

## *Our Missouri Podcast*

Title: Summer Series, Part 3: Moon Memories

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KEVIN WALSH: Welcome to *Our Missouri*, a podcast about the people, places, culture, and history of the 114 counties and independent city of Saint Louis that comprise the great state of Missouri. Each episode focuses on a topic related to the state ranging from publications about Missouri's history to current projects undertaken by organizations to preserve and promote local institutions. The *Our Missouri Podcast* is recorded at the Center for Missouri Studies in Columbia, and is generously provided to you by the State Historical Society of Missouri. And now, here's your host, Sean Rost.

SEAN ROST: Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening, or at whatever hour you are tuning in to listen to the *Our Missouri Podcast*. My name is Sean Rost and I will be your guide as we explore the memories, moments, and misfortunes from our Missouri. Fifty years ago this summer—1969 to be exact—the space race pitting the United States against the Soviet Union was reaching the proverbial finish line. The only question that remained was: Who would land on the Moon first? Over the next four episodes, we will explore the history behind the contributions made by Americans—and more specifically, Missourians—to not only explore the far reaches of space, but also to land a person on the Moon. So, let's prepare for launch.

[Mission Control Opening Sequence]

SEAN ROST: Today's episode takes us to the American living room circa 1969. There were three channels, and if you were lucky, you could find quality entertainment and news on all three options—NBC, ABC, and CBS. But for many Americans—and Missourians at that—there was only one person that the TV dial was always tuned to—Walter Cronkite. This was especially true as the space race of the 1950s and 1960s heated up with the launch of each new space mission. For all of his distinguished honors regarding his coverage of political campaigns, wartime reporting, and national tragedies—including being known as the most trusted man in America—it was the space race that made Cronkite into a household name. And yet, the path Cronkite took to the top of television journalism was by no means an easy one. It started far from the bright television studio lights of New York City. In fact, it started in Saint Joseph, Missouri.

Walter Leland Cronkite, Jr., was born at Saint Joseph's Grey Lying-In Hospital on November 4, 1916. His parents, Walter and Helen Cronkite, had moved back and forth between Saint Joseph and nearby Leavenworth, Kansas, in the years before his birth. His mother, Helen Fritsche, had grown up in Leavenworth at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She met Walter Sr. when he accepted a position as a staff dentist at the Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. The Cronkites were well known in the dental community. F.P. Cronkite—Walter's grandfather—had made a name for himself as a renowned expert in restoration dentistry. Walter Sr. followed in his father's footsteps and graduated from Kansas City Dental College in 1914. While he initially set up his

dental practice in Saint Joseph, Walter Sr. longed for the day when he could relocate his family to the bright lights of nearby Kansas City. This move had to wait, however, as Walter Sr. was drafted into the medical corps during World War I. With her husband away in France, Helen and Walter Jr. spent some time in Oklahoma where Walter Sr. had been stationed. But before long, she moved back to Missouri. When the war ended and he returned home, Walter Sr. immediately made plans to open his new dental practice in Kansas City.<sup>1</sup>

Though he had been born in Saint Joseph, and would spend much of his life on the East Coast, Walter Cronkite always considered Kansas City to be his hometown. He spent only eight years of his youth in Kansas City, but he enjoyed the sights and sounds of the up-and-coming city. Pendergast Era Kansas City had a lot of bawdy entertainment to tempt young Cronkite, but his parents made sure that he stayed far away from these locations. Nevertheless, he knew the city's distinct pulse thanks to a job as a paperboy for the *Kansas City Star*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and other publications. Even from a young age, Cronkite knew how to dispense the news as well as how to sell it. Yet, Cronkite's youthful days in Kansas City would be brief. Around his tenth birthday, his father received a lucrative job offer from the Texas Dental School in Houston. In 1927, the Cronkites left their Missouri familial ties behind and headed for Houston.<sup>2</sup>

One of the first things that Cronkite noticed about his new home was racism. He had attended an integrated school in Kansas City—though he no doubt grown up in a racially divided city. Houston, however, was a community dominated by Jim Crow. He attended an all-white school, and he lived in all-white neighborhoods. He later told of a story that truly disgusted him and stamped the evils of racism directly into him. While attending a dinner hosted by one of his father's dental school colleagues, an African American delivery man was verbally and physically accosted for bringing items to the front of the home instead of the back. The Cronkites were deeply shaken by the event, and Walter Sr.'s apparent defense of the delivery man made him enemies in the dental school.<sup>3</sup>

