office and served in the Pacific Theater. He would later be recalled again during the Korean War.

Gordon Jr. or Gordo; as he would always be called, went to school in Shawnee until his senior year when his dad became stationed near Murray Kentucky and where Gordo would graduate.

As soon as Gordo turned 18 and still in high school, he enlisted in the Marines because as the war was coming to an end the Army or the Navy weren't taking any pilots applications. Well as it turned out, the Marines weren't either,

they just didn't tell him. He was sent to Washington D.C. and served as a Presidential Honor Guard.

After his discharge from the Marines, he went to Hawaii where his Dad was now stationed. He started college at the University of Hawaii. While there, he first joined the Army R.O.T.C. program but transferred to the newly forming Air Force R.O.T.C. He started his flight training at Perrin Air Force base in Texas, and then to Williams Air Force base in Arizona.

In 1950, he was assigned to the 86th Fighter Bomber Squadron and sent to Germany for 4 years. While there he would become Flight Commander of the 525th Fighter Bomber Squadron.

In 1954, he would return to the States to attend the Air Force Institute of Technology at Wright-Patterson where he would graduate with a bachelors in Aeronautical Engineering. He was then sent to Edwards Air Force base to attend the Experimental Flight Test School, and in 1957, assigned to the Fighter Section.

While he was at Edwards, it was announced that Mc Donnell Aircraft had just been awarded the contract for the first Mercury Space Capsule. Shortly after the announcement; Gordo was called to Washington for a briefing. 110 men were invited for the day long briefing and later, they were individually asked what they thought of the program. Well just before Gordo left for Washington, he was told by his C.O. "don't you dare volunteer for anything." Oh well. After tests in Albuquerque and Wright-Patterson, the 110 were narrowed to 7, he being the youngest. On April 9th, 1959, NASA made the announcement. Four of the seven original Mercury Astronauts were, or would become Masons.

Well, now comes the West Slope connection. When young Gordon was growing up, his dad purchased a small place near Carbondale so he and his mom could escape the Oklahoma summer heat. Now as a kid growing up, what could be better. Through the years the family kept the place. Gordon Sr. was a Mason and when. He was there, attended Carbondale 82. Lodge, and in 1960, he was raised a Master Mason. With all that was going on at that time in his life, I don't know how he pulled it off! Later he would become a York Rite Mason, a Scottish Rite Mason, given a honorary 33rd Degree, and a Shriner.

Well, probably one of the most famous missions in N.A.S.A.'s history was the last of the Mercury Missions, Faith7, when Gordo was pilot. On the 15th of May, 1963, it started without much incident other than a 6 hour delay at the start; a generator that was needed to power the gantry back from the rocket, wouldn't start. But it was on the 19th orbit when things started to go south. On that orbit, when he was in a place where he had radio contact with no one, an indicator light came on. One that shouldn't until reentry had begun. The autopilot should have corrected it, but it didn't. A reentry circuit breaker had tripped out of sequence.

When he again had established radio contact with Mission Control, they were showing nothing had happened to the orbit. On the next orbit he was to start the reentry sequence by switching on the autopilot. When he did; the capsule began a slow roll. This wasn't to happen until after retrofire had ended. The computer had skipped ahead and missed several steps that were necessary before reentry should begin. Now he was going to have to do these steps manually.

On the 20th orbit he lost all altitude readings when a power inverter died and when switching to the 2nd, it wouldn't respond either. He didn't dare switch to the 3rd. It was to handle the cooling system for reentry. He was going to have to do it all manually and with no altitude information or clock. Of course these things only happen when he had no radio contact. When Mission Control could make contact again and he was asked about his status, Cooper's response was "things are beginning to stack up a little."

On the 22nd orbit he began his descent. He made his way through the check list. By using the stars he made marks with a grease pencil as to where the horizon should be and another 34 degrees about it for his reentry altitude. By using his watch, he fired the retro rockets and began his descent. As he made his way down he'd make corrections by observation, feel and just plain gut instinct. Looking out that tiny window and feeling the time was right, he deployed the chutes landing only 4 miles ahead of the carrier, U.S.S. Kearsarge, the closest of any of the Mercury or Gemini missions. In August of 1965, Cooper would be in command of Gemini 5.

Realizing he would probably never fly an Apollo mission he retired from both N.A.S.A. and the military in 1970. Toward the end of his life, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's and passed away on October 4th, 2004. I do know the library and Middle School in Carbondale are named in his honor and both his parents are buried in Carbondale as well.

I don't think our story about Brother Cooper would be complete without relating a couple of his antics. He had many and they are legendary.

Jim Rathman, a winner of the Indy 500, owned a Chevy Dealership in Melbourne, Florida. He offered to lease a new 1960 Corvette to each astronaut for 1 year for a Dollar. Only John Glenn declined.

One day after landing at a local airport, on a commercial flight, Gordo had arranged to have the Vette brought to him so he could drive it back to the Cape. Cooper offered a fellow passenger who he didn't know and who was also going that way as well, a ride. They got in the car and Cooper made a tire smoking 180 in the parking lot and by the time they got to the highway they were doing 90. When he stopped at the highway he looked over at his passenger and said, "Hi, I'm Gordo Cooper." His passenger glanced back and said "I'm Gene Kranz, your new boss."

Well, Gordo's wild streak almost got him canned. N.A.S.A. was becoming concerned about his maverick ways and were considering replacing him with Alan Shepard. When Gordo caught wind of it he was angry to say the least. Each of the astronauts had use of a F-106. Two days before his mission, Cooper took the 106 up to "blow off some steam." He made a high speed low level pass over the restricted area and just as he approached mission control, pitched up and turned on the afterburner. Some said he was below the 2nd story windows. They were furious with him and at that night's briefing they were asked "who made that pass" as if they didn't know! Dead silence. Never the less, they let him stew about it for a day. Anger subsided and cooler heads prevailed, the next day, Cooper and Faith 7 started their legendary mission.

Brother Leroy Gordon Cooper Jr. would prove Chuck Yeager wrong when Yeager quipped, "those astronauts are all nothing but Spam in a can." On Faith 7 they needed a real test pilot, Gordo.