

LEE B. JAMES

August 28, 1998

INTERVIEW BY BOB WARD:

Q. You were saying it was unfortunate, is that how you put it?

A. Yes. In the first place, his method of working required the people _____.

Second place, Washington's office was pure animosity to him.

Q. And why was that?

Wash. A. Well, I think it started at the top. I think the top people at that time decided that the main thing was the budget, and the main thing about von Braun was he would start newer, bigger, and greater things, and they couldn't handle it; so let's "silence" him. That's my opinion.

Q. The timing was wrong, wasn't it?

A. The timing was wrong and the situation was wrong. And they sent him up there with the idea — Let me tell you a story about them sending him up there that he told me once.

Q. All right.

A. I don't think this is publishable, but anyway, the first day he went into a great big meeting

up there, that he heard about, to discuss various things. He walked in a little late as he

always did and when he walked in, the room got kind of ~~quite~~ quiet. So Wernher said, "I

looked around at — (I forget who he said was running the meetings) — and said, 'I am

welcome here, aren't I?'" And they said, "No, you're not." Can you imagine that?

Q. Is that right? It was just not meant for headquarters hierarchy meeting or —

A. It was the headquarters hierarchy meeting.

Q. Oh, okay.

Wash. HQs.

wrong; later; probably late '70 or '71; BW

Wash.

A. It was just that they had decided that they didn't want von Braun up there. You know, it wasn't long that he went to Fairchild.

Q. I know. It was two years or less.

A. He caught on pretty quick up there of how welcome he was. He was just not welcome. The people up there running it at that time wanted somebody who just did the lower budget like they were told and didn't make any waves, didn't start anything, didn't have any ideas. That's not Wernher's way of doing things. I felt sorry for him. He must have suffered miserably up there. You know who I blame for this; his wife.

Wash. HQs

Q. Is that right?

A. I don't think he would have ever gone up there if it hadn't been for her desire to get out of this little town and get into a society and other things. That's my opinion. She always brought that up.

HSV. vs. Wash.
Maria:

Q. So she was just not all that thrilled about being here.

A. She never did like Huntsville. He was a big man in a little town and she wanted him to be a big man in a big town. We got to know him pretty well because my son and his daughter used to date each other.

Q. Oh, is that right?

A. He took her on camping trips and Myrtle Beach and things like that.

Q. Margaret or Iris?

A. Iris.

Q. Iris was the second daughter, wasn't she?

A. Yes. Iris was not the smart one or the brilliant one, but she was the pretty one. Margaret

was the brilliant one.

Wash.

From that meeting on, von Braun was rather crushed. He says, "Lee, how do I handle something like this?" I don't think I gave him any great wisdom. Obviously, what happened to him right then was he had gotten into something where he was not going to be happy.

Q. I have talked to Jim Daniels recently and he was up there with von Braun for six months or so and he felt much the same. He said part of it was owing to politics and wasn't personal, but part of it was personal. But he said some of these, I mean, the office of Marshall Space Flight kind of wanted to hash out some of these deals before the NASA command authority. Anybody in that line of command I guess. Von Braun, he was kind of off to the side but in a way he was in the line and whether it was von Braun or somebody else, they kind of wanted to hash some things out before getting into the command and yet he said, "Look, I'm not racist in any way, but some of the Jewish elements up there —

A. Is this von Braun?

Q. This is Jim Daniels saying that some of the Jewish elements during the program and during von Braun's years up there they couldn't forget Hitler's Germany. Julian Sheer, the head P.A.O. guy, and I think George Low was his —

Geo. Low

A. George Low said, "The first time I met von Braun I was prepared not to like him, but we became the best of friends." And I think that's probably true in his case.

Q. I think there are another couple of Jewish guys; Abe Silverstein. He mentioned him. But he said otherwise in some cases it was just some jealousy. Envy. Who did NASA have

to turn to go before Congress when they wanted to charm the pants off of them, you know, at budget time. They went to von Braun and some people resented that.

A. Yeah, but there's another thing, they didn't go any place often enough. They were prepared to sit back with a lesser budget. You know, von Braun was always selling something. The period when he went up there was when he was selling Mars and they did not want that brought up at all. It was hard for von Braun to restrain from bringing up the next thing and they held that against him. They really did. He talked to me about that. Von Braun used to have "unloading sessions." He would say, "I'd like to hear your views on something." And then he would tell his views. That's the way it always went. He was kind of curious of what you thought about his views more than hearing your views. We had some sessions like that several times. One was about his Washington trip and I felt sorry for him, I really did, because I didn't think he deserved this. He did such a good job for us, I thought. He didn't have to do it.

