



Hands Across History

A joint newsletter for the White Sands Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group.



Volume XIII, Letter I

February 2017

Historical Foundation Contemplates Future

By Eddie Kennedy
WSMR Historical Foundation President
and
Darren Court
WSMR Museum Director

The White Sands Missile Range Historical Foundation is committed to helping preserve the legacy of the missile range through fundraising and technical support of the WSMR Museum and Learning Center. How best to contribute to this effort has frequently been a topic of discussion whenever the Board of Directors meet.

Foundation contributions previously made include a \$117,000 donation for an administration office addition to the museum building, a Signature Plaza with over 400 donated bricks, and sponsorship of various events.

There is much hope concerning the prospects of the long-awaited museum expansion occurring sometime in 2017. This has been a principal goal of the Foundation, but now the question is what sorts of other initiatives should the Foundation pursue after this goal has been met? Potential contributions include:

1. Help build a series of speaker programs to offer to the installation workforce.
2. Help develop or sponsor an annual symposium to be held at a local community focusing on the abundant history found on WSMR.
3. Sponsor museum Science-Technology-Engineering-Mathematics (STEM initiatives) such as "Rocket Scientist" camps for elementary and middle school students as part of Director, Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation's (DFMWR's) Summer Quest program.
4. Fund Museum initiatives such as the development of downloadable material packets meeting middle school/high school state and federal standards for STEM programs and history.

5. Help with the funding of museum exhibits and refurbishment of displays in the museum and the Missile Park.

6. Ensure new exhibits utilize the newest learning technologies, to include interactive media displays, touch-screen technologies, QR codes and downloadable content, to enable opportunity to learn more about every aspect of WSMR's history.

7. Build partnerships with New Mexico Military Institute, the Holloman Air Force Base Historical Office, the New Mexico National Guard, and with the ROTC departments at New Mexico State University and the University of Texas at El Paso to highlight WSMR's unique role in Army history.

8. Acquaint the Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau functions in Las Cruces, El Paso and Alamogordo and the annual Space Travel symposium with the WSMR Museum and its ongoing initiatives.

There are of course many other contributions that can be made. The WSMR Historical Foundation is poised to continue to have a key role in providing support to the WSMR Museum and Learning Center well into the future.

If you have a suggestion, please send it along. Snail mail can be addressed to the Post Office Box on page 2. Also, you can email your input to our newsletter editor at: nebraska1950@comcast.net

**WSMR
Museum
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created by
Don Montoya.
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Former WSMRite Is Honored By The NAACP

Frances F. Williams, Former Equal Employment Director for WSMR and a member of the Hall of Fame, received the prestigious NAACP Freedom Fighter Award for her work in Civil Rights. The award cited her work in the area of employment discrimination, and her activities in support of equal employment opportu-

nity throughout the state and nationally.

In addition to her duties as Director of the Equal Opportunity Program at WSMR, she was a Commissioner on the New Mexico Commission on the Status of Women, Chairperson of the Grievance and Discrimination Board for the City of Las Cruces, a Commissioner for both the City and State Housing Authority, New Mexico's Affirmative Action Committee, and an activist in fighting for equal opportunity for all individuals.

The award was presented to her by Curtis Rosemond, President of the NAACP of Las Cruces, and Chief Judge Fernando Macias of the third Judicial District Court.



From the left, Judge Macias, Frances Williams, and Curtis Rosemond. Courtesy Photo

Audrey Paczynski, From WSMR Audio-Visual, Passes Away

By Frances Williams

Audrey L. Paczynski, who began her career as a Travel Clerk in Logistics and retired as an Audio Visual Specialist, recently passed away in Las Cruces. She was in charge of AV support for the CG's conference room at Bldg. 100, and was known for her creativity and devotion to her duties in support of this mission.

She also served as a Board member of the WSMR Museum Historical Foundation and a member of Federally Employed Women. Her husband, Alex Paczynski, a member of WSMR's Hall of Fame, and her son Jeff Paczynski preceded her in passing. May her memory be for a blessing. Donations in her name may be sent to the WSMR Historical Foundation, P. O. Box 171, White Sands New Mexico 88002.

Statement of Purpose and Membership

The "Hands Across History" newsletter is published by the White Sands Missile Range Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group (WSPG). Both nonprofit organizations aim to preserve the accomplishments of White Sands Missile Range.

