



Kansas 1972 Podcast
EPIISODE 5: TO THE STARS!

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Tracy Quillin:

This series was made possible by the Friends of Humanities Kansas.

Kara Heitz:

Welcome to *Kansas 1972*. A lot happened during that pivotal year, including the founding of Humanities Kansas. In celebration of our 50th anniversary, we'll be telling stories from that era of Kansas history. So tune in, chill out, and get the lowdown on 1972.

EPIISODE INTRODUCTION

Audio: Pioneer 10 Jupiter Odyssey, NASA 1973

"In early 1972, mankind launched Pioneer 10, the first mission to the outer planets. The first to venture out beyond the orbit of Mars, out through the Jupiter system, and eventually out of our solar system completely."

Kara Heitz:

After leaving Earth's neighborhood, Pioneer 10 headed into deep space, in the direction of the constellation Taurus. NASA lost contact with Pioneer 10 in 2003; however, Pioneer was equipped with more than just scientific instruments.

Audio: Pioneer 10 Jupiter Odyssey, NASA 1973

But in the remote contingency that there are interstellar space-faring societies which might someday pick up this derelict no longer radioing, we thought we would put a message on it to indicate a little bit of where we are, when we are, and who we are.

Kara Heitz:

That's the voice of Carl Sagan, astronomer and noted science communicator, who helped design the plaque affixed to Pioneer 10.

Pioneer 10 was the first of five human-created objects to eventually leave our solar system, and its mission combined two very different, yet related impulses when we think about outer space. The first is human efforts to break free of our planet's atmosphere and explore the cosmos. And the second, is questions about whether there are other beings who have perhaps done the same thing.

[Music starts]

Today's episode features stories that take us "To the Stars" by way of Kansas.

You'll hear about the last of the Apollo missions to the moon. And the Kansan who was part of that mission.

Audio:

Hello there. I'm astronaut Ron Evans.

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

The Apollo 17 mission was his first flight. He was the command module pilot.

Kara Heitz:

How Western Kansas was considered as a potential space shuttle launch site...

Jennifer Ross-Nazzal:

Kansas would be a great location for that shuttle landing facility and launch facility.

Kara Heitz:

And how some Kansans were none too happy about this possibility.

Jeremy Gill:

...about 100 farmers descended on to the Hays business district, driving their tractors, their trucks, their trailers...

Kara Heitz:

How Kansas experienced a rash of UFO sightings in 1972

Audio:

Kansas authorities are puzzling over the significance of unidentified flying objects appearing over west-central Kansas in the past week.

Kara Heitz: A

nd a flying saucer encounter in Delphos that left unique physical evidence.

Dakota Davis:

...it's a story that can still, you know, put wonder in somebody today just like it did when it happened in 1971.

Kara Heitz:

But first, let's go back to the night of December 7th, 1972

[Music ends]

SEGMENT 1 - APOLLO 17 & RON EVANS

Apollo 17 highlights

Ten, nine, eight, seven. Ignition sequence started. All engines are started. We have ignition. Two, one, zero. We have a liftoff. We have a liftoff. And it's lighting up the area. It's just like daylight here at Kennedy Space Center is a Saturn five is moving off the pad.

Apollo 17 news, CBS 1972-08-28

The Apollo 17 spacecraft was rolled out to the launchpad at Cape Kennedy today. The last time that trip will be made this big in the final mission in the Apollo program. From the assembly building to the launchpad, that was a three-and-a-half-mile trip for the towering rocket.

Kara Heitz:

Apollo 17 was the last of the Apollo missions, the US spaceflight program that ran from 1961 to 1972. Of course, the most famous Apollo mission was Apollo 11, where the first human beings walked on the moon on July 20th, 1969. But Apollo 17 had something none of the other Apollo missions had - an astronaut from Kansas, Ron Evans.

We'll hear more about Evans and the Apollo 17 mission in a moment. But first, I wanted to understand more about the history of the Apollo program.

[Music starts]

Early efforts at space exploration began in the 1950s with the International Geophysical Year of 1957-1958, an international cooperative project of over 60 nations engaging in research in Earth sciences, including using rockets to study the upper atmosphere. But that collaborative spirit soon gave way to the political realities of the Cold War. The Soviet Union was the first to launch an artificial object into Earth's orbit in 1957 with Sputnik. This helped trigger the Space Race, with the United States and USSR competing to be the first country to launch a human being into space and, eventually, to the moon.

[Music ends]

To help tell the specific history of Apollo, I spoke with Teasel Muir-Harmony, the curator of the Apollo Collection at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

And so there was an evaluation that took place multiple sort of studies during the Eisenhower, the end of the Eisenhower administration looking into the costs of sending humans to the Moon. Eisenhower, being the fiscally conservative person he was, thought it was far too expensive and said, "I'm not going to hock my jewels at the Moon," was a reference to Ferdinand and Isabella funding Columbus's voyages to the Americas and the Kennedy administration, his transition team also evaluated the costs, and that was sort of the future of the American space program,

the cost of sending humans to the Moon. His adviser said, "You know, this is not worth it." And Kennedy decided to delay that decision till the next fall. So the future of American spaceflight when Kennedy took office didn't look too optimistic. It didn't look like there would be a program like Apollo.

Kara Heitz:

This all changed on April 12th, 1961, when the Soviet Union launched the Vostok 1 capsule carrying cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. He became the first human being to travel beyond the Earth's atmosphere, thereby giving the Soviets another first in the Space Race.

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

But with Gagarin's flight, people were impressed. And so Kennedy was really concerned about the perception of the Soviet Union and of communism more broadly around the world and especially in newly independent nations. And he was concerned that something like Gagarin's flight [would] impress them so much that they might think the communist system was a preferable system to the United States' approach to a political system of democracy.