Wash. Yrs.

Q. Are you the one who told me years ago about Dr. von Braun coming back for a visit to Marshall maybe during this tour of field centers that he did in connection with his new job including JPL and Houston and somebody ask him how he was doing and he said, "I'm living the life of a mushroom." That's become kind of a cliché story. A lot of people tell it in their own connection, "But you know I've kept in the dark and every now and then somebody opens the door and throws a shovel full of manure in and that if I ever dare stick my head up it's in danger of being chopped off."

A. I've heard that story, but whether I told you or not I don't know. I really often felt so sorry for him to be put into that environment after all he did at Marshall. And I tell you

Leaving
Hsv. for Wash.

people here were pretty well crushed with his departure. They knew that was the end for them. Of course, they had all just about come to the end of their line anyway. They were pretty well crushed with that decision.

Q. Now, that was not von Braun's idea necessarily to go to Washington. He didn't initiate it.

A. No, he didn't initiate it and he tried to talk them out of it. He couldn't. In fact, some of his Germans had said to me, "Why did he accept it?" "Why did he go?" His answer to that was, "I didn't have much choice." He said, "They told me I'm going." I think that's the way it was. I felt so sorry for him. And his wife was always pushing. She thought it was the best thing that ever happened. That's unfortunate that she should feel that way because that influenced him.

Q. Getting up there in the power capitol of the universe and all that glitter and glamour, I guess.

A. She didn't realize the circumstances of what he was going through.

Q. Sure. And she was up there in Virginia "horse country," which I understand she loved.

A. She lived down there just south of the Capitol and just loved it.

Q. Were they in George Town?

A. Alexandria.

Q. Oh, of course. Where she still is.

A. Their daughters went their separate ways and their son never seemed to amount to an awful lot, the last I heard of him.

Q. That's what I've heard. He's doing ^{menial} ~~medium~~ work from what I understand as a clerk or something.

A. It's a wonder the family hung together under all the circumstances, but they did. Love must have been there.

Q. Do you think those stresses and strains may have contributed at all to the onset later of cancer that he had?

A. I have no way of answering that. I don't know. I don't know much about cancer.

Q. That would be highly speculative, wouldn't it?

A. Yes. I'm sure it had a lot to do with his frame of mind. Whether it had anything to do with his health or not I don't know.

Q. Do you have a feel for how he felt during his Fairchild years?

Fairchild

A. Well, he was very close to Ed ^{Uhl,} ~~Euch~~ the president of Fairchild, and I think very happy with ~~him~~ working with him. So when Ed saw the situation up there ^{and} ~~and~~ he invited him to come down and be his chief of R & D, That was a friendship type thing. Von Braun probably wasn't great at that job because he didn't have his own crew, and overall R & D wasn't handled like he handled things and it was hard for him to do, I think. I'm just guessing. I wouldn't think that he would have been great, but he stayed in it a little long.

Q. And made the most money for his family that he ever did.

A. And I think that was what Ed ^{Uhl} ~~Euch~~ had in mind. Ed was a nice guy. He and von Braun were very, very close. I think that was the greatest thing that ever happened to him. Did I ever tell you the story of how I joined with von Braun.

Q. I don't think so. Please do.

A. You know, when they separated von Braun's group out it was pretty much just his German people that came and some NASA and a few others but mostly all his people

Lee James
8-98

MSFC (after from
split ABMA)

All-German Team

were German people. [?] General Tye, von Braun and I had talked about a subject that you found very interesting. He said, "Lee, what do you think of my organization? It's headed by all German people. What's the American people going to think about all of this?" And I said, "Frankly, Leonard, about like I do: I don't like it." He said, "What do we do?" I said, "The only thing I can think of that we can do is very slowly infiltrate American people into some of these jobs." And he said, "Yeah, but I feel like that's going to be so slow and it isn't going to solve the problem." I think we kind of left it there. Then one day I was living on Panorama Drive up on Monte Santo and I was down over on the back of my property cutting brush out so I could clear my view, and who comes climbing down the hill but von Braun. He says, "Lee, we've knowⁿ each other for some time, why don't you come join us?"

