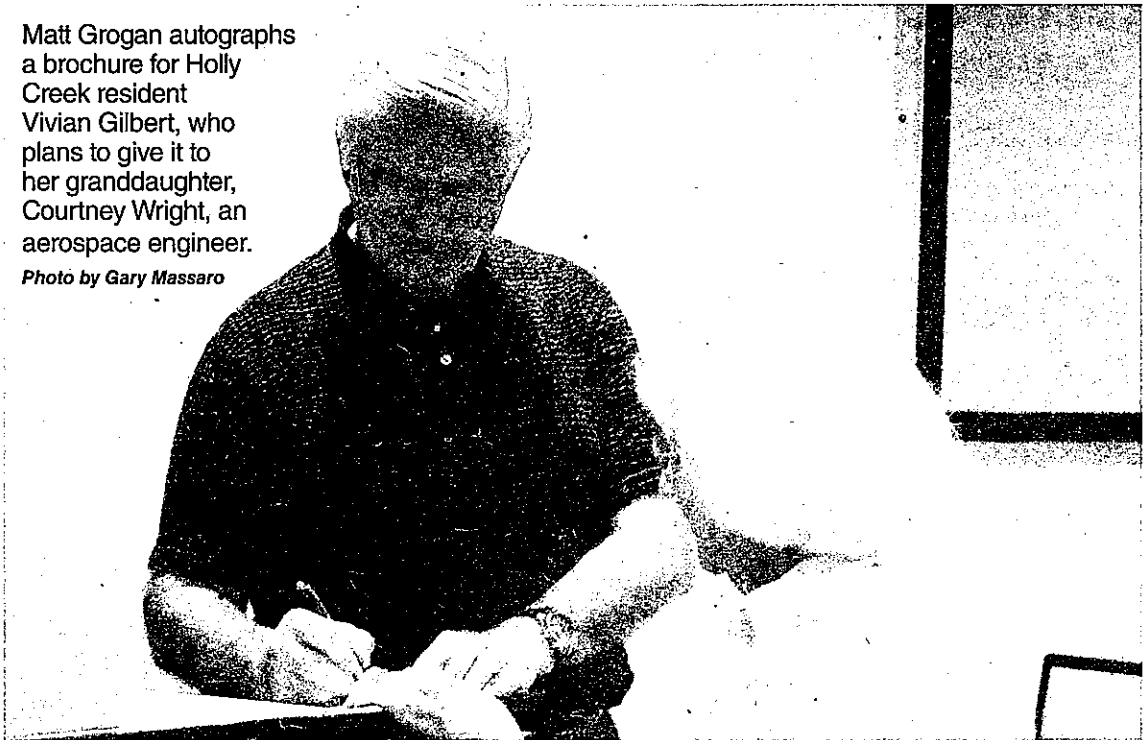


Matt Grogan autographs a brochure for Holly Creek resident Vivian Gilbert, who plans to give it to her granddaughter, Courtney Wright, an aerospace engineer.

Photo by Gary Massaro



Man on moon possible in part because of Matt Grogan

Former NASA engineer gives talk to Holly Creek residents

By GARY MASSARO

Matt Grogan never went to the moon, never stood on it. The closest he has been is as close as most everyone else, right here on earth.

But without Grogan and a bunch of people like him, no American would have gone to the moon, either.

Grogan, of Littleton, was an engineer on the NASA team that launched Lunar Orbiter craft and then moved on to work on the Apollo program, including 13, which didn't land on the moon but became famous for making it home after critical failures with equipment — the repairs of which were orchestrated from the guys on the ground.

Grogan, a native of Birmingham, Ala., talked about the moon shots June 8 at Holly Creek Retirement Community in Centennial.

"It was an honor and a privilege to work on the Lunar Orbiter and Apollo programs and to help land eight astronauts on the moon," Grogan said. "It was a big program. It was an exciting program. There was very little politics. It was a team effort on both programs. And I was part of that team."

Grogan graduated from the University of Notre Dame with a degree in aeronautical engineering in 1958, a year after the Soviets launched Sputnik, the first satellite. He received a master's degree in Aeronautics from California Institute of Technology in 1960, and then went to work for Boeing in Seattle.

He joined the Lunar Orbiter program in 1964 while still with Boeing.

Times were turbulent. The Cold War was heating up. The Cuban missile crisis put the world on the brink of nuclear war. President John F. Kennedy, who promised the U.S. would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade, was assassinated. The Vietnam War polarized Americans. More political assassinations followed. Race riots broke out in major cities.

Grogan said he was isolated from most of that turmoil because he and NASA colleagues were busy with the orbiter program, which proved invaluable. Think of the lunar orbiting craft as scouts sent ahead to check the terrain, reporting back with photographs.

But the reports were flawed, caused by gravitational abnormalities from iron-laden meteorites that hit the moon and were on the surface or buried beneath.

Once scientists learned to compensate for the gravity tugs, it enabled them to land craft that hit a target a quarter-million miles away.

The first task — Apollo 11 — was to land men on the moon safely. The next step — Apollo 12 — was to land them within walking distance of a target — a Surveyor 3 lunar probe that was launched April 17, 1967, and made a soft landing three days later.

"The astronauts of Apollo 12 brought pieces of Surveyor back home for scientists to examine the effects of extended stay on the moon," Grogan said.

All missions — excluding 13 — brought back rocks.

In the early days of the space program, when scientists were talking about moon missions, it was described as shooting a rifle at a moving teacup about a football field's length away. So the pinpoint landing was more like trying to hit a flyspeck in a moving teacup a football field away.

Grogan and his colleagues nailed it, landing within a football field and a-half of Surveyor 3 with Apollo 12.

"That's what was so fantastic about that," Grogan said. "Apollo 11 was about 5 miles away."

Grogan's talk was a big hit.

"He explained it so you could feel like you were going right there with him," said Holly Creek resident Vivian Gilbert, whose granddaughter is an aerospace engineer.

Grogan left NASA in 1971 and went to work for what is now Lockheed-Martin. He retired in 1998. He spends his spare time volunteering as an income tax counselor for AARP and as an insurance counselor for Medicare/Medicaid Colorado State Health Insurance Program.

He is married to the former Olivia McKenna of Littleton.

The future of the space program is shifting toward private companies. The space shuttle program "has been retired forever," Grogan said.

The federal government has slashed its Orion budget to land astronauts on Mars.

"It's not going to be in our lifetime," Grogan said.

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