

J.L. Pickering and John Bisney
authors of
Picturing Apollo 11: Rare Views and Undiscovered Moments

You were both part of the generation who witnessed the launch of Apollo 11. What was it like to see Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin step onto the moon's surface?

JL: It was mesmerizing. I had already been following the space program very closely for a few years, so knowing the players and equipment so well made it more exciting. It seems just as amazing 50 years later.

John: I was fortunate enough to have attended the launch, and like the rest of the country (and the world), I was also paying very close attention. I watched the landing with my parents on our black-and-white TV, which was fine as this first landing didn't have a color camera. I wish we had as many media outlets back then as we do now, which could have brought us even more information!

What would you say to the people who believe the moon landing was a hoax?

JL: The favorite reply to this nonsense came from Apollo 16 astronaut Charles Duke, who replied, "We've been to the moon nine times. If we faked it, why did we fake it nine times?" It seems to me that most non-believers are younger in age and were not around at the time the Apollo missions were taking place. I guess these young folks just cannot fathom such an accomplishment. 400,000 people worked on the Apollo program. Seems like it would have been difficult to keep faked moon landings a secret.

John: A certain small percentage of people will always believe in false conspiracy theories. Some still think Earth is flat. All you can do is show them the facts and hope they come around.

The debate over government funding for space exploration continues to incite controversy. Why do you believe the public should support the use of government funds for space science?

JL: There has always been a misconception about government funds for NASA programs. Last time I checked it was 0.47 % of the annual budget, and that money is spent on Earth, not in space. It is a small price to pay for advancing technology and celebrating human achievement.

John: I agree. The critics who mistakenly insist our space budget is hugely expensive also ignore all the benefits it has brought and continues to bring. NASA's annual budget has never exceeded 4.5%. We spend far more as a nation each year on pizza.

In the past year alone, SpaceX launched its Falcon 9 rocket, China's Chang'e-4 rover landed on the moon, and NASA's Parker Solar Probe is on its way to study the sun. What new efforts in space exploration are you most excited about?

JL: They are all interesting in their own way. SpaceX has done some amazing things with the Falcon, but nothing to this day holds my interest like the Apollo missions did—and still do. It has been real disappointing seeing the United States get themselves into the position of not being able to launch our own astronauts to space. Hopefully that will change soon.

John: As a fan of human space exploration, I'm most excited about prospects for eventually landing astronauts on Mars, but progress continues to be frustratingly slow. It's good to see continuing development of private space capabilities, but the seeds were sewn more than 30 years ago after the space shuttle *Columbia* disaster. Without any geopolitical threat or competition, there is unfortunately no imperative now to act more quickly.

If you had the opportunity to go into space, would you take it? Why or why not?

JL: Probably not. I don't feel quite as adventurous as I used to. Combine that with the hefty price tag for 15 minutes in space, and I think I will stay put. My wife would agree!

John: I'd sure consider it. I applied for the Journalist in Space program in 1986, but I'd sure feel a lot safer aboard a NASA launch than some of the emerging "space tourism" ventures. But as JL notes, price would be a factor!

How did you choose the images for *Picturing Apollo 11*?

JL: It was a difficult process of elimination to be sure. There was a mix of putting together an outline of topics to be covered, and then looking through a few thousand images to see which ones we could match rare photos with. A large percentage of the photos in the book have never been seen or have rarely been seen. There were a handful of "more common" images included almost out of necessity. The in-flight images have of course been available for everyone to see since 1969. We have just tried to pick some lesser known ones from that group. All in all, we think we have put together a book of rare images that will tell the story of Apollo 11 in a new and refreshing way.

Is there anything special about the captions?

John: Yes (said the writer)! I analyze each photo carefully, noting the people, places and hardware in each one. Then I research who they are and what's going on using the vast library of original NASA and contractor documents available online today. I also draw upon newspaper accounts of the day, all intended to provide the most detailed and comprehensive background information possible. We hope even space buffs will learn a thing or two. We certainly have.

Images tell stories and facilitate dialogue. What do you hope readers will take away from the photos in your book?

JL: I hope readers look closely at the photos and come away with a sense of beauty for the machines, and an understanding of how difficult the process of launching and flying an Apollo mission was.

John: I agree. It's only when you see the enormous national effort involved that you can truly appreciate what (as it turns out) a unique undertaking this was in American history—one not likely to be duplicated any time soon. Also, so many people were dedicated to Apollo 11's success, from NASA officials to the lowest-level worker.

Are there any documentaries you would recommend for people who loved *Picturing Apollo 11*?

JL: I quite enjoyed the documentary on astronaut Gene Cernan that came out a couple of years ago. I am also looking forward to an upcoming Apollo 11 documentary that was produced with a considerable amount of previously unseen large format film. I enjoy any project that is true to the actual mission footage and material and does not substitute images or footage from other missions.

John: My favorite Apollo documentary is *In the Shadow of the Moon* for its portrayal of the astronauts. Also good, especially for the engineering aspects, is the four-part TV mini-series, *Moon Machines*. But JL is quite right; it's amazing how many books and documentaries end up including inadvertent mistakes because nobody bothered to double-check.

You have worked together on two other photographic history books of NASA missions. What has that collaboration been like?

JL: John and I have known each other for almost 30 years and we both share a love of space history. My extensive collection of rare images is a perfect match for John's writing talents. My only complaint is that there are never enough pages for additional images we end up cutting from the books.

John: Absolutely. We also have similar upbringings and personalities, so it's a very satisfying personal and professional relationship.

What project are you working on next?

JL: We are currently working on what we hope to be a two-volume set dedicated to the early years (1976–1988) of the Space Shuttle program. These two books will be similar in style to our previous *Spaceshots and Snapshots* and *Moonshots and Snapshots*. We have no shortage of ideas or images for projects beyond that. I would personally like to see a *Picturing Apollo* for each of the missions, but one step at a time.

John: The shuttle books are quite an undertaking, but already we have started. The wonderful thing about the vast scope and size of JL's archives, as well as his amazing photographic memory, means the sky (or maybe space) is quite literally "the limit!"