Q. And you were still with ABMA?

A. Yes, I was with the military. So I was being sent back to a military job instead of being transferred with NASA. So at that point I retired and joined him and I've never regretted that. Some of my best jobs really were with Wernher. I was manager with Saturn I, Saturn I B, and Saturn V. It's hard to beat that. I don't know if I could do that any different or not because I couldn't believe it would happen like it did, but maybe it would. Anyway, that was the way he did it. I couldn't believe he would come down there. I joined him right away and never regretted that. We always had a good relationship. And I started to say when he talked about this, he said, "Now, we've got to get some American people into our hierarchy here." So that put me into it. I could remember going to his staff meetings and there were only two American born people there.

All Germans -
Plus Lee J.

Q. And so there was this obvious imbalance there?

A. He had some staff people that were American but they weren't really high enough to call them staff meetings.

Q. A couple of small questions. You indicated that he was always late, he tended to be late a few minutes?

A. Always.

Q. Why was that? To make a grand entrance or to let people talk among themselves before he got there?

A. I hate to say it, but I think it had a little to do with the grand entrance. Let me give you an example. I had a party at my house one night and von Braun and Maria were invited and by the time they got there the party was going full blast. Everybody had had a drink or two and going pretty fast. The talk was almost deafening, you know, you almost couldn't hear each other talk. About that time the door bell rang and I let von Braun in — I don't know if you remember my house or not, but there is the big double door that goes into the living room. So von Braun entered that double door in the living room and that whole house fell silent. I will never forget that. It was like they were waiting for him to say something. Americans and Germans, everybody, as soon as they saw him everybody just quit talking. I always remembered that.

Q. That was kind of awkward, wasn't it?

A. I forget what he said, but it was not awkward. He knows how to handle those situations. And he did it very well. He was just amazing.

Q. How much do you attribute regarding his poise, his savoir-faire, you know, his knowing

Late arriving

"presence,"
"charisma"

what to do or say at the right time, to his aristocratic upbringing?

- A. It must of had a lot to do with that because he always seem to know how to fit. I think that's what that would teach him. I'm just guessing. I can't imagine he would get that any place else. You don't get that from engineering. He was always so good at fitting in.

Photos I looked at some pictures last night trying to think of what might interest you. I noticed picture after picture with the Presidents of the United States he just seemed to be at ease with them. That had to be his background.

- Q. I'll have to ask somebody else perhaps, but is it the oldest son that inherits the Barron's title?

A. That's not von Braun.

- Q. That's Sigas Moon. Do the younger sons become Counts?. Did von Braun ever have a title he didn't use?

A. I don't know. I really don't know the answer to that. That's interesting, but I don't know. Von Braun is one of a kind. There has never been anybody manage a group of people like him, I don't think. I don't know how you describe his management. I've had a lot of people ask me over the years, "How do you describe the way von Braun managed?" I don't know how to tell them except to tell them this one story: After he had been in business for about a year or something his organization grew to a pretty good size organization and there were 38 people reporting directly to von Braun.

As manager

- Q. And where was this?

A. This was right here at the NASA center. 38 people reporting directly to him and the American people, the hierarchy of the American people said, "Wernher, this is not the

!

AS Manager (episode leading up to Hermann Weidner's selection)

way you run an organization." "You've got to cut down the number of people working under you." Well, they finally convinced him that he had to do something about that. So von Braun decided to have all these lab chiefs report to one person who then reported to him. That was a step. He didn't tell this to anybody, but we had the staff meeting and von Braun started talking and there were two Americans in there and after they listened for a while we all realized what he was getting at. He was going to have all the lab chiefs report to one person. I realized it and the rest of them realized it and all of sudden all the lab chiefs started saying, "Wernher, this will never work because, and so on." I want you to know that conversation went on for over two hours. After two hours after they finally wore themselves out, he says, "Does anybody else have any comments?" "No." "Well, I think I'll go ahead and do what I said." They didn't make a peep. He let them talk themselves out but that was all there was to it. That was the way he managed.

Q. That's decisiveness, isn't it? I was going to ask you: Otherwise, how did he run a meeting? Was there a lot of give-and-take or shouting and pounding the table?

A. A lot of give-and-take. If von Braun asked a question, "How do you feel about such and such?" You'll find he would usually answer it himself. What he really wants to know is how do you feel about his solutions? He'll listen to that. He'll listen as long as somebody wants to say something. He listens until you do it his way. He doesn't force it. That group loved him, believed in him, and eventually would come around to it. That's all there was to it. The Americans that fell into that group became the same way. Me too. They had a lot of faith in him. He was usually right. I would have my say, but I can't think of a case that we didn't do it his way.

