

APOLLO Poppy Northcutt WSJ 071419

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-the-moon-landing-shaped-four-americans-lives->

## Reach for the Moon: Four Lives, the Space Race and a Chaotic Decade

### ....Math opens a path

...Poppy Northcutt was carrying printouts filled with chunks of computer code home from her job at a NASA contractor in Houston.

“I would reverse-engineer them,” Ms. Northcutt says, “and if there was something I didn’t understand, I would have a list of questions the next day.”

She was a computress, the title TRW Systems gave to women who worked with data. It was an hourly job, and the law kept her from making as much as the men who did the same work. Employers could legally pay women for only 54 hours each week.

“ ‘You know, we can’t pay you for that,’ ” her boss would tell her when she exceeded that limit, Ms. Northcutt said, but she felt she had to work 60 to 70 hours a week if she wanted to win a promotion and feel fully part of the team.



Ms. Northcutt grew up in small Texas towns. Her father worked on pipelines, and her mother stayed home. When she graduated from Dayton High School, she wasn’t sure what she wanted to be, just what she didn’t: a wife, nurse, teacher or secretary.

She decided to study mathematics at the University of Texas because she was good at it and because it was a male-dominated field, which equaled more opportunity and pay.

Ms. Northcutt was smart and beautiful and enjoyed being both. The women’s rights movement wasn’t on her radar. She felt

honored to be named a finalist in the university’s 10 most beautiful women contest.

After about 15 months at TRW, she earned a salaried engineering job. The only woman on her team, she would later discover that at one point, a camera was focused on her and she was being ogled in real time on the screens in the consoles at the Manned Spacecraft Center, later named the Johnson Space Center.

Ms. Northcutt and her colleagues designed the trajectory to bring Apollo 8, the first manned spacecraft to orbit the moon, back to Earth....On Christmas Eve 1968, she sat in Mission Control, the first and only female engineer in the room. Reporters wanted to

interview the tall blonde in the headset. She was described as the “beautiful star that guided” astronauts home.

The notoriety raised her standing. It also made her uncomfortable.

“How much attention do men in Mission Control pay to a pretty girl wearing miniskirts?” Jules Bergman of ABC asked her.

She appeared in a national magazine ad with the headline, “TRW’s Poppy Northcutt keeps bringing astronauts home.”



Poppy Northcutt was the first female engineer in Mission Control. PHOTO: TRW/PHOTOQUEST/GETTY IMAGES

“My father remarked that the only thing that would make him prouder,” she says, “was to read the announcement of my engagement in the local newspaper.”

...where are they now: A year after the lunar landing, Poppy Northcutt joined the first Women’s Strike for Equality. “I was very visible because of the press attention,” she says. “I felt like I could speak out in a way other women didn’t feel comfortable doing.”

She became a leader in the National Organization for Women and was named Houston’s first Women’s Advocate, pushing for more female police officers and firefighters. She went to law school.

Ms. Northcutt, 75 and never married, describes herself on Facebook as a “one-time rocket scientist, sometime lawyer, full-time feminist activist.” She later posted that she already knew what a happiness expert quoted in the Guardian stated: ***unmarried childless women are the happiest population cohort.***