Dr. Jennifer Ross-Nazzal has served as the Johnson Space Center (JSC) Historian since 2004. In this position she provides reference assistance to NASA and the public and has shared her expertise with journalists, writers, broadcasting agencies, documentarians, and many others. She was awarded her Ph.D. from Washington State University, her master’s in History from New Mexico State University, and B.A. in History and Political Science from the University of Arizona. In 2011 she published her first book, Winning the West for Women, a biography of suffragist Emma Smith DeVoe. Her latest manuscript, Making Space for Women, is forthcoming from Texas A&M Press and focuses on the history of JSC through the experiences of its female employees.

Interview by Thomas Faith

What are your current duties at NASA’s Johnson Space Center (JSC)?

I spend a good portion of my day working on our oral history program where I help to capture experiences from current and former NASA and contract employees. (The interview is only one part—I also prepare for the sessions by researching individuals and writing questions, and finally editing the transcripts.) We receive reference requests from the public as well as other Agency historians and staff, which I answer. Like many government historians, I take great pride in sharing NASA history by giving talks at local colleges and universities, our visitor center (aka Space Center Houston), and community, state, and national organizations. I also occasionally write for publications. My current research focuses on the impact the Apollo Program and the decision to build a NASA Center in Houston had upon the Clear Lake community—the area surrounding the Space Center.

What aspect of your personal or professional experiences do you think most influences your approach to your current position?

I am a women’s historian by training, but NASA is an engineering, scientific, and technical organization. When possible, which is not very often, I try to combine the two. Several years ago, for instance, I wrote a chapter on the first female astronaut of color, Mae Jemison, for Texas Women: Their Histories, Their Lives (University of Georgia, 2015). Spacefarers: Images of Astronauts and Cosmonauts in the Heroic Era of Spaceflight (Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2013) featured my essay, “You’ve Come a Long Way, Maybe: The First Six Women Astronauts and the Media.” My chapter explored the gender biases the first female space flyers, selected in 1978, faced. Over the past few months, our office has been interviewing some of the astronaut wives from the Apollo era. My book, Making Space for Women: Stories from Trailblazing Women of NASA’s Johnson Space Center, is currently under review with Texas A&M Press.

How did JSC help commemorate the recent Apollo 11 Anniversary?

Center resources for anniversaries are limited, so NASA linked many of its celebrations to community events: NASA Nights at the Houston Dynamos and the Houston Astros, exhibits, and festivals. One event that received a great deal of attention was the unveiling of the newly restored Apollo Mission Control Center. A National Historic Landmark that had been neglected and fell into disrepair, the Apollo MCC has now come back to life; visitors can experience the first lunar landing from one of the viewing room seats overlooking the room where flight controllers sat.

What online projects has the JSC History Office undertaken?

In 2000, our production coordinator, Sandra L. Johnson, created the JSC History Portal. You can access the portal here: https://historycollection.jsc.nasa.gov/JSCHistoryPortal/history/. Initially seen as a one-stop-shop for all things related to JSC History, the website includes a variety of documents, transcripts, and books. As of today, the portal hosts over 1,400 electronic transcripts from the Center’s oral history project. We are currently in the midst of redesigning and upgrading the twenty-year-old portal. We look forward to unveiling the new site soon!

Your office maintains an extensive and outstanding oral history program. How do you identify subjects for oral history interviews?

That depends on the project. If you look at our website you’ll see a whole host of oral history projects, from the JSC Oral History Project to the STS Recordation Oral History Project. Different offices across the Center and Agency regularly request our office capture information through oral history interviews. They often determine who they would like interviewed, although we do make suggestions. For example, as the Space Shuttle Program closed out, our office set out to document the history of the program from design, development, and testing to retirement. More women and people of color came onboard during this program, but the original interview list was nearly all male, so I encouraged them to include women as well as people of color.

What advice can you offer other oral history programs?

Really, it’s simple—be on time, and do your homework. I once interviewed Moonwalker and artist Alan Bean. When we
arrived he insisted we had exactly one hour for our session. When he realized that I was prepared, our equipment worked, and we were genuinely interested in his history, he let us stay longer so we could ask more questions. As the interview wrapped up, he commented on our professionalism and ended up showing us around his art studio. We spent all morning with him, not just an hour!

A lot of interviewees are surprised by the amount of research we have done before we sit down to talk with them. We try and find out as much about their careers before meeting with them, and more than once people have asked, “How did you know about that?”

News about your forthcoming book, Making Space for Women, is very exciting. What aspect of the history of women at NASA do you find most compelling?

Thanks! It will be great to see the manuscript in print.

During the sixties NASA had a reputation, among feminists at least, for being hostile to women. But many female employees insist that they didn’t face any discrimination. Some of the secretaries working for the Space Center described their offices as an extended family and that all were united behind a single cause, to land a man on the Moon by the end of the decade. One described how astronaut Alan Shepard looked out for her and insisted she could not visit the Cape—a rowdy place with lots of drinking and womanizing—until she turned 21.

What lessons did you learn in providing historical support to filmmakers as they shot and edited the recently released motion picture, First Man?

Our office’s involvement began well before filming started. Screenwriter Josh Singer visited our office to talk about the script and the sources he needed about Neil A. Armstrong, Apollo 11, and crew training. I dug into the archives to find the materials he sought. Once the film moved into production, I regularly received requests, sometimes daily. More often than not researchers and other staff needed answers that day. The demands of the Apollo anniversary, not just First Man, emphasized the need for our office to create and follow a reference request policy. Our office provides reference support for the public, but our office is small—there are only three of us, and we also have other tasks that require our attention.

How does the history of space research and exploration inform the study of the history of the federal government?

For years space travel and research has been solely financed and managed by the federal government, and historians and policy experts have mined presidential and congressional collections to explore how NASA programs reflect their views on the role of government or how and why administrations established certain programs and scrapped others. President Lyndon B. Johnson, for instance, saw the Apollo Program as an extension of his Great Society Programs. A southerner, he believed that federal dollars could help the South rise out of poverty. The decision over whether or not to build the Space Shuttle, which flew from 1981 to 2011, involved numerous players and sometimes heated debates between NASA, the Nixon Administration, Congress, the Department of Defense, and the Office of Management and Budget. To put it simply, NASA reflects federal decisions on a smaller scale.

Finally, what is your favorite aspect of your duties?

I like the variety in my job, so it’s hard to pick just one. I’d say I have two: research and oral history interviews. I love combing the archives to track down answers to difficult questions. One of my favorite research projects involved a request from the Inspector General’s Office to find information about a camera Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell attempted to sell in 2011. NASA filed a lawsuit against Mitchell, stating that the item was not his personal property; instead, the item belonged to the space agency. To build the case, the Assistant United States Attorney asked for documents relating the transfer of artifacts (flight hardware) from the Apollo 14 mission to that flight crew or any other Apollo astronauts who flew. I also enjoy capturing people’s stories and having a fuller appreciation of NASA’s history. I’ve interviewed many members of the 1978 Space Shuttle class of astronauts, and it’s interesting to hear their different recollections of the early program.

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