The strain felt between Walter Sr. and the Texas Dental School only got worse as the Great Depression set in soon after the family's arrival in Houston. With the school facing foreclosure, and Helen's parents opting to relocate to Texas, the Cronkites stable middle class life slowly faded away. Facing the prospects of failing in his career ambitions, Walter Sr. began to drink more and more, and his alcoholism put even more strain on the family. In 1932, Helen filed for divorce. Walter Sr. decided to move back to Saint Joseph to revive his dental career. Having just started at San Jacinto High School, it was decided that Helen and Walter Jr. should remain in

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 5-13; Douglas Brinkley, *Cronkite* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 13-17; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

<sup>2</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 5-19; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 19-21; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

<sup>3</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 19-23; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 24-25; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

Houston for him to finish his education. He may not have liked how the move to Texas impacted his family, but Houston was home and Walter planned to make the most of it.<sup>4</sup>

While attending school in Houston, Cronkite rekindled his interest in journalism. But now, he moved from just delivering the newspaper to actually writing in it. Though he still worked the delivery route for the *Houston Post*, as a student at Sidney Lanier Middle School, Cronkite served on the staff of the school newspaper. Continuing on the newspaper staff at San Jacinto High School, he also turned his earlier work with the *Houston Post* into a summer job. By the time he graduated high school in 1933, Cronkite had helped edit two newspapers, served in several capacities at the *Houston Post*, and won a state journalism award for his writing. It certainly seemed that a return to Saint Joseph and Kansas City was in the works as he had all the credentials necessary to enroll at the prestigious journalism school at the University of Missouri. Instead, Cronkite decided to stay close to his mother and enrolled at the University of Texas.<sup>5</sup>

Cronkite enjoyed his time at the University of Texas. In addition to a growing social calendar, he also found time to work in radio and press journalism. But, as he later noted, his work outside the classroom had a negative effect on what he did in the classroom. In 1935, he opted to drop out of college and accept a job with the *Houston Press*.<sup>6</sup> A year later, he returned to his old hometown when he took a position with radio station KCMO in Kansas City. His time at KCMO would be brief, however, after clashing with the manager over running a breaking story without first checking the sources, but he did manage to meet Mary Elizabeth Maxwell, a copywriter and University of Missouri graduate, who also worked for the radio station. They married in 1940.<sup>7</sup>

Cronkite's marriage offered stability in his life and helped offset a period of instability in his employment situation. After his firing from KCMO, Cronkite accepted a position with the United Press telegraph news agency. United Press—now known as UPI—was in need of a night editor at its Kansas City bureau as well as some journalistic work in Texas. Cronkite's first major story was a school explosion in Texas, but he was unsatisfied with UP and quit. He spent a brief period of time shuttling between Texas, Oklahoma, and Missouri, including stints as a radio broadcaster for University of Oklahoma football games and the manager of the Kansas City-based Braniff Airlines. Finally, he relented and returned to United Press in an effort to rectify his earlier mistake. His second time at UP proved to be successful and he rose through the journalism ranks covering the frontlines of World War II, the shocking revelations of the

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<sup>4</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 14-29; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 26-29; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

<sup>5</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 30-36; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 29-36; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

<sup>6</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 37-51; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 36-45; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

<sup>7</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 51-60; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 45-52; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

Nuremberg Trials, and the early years of the Cold War.<sup>8</sup> But to truly make a name for himself, Cronkite would need to break-in to a new form of media—the television.

DANIELLE GRIEGO: Hi, I'm Danielle Griego, the Education Coordinator for the State Historical Society of Missouri. I'd like to talk to you briefly about National History Day in Missouri. National History Day in Missouri is a unique opportunity for middle and high school age students to explore the past in a creative, hands-on way by producing a documentary, exhibit, paper, performance, or website on a topic of their choosing. In June, Missouri students traveled to Washington D.C. for the National Contest and brought home 3 bronze medals and 2 Outstanding Entry Awards. In 2020, the theme will be "Breaking Barriers in History," and we look forward to the amazing projects Missouri students will produce. To learn more about National History Day in Missouri, including how to start a program at your own school, please visit [shsmo.org/nhdmo](https://shsmo.org/nhdmo).