Managing/Decision-making

Note: (Present tense, like Frank Williams)

Q. You used the word manager or leader. He obviously had some natural leadership gifts, abilities? Whether it was God given or developed, it was probably some natural leadership ability from his upbringing or whatever.

A. One thing von Braun used to talk to me about and I could never contribute to it much, but he said, "How are we going to convince the American public that this space program is something they need to do and be foremost in? It's going to cost money. How are we going to convince them?" He would go over that with me time and again because I guess I was one of the few Americans there that he would talk to and, you know, I hate to say it like this, but I think that the main thing I ever said to him was, "Wernher, what you're doing is about the best thing I can think of." I didn't know how to ask him to do anything better or do anything different. Maybe that's what he wanted to hear, I don't know. Talking about the American public, I can't imagine anyone one of us convinced them as well as he did.

Q. And he had this salesmanship ability, didn't he?

A. Oh, yes. He was a great salesman.

Q. He probably made many more speeches than he would have like to do, but he saw that as a way to sell the program.

A. And he was so good at it. He could make a speech on any subject and get some other points across every time. He was really good. I admired von Braun, I've always liked him. I'm sorry his boy didn't turn out to be the genius that he would have liked for him to have been.

Q. Someone had suggested to me that Peter perhaps had some learning disabilities.

Salesman

A. He may have. He didn't seem very bright to me.

Q. Whether it was what they call Attention Deficit Disorder now or Dyslexia or maybe just a lower IQ.

A. He just wasn't very sharp. Margrit ~~Margaret~~ was always sharp. She's a doctor now.

Q. Some people, whether rightly or not, might attribute some genetic failing there to cousins marrying each other. Were they distant cousins?

A. They may have been distant cousins. I don't have any trace of that, but I understand that they were distant cousins and maybe before that the cousins were cousins of somebody too. That never came up. I can remember an interesting incident one time. Von Braun and I were taking the Gulf Stream. We were the only ones on there other than the crew and so forth. We sat and talked about the Saturn V and problems the whole trip. He was very interesting and he used the dog-gonest details all the way through it. All of a sudden we crossed that last range of mountains out there and Los Angeles was just around the corner and all of a sudden von Braun changed. He was all of a sudden a different person. Obviously something had crossed his mind. Well, what it turned out to be was this was the time that his movie "Eyes on the Stars" -- he knew ahead of time that he was going to be met by a crowd of people out there. He was preparing himself for it. When he stepped off the plane he was surrounded. I could see that this was going on and I was thinking about going on to the hotel because he was going to be there for quite a while. All of a sudden he stepped out of the crowd and he said, "Lee, I'm going to be here for a minute, would you mind keeping an eye on this bag until I'm through?" That was the last I ever saw of him. He was something else.

Traveling

Q. Did you ever see him catch any flack from critics in a crowd like that? I mean, that was a bunch of reporters I guess. And when that movie came out there were some snide remarks, "Yeah, you aim at the stars, but sometimes you hit one of the --" I never witnessed anything like that, did you?

A. I didn't pick up any of that, but I'm sure it happened. I just wasn't in the right place to hear the criticism I guess. I tell you another story: We had a Jupiter launch back when I had a job in the army close to him and everybody expected it to be a success like everything else so there was a party at his house that night to celebrate the success, but the launch was a failure. I don't know if you remember this one, but it rolls up, tipped over, and fell back. It was a very short flight. It didn't really even get up off the pad. Some enterprising photographer got a picture of it just as it was up there horizontal and that night at the party, gloom and doom kind of fell over the party because here was this thing that we were celebrating had been a failure. It's not like von Braun to let something like that destroy an evening. So he tried to lighten the evening. He knew that the one that was hurt the most was Mr. Boerham and all of his people who had developed the payload that was on there. So von Braun in order to make a light moment of a tragic affair got a photograph of the thing up here like this and he presented it to Mr. Boerham in front of everybody and he said, "Mr. Boerham, isn't your perigee a little low?" Mr. Boerham took the picture, turned around, walked out the front door and went home. Never said a word. Just took it and walked. He was completely crushed. Wernher said, "I guess I said the wrong thing." I still have a couple of things that show how interested von Braun was in making it better for Mr. Boerham, which he was unable to do, but it shows how

1950s
Early Rocketry (ESA / CAPE)
(a case of humor not helping)

Josef
Boehm

Redstone?

Boehm Story

Q.

dedicated some of his people really were. He was absolutely crushed and he never applied again because that was the only one allotted to it. He was absolutely upset.