JFK Address to Joint Session of Congress, May 25, 1961

"Finally, if we are to win the battle that is now going on around the world between freedom and tyranny, the dramatic achievements in space which occurred in recent weeks should have made clear to us all, as did the Sputnik in 1957, the impact of this adventure on the minds of men everywhere, who are attempting to make a determination of which road they should take."

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

And so Kennedy asked his advisors, "Find me a space program that promises dramatic results that we can win."

JFK Address to Joint Session of Congress, May 25, 1961

"... I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish."

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

And then Kennedy proposed this plan in the end of May of 1961. So he did it to a joint session of Congress, and it's called Project Apollo. It was extremely bold initiative at that time, the United States had a total of around 15 minutes of human space flight experience, so the first American astronaut had flown in space at the beginning of that month. It was a brief suborbital flight, so when Kennedy proposed Project Apollo sending humans to the Moon, the United States had not even orbited Earth yet hadn't, hadn't spent a day in space yet, just 15 minutes.

It's quite remarkable. There were a lot of unknowns at that time. But there was a sense that it could be, you know, it would be possible if there was the sort of investment and the national will. And it's a program that cost over twenty-five billion dollars at the time...

Kara Heitz:

Of course, we know that Kennedy's objective to put a human - an American - on the moon by the end of the decade was indeed achieved.

The Time of Apollo, NASA 1975

That's one small step for man,
one giant leap for mankind.

Apollo 11, Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins. They and millions of others reached out and in their own way touched another planet.

Kara Heitz:

While we often think of this accomplishment of the Apollo program as an achievement of humanity and not just the US, this was actually part of a larger American Cold War strategy.

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

A lot of the framing that we think of is just sort of natural, the way that we think about space exploration for all humankind and, and sort of our associations with the first lunar landing. This idea of this one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind, that this is part of a greater accomplishment of human civilization, not just the United States. So a lot of that framing is actually really tied to political strategy at that time. The programming that resonated the most strongly with people internationally was the programming that sort of downplayed sort of talking about the United States or the American flag or championing American technological achievement and instead sort of messaging that had to do that was more inclusive was about humankind that focused on peace. And the important role that science and technology could play for the world more generally. And so, through this observation, they fine tune the programming and they fine tune their messaging about Apollo.

Kara Heitz:

By the later Apollo missions in 1971 and 1972, the program had refocused on more scientific aims.

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

They were longer duration stays on the Moon. The astronauts used lunar rovers for the first time in these missions, which allowed them greater reach around the lunar surface to collect more samples to do more science.

Kara Heitz:

And the last mission, Apollo 17, really embodied this shift in its accomplishments.

The Time of Apollo, NASA 1975

The complex organization, the mammoth machines. The incredibly detailed technical knowledge, the dedication. It was all harnessed, sharpened to a fine edge and focused. The program developed and matured. Apollo 17 was launched at night, and even the old hands of

the hardened veterans of the space program couldn't help but feel the awe, wonder, and excitement.

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

So Apollo 17 was part of this last group of missions. The stay on the Moon was the longest of any Apollo mission. They stayed on the lunar surface for three days. They had three moonwalks. They collected an incredible amount of lunar samples, I believe, over two hundred and fifty pounds. And to give you a sense in comparison, the first lunar landing mission, Apollo 11, they collected a roughly 50 pounds. So this was a lot, lot more.

Kara Heitz:

In fact, this scientific impact of the later Apollo missions is still with us today. Just earlier this year, in March of 2022, NASA scientists tested some of the 50-year-old moon rock samples collected by Apollo 17. We'll put a link to an article about this on the episode website.

So while later missions like Apollo 17 were more science-heavy, this does not mean that geopolitical concerns were completely absent.

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

This mission also involved some diplomatic things, like many of the missions. And so the astronauts collected a moon rock on the lunar surface that was going to be part of a diplomatic gift to countries around the world. And during the process of collecting that moon rock. On the lunar surface, there was a bit of a ceremony, I guess you could say, because the U.S. also had this program where they had one student from each country. So these children come to the United States to tour NASA facilities and sort of STEM facilities. And then so they were they were referenced in this in this collection of the Moon Rock. And then they were participants in the presentation of these lunar samples within their respective countries after the astronauts returned home.

Apollo 17 Highlights

Probably one of the most significant things we can think about when we think about Apollo is that it opened up for us being the world a challenge of the future. The door is not cracked, but the promise of that future lies in the young people, not just in America, but the young people all over the world learning to live and learning to work together. In order to remind all the peoples of the world and so many countries throughout the world that this is what we all are striving for in a future.

Kara Heitz:

Until the end of the program, NASA continued to frame Apollo's achievements in terms of humankind, and not just Americans, for both altruistic and strategic reasons. However, certain individuals became the face of the US space program - the astronauts. They became heroes and celebrities, feted, and paraded by their hometowns and home states.

And in Kansas, that celebrated Apollo astronaut was Ron Evans.

Ron Evans, *Let's Fly to the Moon*, 1983

Hello there. I'm astronaut Ron Evans. On December six, 1972, I was command module pilot of Apollo 17, the last spaceflight to the moon. During this flight, I logged 301 hours and 51 minutes in space, one hour and 6 minutes of which were EVA outside the spacecraft.

Kara Heitz:

Evans was a native of St. Francis, Kansas, located in the farthest northwest corner of the state in Cheyenne county. He attended the University of Kansas, studying electrical engineering, and after graduation became a navy pilot, serving in the Vietnam War. In 1966, he applied to the astronaut training program and became part of NASA's astronaut group number 5.

Teasel Muir-Harmony discusses Evans' work on the Apollo program.

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

The Apollo 17 mission was his first flight. He was the command module pilot. So, with the command module pilot does is they they're in charge of the command module. So, the Apollo spacecraft is a multi-part spacecraft, so three astronauts travel to the moon together. The command module pilot stays in the command module orbiting the moon, while the two other astronauts, the lunar module pilot and the commander, glide to the lunar surface in the lunar module. And they do the moonwalk on the lunar surface. They collect lunar samples all that activity, while the command module pilot orbits, orbits the moon. And then after they're done with their EVA, they launch from the Moon and they rejoin the command module and then eventually they make their way back to Earth.

