William Heink

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ill Heink grew up in California and has lived in Florida since 1964, but he feels his roots are really in Wyoming.

He came to the Cowboy State in 1958 because his father, who worked in logistics with Convair, was transferred to Cheyenne to work on the Atlas Missel activation. He asked me to come along and go to UW,” Heink says. “It turned out to be the best decision I ever made because I met my wife there.”

That wasn’t the only reason it was a great decision; Heink loved his UW experience. “What I thought made UW a great place to grow up, like all my life,” having had the same small town, small school feel as my hometown of Saratoga,” Heink says. “Classes were small; people knew each other. You were more than just a number on a chart. You had the feeling the University cared about you. I was probably a fairly immature kid who had a propensity for being a smart mouth, but the professors took me under their wing and I got a great education.”

He’s pleased to note that things have not changed much in the years since. His oldest daughter came to UW to study special education, graduating in 1990. “The atmosphere and people and feeling is still the same, even though it’s grown bigger,” he says.

His fond memories of his college years include one particular spring afternoon football game, when it was snowing so hard he and his friends couldn’t see across the field, but they stayed nevertheless. “We figured if they were playing, we’d be there,” he says. He also recalls being in the engineering building the day the brand new petroleum lab blew up, blowing glass all over. “It made a very big noise,” Heink reports.

Heink grew up in the aerospace industry, but his decision to study engineering was not due to his father’s inspiration. “Quite the opposite,” he says. “He was not, an engineer, and he often, spoke in very derogatory terms about engineers. It was always, ‘You can’t believe what those engineers want me to do now.’” Nevertheless, both his parents were extremely supportive of his decision to pursue an engineering career, and Heink had no doubts himself. “I had a natural interest in the technical and especially electrical,” he says, which “expressed itself in the young Heink in the form of household experiments. ‘I wonder how I managed never to burn the house down,’ he says.

After graduation, Convair offered Heink a job that took him to Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, the west coast rocket launch base still used today. In the working world, he discovered that UW’s small-school feel had come alongside an excellent education.

“In all honesty, one of the things that pleased and surprised me in dealing with people from other, bigger schools, was that my education in engineering was probably stronger than theirs.”

It was at Vandenberg that he launched a one space shuttle each month for the next year, taking hard-ware up the new space station which will eventually be the brightest star in the sky but they’ll be doing it without Heink, who retired in August. “We’ve got a list of things to do and places to go, and eight grandkids to keep us busy,” he says.

“My strongest recollection is surprisingly not Apollo 11, the first one we landed on the moon, but Apollo 8, a lunar orbiting mission and certain engine “instability” move NASA ever made,” Heink says. It was the third launch of Saturn V, and the first one with people. “The Russians were breathing down our necks. NASA decided to take a three-man crew and fly them to the moon.”

The tradition is that once the Kennedy Space Center launch is completed, the responsibility for the mission gets turned over to Houston. “For the launch team, it’s party time.” Heink was on his way to the party, but stuck in a traffic jam.

“It was a beautiful morning,” he says. “You could look up directly overhead and see the moon. I was listening to the car radio talking about the mission when the astronauts, orbiting over Hawaii, said, ‘We’re going to take these kids on the moon, it’s going to be great! And I got to see them on the moon! Tears ran down my face. ManKind had never done anything like that before.”

Now, more than 30 years later, Heink still gets choked up speaking of it.

At working his way through a series of engineering management positions, Heink eventually found himself in charge of the Boeing Space Shuttle operation at the Kennedy Space Center when he was appointed Site Director of Florida Operations in 1998.

“It seemed to be a natural culmination of a lifetime career in the rocket-launching business, and the job was truly a dream come true because of all the outstanding people I had working on my team,” he says.

Somehow, Heink has found time for many other pursuits away from the launch pads, such as being a part of the National Management Association for years, and serving as national chairman of its board in 1995. He’s Distinguished Alumnus Alumnus 2000

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