Q.

And von Braun was certainly not trying to put him down. It was just the opposite.

A.

He was trying to lighten the moment. It was hard to do in a case like that. That was at von Braun's house downtown where he used to live, do you remember that?

Q.

On Big Cove Road?

A.

Yes. Von Braun had a great attention to detail and great ability to absorb a lot. I'm setting there at the console giving the "go" or "no go" to the launch vehicle and listening to the countdown and completely absorbed because that was my job, I would see von Braun and that bunch back there having a good time without paying much attention to it. Von Braun came out one day and says, "How's the count going, Lee?" I would say, "Well, we've had ^{holds} ~~holes~~ on the _____ that worries me a little bit." He says, "Yeah, I caught that. I called the guy that developed them and he says don't worry about it, so what." He picked it up, called the guy. I was always impressed with that.

(Not usable)

Q.

Boy, that's staying ahead of the game, isn't it?

A.

I'll tell you another story along that line and then I'm about out of stories. I had a bad situation one time. George ^{Mueller} ~~Miller~~ was the head guy up there and von Braun of course was our boss. We were launching a particular missile and he never would go down front down there and there was a glass room up above, up front where the hierarchy was sitting. So there was George Miller, von Braun, and Phillips and some of those people. Obviously enjoying themselves. You could see them up there. All of a sudden we had a major propulsion problem. When we have a launch like that I have a room up there at

"Scrubbed the scrub"

Saturn unmaneuvered launch story



Cont'd.

Lee James
9/98 15

Saturn launch story

Marshall in Huntsville that will hold a couple hundred people and when you have something like a propulsion problem you call in all the propulsion experts and see what you can do. So we called in all the propulsion experts and it look like there wasn't much we could do. It look like the thing to do was change out the unit. It would be down for a couple of days or three days before you could come up again. Walter Cronkite was announcing and he announced that it was going to be down for three days before it would come back up. Von Braun and all of them heard this. I guess I'm kind of brash or something because I kept working at the booth up at Marshall and they came to the solution of this thing. We went over it and over it and over it until I finally said, "Is there anybody in the room that disagrees that we should go ahead and count and we do this?" Nobody raised a hand, everybody agrees. So I started to count.

Q. I was down there for that.

A. Were you? Von Braun and everybody hadn't heard this conversation that I had, you know. They looked up there and all of a sudden the clock is counting down. Walter Cronkite says, he's telling them to hold up and all of a sudden the clocks ticking. They came storming down the hall. ^{Mueller} ~~Miller~~ got to me first. I had gone to meet him and tell him what happened. He said, "Lee, what's going on here?" I said, "George, we've been working on the problem up at Marshall and I did this, this, and this and I started to count." George thought about it and he said, "Tell me again what you did." And I said, this, this, this, and this and started counting. He looked up and said, "I wouldn't have done that, Lee, if I ^{had} ~~would have~~ been you." And then he turned and walked out of the room. I looked over at von Braun and he winked. I knew that he agreed with me. He



(cont'd)

Lee James
B/98 16

winked real big and I let the count go. I think I probably would have stopped it on
Miller's
Miller's thing if it hadn't been for von Braun.

Q. You know, when the launch was scrubbed, I think it was later written that it was the only flight that was "described" I mean, the scrub was reversed. ^{Jules} ~~Jewels~~ Bergman from ABC TV was there and Jewels usually had a couple of IBM lackeys following him around and a convertible and ^{Jules} ~~Jewels~~ jumped in his convertible and sped away from the press site. I mean, most of us didn't bring any cars into the press site. So with the scrub he fled the scene to go have a beer or whatever and he was driving away when he learned either by phone or on his car radio that the count was back on and he turned around and by the time he gets back the rocket is gone, but he still screeches up to the press site and gets his TV crew and they film him looking up at the rocket and I guess they splice in some launch shots that somebody got and Bergman recreates the launch and it was long gone then. I put that in the earlier book.

A. I had a conversation with ^{Jules} ~~Jewels~~ after that. It went like this: ^{Jules} ~~Jewels~~ said to me, "Did you ever think what you would be doing now if that thing would have been a failure?"

Q. That's a great story, the "describing". That was so supportive of him wanting to back you up.

A. I don't think I could have gone on with George against me.

Q. Von Braun was satisfied with all that you had done.

A. That's right. He approved of all of it. I always thought that that was a rather odd stand for George to take. He didn't say stop the count he just tells me he was not happy with my decision. That was kind of an odd situation, I thought.