Kara Heitz:

On the return journey to Earth, Evans performed an EVA (short for extra-vehicular activity), commonly called a spacewalk. To this day, this is still the last DEEP spacewalk performed by an individual.

Teasel Muir-Harmony:

It took about an hour in total, and there's television coverage of it as well, so it's quite extraordinary.

Apollo 17, deep space EVA

"Going up. Am I clear? You're clear, babe. Go. Ok. Hot diggity dog!"

He saw the Moon and he saw that he saw the Moon, obviously, because they were that far along at that point. But he saw the Earth at this great distance during this experience, which must have just been extraordinary, that that experience is really unique.

Kara Heitz:

By 1972, public sentiment about Apollo had been shifting. There was a lot of critique in the US about the cost of the program and whether Moon landings should continue to be a national

priority. But the amazing accomplishments of the Apollo program and of astronauts like Ron Evans still continue to inspire us, five decades on.

The Time of Apollo, NASA 1975

They first went there in 1969. They last left there in late 1972. Between the beginning and the conclusion, they came to feel, to dimly perceive what it was all about, to come to a perspective on the meaning of it all. Poet Archibald MacLeish said it better than most. "To see the Earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful, and that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together. Brothers who know now they are truly brothers."

Kara Heitz:

But the end of the Apollo program was not the end of the US space program. In our next segment, we'll learn about how some Kansans' were not as enthusiastic about this next phase of space exploration.

SEGMENT 2 - SHUTTLE PROTESTS

Kara Heitz:

On January 5th, 1972, almost a year before the last Apollo mission blasted off, NASA administrator James C. Fletcher held a press conference to announce a new direction in the US space program.

Jan. 5, 1972, Nixon administration announces Shuttle program

"A most historical step in the history of the space program, in that it gives man, for the first time, the capability of routinely, and at a moment's notice when necessary, of getting to and from space with either men or equipment. And this all can be done within the framework of a space program which is useful in science applications and in exploration and can be fit into what is essentially today's space budget."

Mission to the Future (Space Shuttle), 1981

A new door to space opens.

The space shuttle.

Everything that has gone before in space, this magnificent treasure, is prologue. We are beginning a new and exciting age ...

Kara Heitz:

While the first Space Shuttle did not officially launch until 1981, planning and developing for the shuttle program began much earlier.

To help explain the history of the space shuttle program, I spoke to Jennifer Ross-Nazzal, the historian for NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas.

Jennifer Ross-Nazzal:

So the space shuttle was something that the Department of Defense and NASA had been interested in for many years, they were interested in a winged vehicle. And in 1968, NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center, which is now the Johnson Space Center where I work, and the Marshall Space Flight Center in Alabama, started working on a vehicle that would become the space shuttle. And the idea behind the Space Shuttle was that it would be reusable because the Apollo spacecraft that we were using was not in any way. The only portion that actually came

back was the command module, which was the spacecraft where the astronauts sat and were located in. So, they thought if we could reuse the vehicle, we could save a lot of money. And so they started working on those concepts.

... And in 1970, the Ralph Parsons Company got a contract from NASA to start looking at facilities that the agency would need for the Space Shuttle program... So they were traveling around the country trying to figure out where the best place might be and also coming up with the requirements at that point.

Kara Heitz:

In 1970, NASA started the search for a space shuttle launch facility. And by 1971, Western Kansas was part of that search.

[*Music starts*]

VO: *Wichita Beacon*, 08-01-1971, “Kansans to Meet Space Officials, Try to Land Prized Shuttle Port”

“*The Wichita Beacon*, August 1st, 1971. Kansas officials – pushing hard for the location of a multi-billion-dollar space shuttle port somewhere in the western part of the state – will make their biggest effort to date Thursday in Washington at a meeting with ... top space agency officials. Leading the delegation ... will be Lt. Gov. Reynolds Shultz, the new chairman of the Kansas Economic Development Commission ... They will present their case to Dr. James C. Fletcher, NASA administrator ... and Gerald P. Gaffney ... head of the special team considering possible sites for the space shuttle port.

Gaffney’s team has visited Kansas twice this month. It was in Topeka July 14 and in Hays Friday to consider a shuttle port location in either the Hays-Russell area or near Garden City. 76 sites in 22 states are being considered for the prize, but Rep. Larry Winn, R-Kansas, believes Kansas is ‘among the final contenders for the facilities ...”

Kara Heitz:

The stakes were high, with an estimated 6,000 jobs and millions of dollars in contracts that would give a big boost to the local economy of the selected state.

[*Music ends*]

So, what exactly were the requirements for a launch site?

Here’s Jennifer Ross-Nazzal.

Jennifer Ross-Nazzal:

...the Parsons company came up with a number of criteria, they wanted a site that would be in the continental United States, so they weren't looking at Alaska or Hawaii or any of the territories.

They also wanted land that was going to belong to the federal government. They estimated around three hundred sixty thousand acres. They also wanted a buffer zone because it was going to be quite loud, so they wanted fifty-eight thousand acres of buffer. They also wanted community support of the program that was ideal for NASA. They needed a workforce. They estimated of about 6,500 people.

They wanted a railroad nearby. They also wanted a locks manufacturing plant within 100 miles. That was the fuel they were going to use on the Space Shuttle. They also wanted cultural and recreational facilities within 100 miles. They were thinking of their workers as well.

Kara Heitz:

Both the Hays-Russell and Garden City areas were identified as meeting a number of these requirements. But there was another requirement that might have put Kansas more towards the bottom of the list.