The newsletter is intended to keep members of both groups informed about current events and share information of common interest. The edi-

tor is Jim Eckles. He can be contacted by email at nebraska1950@comcast.net or at either address below.

Membership to either organization is open to anyone who shares their goals. However, details of membership (dues, etc.) differ between the two groups. For more information, please contact the appropriate organization and we will send it via the Post Office or email.

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Debbie Walters Runs Archives Using Her Experience

Debbie Walters is now running the White Sands Missile Range Museum Archives and using her long experience at WSMR to guide her - with the help of many friends and volunteers.

Debbie has a bit of military back story but it wasn't military. Her father worked in the grocery business, at one time with Piggly Wiggly, which meant he moved around a lot. Kind of like a military family.

Born in Lockney, Texas, which is near Lubbock,



Debbie Walters cutting some cake during the annual volunteer's luncheon on January 5 in the Museum Archives. During the luncheon Doyle Piland officially turned over the Archives to Debbie.

Debbie saw many different schools. Eventually, the family ended up in Tularosa and then Las Cruces. Debbie graduated from Las Cruces High School.

In 1970, she went to work at the NASA facility as a secretary. Right away she knew it was something she didn't want to do.

In 1973 she jumped to White Sands where she landed a job as a clerk in Range Scheduling. She stayed in Scheduling until she retired in 1999.

She says she loved that job and is very happy to see the old plastic scheduling slats hanging on display in the Museum. Like most old-timers she liked the way you could glance at the wall and take in the range schedule with one hard look - no scrolling around on a computer screen with tiny icons.

In 1979 she met Fred Walters who was working on DOVAP - Doppler Velocity and Position which was a way of measuring trajectory. They were married in 1980.

They retired to Cloudcroft. Both volunteered to work in the Museum Archive after attending a talk on the Museum in Alamogordo. Basically Doyle Piland recruited them to help get the archive going. Fred died in 2009.

Debbie says she loves working in the archive because she is looking at the history she was involved in. It makes it personal.

If you would like to volunteer to help, Debbie says you are welcome - plus you get to meet some cool people. There are many kinds of jobs available which are best described by Debbie. You can reach her by email at: debbiedo10@tularosa.net

If you'd like a little different perspective on what there is to do in the Archives, you can contact Gerry Veara at: agveara@gmail.com

If email is not your thing, contact Jim Eckles, your newsletter editor, at 575-521-8771 and he'll hook you up with a good phone number.

An Archives Factoid

Without an archive, how do museum staffers know what information to use in describing any artifact on display? Wikipedia seems dubious at best and relying on the uncertain memories of a few acquaintances is a recipe for error after error.

Nope, there is no substitute for an archive and its original documents and photos. If you can't help, the archive needs your stuff - the material you've hoarded over the years that is now collecting dust in the attic or garage. Face it, your kids don't want it. Give it to the WSMR Archive where it will actually do some good.

Debbie Reynolds Appeared At White Sands

Editor's Note: With El Pasoan Debbie Reynolds and her daughter Carrie Fisher dying within days of each other, I thought it appropriate to extract this segment from *Pocketful of Rockets: The History And Stories Behind White Sands Missile Range*. Reynolds and her husband Eddie Fisher performed for WSPG personnel on March 2, 1956 at the invitation of Michael Todd, who was at the range to film a Corporal missile launch. Their story is one of the great soap operas of the 1950s. I've updated the segment as needed.

By Jim Eckles

I knew the opening scene of the movie *Around the World in 80 Days* contained a missile shot from White Sands, but didn't think I'd include the story in *Pocketful of Rockets*. After all, missile footage from White Sands has appeared in lots of productions.

Then, the more I learned about the film's producer, Mike Todd, the more my curiosity grew. I'm pretty sure this guy would feel right at home in today's entertainment business. Todd was a handsome, confident, self-made man who lived in the fast lane. He was brash and yet charming, could get blood out of a turnip, and was fearless to the point of trying just about anything. He was a fast talker, wheeler-dealer who pushed and shoved to get what he wanted. Today, I'm betting he would have his own reality television show.