(See Pg. 18 for kicker line)

Early Saturn Launch Story

Q. In a way it was covering his butt. I mean, he was letting it be known he wasn't thrilled with that, but he didn't oppose it so much that he would stop it.

A. I saw that, too.

Q. He traveled a lot, didn't he? Was he a pretty good traveling companion?

A. A lot about von Braun came out then, more than I thought it would.

Q. Did von Braun ever tell you any stories about the Pennemunde?

A. Yes. That turned out to be exciting. He told me how things went up there. He had a lot of trouble up there with the brass too. I think he was the only one.

Q. In the course of my research for the ^{(Milton) Cummings} ~~coming~~ ^{Someone} book, told me about a dinner party once at the Cummings' house and the von Brauns were there and a few of the team members and the fellow that was telling ^{me} the story was a member of the family from Massachusetts that owned Lincoln Mills, cotton mills. This would have been in the 50s and they were down here visiting and one of the Germans, they didn't remember whom and they didn't think it was von Braun but he was present, one of the ~~V2~~ test launches at a time when they were unable to get any money out of Hitler's regime to really precede with production or advanced development or something so they were preparing for a launch that they had a lot of confidence in and it had had a lot of failures before then and they positioned about ten motion picture camera men and crews around the launch site at different vantage points. It went up, this flawless launch and flight, and all these cameras grinding away. They put together a film with this footage from one launch and gave every indication that these were multiple launches. "Look at all these different launches!" Because here were all these different camera angles and each angle looked different and it wasn't numbered

or anything, you know. They presented that film to Hitler or the higher authority anyway and it worked. It "wowed" them. And they got their money. That makes a great story and a great dinner party.

Pen:

A. The time that they had that ~~12~~ that went up a little ways and came right back down and exploded. All von Braun said was, "Well, boys, back to the drawing board."

Q. Regarding Dr. von Braun's characteristics, did he seem to be what you characterize as a worrier or someone who could make every preparation possible and do everything everybody could think of and then kind of just let it go ~~and then~~ ⁻⁰² continue to fret about things or worry about things?

A. My guess would be that probably inside somewhere he was worrying quite a lot about some of his decisions, but he had the knack of never showing it. he would make a decision and then smile you would think, "Well, it's not bothering him any." I doubt if that's right, I'm just guessing. I suspect that when he winked at me real big and knew that was going to convince me, that he went back worrying. I sure was. I told people that that was the slowest lift off I ever saw in my life. !!

Saturn Launch *

Q. And those Saturns could be slow, couldn't they?

A. I doubt that I would have gotten that decision if I hadn't gotten that wink. I didn't need anybody else on my side at that point. I expect that he worried, don't you think he would?

Q. I would think so. ?

A. You have to give credit to what George included. George, he was head of the computer company and no slouch at technical stuff.

unanimity

Sat. cont'd.

Q. On the other hand, you didn't have unity among your —

A. I asked them and there was not a single person there that disagreed with the decision, not a one. If there had been one I would have been worried. I only worried about George. I guess he was covering his tail by keeping mine exposed.

Q. The Saturn V project involved the greatest complexity I guess of any large undertaking that has, maybe, ever been done; including, this incredible number of components.

A. One million parts.

Q. And I understand you had 20 thousand contractors, large and small, involved in that project.

A. Our budget reached one billion dollars a year on Saturn alone. That was good money back then.

Q. In talking to von Braun, did he ever say anything that reflected his opinion about the complexity of this project that you can recall?

A. My off-hand remark is that I don't think he thought it was all that complex. I mean, he served it so well and he never said anything at all along that line that I can remember.

Q. He was pretty good about visiting contractor plants, wasn't he, and helping with pep talk?

A. He was very good. He discussed the complexity sometimes in terms of our pay. He said to me one time, "Lee, ^{your} project alone — which came to me directly from headquarters, they go through him — "Your project alone hit a billion dollars a year, and you make \$39,000 and I make \$39,500.

V.B. Salary (during Apollo)

Q. Would that be right before the flights or the landing?

A. That was in about '68.

Q. I guess he made a little bit from his free-lance writing and his speeches.
A. He wrote books and I'm sure he made something from those because they were good books. But still that's not great money compared to what his counter-parts usually made. Contractors made many times what he and I made. I'll tell you the government benefits aren't that bad. I make twice as much now retired as I made working.