Jennifer Ross-Nazzal:

This one, I thought, was very interesting because I don't know that it would apply to any location. They wanted a location with no interruptions of ground ops due to rain, snow, fog, high or low temperatures, or wind speeds. I don't know where that exists in the United States, but that was ideal. So they had some pretty specific criteria that they were looking at.

Kara Heitz:

I'm not so sure how well Western Kansas would fit into the "no extreme weather" criteria!

So, NASA put together a list of 76 potential locations based on these criteria. Almost all these sites were in the Western United States with Texas having the most sites at 14, followed by Nebraska at 12, and Wyoming at 10. Kansas is listed as only having one location on the list.

And while many Kansans seemed excited by the prospect of hosting a space shuttle launch site, there were some local residents not very supportive of the idea.

To help tell this story, I spoke with Jeremy Gill, a historian who is the Kansas Room Coordinator at the Hays Public Library.

Jeremy Gill:

So August 20th, 1971, about 100 farmers descended on to the Hays business district, driving their tractors, their trucks, their trailers, and they were protesting something kind of interesting. They were protesting the possible site of a new NASA launch site that was being proposed, possibly in the Hays Russell area. ...

[Music starts]

VO: *Atchison Daily Globe*, 08-29-1971, "Hays Shows Opposition to Space Shuttle"

"Associated Press. Hays, Kansas. August 29th, 1971. More than 60 tractors and a number of farm trucks paraded through Hays' business district Saturday bearing posters decrying thoughts of the area as a possible site for a space facility... [Organizers] said the demonstration was necessary because 'the Chamber of Commerce is going to put our land up for sale and we are not going to stand for it.' ... The recurrent theme offered by opponents who spoke at the rally was the desire 'to be left alone,' and the need for the country to recognize 'agriculture is the backbone of the economy.'"

[Music ends]

Jeremy Gill:

And a lot of these farmers kind of felt like a little bit burned by those because there was a lot of resentment, especially people from Katherine, which is north of Hays, that there was some eminent domain that took place during World War II to build Walker airbase. And they saw this

as a as a new expansion of the federal program and in kind of invading into their territory again, like whether or not they were going to lose their land,

Kara Heitz:

The groups' actions did not stop there. And they seemed to have gathered more support beyond the tractor protest participants.

Jeremy Gill:

So just after that, the next day really are in that early week after that protest here in Hays. Twenty-seven hundred signatures were actually sent by the citizens against the Hays-Russell Space Shuttle Safety Committee to Governor Docking, who actually did support the possibility of a shuttle launch station being placed in Kansas. Governor Docking and Congressman Keith Sebelius also supported the possibility of this happening. But you have to think that on their end, this would be a major economic power boom to the state of Kansas. but they didn't realize that there was some constituents that wouldn't be particularly happy about it,

Kara Heitz:

This anti-space shuttle sentiment was not just limited to Hays. Remember that the Garden City area was also identified as a potential launch facility site.

VO: *Hutchinson News*, 09-07-1971, 'Hays Shuttle Foes Back Garden Citians'

"*The Hutchinson News*, September 7th, 1971. Landowners in the Hays area have agreed to 'active cooperation' with their Garden City counterparts in a fight to prevent the establishment of a space shuttle complex in Western Kansas."

Kara Heitz:

In both Garden City and Hays memories of land confiscation by the federal government and concerns over industrialization certainly were driving forces in this opposition. And Humanities Kansas (then known as the Kansas Committee for the Humanities) supported programs that showed citizens were eager to discuss these concerns. For example, Fort Hays State College hosted two programs connected to these topics - one in 1972 called "An Exchange of Dominance: Industrialization for Agriculture" and another in 1974 which posted the central question "What impact would industrialization have on the lifestyle of this area?"

But there was perhaps an even deeper concern at work.

Jeremy Gill:

And there was some resentment towards the NASA program in general and the sense of like, do we need to be spending money on going to space? Why don't you worry about the common man's issue, you know, some pricing commodities issues. So they probably was a little resentment over just like the necessity of something like this. And then also like, is it? Should I be sacrificing my land for this? What they might have saw as an asset or not a necessity?

Kara Heitz:

And in the late 1960s and 1970s, it was not just farmers in Kansas who are expressing these concerns over all the money being spent on the space program.

“Whitey on the Moon” by Gil Scott-Heron, 1970

[~] I can't pay no doctor bill.
(but Whitey's on the moon)
Ten years from now I'll be payin' still.
(while Whitey's on the moon)
The man jus' upped my rent las' night.
('cause Whitey's on the moon)
No hot water, no toilets, no lights.
(but Whitey's on the moon)

Kara Heitz:

That's spoken word artist Gil Scott-Heron performing his 1970 poem "Whitey on the Moon". Scott-Heron's poem represents the frustration that many underprivileged groups, not just rural farmers, felt about the priorities of the US federal government.

So did these protestors actually have something to worry about? Was Kansas seriously considered as a space shuttle launch site?

I asked Jennifer Ross-Nazzal this question.

Jennifer Ross-Nazzal:

I'm not really sure that that Kansas was really considered. In fact, when I went to our archive, I found that we had only two letters about Kansas, and they were actually from people in Kansas trying to encourage NASA to take a look at their site. We have one letter from the governor of Kansas, and he talks about how Kansas would be a great location for that shuttle landing facility and launch facility. And he brings up the fact that Kansas manufactured about two thirds of the aircraft at that point in in the country which I did not realize.

And then there was Hutchinson's industry. They were trying to encourage NASA to come out. They talked about their industrial plant. They also talked about their runway that they had, which was a little too short. But I think they were hoping that can be expanded. So but like I said, I think cost was a huge driver.

Kara Heitz:

But remember, some in the state thought Kansas was, quote, “among the final contenders for the facilities.” So why this impression?

Jennifer Ross-Nazzal:

So, NASA made this announcement that they were going to be looking at 76 sites and then they had to make that commitment because members of Congress were holding NASA's feet to the fire and saying, “Well, you know, if this is really a fair competition, you need to go see all the facilities and you need to travel to the states.”