At White Sands he engineered a deal with the Dept. of Army to allow him to film the launch of a Corporal missile and use the footage in the prologue for his



Mike Todd

film version of Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*. The film was released in late 1956 and won five Academy Awards to include Best Picture. Being the film's producer made Todd a celebrity, someone to be taken seriously. Unfortunately for him it was the only movie he ever made. He died in a horrific plane crash near Grants, New Mexico on March 22, 1958.

His film opens in the tiny, square film format typical of the day with the famous newsman Edward R. Murrow in a library, sitting behind a huge desk nursing his ubiquitous cigarette. Murrow talks about the fantastic fiction of Jules Verne, who wrote the around the world tale in 1872, but focuses on Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*. That book inspired one of the first science fiction films ever made, *A Trip to the Moon* by Frenchman George Melies.

Several minutes from the French black and white, herky-jerky film then appear. This is the famous movie where a group of men are blasted to the moon from a cannon and crash into the eye of the man in the moon. They are then captured by the inhabitants of the moon and have to escape. The movie was made in 1902.

Murrow then tells the audience that fiction now lags behind fact as the scene shifts to the present at White Sands Proving Ground. For this the curtains at the movie theater would open wider so the movie could be projected on a new, wide screen, wall to wall. In the middle of the screen a Corporal missile is poised in the sand dunes of White Sands as a countdown descends from 10 to zero and launch.

After following the missile's climb for several seconds, we eventually get a look-down view from the missile. At the time, reporters were told the footage was taken from a camera on the missile. I have my doubts. It was more likely footage from any number of prior sounding rocket shots.

Murrow then says something about our shrinking world and the movie kicks off in London circa 1872.

To film the launch, Todd used his specially designed wide-screen photography system called Todd-AO. He had been a partner in the early development of Cinerama, the wide-screen system that shot everything on three cameras and then required three projectors to show it. It was a very popular technology in the 1950s and 60s as it produced a bit of an IMAX sensation. For Cinerama, if you sat in the middle of the theater and close enough to the screen, you saw nothing but the images on the screen.

see *Bankruptcy to Fame and Fortune*, page 5

Bankruptcy to Fame and Fortune — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

Todd contracted with the American Optical Company to devise a 70mm film system that used just one camera but gave the same wide-screen images. Being the modest person he was, he put his name on it.



EDDIE FISHER and DEBBIE REYNOLDS

***Wind and Sand* photo from Feb. 17, 1956 with the announcement that they would be appearing.**

He picked himself up and quickly moved on.

His instincts for *Around the World in 80 Days* were good. He put together an almost three-hour long, quasi-documentary, partial travel film, with loads of famous actors. In fact, he is credited with coming up with the term “cameo role.” The list of actors he cajoled into making very minor appearances reads like a who’s who for the time and includes Charles Boyer, Noel Coward, John Gielgud, Trevor Howard, Jose Greco, Robert Morely, Cesar Romero, Peter Lorre, George Raft, Red Skelton, Frank Sinatra, Buster Keaton, Marlene Dietrich - and this is just a partial list.

David Niven played the lead role of Phineas Fogg and Mexican star Cantinflas played Fogg’s servant Passepartout. A very young Shirley Maclaine played Princess Aouda.

The film was shot in many locations around the world and was billed as a spectacular show of the exotic. This was just at the beginning of television, so American audiences were still ready to be impressed by the colorful and mysterious cultures found elsewhere. The movie ran almost three hours so it required an intermission.

So Todd was an interesting guy, but it got better when he actually came to film that launch. He first showed up for the Corporal firing in early February 1956, but the launch was scrubbed because of “weather conditions and mechanical difficulties.” He came back

to White Sands on March 2 and brought two of his talented friends with him to watch. Those friends were Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds, and they put on a show that night at 6 p.m. for the benefit of the White Sands Proving Ground Combined Charity Drive (now called the CFC).

This was a big deal. According to Wikipedia, Fisher was at the height of being a teen idol with 17 songs in the Top 10 music charts between 1950 and 1956. Meanwhile Reynolds was moving up in the world after playing a major role in Gene Kelly’s *Singin’ in the Rain*.

Considering what a negotiator Todd was, I would bet the benefit show was promised by him to help seal the deal allowing him to film the Corporal missile launch. Of course, these two stars were quite an attraction for White Sands. The *Wind and Sand* reported over 500 tickets were sold at a dollar each.

The show was held in Building 1753, a large open bay building used for maintenance – it held more people than the theater.

