

Most Alabamians are unaware that Alabama is the state that deserves the most credit for the 20th century's greatest accomplishment — putting man on the moon. But if Mark and Ralph Petroff have their way, it will be common knowledge soon.

America's July 1969 moon landing is often considered the greatest achievement of the 20th century — and it was made possible by the Alabama-built Saturn V rocket. If Huntsville's Petroff brothers get their druthers, Alabama will ride the rocket to a new state image.

Ralph Petroff and his brother Mark have traveled millions of miles crisscrossing the planet on global business endeavors over the last three decades. "It seems like we spent half of our time explaining that 'Alabama isn't what you think it is'—rather than selling our business," Ralph says. "We have found that misperceptions about Alabama are an obstacle to doing business outside of Alabama."

They observed that people over 50 tend to associate Alabama with civil rights issues and younger people think Alabama is backwoods. They think the

residents are nice, but uneducated. "We were just so tired of having to explain these misperceptions," says Ralph. "Frankly, we were equally tired of having people from the other states

look down on us."

Mark Petroff says he and Ralph remarked many times when they were traveling that it would be wonderful to have time to work on Alabama's image issue.

About a year and a half ago, the Petroff brothers became actively involved in a U.S. Space and Rocket Center campaign to raise \$5 million to restore the original Saturn V moon

Alabama: First to the Moon and Beyond

BY DEANA NUNLEY





About a year and a half ago, Mark (left) and Ralph Petroff became actively involved in a U.S. Space and Rocket Center campaign to raise \$5 million to restore the original Saturn V moon rocket at the Space Center in Huntsville.



rocket at the Space Center in Huntsville. Statewide sales of a specialty license plate go toward the rocket refurbishment. The colorful tags show the

135,000,000-horsepower Saturn rocket with the moon in the background and the words “Alabama — First to the Moon — and Beyond.”

Ralph spearheaded the

effort to get the tag approved and he and Mark embarked on a mission to re-brand the state’s image using the tagline on the license plate. The highly successful technology busi-

nessmen now devote as much as half their time to the re-branding initiative and tag effort.

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most credit for the 20th century's greatest accomplishment — putting man on the moon,” Ralph says. “Alabama actually played the central role in the moon landing. We built, designed and tested the most critical component — the amazing Saturn V moon rocket. The master plan of getting to the moon was conceived in Alabama.”

Ralph says Alabama's activities were less visible than the activities at Cape Canaveral, Fla., and Houston, partly because that's where the television cameras were pointed. “Even launch pad 39A at Cape Canaveral was built by Alabamians — the Blount Brothers of Montgomery. The indispensable person of the Apollo program was in Alabama — Dr. Wernher von Braun.” Ralph says the legendary German rocket scientist was fond of saying,



In 1950, Wernher von Braun (below with President John Kennedy) and his German rocket team moved from Texas to Huntsville, Ala., forming the group that shaped the country's space and rocket program. Its Saturn V rocket (above) created in Alabama, assured a manned lunar landing in 1969.



“Anything sent into space should have a tag on it saying ‘Made in Alabama by the people of Alabama.’”

Huntsville is known as the Rocket City, but Mark says their research revealed that people from all 67 Alabama counties were recruited to work on the Saturn rocket.

“The mosaic that began to develop is that if you looked at all the people who worked in the space program in Alabama, the majority were not from Huntsville. Birmingham was 50 times larger than

Huntsville at that time,” Mark says. “The space program was not a Huntsville accomplishment; it was an Alabama accomplishment.”

When the Petroffs realized that, they began to believe this could be something with broader appeal. They established the Alabama Image Initiative, a nonprofit organization formed to help build support for a re-branding of Alabama as the “First to the Moon” state. They have made about 50 presentations to business, government, and community leaders across the state during the past year.

Ralph says the biggest challenge they foresee is the need for more dedicated resources. He says the initiative has gotten excellent traction, but more donations are needed to take it from a “pro bono” project to one with dedicated resources. The ultimate goal is to adopt “Alabama — First to the Moon” as the state slogan and the Saturn V as the state symbol.

“The reaction of non-Huntsvillians is always the same. They are astonished and delighted,” Ralph says. “Many Alabamians have a chip on their shoulder about the state's unfair image. The knowledge that Alabama played the central role in the 20th century's greatest event is a huge source of pride for them.”

The Saturn V moon rocket was designed, managed, built and tested in Alabama. Because of Huntsville's small population in the early 1950s, engineers were recruited from all over the state, including the Mobile shipyards, Birmingham steel mills, Alabama Power Company and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

"Many of these Alabama engineers who worked on the moon program were first in their family to go to college — typical Greatest Generation war veterans on the GI Bill. They could dig a well, fix a Model T or Sherman tank, and then work with their former enemies — the Germans — to build moon rockets," Ralph says. "The story of Alabama farm boys putting man on the moon is truly one of the greatest stories never told."