[Teletype SFX]

VO: Press Release, The Office of Senator Bob Dole, July 12, 1971

“Washington, DC, July 12, 1971. Senator Bob Dole today met with Major General Robert H. Curtain ... of NASA. ... Curtain brought Dole up to date on the progress of the selection process ... Dole, who has been working with NASA since the announcement that sites were being considered for the space shuttle, expressed his interest and support for serious consideration of a Kansas site.”

Kara Heitz:

So perhaps the influence of Bob Dole had something to do with Kansas getting on the list.

Another aspect may be the very fact that NASA officials visited Kansas. And residents may have taken those visits a bit more seriously than NASA officials did. In fact, NASA officials indicated they were not too pleased with all the site visits.

Jennifer Ross-Nazzal:

And one of the gentlemen and I say gentlemen, because there were no women on the team, was very upset about this. He was upset that the media had gotten a hold of it because now they had to go to all these sites. And he was like, "Oh, I wish that we had come up with some geographical criteria or some other criteria, so we wouldn't have to visit all these sites because they were actually fairly long visits." It wasn't just go up, you know, take a look around the site. It was more involved.

They were interested in the cultural activities, the recreational activities of the area, the potential workforce, lots of things. So they had to go around. They had to meet the Chamber of Commerce. They met with university officials. So there was a lot more involved. It wasn't just, you know, an eight to five visit. It was three or four days that they were in that area. So this one individual, I wish I knew who it was. We have his notes in the archive, but he was very frustrated by this fact.

Kara Heitz

So these NASA visits were mostly just about PR. In fact, behind the scenes, NASA had been leaning heavily towards two specific sites all along - Vandenberg Air Force Base in California and Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

Then, in 1972, a new design decision about the space shuttle most definitely took Kansas out of the running.

Jennifer Ross-Nazzal:

Well, it turns out that NASA was not going to get as much money as it hoped for the development of the Space Shuttle. So they had to come up with other potential options to make the development and research phase a lot more inexpensive. So what they came up with was an external tank that would come off of the vehicle and not be reusable. It would just burn up on reentry, and they would also use solid rocket boosters for the first time on a manned spacecraft. And by doing so, they could no longer use any of these inland sites that they had visited. Everyone basically was out of the running. So that really limited the areas to coastal cities. And obviously, KSC was a prime choice since it was Vandenberg Air Force Base for that reason.

And I'm sure people were really disappointed because, of course, you know, it meant jobs, good paying jobs might be coming to their states. And, you know, a lot of visitors would come want to see launches and also see the space shuttle as it returned to Earth. And so that probably was disappointing for many people. But for farmers in Kansas who were concerned, they were probably quite relieved to hear this news.

Kara Heitz:

I have to admit, while I sympathize with the protesters' legitimate concerns about land confiscation, I also think it would have been kind of neat to be sitting on the prairie in Western Kansas, watching the space shuttle take off. Oh well!

In our next story, we shift our focus from human efforts to explore outer space to stories about Kansas visitors from beyond the stars.

SEGMENT 3 - UFOs

Project UFO TV show, 1978

"These are unidentified flying objects. Are they proof that we are being visited by civilizations from other stars? Or just what are they?"

Kara Heitz:

1972 was a banner year in Kansas. But for a reason that might not be the first thing that comes to mind. That year, the state experienced a rash of UFO sightings, probably the highest concentration in the state's history. The biggest cluster of sightings occurred around Dighton, Kansas, which began in February of 1972 and persisted for the next few months.

[Music begins]

VO: *The Wichita Beacon*, 07-25-1972, "Pesky UFO Revisiting Kansas Community"

"United Press International, July 25th, 1972. Dighton, Kansas. Police chief M.R. Shelton said today an unidentified flying object (UFO) seen several times in the Dighton area since January, apparently still has an interest in ... Kansas.

Two recent sightings of the UFO have been reported ... A man saw the mysterious red-orange glowing object last Friday and a girl saw it Wednesday night ... Pam K., 17, said she saw a red-orange glowing object ahead of her on the road. "It didn't move like an airplane or anything," she said. "It just stayed there and hovered. Then it moved real fast and stopped." It appeared to be round, she said, and continued to appear and disappear above the road. Wednesday morning her father ... discovered a 20-foot circle in a field where all the plants were dead. ... The circle was similar to a previous ... UFO sighting near Delphos, Kansas last November ..."

Kara Heitz:

The Dighton sightings were only the beginning. The summer of 1972 saw a number of observations in the region of the same glowing reddish lights, hovering over the ground, then rapidly moving away. And it seemed they were all related.

VO: *The Wichita Eagle*, 08-18-1972, "UFO Mother Ship Traced to Dighton"

"United Press International, August 18th, 1972. Hays, Kansas. Kansas authorities are puzzling over the significance of unidentified flying objects appearing over west-central Kansas in the past week.

A chart of the UFO sightings ... shows when all within a near-equilateral triangle, with sides about 120 miles long. Hays lies at the center of that triangle and has reported the majority of the recent sightings.

One corner is Lyons, to the southeast, where two of the fiery red hovering objects were seen Wednesday night. The northern corner is Phillipsburg, where a similar UFO was spotted before dawn Wednesday.

The southwest corner of the triangle is Dighton, where the phenomenon has recurred regularly since February. Dighton Police Chief M.R. Shelton, who has seen the “things” personally, said the UFOs reappear there every three to four days.

Within the triangle are at least six other towns where nighttime aerial phenomena have been reported in the past two days. Ellis, 15 miles west of Hays, reported five UFOs visible at the same time in the predawn hours Thursday. ...

Shelton, whose men have seen the red and white lights frequently, said every time he has seen it, ‘I’m dumbfounded and think - what the hell is it?’”