SEAN ROST: Television was a relatively new invention by the time that Walter Cronkite returned from Europe in the late 1940s. Few people at the time could foresee the impact that it would have on American society and American culture. In fact, when Cronkite first announced his intention of venturing into television media, his colleagues thought for sure that his journalism career was over. Nevertheless, Cronkite took a chance on television and accepted a position with CBS broadcasting political updates from Washington D.C. to affiliate stations in the Midwest. Realizing his potential, CBS soon assigned him to various roles within the network, including covering political campaigns, sporting events, documentaries, and daytime programming.<sup>9</sup>

Having served in all of these roles, including as one of CBS' primary weekend news anchors, it was not long before Cronkite received a major promotion. In 1962, Walter Cronkite premiered as the new host of what would become the *CBS Evening News*. Though he spent the majority of the 1960s trailing network rivals Chet Huntley and David Brinkley of NBC's *Huntley-Brinkley Report* in the ratings, the anchorman earned the nation's respect and admiration as he guided viewers through triumph and tragedy of the 1960s. He spoke with former president Dwight Eisenhower on the beaches of Normandy during an anniversary of D-Day. He calmed a mourning nation in the aftermath of assassinations of men like John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. He supported, and then, ultimately critiqued the government's handling of the Vietnam War. Through it all, Cronkite became a fixture on

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<sup>8</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 61-151; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 53-142; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

<sup>9</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 152-198, 212-239, 337-347; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 141-220; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

television screens that occupied a prime spot in American living rooms. But, there was one subject that truly captured Cronkite's full attention—the space race.<sup>10</sup>

When Sputnik launched in 1957, Walter Cronkite, like many Americans, was stunned. CBS, however, did not angle Cronkite's broadcasts to the space race until Project Mercury began to pick up steam in the early 1960s. Yet, in addition to covering Alan Shepard's Freedom 7 mission, Cronkite quickly scored a major interview with cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space. After having Cronkite broadcast from a makeshift studio for the launch of Freedom 7, CBS moved quickly to establish a fulltime residence on Cape Canaveral. When John Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth, Cronkite stayed on the air for nearly ten hours to keep his eager audience attuned to the sights and sounds from liftoff to splashdown. Soon enough, Cronkite had a backstage pass to the inner workings of NASA—much to the chagrin of some of his network rivals.<sup>11</sup>

Cronkite's intense focus on the manned space program, and his seemingly all access pass from NASA, may have drawn the ire of other news anchors, but it was a ratings windfall for CBS. By opting to cover all of the Gemini missions himself, Cronkite became the face of space, and soon saw his ratings soar. At the end of 1968, with that tumultuous year coming to a dreary end, Cronkite hoped that the successful launch of Apollo 8 would ring in 1969 as a year of hope. When the Apollo 8 crew of Frank Borman, William Anders, and Jim Lovell orbited the moon on Christmas Eve, Cronkite basked in the moment. Not only had the astronauts provided the weary and worn-torn Earth a glimpse of the surface of the Moon, but also a hauntingly beautiful image of itself—Earthrise.<sup>12</sup>

July 16, 1969—a date roughly a decade in the making—finally arrived at Cape Kennedy with fanfare, large crowds, and, of course, Walter Cronkite. An estimated one million people came to Florida to see the crew of Apollo 11 off to the moon. For such a momentous occasion, CBS pulled out all the stops, including pairing Cronkite with Mercury 7 astronaut Wally Schirra. Over the span of eight days, Cronkite shuttled between Florida and New York to talk with dignitaries and commentators on a variety of topics related to the much anticipated moon landing. On July 20<sup>th</sup>, he was in his New York television studio preparing for what would be over twenty-four hours on air with only a few breaks. When the lunar module Eagle touched down on the Moon's surface, Cronkite and Schirra were both speechless. Having long pondered what wit and wisdom to proclaim at such a historic moment, Cronkite couldn't find the proper

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<sup>10</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 230-231, 240-270, 294, 304-307; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 241-332, 340-407; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

<sup>11</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 271-276; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 197, 221-237.

<sup>12</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 276-281; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 234-237, 332-339, 408-409; Craig Nelson, *Rocket Men: The Epic Story of the First Men on the Moon* (New York: Viking, 2009), 199-203; "Earthrise," NASA, last modified August 7, 2017, [https://www.nasa.gov/multimedia/imagegallery/image\\_feature\\_1249.html](https://www.nasa.gov/multimedia/imagegallery/image_feature_1249.html).

words to describe how he felt. "Wow," he began as if channeling the feelings of a mesmerized child, "Oh, boy."<sup>13</sup>

