How did you experience Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon?

It was about 9:30 on Wednesday morning July 16, 1969 when Apollo 11 blasted off from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida on its way to the moon. Aboard were Neil Armstrong, “Buzz” Aldrin and Michael Collins. It took four days to get to the moon and get in position for Armstrong and Aldrin to leave the Columbia mothership and begin the descent to the surface in the lunar lander named Eagle.

I was a 16-year-old boy working for the summer as a caddy at Arcola Country Club. I was most likely out on the golf course when Apollo 11 launched. In any case, I don’t remember the launch. But as a longtime space travel aficionado (I kept a scrap book of newspaper coverage of all the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo missions) I was glued to our black and white Zenith television each evening from Wednesday through Friday and then through the entire July 19-20 weekend.

On Sunday morning, July 20, 1969 the two astronauts made the descent to the surface of the moon while Collins remained on the Columbia mothership circling the moon. That afternoon we all held our breath as the Eagle descended toward the lunar landing site. It was moving very fast and I remember thinking that it was not beyond the realm of possibility that it could crash. We were not used to seeing a spacecraft land on land. All the previous missions had landed in the ocean. So there was more than a little anxiety in watching this first landing on a hard surface.

But at around 4:00 on that Sunday afternoon, the Eagle landed safely on the moon and we all could breathe again. Since we had been watching for hours, it was time to take a break for dinner because we knew that the astronauts were not scheduled to open the hatch and go out on the moon for several hours.

Walter Cronkite was heading the CBS coverage of the Apollo 11 mission and he was Mr. Spacetravel. You could see and hear the excitement on his face and in his voice as he gave us the play-by-play on the mission. And when Neil Armstrong’s voice from the surface of the moon informed us “The Eagle has landed,” he visibly breathed a sigh of relief on live television with the rest of us.

We took a rest from the television for a few hours as the astronauts reported to mission control in Houston on the landing and prepared for the planned walk on the moon. It was not until 10:30 that night that the Eagle’s hatch was opened. And it was just before 11:00 when Neil Armstrong climbed down the ladder of the Eagle onto the surface of the moon. We watched as a ghost-like image of Armstrong said “That’s one small step for {static} man, one giant leap for mankind.”

There was a profound feeling of accomplishment in the country. President Kennedy had committed the country to “put a man on the moon in this decade” and we had done it with five months to spare. For several years the Vietnam War had split the country. That night we were united in our pride as we watched Neil Armstrong place an American flag on the surface of the moon.

“Buzz” Aldrin soon joined Armstrong on the moon, and we watched as the two took turns operating the video camera that allowed us to see live pictures from the moon. And just to reinforce that amazing fact in our minds, CBS flashed the wording “Man on the moon” across the bottom of the screen.

Eventually the astronauts placed the camera on a tripod so that both could get in the picture. We watched as the astronauts scooped up soil from the moon and placed it in pouches. Montclair, N.J. native “Buzz” Aldrin described the scene as “magnificent desolation.” Both astronauts seemed to enjoy the reduced gravity on the moon and found they could leap long distances even in their bulky space suits.

Next, the astronauts took a phone call from President Nixon, calling from the Oval Office to congratulate them. Nixon called it “the most historic telephone call ever made from the White House.” Incidentally, I saw the telephone Nixon used when I visited the Nixon Library in California. Armstrong made a point of telling the President that he was on the moon “representing not only the United States, but men of peace of all nations.”

The astronauts spent almost 24 hours on the moon and the next afternoon the Eagle blasted off from the moon and reunited with the Columbia mothership and its captain, Michael Collins. There would be four more missions to the moon between 1969 and 1972, and then no more for more than half a century. Americans lost interest in the space program after Apollo 11 achieved the goal that President Kennedy had set. I hope that we get back to manned missions to the moon and the planets. It’s good for a country to have lofty goals and then meet them. Everyone, regardless of politics, shares in the pride of accomplishment.

As I sat on the living room floor those nights in 1969, I was filled with teenage optimism for the future of the country. We had just seen the movie “2001: A Space Odyssey” the summer before. That film’s look into the future seemed realistic after Apollo 11. I actually thought that travel to the moon would become routine in my lifetime. I think that most people my age are sad that the promise of “a honeymoon on the moon” was never realized. But in July 1969, as we looked up at the moon and knew that Americans were there, everything seemed possible.