[Music ends]

Kara Heitz:

Reports of the same phenomenon continued into the early fall, with additional sightings in Russell, Phillipsburg, Stockton, Great Bend, Colby, and Arkansas City.

It seems Kansans had contracted UFO fever, with any unusual objects in the sky perceived through the lens of UFOs.

UFOs are Here, Australian TV, 1977

We have met the people at the heart of the UFO phenomenon, and it is their opinion that UFOs are here.

Kara Heitz:

But this rash of sightings in Kansas actually goes back to late 1971, to what is, to this day, still one of the more well-known cases of a UFO sighting in the US. This encounter occurred in Delphos, Kansas, in November of 1971 and left behind some unusual physical evidence.

But before we tell the Delphos story, I wanted to understand the larger cultural history of UFOs in the US. Where does this large cluster of sightings in Kansas in the early 1970s fit into the broader history of claimed UFO encounters?

To help me understand this history from an academic perspective, I talked with Greg Eghigian. Eghigian is a professor of history at Penn State University, specializing in the history of science and medicine. He is currently writing a book about the history of UFO sightings and claims of alien contact worldwide.

Greg Eghigian:

So, in the summer of 1947 is when really things start to take off, no pun intended, when people begin to talk about seeing strange objects in the sky that seem to be machines of some kind and very quickly the term the moniker used to sort of discuss them and talk about them was flying saucer. And so throughout the 40s and 50s into a good chunk of the 1960s, that was the way they were talked about as flying saucers. In time, other people referred to them as unidentified flying objects. And soon enough, by the 70s, you start to see people talking pretty regularly about them as UFOs.

Kara Heitz:

Of course, UFO does not necessarily mean little green men. A lot of what people started seeing in the sky were human-made objects or natural phenomena they could not immediately identify.

Greg Eghigian:

All sorts of things that sort of fell under that rubric. So it was a kind of a generic term that was adopted not just by the general public, but by the media. And so if you were out walking your dog at night and you saw a strange blue light that appeared and then it disappeared, or if you were out during the day and you saw some shiny object that seemed to appear disappear, it appeared disappear. All those kinds of things were very, very, very kind of common things that people saw that were reported as being UFOs.

Kara Heitz:

However, at the time same, the idea of flyer saucers and alien visitor to earth was a part of popular culture. And as people consumed more and more fictional accounts of UFOs, that fed into their perceptions of real-world encounters.

The War of the Worlds, Orson Welles, 1938

We know now that as human beings busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.

Kara Heitz:

So when the modern era of sightings begins in the late 1940s, the US government, especially the US military, quickly becomes interested in the UFO phenomenon. Of course, they want to know whether these objects are real or not, but they also wanted to know whether they presented a national security threat.

Greg Eghigian:

The Air Force in particular establishes a kind of working group. a group of people internally working within the Air Force who are assigned the task of collecting reports, analyzing the data, arriving at any conclusions they can about what these things are.

And so the government, the Air Force does this. Starting already in 1947, the projects go by different names. Over time, it began as Project Sign. It then moved into something called

Project Grudge and then eventually becomes the very famous Project Blue book that runs through to 1969.

Maj. Gen. Samford's statement on Flying Saucers, 07-31-1952

I'm here to discuss the so-called flying saucers, the Air Force's interest in this problem has been due to our feeling of an obligation to identify and analyze, to the best of our ability, anything in the air that may have the possibility of threat or menace to the United States.

Kara Heitz:

Project Blue Book is probably the most well-known government program that investigated UFOs. And there are a lot of conspiracy theories surrounding this agency, but we won't go down that rabbit hole today.

Project Blue Book actually did collect quite a bit of information on alleged UFO sightings, specifically over 12,000 reports between 1947-1969. Most of these cases were concluded to be natural phenomena like stars and clouds, or human-made objects like aircraft and weather balloons.

However, 701 of these cases could not be explained or debunked, which is a little over .5% of the total. And 8 of these unresolved cases were reported in Kansas. We'll put a list of them on the website.

By the mid-1960s, the US government wants to more thoroughly investigate these cases where there is no obvious natural or human-made cause. So they form a research group that will review these unexplained sightings from a scientific perspective. Sure, they want answers, but even more so, they want these cases explained away so they could stop investigating UFOs. This group comes to be known as the Condon Committee.

Greg Eghigian:

The Condon committee, which is, is operating its headquarters at the University of Colorado, conducts an investigation into UFO reports, combs through what seemed to be the most valid kinds of prominent cases.

They assemble a group of really physicists, meteorologists, psychologists to look into the phenomenon and the conclusion they reach that's reached by 1968 is that there is nothing to indicate that UFOs are, have anything to do with extraterrestrials visiting Earth. The military they can, they concede, has also established that there is nothing that threatens national security.

Kara Heitz:

So right around the same time the Apollo space program is preparing to send humans to the moon, the US government decides that there is no evidence that extraterrestrials have directed their own space programs at Earth.

While most people probably shrugged their shoulders or didn't even pay much attention to the conclusions of the Condon Committee, there is a group of people who were dramatically affected.

Greg Eghigian:

...What that does is it creates a kind of really throws cold water on the whole UFO world in its wake because in 1969 Project Blue book is disbanded and the government basically gets out of this, this work of tracking UFOs for quite some time.

But one of the other things that did is in the immediate aftermath by 1970, 1971, there's a general sense of gloom within the UFO world the UFO milieu of people who are enthusiasts and people who investigate this stuff, the sense that there's not a lot of interest anymore. The newspapers aren't covering UFOs terribly much. There's a sense that maybe this is the death knell of the whole UFO movement. And so, there's a lot of a lot of people going around saying, you know, we are witnessing the end of the kind of UFO craze.

Kara Heitz:

Besides government and military investigations, a whole slew of private groups had emerged in the 1950s and 1960s that researched and tracked UFO cases. Some of these were just small groups of friends getting together to talk about flying saucers, but some had a national, even worldwide presence, and focused on scientific analysis of UFO cases, such as the Mutual UFO Network or MUFON for short.

