

Y-12's Moon Box – a big hit in Texas

On Monday, March 12, 2012, one of Y-12's prize historical artifacts, the Y-12 History Center's Moon Box (Apollo Lunar Sample Return Container), made in 1969 for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Apollo Program moon landings was carefully removed from its display case. The box was opened and the contents selected that would enhance its display at *the Nuclear and Emerging Technologies for Space* conference held in The Woodlands, Texas.

The aluminum box was closed, sealed and stuffed inside a nondescript black piece of carry-on luggage. Some padding was added to ensure the special artifact would not rub against anything that would mar its shiny finish.



Then off it went to Texas. In planning this trip, I first considered shipping the Moon Box, but I did not want to let it out of sight of a responsible individual. So, we discussed the possibility of just carrying it through airport security and treating it as carry-on luggage. Eventually, after talking with airport security at McGee Tyson, it was decided to place the Moon Box inside standard carry-on luggage. They agreed to inspect it through security and asked that it be there 30 minutes early.

The Moon Box made the trip just fine, and even though the routine scanning caused the operators to do a double take at the size of a metal object in the bag, evidently the x-rays penetrated the aluminum just fine and it was not even necessary to open the box. Both airport security checkpoints were navigated with little to no delay.

This conference was held in conjunction with the 43rd *Lunar and Planetary Science Conference* where it was widely recognized that nuclear power has been an enabling technology for historic missions in the past and will be the most likely candidate for powering future missions. Of course, Y-12 has been involved with NASA dating back to the Gemini and Apollo missions.

The Moon Box accompanied two speakers to the conference, Y-12's John Creasy and Bill Rogerson. The purpose was to lend visual support and tangible evidence of Y-12's machining capability as well as to emphasize that Y-12 has a long-standing working relationship with NASA on space missions.

At the conference, John Creasy noted, "The attendees were impressed with the box and handled the sample collection equipment we brought along as well. It was a strange sight witnessing a 50-year old moon box being displayed next to equipment that is scheduled to fly into orbit 30 years from now! The technology may change, but the dream of space flight stays the same."

In addition to the conference appearance, the Moon Box was also displayed at a presentation to a local American Nuclear Society meeting at Texas A&M University where Y-12's past and future missions, including the space program, were featured. John said, "The students were very interested in our talk and many stayed afterward to take a closer look at the pinnacle of 1960s technology that sat before them. Several even took the opportunity to open and close the latches while I asked them to picture doing so with extremely thick gloves on while on the moon and a quarter million miles from home."

The Moon Box returned safely on Monday, March 26, 2012, after a week gone from its display case. It was good to see it back on display, but it was even better to realize that this piece of history continues to serve us well as a symbol of Y-12's "Can Do" attitude and that folks like John and Bill put faces to Y-12's capabilities and saw the value of using one of our most unusual visual props.

Of course, this is not the first time Y-12's Moon Box has travelled. It went to a school last year, to a conference in Knoxville and even to a funeral for someone who worked on fabrication of the Moon Box. The man's son wanted to display the Moon Box at his father's funeral.

You might wonder about that request for the Moon Box to be put on display at a funeral, but it is not that unusual to me. Y-12 workers take pride in their jobs and often find themselves doing things that may not be easily conveyed through the spoken word and sometimes are not even something that can be talked about. The Moon Box was something that the workers could tell their families about, and NASA Apollo Program events on TV explained that Y-12 "built the Moon Boxes" taken on each flight.

When Apollo 11 landed in the Sea of Tranquility on the Moon, Paul Wilkinson was called to New York City to be a guest on the national television networks and to explain about the "Moon Box" made in Oak Ridge. He was proud of that, but he downplayed the trip when he shared the story with me. He preferred to talk about the workers who made the boxes than about the media blitz when it was first used.

I am glad that John and Bill realized the value of sharing the Moon Box, an amazing part of both Y-12 and United States history, with the people at the convention and Texas A&M. They both indicated that it was a great touch, and they were glad to be able to show it to so many people.