The broadcast day was not done when the Eagle landed on the moon. While NASA and the astronaut crew performed testing in preparation for the next stage of the mission, Cronkite and his studio crew had to hold the audience's attention for several more hours. With midnight fast approaching on the East Coast, Neil Armstrong opened the module's door and descended a ladder to the moon's surface. Each small step was historic and Cronkite let Armstrong and NASA do all the talking. Yet, when Armstrong's now famous "One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind" was first spoken, the static from the communication line prevented a confused Cronkite from fully hearing the entire phrase until a little while later. Nevertheless, Cronkite enjoyed the moment and guided his audience through the arrival of Buzz Aldrin, the planting of the American flag, and the communication between the astronauts and President Richard Nixon. In all, Cronkite was on air for a good portion of the roughly twenty-one hours that Eagle sat on the moon's surface. His persistence paid off as nearly half of the entire television audience that tuned in to watch the historic event did so with the dial turned to CBS.<sup>14</sup>

On July 24, 1969, Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins splashed down in the Pacific Ocean near Hawaii. They were picked up by helicopter and escorted quickly to a quarantine chamber aboard the USS Hornet. After a few weeks in quarantine, the three astronauts became global sensations. Having been a NASA supporter since Project Mercury, Walter Cronkite got a featured interview with all three of them on CBS' *Face the Nation*. Yet, with all of the worldwide attention given to the crew of Apollo 11, the remaining Apollo missions from 1969 to 1972 went off with little fanfare and attention—outside of the ill-fated Apollo 13. Walter Cronkite still manned the desk alongside Wally Schirra for Apollo 12 through 17, but the moon had lost its luster. The space race, for all intents and purposes, was over.<sup>15</sup>

DANIELLE GRIEGO: The Missouri Bicentennial provides an occasion for reflecting upon and increasing understanding of various aspects of the State's cultural and geographic landscape. Missouri 2021 invites professional and amateur photographers to capture and share unique and meaningful aspects of place in Missouri. Through the My Missouri 2021 Photograph Project, two hundred photographs will be selected to be part of the permanent Missouri Bicentennial collection at the State Historical Society of Missouri. Together these images will create a snapshot of the state's physical and cultural landscape during its Bicentennial that will be available to researchers, teachers, and students, and the public for generations to come. To learn

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<sup>13</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 277-278; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 409-421; Nelson, *Rocket Men*, 260; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

<sup>14</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 277-278; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 421-425.

<sup>15</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 277; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 425-426; Nelson, *Rocket Men*, 299-305.

more about the My Missouri 2021 Photograph Project, please visit [missouri2021.org/my-missouri](https://missouri2021.org/my-missouri).

SEAN ROST: By the 1970s, a poll found that many Americans considered Walter Cronkite to be "the most trusted man in America." Such an honorary title is significant considering it was born at a time of events like the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. Cronkite would carry this title for the rest of his life. After retiring from the CBS Evening News in 1981, he still stayed active on television in select programming, but his screen time decreased dramatically. In retirement, Cronkite was honored with a bust in the Hall of Famous Missourians, President Ronald Reagan presented him a Presidential Medal of Freedom, and NASA awarded him the Ambassador of Exploration Award. When he died in 2009, Cronkite was buried in Kansas City's Mount Moriah Cemetery, next to his beloved wife, Betsy.<sup>16</sup>

In looking back over Walter Cronkite's life, it is easy to see why the "most trusted man in America" was also considered to be the face and voice of the space race. He was Mr. Space. He was Mr. Moons Shot. He was—by all accounts—an unofficial astronaut. It may not have been the only defining moment in his journalistic career, but his coverage of the decade long push to land an American on the moon arguably came to define Cronkite's role in American society and American culture. "Of all humankind's achievements in the twentieth century," Cronkite wrote in his autobiography, "and all our gargantuan peccadilloes as well, for that matter—the one event that will dominate the history books a half a millennium from now will be our escape from our earthly environment and landing on the moon."<sup>17</sup> And so, we leave you with the stories of Missourians as they watched the Moon Landing unfold. We'll begin with former astronaut, Linda Godwin.

[MOON MEMORIES SECTION]

SEAN ROST: Thanks for listening to this week's episode. As always, I am your host, Sean Rost. The show's producer is Brian Austin. The opening and concluding credits are narrated by Kevin Walsh.

KEVIN WALSH: Thank you for listening to the *Our Missouri Podcast*. If you would like to learn more about the podcast, including past and future episodes, information about guests, and upcoming events, please visit our website at [shsmo.org/our-missouri](https://shsmo.org/our-missouri).

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<sup>16</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 333-336, 351-384; Brinkley, *Cronkite*, 440-481, 543-656; "Walter Leland Cronkite Jr.," The State Historical Society of Missouri, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/c/cronkite/>.

<sup>17</sup> Cronkite, *A Reporter's Life*, 271.