So, when we get this rash of UFO sightings in Kansas in 1972, we're actually in a really interesting moment in the history of UFOs. It's a low point for sightings, for research interest, and even in for UFOs in popular culture. I guess Kansas liked to buck the trend!

And as mentioned before, these 1972 sightings in central and western Kansas can possibly be traced back to what would become a globally famous UFO encounter in Delphos, Kansas. So what happened on the night of November 2nd, 1971, in Delphos?

Here's what the Minneapolis, Kansas, newspaper reported a few days after the incident.

[UFO SFX]

VO: *Minneapolis [Kansas] Messenger, November 1972.*

"Mystery continues to hover over the sighting of an unidentified flying object on the ... Johnson farm near Delphos last week. Ronnie Johnson ... and his pet dog were taking care of a flock of sheep at about 7pm when a brilliant light with a rumbling sound took off into the air from among the trees ... As the object moved upward it made a sound similar to a jet engine, the youth said. Ronnie ran to the house and called his parents. They were able to see the light in the sky, moving to the south. They investigated the area where Ronnie had seen the object and found a ring of earth approximately eight feet across. The ring had a fluorescent glow. Mrs. Johnson took a picture of the area immediately. ...

Said sheriff Ralph Enlow, "The ring was more than a foot wide and extended about a foot deep into the ground. The surrounding area was still muddy from recent rains, but the ring was extremely dry, as if something had sucked all the moisture from it."

[Music begins]

Kara Heitz:

What is most notable about this case is the physical traces left on the ground. Family members all observed that the earth on the ring seemed crystalized. After touching the ring, Mrs. Johnson claimed her fingers went numb.

The next day the glowing ring was still there. Rain had dampened the ground during the night, but the family claimed the ring was dry, like the rain had just run off that part of the earth. This dehydration effect on the ring site would persist reportedly for years, even with soil samples taken from the site.

In the ensuing weeks, a local newspaper reporter, the local sheriff, two other law enforcement officers, and an independent UFO researcher all investigated the ring. And they all observed the same thing - the ring on the ground was crusty looking and also bone dry, even when the ground adjacent to the ring was wet. Further analysis showed the dry patch extended about one foot down into the ground.

The Delphos incident immediately attracted the attention of the UFO community and has continued to draw people to the area for the past five decades.

[Music ends]

I had a chance to talk with Dakota Davis, curator at the Delphos Museum, and Samantha Davis, curator at the Ottawa County Historical Museum in Minneapolis. (Side note: Dakota and Samantha are actually son and mother. A love of history must definitely run in their family!)

I asked Dakota Davis about the interest they get at the Delphos Museum about the UFO encounter.

Dakota Davis:

Yeah, that's probably one of the top things we get is people want to see the pictures of the circle. They want to see the dirt from the circle or they want to hear about it because it's a story that can still, you know, put wonder in somebody today just like it did when it happened in 1971

Kara Heitz

I asked Samantha Davis what she thought about the incident.

Samantha Davis:

A lot of people were skeptical. But you have to know these people. they're not the kind of people that would just make something up. And on top of that, they're not the kind of people that would

have had the technology or the knowledge really to have faked something like that. I'm 100% positive that it was not faked in any way, and if it was something that was not a UFO, then it was government, I mean, but it was something.

Kara Heitz:

I was also curious how the local community reacted to the sighting at the time and what people in the area think about it now.

Samantha Davis:

I was only three when it happened, so I, I don't remember necessarily that happening, but at the time it just raised a level of fear and paranoia. And I can remember my older sisters taking me outside at night and we would look at the sky and try to find the UFOs because everybody was so convinced they were coming back. And they maybe they did, I don't know. But at least it didn't come back there.

Dakota Davis:

Yeah. A lot of the, the younger kids, you know we want to see a UFO.

Samantha Davis:

Yeah.

Dakota Davis:

They were always scared. Our parents, they didn't want to see the UFO, but we want to see a UFO. We go out looking at night to see if we can see one and see if we can figure out where one's going to land. And there is a lot of kids in the area and I have friends that come from like 30, 40 miles away to see where the UFO landed. And, you know, they we'd sit out there in that spot to hope and see if maybe they'll come back.

Kara Heitz:

And those big Kansas skies are certainly ideal for spotting strange objects in the sky.

So these generational differences that Samantha and Dakota Davis mention brings us back to the larger history of UFOs. Remember that the incident in Delphos in 1971 and the rash of UFO sightings in Kansas in 1972 is kind of an anomaly. After the Condon Report and project Blue Book is shut down, there is a lull in national interest in UFOs in the early 1970s. So what happens after that?

Here's Greg Eghigian.

Greg Eghigian:

In 1973, there was this surprising wave of UFO sightings that that happened in general across the United States, though it seemed to have been mostly centered around the American Southeast. That takes place. I think there's, there's already some beginnings in the spring, but it

really explodes in the in the summer and early fall of 1973. And this huge wave of sightings gets reported on really by local media.

The government is no longer involved in this stuff. So it's really local newspapers that are reporting on this stuff. And then it's only then after that that national news outlets take up the story.

Kara Heitz:

And by the mid to late 1970s, UFOs are again a prominent part of popular culture.

In Search Of ... UFOs, July 13, 1977

"They've been reported at dusk or in the dead of night. In clearings amidst still woods and in fields in lonely farm country. Sometimes they come in silence. Sometimes with quiet thunder. Often they leave marks in the earth. Signals of their passing.

Greg Eghigian:

One of the of after effects that we see with this is it also not only spurred interest in studying UFOs, but now it sort of re-energized another aspect of the whole UFO milieu that had always been there but had been dormant for a while. And that is interest in what the government might actually know about UFOs but isn't telling anybody about it. And it all ties together a lot with, of course, the scandal surrounding Watergate at the time, the distrust in government.

