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Oral history interview with Paul G Dembling  
[full name of interviewee]

about MSC site selection, public relations,  
[main focus of interview]

Congressional relations, Astronaut activities  
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**Biographical** - [date/place of birth; family background] \_\_\_\_\_

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**Education** - \_\_\_\_\_

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**Career Path** - \_\_\_\_\_

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**Topics** - Gilruth's hand-picked STG; site selection Criteria; John Parsons as site survey team head; site survey team plan; ~~some~~ taken visits for political reasons; pressure from Congressional leaders; <sup>NASA (Webb)</sup> decision to use Corps of Engineers; NASA-Congress relationships; issue of incremental appropriations; flap over expensive flagpole; <sup>press</sup> public scrutiny of government spending; official policy on astronaut outside activity; astronaut association with JFK Kennedy family; Astronaut Life magazine Contract; Astronaut of the Week program; Astronauts <sup>to report</sup> appearances/whereabouts; Apollo Review Board; Apollo fire documents; controversy over "Phillips Report."

## Interview with Paul G. Dembling

9-25-69

The STG at Langley was formed because of Gilruth's position and interest in work that he had done prior to its formation. He had been in charge of the Pilotless Aircraft Division which also used Wallops as its launching site. He was a logical man to move into that area. Gilruth was and is a pretty positive man and made sure that he had the people he wanted, so he brought in from Langley the people that he wanted. It was sort of a pick-and-choose type of thing. They were picked throughout the organization, but the place from which they came was Langley with their aerodynamic background, and the pilotless aircraft and rockets background.

I recall that there were committee meetings here in NASA Headquarters to establish criteria for the location of the Center. Some 10 or 14 points were finally developed after much discussion, and my feeling was that we ought to write them down and that they ought to be available to everyone to see and understand. After much discussion, I actually wrote the three-page paper that summarized the criteria for the site selection survey team which would be the basis upon which a site would be selected. There were additional inputs and finally a meeting with Mr. Webb was held, after which I wrote those three pages that were mimeographed and sent out to everybody so everybody could see what we were looking for.

Question: In these meetings that were held when this memo emerged, to what extent was STG represented and who was there from STG? Answer:



I remember that Gilruth was involved in some of those meetings, and Abe Silverstein was involved in some. I believe Wes Hjernevik was involved--he later became a member of the site selection team. Somebody may have even kept records of those meetings. You might check with Miss Scribner, Mr. Webb's secretary, to see whether she kept any records of the meetings or whether the Executive Secretariat up here kept records of the meetings, or whether the Facilities people did. I know Ralph Ulmer was heavily involved at the time and he too may have had some records of the meetings. Once the criteria were established we made it known to everyone. I recall that there were hundreds of brochures sent in from cities around the country. In response to a lot of them we merely sent out the criteria and said, "Look, you people, you don't appear to meet the criteria."

A site selection team was established. John Parsons who was an associate director or deputy director of Ames, Wes Hjernevik was in on this committee, Philip Miller was out of Goddard and was on the committee.

Question: Why was Parsons chosen to head the site survey team?

Answer: We were looking for a man who was not involved. Someone who had stature in the agency, a man who'd been involved in other site selection surveys (and he had been in several of them as I recall, one of them being when there was the Unitary wind-tunnel plan), a mature, balanced man with good judgment who had had years of experience and knew the agency, who had not been involved in a sort of daily ongoing



relationship with STG so he could be objective. He didn't have any prejudices for or against. He was a logical man. He was one who could represent the Agency also in terms of meeting and talking to mayors and community representatives and that sort of thing.