Q. Well, then there is some justice then.

A. Right. I have no complaints.

Q. You mentioned about how Maria really felt about Huntsville and I heard something along that line, too, from others — a couple of things that people have told me is that, and this is what Maria, they say, told Huntsvillians that they resisted going to large parties of people in Twickenham or whatever who were not connected with the programs and the Arsenal. That at social events, she felt like they were invited there in an attempt to show them off. That some of the hosts were not that interested in even talking. She has been quoted as saying, "We're the stars that are brought in to show off."

A. She accepted our parties I guess because they were in our group. I guess that's what she meant.

Q. Otherwise, she felt that too many of the women of Huntsville were quote, "^{hausfrau.}Too ~~house~~ proud." That their world was not much beyond their family and home and that's about all they had to talk about. How do you think Dr. von Braun felt about living in Huntsville, this little town?

A. I think he was quite happy. With von Braun, happiness was his work. He was doing here what he wanted to do, what he couldn't have gotten done most any place else and I



V.B.
happy in Hsv.

Lee James
8-98

Maria in Hsv.
(re: Wash.)

think he would have been very happy. I heard Mario one time say to me that, "So and so is going to Washington, maybe we will someday." That's when I realized how she felt about it. I think that bothered von Braun because he wanted to make her happy of course. It hurt him, I think, to have her wanting to go. Do you know who von Braun's secretary was in Pennemunde?

Q. No.

A. Doretta Schlitt. She's very nice.

Q. You know, I've gotten to know Doretta. I was at a party with her. Maybe I ought to talk with her. At the moment of touchdown of Apollo 11 on the moon, was he in mission control in Houston? I talked with him at the Cape on the morning of the launch for Apollo 11 and wished him good luck. That's all I could think to say.

A. He was at mission control at the Cape, I think. I think he might have went to Houston. That's usually what they did. I saw him somewhere after launch. They always had that big shindig at the Cape the night before. I know he was at that.

Apollo 11

Q. I meant at the moment of touchdown and the moment of Armstrong's first step, was von Braun in mission control in Houston for those or do you know?

A. I guess it's a matter of when he left. I know he was at the Cape and I knew he left for Houston and it may be that since the big events were going on and everything, that he went down, I just don't know. I had a bad night that night. I went to this party down there and stayed until about 11 o'clock and went directly into the countdown from there and was there the rest of the night until lift off the next morning. That was a long day.

Q. Was that a Marshall Center's party?

A. It seems to me it was one of those magazines. Time maybe.

Q. So it was not Dr. von Braun's own party or Marshall's?

A. It was a big affair. They had everybody there. My wife enjoyed it. They had movie stars and everything.

Q. Is there anything in particular that stands out about the party or do you remember anything that happened?

A. One thing that stands out in my mind is that we got going with -- I can't remember his name. He was a well-known person and he impressed my wife and I enjoyed having him impress her because she had so much dull time.

Q. Were there any speeches made?

A. There were speeches made, but not much. Just "wish you luck" that sort of thing. I can't remember any outstanding speeches.

Q. After the launch von Braun went to Houston to be there?

A. I'm guessing now, but I would think considering the activity that was coming, it would have been impressive to watch the landing -- would be better done from Houston. So I would imagine that after a successful launch that he left probably. I left the next day myself to get down there.

Q. From the press site I saw just a short time before launch ~~Mr. Stewinger~~ ^{Dr. Stahlinger} with Hermann Oberth and I ran down from the bleachers where the press was, you know, down to the site and caught up with Ernest and he was very gracious. Ernest is always very gracious. But he acted as a translator while I interviewed Dr. ~~Oberth~~ ^{Oberth} and I couldn't help thinking, what cosmic, poetic justice that ~~Oberth~~ ^{Oberth} is here to witness this and he seemed —

Apollo II

- A. I imagine he was interesting to talk to.
- Q. Oh, he was. I ask^{ed} him about five great questions and I couldn't think of any^{more}. He was fairly responsive, but he began with theories first and then toy rockets and then to be there with Saturn V...
- A. But you could see how much he was impressed with what was happening there. I think it was a combination of something he had been wanting, too.
- Q. So I filed a story just right off the top of my head five minutes later for the paper and I think they used it out front as a little sidebar. I don't know that any other press people knew who that old gentleman from Germany was. Did you ever work with Ruth von Saurma's husband?
- A. Yes, I knew Fred very well.
- Q. He was titled, wasn't he? Wasn't he a Count?
- A. He outranked von Braun. In the German hierarchy he was a rank above von Braun. He was the only one that was. Count Frederick von Saurma.
- Q. What was his technical specialty or his scientific area, do you know?
- A. He flew Stukas. I think he was brought in more as a favor to Ruth or somebody because I don't think he had an engineering specialty that would really serve well. He used to tell me that he would pull out with his Stuka guided straight down.
- Q. He was in Pennemünde, I guess. Did he come over with the rest of them?
- A. He never had a responsible job. He was more of a consultant on certain things involving flight and gravity and that sort of thing.
- Q. Did he hold a Ph.D.?

