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The Astronaut Memorial Grove.

Holiday lights with a special meaning

NASA’s Astronaut Memorial Grove honors historic contributions

By DAVID PERO
The Daily Astorian

Sometimes holiday displays are not only joyful, but also serene and reverent in special ways. For instance, there are two beautiful tree groves dressed with bright holiday lights every year not far from Interstate 45 a few miles south of Houston, in the city of Clear Lake. One of the groves, near the intersection of Avenue E and Second Street, has 64 live oaks and Shumard red oaks and each has a special dedication. Across the street is a second grove with 76 oaks, each also with a dedication.

During the holidays, all but one of the oaks in the smaller grove are decorated with bright white lights. The single remaining tree stands out with glowing red lights. Each oak in the larger grove across the street twinkles with dazzling white lights.

Both groves are rooted on federal land, planted within the confines of Johnson Space Center not far from the entrance, and the trees have a special significance to the center’s current and past employees. The smaller grove is a living memorial to NASA’s astronauts, with each tree dedicated to an astronaut who has died. The second grove is a memorial for employees and contractors who worked at the space center. NASA plants the trees in both groves and dedicates one in the smaller grove each time an astronaut dies, whether in the line of duty, or from an accident or from natural causes. Families of employees, their spouses and contractors who have died have an option of ordering a tree to be planted in their honor in the employee grove. The agency also memorializes all the astronauts and employees in a ceremony in the Astronaut Memorial Grove during an annual Day of Remembrance each January.

The groves are not currently open to the public, but can be viewed from nearby streets, and space center visitors can see the trees while taking a tram tour of the giant facility. The Johnson Space Center, as part of its future planning, is in the process of developing the areas around the groves to enlarge the memorial, while keeping its tranquility with a goal of opening them to the public at a future date, according to Lynette Madison, of the space center’s Public Affairs Office.

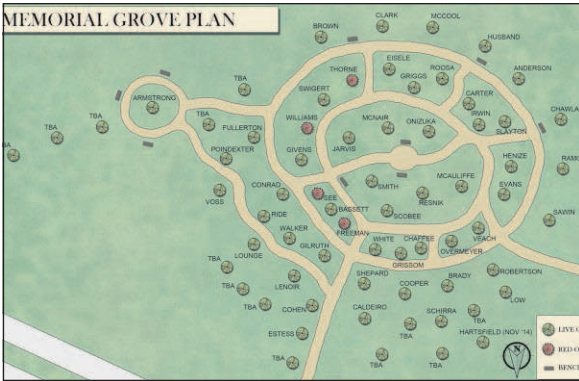
John Glenn

Although a date has not been set, in the coming weeks or months, a new tree will be dedicated in the astronauts’ grove to memorialize John Glenn, the first American to orbit the earth, who recently died at age 95. Glenn was the last of the original Mercury Seven astronauts to die. After retiring from NASA, he later



NASA Photos

The Astronaut Memorial Grove has 64 live and Shumard red oaks and is decorated in holiday lights.



NASA Illustration

The idea for the Astronaut Memorial Grove originated in 1996 from George Abbey, who was director of the space center at the time. It started with seven trees.

Writer’s Notebook

served 24 years in the U.S. Senate, and flew on the space shuttle while serving in Congress at age 77, the oldest person to fly in space.

Madison said dedication ceremonies are usually scheduled on a date that is best for the family, and usually on a day that is meaningful, such as a birthday or an anniversary of a specific mission.

According to NASA historians, the idea for the Astronaut Memorial Grove originated in 1996 from George Abbey, who was director of the space center at the time. The grove began with the planting of seven trees dedicated to the astronauts who died 10 years earlier in the 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger accident. Since then, tree dedication ceremonies have been held in honor of each astronaut who has died.

Pete Conrad

Each year, NASA workers always get questions from visitors during the holidays on why all the trees have

white lights except the lone live oak with red lights.

The answer comes from the book “Rocket Man” by Howard Klausner and Nancy Conrad, wife of astronaut Pete Conrad. Pete Conrad, who died in 1999, was a member of the second group of astronauts NASA selected, which was called the New Nine. He flew during the Gemini program, commanded the second moon landing on Apollo 12 and also commanded the first manned mission aboard Skylab. Conrad was also one of the smallest of NASA’s astronauts at 5 feet 6½ inches and had a personal motto of, “If you can’t be good, be colorful.”

According to the book, after Conrad’s death from injuries he suffered in a motorcycle accident, NASA planted a tree in his honor. Alan Bean, Conrad’s Apollo 12 crewmate who walked on the moon with him, spoke during the tree dedication ceremony.

The instructions

According to the book, during Bean’s speech, he pseudo-“channeled” Conrad, who supposedly sent instructions from the hereafter. The book recounts that Conrad’s instruc-

tions were that NASA should first make sure his tree wasn’t the smallest in the grove. Conrad, through Bean, then instructed NASA to decorate all the trees but one every Christmas season with white lights, but in keeping with his motto, his tree should stand out with colored lights.

The channeling brought laughter to the crowd during an otherwise solemn ceremony and both Bean and Nancy Conrad were later quoted as saying Pete Conrad would have enjoyed it because he loved humor and would have wanted the moment lightened.

NASA honored the “request” that year and every Christmas season since by decking out Conrad’s tree with bright red lights, the most colorful tree in either grove.

As time passes, the groves will become brighter and even more beautiful during the holidays as more trees are planted. But the trees also serve as a reverent and living reminder of the astronauts’ historic contributions and of the dedicated service of the NASA employees and contractors who worked to further both science and space exploration.

David Pero is the publisher and editor of The Daily Astorian.



Pete Conrad



John Glenn