UFO Interview, DoD, 1966

The Air Force has been accused from time to time of hiding information about the UFO. What do you have to say to that kind of thing?

Those charges are absolutely untrue. Actually, the United States Air Force releases statistics on the UFO phenomena through the Department of Defense press space periodically. And we've always honored accredited media when they want to investigate a given specific sighting. There's nothing to hide. There's nothing to hide at all.

Kara Heitz:

Of course, this suspicion about the government and the belief they are covering up something about UFOs is still part American culture today.

So after the 1970s, there continues to be a lot of reports of unidentified flying objects, but in the 1980s and 1990s more and more reports include claims by individuals that they encountered alien beings and were even abducted or experimented on. There are some of these kinds of stories that go back to the beginning of the modern UFO phenomenon, with the most famous case being Betty and Barney Hill in 1961. However, it's the 1980s and 1990s when the central focus of UFO stories in our culture shifts to abduction narratives, often combined with government conspiracies.

Of course, in popular culture this was exemplified by the TV show *The X-Files*.

[Very brief X Files theme clip, less than 5 second]

But as we move into the 21st century, we get another shift, actually another lull, like in the early 1970s.

Greg Eghigian:

What happens after 2000 is that really the UFO phenomenon really kind of falls off to the side from mainstream media. It doesn't get the same kind of attention anymore. It, of course, gets taken over by the internet, social media and things like that.

Kara Heitz:

But in 2017, a story broke that the Pentagon had actually been investigating unidentified flying objects again, thereby signaling a new revival in interest in UFOs.

Greg Eghigian:

And probably the biggest takeaway, I think, and maybe surprising given what we had heard back in the 1960s, was that the Navy and National Intelligence acknowledge that the vast majority of sightings made by military personnel over the period of time that they were looking at in the 2000s. The vast majority of these were actual physical objects. That these are not hoaxes. These are not errors in judgment on the part of navy pilots and what they're seen with. The actual physical objects are out there. So we're at another moment, another juncture in time where, much like 1970/71, when things looked like they were dying there now is this revival and we don't know where it's going to go.

Kara Heitz:

And very recently, on May 17, 2022, the U.S. House Intelligence Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Counterintelligence, and Counterproliferation held an open hearing on what are now being called unidentified aerial phenomena (or UAPs). I guess the acronym UFO still carries too much stigma!

Here's subcommittee chair Congressman André Carson opening that hearing.

Open C3 Subcommittee Hearing on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena, 05-17-2022

This hearing and oversight work has a simple idea at its core....unidentified aerial phenomena are a potential national security threat, and they need to be treated that way. For too long, the stigma associated with UAPs has gotten in the way of good intelligence analysis. Pilots avoided reporting or were laughed at when they did. DOD officials relegated the issue to the back room or swept it under the rug entirely, fearful of a skeptical national security community. Today we know better. UAPs are unexplained. It's true. But they are real. They need to be investigated. And any threats they pose need to be mitigated.

Kara Heitz:

Maybe this re-emerging interest in UFOs ... oh sorry I mean UAPs ... will bring even more attention to cases like Delphos, Dighton, and the 1972 sightings wave in Kansas. Because I really want to know what all that was about?

But I have to admit, as a historian, this has been a strange topic to cover, since so much of what surrounds UFOs in our culture can get a little out there.

I asked Greg Eghigian how he approaches the study of UFOs also as a historian.

Greg Eghigian:

I'm interested in the human dimensions of these things. I leave it to other people to decide on whether UFOs are extraterrestrials visiting us or, or secret weapons of superpowers or nothing at all.

I leave it up to other people to debunk those things. My job is not to do those things. My, my interest is in this remarkable cultural movement that took place beginning in the 1940s and has grown into what it is today and has shown remarkable resilience. Despite these times every, every, every few decades, there's talk of it dying and it keeps coming back. So, there's something remarkable to me about the people who have played a part in in this kind of long-standing drama.

Unidentified Flying Objects - The True Story of Flying Saucers, 1956

What do you think about the chances of these objects having intelligence behind their control?

All I can say is I have an open mind.

What do you think about the theory of interplanetary source?

I have an open mind, period.

Kara Heitz:

This is how I approach UFOs, skeptical yet open-minded, and curious about the history of these kinds of stories and what they can tell us about our culture.

EPISODE CONCLUSION

Kara Heitz:

The Kansas state motto "Ad Astra Per Aspera is Latin for "to the stars through difficulties." It was coined in 1861 by John James Ingalls a politician and later Senator from Kansas, who also designed the state seal. When asked to explain the motto, Ingalls stated: "The aspiration of Kansas is to reach the unattainable. Its dream is the realization of the impossible."

While Ingalls probably did not have space exploration and unexplained ariel phenomenon in mind when he said that, I think we've seen a lot of reaching the unattainable and realizing the impossible in today's episode. And whether it's through human exploration of the cosmos, or stories of encounters with the unknown, Kansans continue to have a strong connection to the stars.

Who's Out There, NASA 1975

I can't feel that any person with any soul. Can look out on our universe that surrounds us and can imagine the immensity of it. The history of it without being rather impressed with the. We as little atoms made of the same stuff those stars are made of have the capability to regard. The other part of the universe. One piece of the universe has the ability to look at another part of the

universe and wonder about it. That's a very amazing thing. It brings into one's mind all kinds of thoughts about religion and philosophy and so on.

SERIES OUTRO

Kara Heitz:

Catch you on the flip side!

Tracy Quillin:

Humanities Kansas is an independent nonprofit leading a movement of ideas to strengthen Kansas communities and our democracy. Since 1972, HK's pioneering programs, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark conversations and generate insights. Together with statewide partners and supporters, HK inspires all Kansans to draw on history, literature, and culture to enrich their lives and to serve the communities and state we all proudly call home. Join the movement of ideas at humanitieskansas.org.