The Site Survey team laid out a plan. They took the map of the U.S. and with the criteria as a general reference, looked for areas that appeared to meet these criteria. The southern and the southwestern portion appeared to meet many of the criteria. They considered areas as far north as Cumberland Island--an island right off Georgia. Boston made a pitch on the basis that they had met the criteria; they had more good weather days during the year, and could move shipments down the coast to Florida as rapidly as any other spot that might appear to be logical. The cold weather they appeared to argue away. There were some discussions with a Boston representative and people from the Boston community. I remember a man by the name of Stevenson who was quite active on behalf of Boston. The group decided that they would start visiting places and they set themselves an itinerary, moving in the areas where it was necessary. Mr. Webb asked me to sort of be the liaison with the Site Survey team. He wanted to be divorced from their daily activities.

He did not want to feel that he had to respond to every pressure group or city or Congressman, or Senator who might call and say, "You have to visit such-and-such city." There were visits made to some cities where it was known that the criteria was not going to be met,

but if the group was five miles away from some city and a Senator or Congressman felt that it was important for them to visit the city, they did; there were some token visits to places that everybody recognized that were really not in the running. To satisfy an important member of Congress or important members of our committees, we did ask the Site Survey team to visit those places.

Usually they would call me in the mornings, tell me where they planned to be that day, then they would call me in the afternoon or late afternoon and tell me what generally happened during the day, where they had been, and what they had done. If I had any instructions for them as to what statements should be made about such-and-such areas when moving into another area, I would usually relay comments to them in the afternoon conversation, and then they'd be gone by the next day. I used to kid John Parsons afterwards because he said that he gained something like 10 to 15 pounds on this survey and he didn't sleep much. He was constantly harangued by telephone calls even when he went into a strange city; everybody wanted to take him out to dinner; television stations wanted him to appear on television and radio. He said it was just a mad hectic life. Later on, when there was thought of other Centers being established, we used to kid Parsons about being the man with experience, and he said once was enough.

Question: To what degree was Albert Thomas a help or a hindrance in this selection?

Answer: That was one of the reasons that Webb didn't want to know where they were and what they were doing on a daily basis. Periodically I give him a report which summarized cities visited during the past week, what information, brochures, etc. and pretty much along that line, rather than to tell him where they were going. He had lots of representation from various Senators. Senator Russell was interested in seeing that Georgia was considered, particularly this island off the coast of Georgia. Thomas was chairman of our appropriations subcommittee. I know there were many conversations between Webb and Thomas as there were between many leaders on the hill on everything--our program, funds, that kind of thing. After it was decided that the Houston area appeared to be a feasible place because it met a lot of the criteria, then it was a question of what kind of a deal we could arrange to buy land.

The decision to use the Corps of Engineers as our interface with the construction contractors resulted from Webb's conviction that it would be wise to involve them as the Corps was not busy at the time, and they had the expertise in building and acquiring land. I remember Mr. Webb had some discussions with the Chief of Engineers as to how they might be involved. The Engineers' civil works programs had slacked somewhat; they had talent available. Another important consideration was that since they were the experts in the area, we would not bear the brunt of the political problems that might be associated with building the Center. I recall making a statement to Mr. Webb



once when the Corps of Engineers build something for us, it might cost between 10 and 15% more than if we built it ourselves, and he indicated that this was worth every penny, if they could also bear the burden of responding to Congress as to who they chose as contractor, how they did it, and why they did it. In retrospect, it was a wise decision, rather for us to do our own construction.

Question: To what extent have the Centers and the programs been a help in getting the appropriations from Congress? In your work your primary concern is establishing good visibility for the Agency on the hill, is this right?

Answer: It used to be. During this period, right.

Question: I've been told that during this early period, congressmen would approach NASA and say, "What can we do for you?" Were your attempts to get money for the Center and for its programs eased by the success we had with Mercury?

Answer: I think so. I think that it was a period when the prevailing opinion on the hill was, "Why aren't we moving faster?" rather than, "Why are we spending all this money?" Testimony given by the Administrator and Deputy Administrator was to the effect that we have to move in an orderly fashion, that we're not in a race with the Russians. We had to move along in a logical, orderly fashion, and that's the way we moved along. The programs as they succeeded certainly helped the overall relationship with Congress. I recall times when Webb testified, especially after the Russians had had a successful

shot, the question always came up, "Why aren't you moving faster?" But the period was one of generally good relations with the Congress. Everybody became an expert on space on the Hill and that gave us a problem.