According to the post newspaper, Fisher and Reynolds sang “Love and Marriage,” one of the top songs from 1955 that was originally recorded by Frank Sinatra. Dinah Shore also recorded the song in 1955 and had success as well.

That Fisher and Reynolds came along with Todd makes some sense because Fisher was Todd’s best friend and Reynolds was originally from El Paso. Al-



Fisher and Reynolds on stage in front of the WSPG audience in Bldg. 1753. From the *Wind and Sand*.

see Fisher, Reynolds, Todd Trio, page 6

Fisher, Reynolds, Todd Trio — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

thought they had different motivations, they both had good reasons to visit White Sands.

That particular song selection was spot on as Fisher and Reynolds had just been married the year before. The *Wind and Sand* reported Reynolds' grandmother, several aunts and uncles and a few cousins attended and sat up front with General Laidlaw and Todd at the performance.

The couple's daughter was the Carrie Fisher who portrayed Princess Leia in the original Star Wars movies. Of course, she was also a noted author who



This is another photo copied from the March 9, 1956 issue of the *Wind and Sand*. At left is Maj. Gen. W.E. Laidlaw, White Sands Commander. Next to him is Mrs. Owen Harman, Debbie Reynolds' grandmother, and next to her is Mrs. Mary Winn, the star's aunt. Both women were from El Paso.

wrote *Postcards From the Edge*. With the death of both mother and daughter within weeks of each other recently, most folks are aware of these details now.

They also had son who they named after Michael Todd. He figured prominently in taking care of family matters after the recent deaths of Reynolds and Fisher.

After *Around the World* hit it big, Todd enjoyed a short time at the very top of the entertainment business. It didn't last long.

His fame bought him into contact with newly-divorced Elizabeth Taylor. In February 1957, he became her third husband. He was so smitten with her, he named his personal jet the "Lucky Liz" in her honor.

According to Dr. Richard Melzer in an article in the Oct. 21, 2006 issue of the *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, on March 22, 1958 Todd was flying to New

York City from Burbank, California to be honored by the Friar's Club as "Showman of the Year." Plans called for a stop in Albuquerque where Todd had just visited a few days before. With his own personal jet he easily zoomed around doing his business.

According to Melzer, Todd was then feted by the city as he hinted his next movie would be Cervantes's *Don Quixote* with some filming in New Mexico. The press described Todd as "dapper and cocky."

On that March 22nd night, Todd's plane never made it to Albuquerque as it went down during stormy conditions over the Zuni Mountains near Grants, New Mexico. When rescuers got to the crash site, they found, according to Melzer, a 10-foot deep crater and just plane and body parts.

Today, we think of celebrity fans as being aggressive, intrusive and just plain rude. The implication is that people weren't always that nasty. I'm afraid that is not true. When Todd was buried in Chicago, fans mobbed the cemetery and the police couldn't hold them back. They tore Elizabeth Taylor's veil off her head. They then stormed her limo and pounded on the windows. So much for allowing the grieving widow a little privacy.

Because these stars were perceived as being fabulously rich with their pockets full of money, myths about Todd immediately took hold. Treasure seekers swarmed the plane crash site for weeks looking for jewelry and money. Others actually dug up Todd's grave trying to find an expensive diamond ring Taylor supposedly gave him. Since the coffin just contained a bag of body parts, there wasn't much to that story.

Of course, the story doesn't quite end there. With Elizabeth Taylor free after Todd's death, Eddie Fisher dumped Debbie Reynolds to try his hand at being an ardent follower of Taylor-glamour. That didn't last long as Taylor soon dumped Fisher for Richard Burton. And so, the soap-opera wheel went round and round.



Elizabeth Taylor and Michael Todd in happier times.

Thank You To All The Historical Foundation Donors!

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The Back Page

Captain Howard Bush on one of the military police horses, named "Honesty," at Trinity Site in 1945. Bush was head of security at Trinity for the test of the first atomic bomb on July 16, 1945. Also, he was camp commander at the site. Bush watched the test from outside the control bunker known at South 10,000. He reported the light was so bright he touched his eyes to make sure they were closed. The following shock wave knocked him down but did not injure him. Articles about the next Trinity Site open house on April 1 are already appearing in newspapers, some outside the local area. Could be a larger crowd than usual this year.