A couple of those farm

boys are Brooks Moore and Jack Lee, who grew up in Perry and Randolph counties, respectively. Both played prominent roles in the Apollo program. Jack Lee ultimately became one of von Braun's successors as director of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville.

"We're trying to track down all the Alabama rocket boys," Mark says. As part of the Saturn V restoration project, it's proposed that a series of 67 plaques representing Alabama counties will sur-

round the rocket and list the names of Apollo workers from each county and that matching plaques be placed in each county seat.

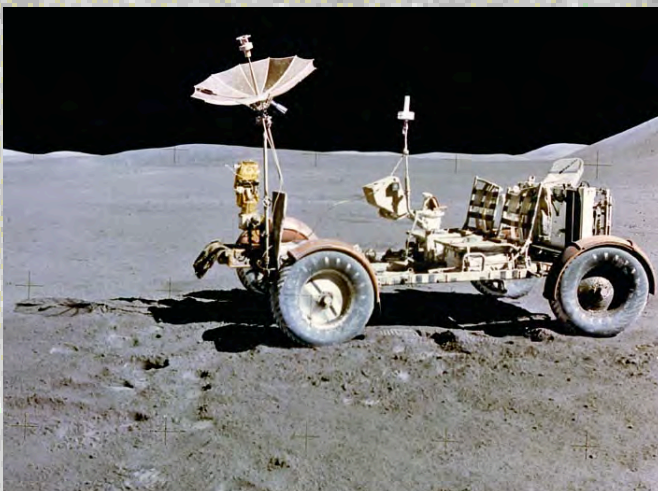
One of those amazing Apollo workers was Peter Petroff, recruited by von Braun to work on the Saturn rocket. Ralph says their father's legacy is an inspiration as they pursue the re-branding initiative. "He would tell us, 'Instead of complaining about Alabama's image, why don't you just change it?'" He says their father, who died in 2003, believed in dreaming big dreams.

The Petroff patriarch developed the world's first wireless heart monitor, digital wristwatch, and computerized pollution monitoring system. He and his sons founded ADS Environmental Services in 1975, sold it in 1995, and then helped lead and direct Time Domain Corporation, a

wireless technology company.

The Saturn V moon rocket is considered by many to be the most remarkable man-made machine ever built. Almost 400 feet long, it goes from "zero to outer space" in less than three minutes. The top speed of the Saturn is almost 25,000 miles per hour. The Saturn V took 12 men to the moon and launched the Skylab missions and never had a launch failure.

"Our Saturn V moon rocket may be the 20th century's most important artifact," says Larry Capps, CEO of the U.S. Space and Rocket Center. "It is Alabama's sacred obligation to preserve it for future



Huntsville's Marshall Space Flight Center took the lead in the design and development of the lunar rover vehicle first used on Apollo 14 in 1971.

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generations.”

Mark Petroff suggests that 500 years from now the things people will remember will be landing on the moon, discovery of DNA, and the invention of the semiconductor. “Landing on the moon in 1969 will be as significant as Columbus discovering America in 1492,” he says.

Mark and Ralph are convinced the Saturn V is Alabama’s most historically significant and unique physical image to capture the spirit of the state.

“We thought ‘The Heart of Dixie’ and older imagery looked backward instead of forward,” Mark says. As they examined other states’ re-branding efforts, they saw the necessity to create a fundamental paradigm shift in how Alabama is perceived.

Alabama’s role in space exploration is celebrated at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center (below) in Huntsville.



Boeing’s Delta IV rocket (above) is built at the firm’s Decatur, Ala., plant.

North Carolina was known for textiles, but in the mid-1970s, the state re-branded itself as “First in Flight” and subsequently became recognized as a progressive state. Interestingly, the Petroffs

say that while it’s true the Wright Brothers’ first flight occurred in Kitty Hawk, they only spent six or eight weeks in North Carolina — compared with some 20 to 30 years of hard work spent in Dayton, Ohio.

“The only thing North Carolina did was provide a beach with enough wind. So if ‘First in Flight’ can work for them, ‘First to the Moon’ should work for us,” Ralph says.

“The image of Alabama is so important to the state’s economic development, both from an industry as well as a tourism standpoint,” says Judy Ryals, chairman of the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel Advisory Board and president and CEO of the Huntsville-Madison County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

brothers for their re-branding efforts. “Everything they’re doing from a positive image standpoint can only benefit all of us,” she says. “I think it’s admirable that they would take that on as a personal issue and spend their own dollars and time and energy to improve the state of Alabama’s image. They seem so dedicated and passionate about what they’re doing and trying to involve other community leaders as well as state officials. They seem to be going about it in a very direct and organized fashion.” ■

For more information on how you can contribute to the Saturn V Restoration, visit www.savethesaturn.org. The Saturn V license plate is an official plate of the State of Alabama and can be obtained at each motor vehicle licensing office in every Alabama county. For more information about the Petroff Brother’s efforts, see