Question: One of the suggestions made by the Corps was that NASA abandon its idea of having incremental appropriations and go to Congress and ask for enough money to complete the Center. What was the attitude of people here as to this type of request?

Answer: The attitude was generally that this would be a good idea, if you could get a lump sum authorization for not only the Center, but projects and programs as well. But the Congress was not interested in losing its jurisdiction; they would point out that we didn't have any trouble in getting authorizations and appropriations and in this fashion they were able to keep tabs on us and on the programs. They wanted to know what was going on and would find out by having us appear each year. They could thus check our performance as well as our promises. After MSC was built, the same idea was revived--why not authorize a program in full and then go to the Appropriations Committee and ask for an appropriation sufficient for the duration of the program. This idea seems to go against the grain with them; I think that they feel it is an abdication of their authority.

Question: Every now and then, there is a problem because of somebody's mistake. Such a mistake was made down at the Center by

facilities people, or someone in administration in regard to the flagpole. What degree of a problem did it cause NASA on the Hill?

Answer: I remember the incident. It was blown up all out of proportion. We got a call that a very expensive flagpole was going to be put up at the Center. Evidently a newspaper had picked up the item and it appeared that this was a very expensive flagpole. We got quite a few telephone calls about the flagpole. I didn't believe the cost was what had been claimed by the Congressman or by the newspaper. I called Gilruth's and Paul Purser and asked about it. They said that they had merely seen the flagpole somewhere or had heard about a flagpole somewhere and had asked that it be duplicated, since it looked pretty good. As a result of our conversations, the flagpole was changed and a different one was emplaced. The papers felt we were going first-class, and unnecessarily. Many times Congress or the newspapers will not understand our technical programs and are unable to evaluate whether we are spending too much or too little. But they see a flagpole or something else that is understandable in layman's terms and they can relate to it. For example, an item that cost \$50,000, when they feel we should get it for \$5,000, is much different from a fancy scientific program which reportedly costs \$50,000 but nobody really knows if that is right. They think in terms of the proposition if one is being extravagant in one area, then he must certainly be extravagant in other areas. This is how such a problem comes up. It isn't a flagpole or building itself that's luxurious; it gets related to those things that they don't know anything about. So



if we're spending ten times more than necessary on this thing then we are probably spending ten times more on something else they don't know about. So maybe they should cut our budget the same amount across the board.

One of the problems that kept coming up was what can and what cannot the astronauts do. Headquarters many times felt that an excessively permissive attitude had been taken toward the astronauts' outside activity, their business and financial arrangements, and I recall that finally a memo was written and signed by Dr. Seamans that laid out a policy as to what their involvement was going to be, rather than leave it to the discretion of the Center. The idea was to require Headquarters concurrence on any outside activities. That memo was prepared in the General Counsel's office by Walter <sup>Sohier</sup>~~Sawyer~~ and me. I notice that whenever MSC sends up a request for any outside activity, they always append Seaman's letter as a reference.

Question: Did NASA Headquarters have any embarrassment or feel any heat from the association of the astronauts, specially with the first seven, with the Kennedys--trips that were taken to the Massachusetts summer home, water skiing, etc.?

Answer: I don't know this of my own knowledge, but there was the argument raging as to whether there should or should not be another Mercury flight. The astronauts were quite interested in having an additional Mercury flight. John Glenn was water skiing with the President and Mrs. Kennedy, and supposedly brought this matter up with the President.

The President then allegedly called Mr. Webb. Mr. Webb supposedly asked the President, "Who's running the Agency? If you want to run the Agency, appoint yourself a new administrator," or words to that effect. John Glenn explained to the President, who was quite upset initially as to the astronaut arrangement with Life magazine, what the arrangement was, what the background was, and supposedly the President said this was the first time he understood the philosophy and background of the problem. There were some White House meetings as a result of that conversation Glenn supposedly had with the President, and the White House took a different approach to astronaut involvement in the Life magazine contract. I know John Glenn wrote a letter to Bob Sherrard<sup>o</sup> summarizing the conversations with the President on the subject.