Lee James
8-98

24

- (he)
- A. I don't know that he did. He did hold a 9th floor office up there. I always felt like that was somebody's guest. I may not be doing him fair, but I liked him, but I don't think he had much to contribute.
- Q. And he never held a job such as Lab Director?
- A. He never was in charge of anything that I can recall. He was a consultant more or less.
- Q. I'm only going to talk to a dozen or so folks other than the material I already have, to make sure I don't miss any classic stories. But all on the human side of him and not a straight narrative biography.
- A. Not a technical biography.
- Q. Exactly. And certainly not a chronological thing.
- A. There's a lot to be written on von Braun on the human side. He's got so much human side to him.
- Q. I am scheduled to talk some time soon with Bob Schwinghamer and ~~and~~ with Jay Foster. Maybe Jim Odom. Even if I just pick up a couple of stories, which I've done more with you today. George von Tiesenhausen.
- A. Well, George has some of the old history that might be very interesting. He kind of got away from Marshall here, but he dates back if you want to get some of the early stuff from him.
- Q. And Ruth, I haven't ever really sat down and talked with her, but maybe on the human side she would have something. Alex McCool and Ruby Higbuckby, they may have a couple of stories that may relate to the Space & Rocket Center. I might even talk with Doris Toftoy Williams, do you know her?

- A. No, I don't know her very well, but I've met her.
- Q. Charles or Chuck Lundquist whom I don't know but I've heard about all these years.
- A. Chuck was one of the earlier people in the research lab, but he's a good guy. He had a good job up in Washington.
- Q. Was he there at the same time Dr. von Braun was?
- A. He was there while von Braun was doing things here.
- Q. And then I thought maybe Dave Christensen who had some kind of an association with von Braun.
- A. Well, he did a good bit of writing and maybe picked up some other people, but I wouldn't think his first-hand knowledge would be as much as the others you just mentioned.
- Q. What do you think about Connie Dannenberg?
- A. You'll get comments. I don't know how right they'll be. He's quite a guy.
- Q. Ed Mohlere?
- A. I would say "no" on him.
- Q. Jim Shepherd?
- A. Not high on your list.
- Q. And I read somewhere a comment by Dr. A. K. Thiel — is he still living?
- A. I don't know. He dates way back.
- Q. Some other people like Ruth von Saurma.
- A. Have you ever spent time with Ruth trying to get information?
- Q. No. It's been more of just at community affairs and such.
- A. If you ever get her going on his human side I think you could get a lot of information.

She ought to know a lot about him. She did all his translating and worked all his records and since her being a woman she's probably more kin to the human side than the technical side.

Q. I suspect that she translated my English manuscript for this German publisher because the German publisher visited Marshall a time or two and I met with the guy and she was good enough to translate — she gave me the English translation of the ^eforward that was done by ~~O'berg~~ ^{Oberth} I think. And this gave me an English translation of that.

A. Ruth gave it to you?

Q. Yes.

A. Well, she must of had something to do with it then.

Q. Lee, that's about all I had.

A. ~~I was going down the hall and~~ I had just become the Saturn V program manager and I ran into von Braun in the hall and he said, "Wait a minute, Lee. I think you and I should talk a minute about how we're going to work together." And I said, "Yeah, I think that would be a great idea. What do you mean?" He said, "Well, I see it like this: you have all the money because it comes directly from headquarters to you, and I've got all these laboratories, and you're going to get into an awful lot of arguments with my laboratories about the money and what to do with it and so forth. And I think I ought to tell you right from the beginning that I'm going to be on the laboratories' side."

Q. That's leveling with you, isn't it?

A. And I think he meant by that not that they're always necessarily right and I'm wrong, but that he's got to defend them. He could be talked out of something, but he usually took

Manager / ("Team"?)

Lee James

8-98

27

the laboratories' view point. I think he had to do that. One thing about having all the
money, you didn't have to end the argument with what von Braun said.

END OF INTERVIEW