We used to receive many requests for appearances--particularly from congressmen. We had to turn down hundreds, but some had to be honored, and we were obliged to construct a policy to govern such appearances. There are always important congressmen that have to be accommodated, and we worked out what we called the Astronaut of the Week arrangement. I did not work out the arrangement; I urged that it be prepared.

I remember a particularly embarrassing occasion when we had been asked if the astronauts were planning on attending the Indianapolis Independence Day Races. We told the congressional delegation no, only to discover later that three had taken leave and appeared at the races. Congressman Richard L. Roudebush, one of the Republican Representatives and J. Edward Roush, a Democratic Representative, both from Indiana and

members of the House Science and Astronautics Committee had not been advised, and were in the stands when the astronauts were introduced. They were considerably chagrined that they didn't know the astronauts were there, and were livid when they complained that: (1) we had misinformed them in regard to astronaut attendance, and (2) they had been embarrassed because they told everyone the astronauts would not attend. Thereafter we established the rule that whenever astronauts went anywhere, they should let us know--they were going to be noticed--therefore let us know so we could inform the Congressman that they were in his state or district and this alienation wouldn't occur between NASA and Congress. If they were going to be somewhere, at least we could have the advantage of foreknowledge that we could pass on to a Congressman. I was the principal architect of this policy and worked closely with Deke Slayton to make it work.

The Outer Space Treaty was signed at the White House, London, and Moscow, the day of the Apollo fire at the Cape. The ceremony at the White House, attended by Webb and some of the Center Directors, went to the International Club where a dinner had been arranged. There word came of the fire. By the next morning the senior management staff in Headquarters came to work and some appointments had been made to the Apollo Review Board, and I was asked to review the list by Dr. Seamans. I felt that it was inappropriate to have an NA-R employee on the Board, from a legal investigative standpoint, and that the Board should have access to legal counsel. Since Floyd Thompson was to be Chairman of



the Review Board, I felt George Malley, Langley's Legal Counsel, would make an excellent appointment first, from the standpoint of his excellent relationship with Thompson, and secondly, that it should not be from one of the MSF centers. Seaman concurred and the NA-R representative became a consultant to the Board rather than a member and Malley became its counsel. The Board was made up of only government employees.

Mr. Webb felt that all documents pertaining to the fire should be ready, should it be required; it was used to respond to congressional inquiry and newspaper report.

General Frank Bogart was asked by the GAO for a copy of the so-called Phillips Report during an audit of MSF. Bogart felt it was sensitive information and called to ask me to determine if it could be released and, if not, what type of response should be made. He brought it over, and I had it on my desk. That evening we held a farewell dinner at the office for Walt <sup>Sohier</sup> ~~Sawyer~~. Webb and Mueller joined the party after testifying on the Hill. During the dinner, I asked Webb how the testimony had gone and he said he had been asked about a so-called Phillips Report by Senator Mondale and Mueller had told him there was no such report--only a series of notes compiled by the so-called Tiger Teams under General Phillips. Mueller had so testified and based on what Mueller had told him, Webb so testified. I told Webb and Mueller that the report was on my desk and recounted my conversation with Bogart. Mueller again insisted that the report did not exist. I insisted that there were notes but on top of the notes was a summary clearly marked as

a report. Webb asked me to get the copy. I did and Webb agreed that it was labeled a report, and knowing how the military tended to view such documents, probably thought of it as notes. Mueller got Phillips on the phone and had a long conversation with him, and it was discovered as a result of that conversation that many copies of the report were around in the Agency and at NA-R. Webb felt Mondale had a copy at the hearing when asking about it. So this was the first time Mueller and Webb had seen the Phillips Report.