

NEWS

How a Louisville man eavesdropped on Neil Armstrong's historic Apollo 11 moon landing

Laurel Deppen Courier Journal

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On July 20, 1969, while America gathered around fuzzy, black-and-white televisions to watch the first moon landing, Larry Baysinger was listening in to the astronauts' radio chatter in a Louisville bedroom he had converted into a radio lab.

Using an old Army radio receiver and an antenna he had fashioned from aluminum, nylon and chicken wire, Baysinger successfully eavesdropped on Apollo 11 crew members Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin.

His lunar "experiment" would become what Baysinger remembers 50 years later as his "15 minutes of fame."

Baysinger, a broadcast engineer and ham radio enthusiast, befriended then-Courier Journal reporter Glenn Rutherford. The pair bonded over a shared interest in space.

When they learned NASA was preparing for manned space flights to the moon, an idea struck Baysinger.

"We decided, 'Hey, that would be something nifty to listen in to, if possible,'" Baysinger said. "'I wonder if we could do that.'"

If they were going to listen in on something, Apollo 11 was the "landmark occasion," Baysinger said.

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Larry Baysinger looks over the antenna he designed and built in his backyard to receive voice communications from the Apollo astronauts during their walk on the lunar surface of the moon. Photo by Jay Thomas, The Courier-Journal. July 21, 1969
Photo By Jay Thomas, The Courier-Journal

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Hearing it 'from the horse's mouth'



Larry Baysinger sat next to shortwave monitoring radios in his home office. Baysinger is an ex-military radio operator who modified radio equipment to eavesdrop on communications during the first moon landing. July 18, 2019 *Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal*

The possibility of hearing something historic from the moon landing that wouldn't be broadcast to the masses piqued Baysinger's interest.

"By golly, let's see if we can hear it from the horse's mouth, and we proved once and for all that this is really where it's coming from and what it is," Baysinger recalled. "That led to this whole endeavor."

He spent a great deal of time and effort designing and building what eventually would become an 8-foot-by-8-foot-by-8-foot triangular-shaped antenna centered in his backyard. He could tilt it up and down and side to side to angle it at the moon, a quarter of a million miles away.

To test the system before the moon landing, Baysinger received test transmissions some ham radio operators were making.

"Moon bounce," Baysinger called them. "You would send a signal up to the moon, bounce it off of the moon, and receive it when it came back, and you could be reasonably sure that's what you were receiving because of the delay between the outgoing and the incoming signals."

Baysinger said it was fortunate that ham radio publications at the time produced information on how to listen in, including the frequencies of the astronaut's backpack radios.

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'There was Neil Armstrong's voice'

The day of the moon landing, Baysinger and Rutherford crowded into his bedroom-turned-control-room while his wife and daughter watched the event on the living room's television down the hall.

He was "constantly" worried the project wouldn't work, he said with a laugh.

"I'm a ham," Baysinger said. "We're used to failure. ... You do with what you got, and you make it work — even in spite of the fact that it's not supposed to."

As the moon moved, the pair had to move the antenna so they wouldn't lose the signal.

At one point, Baysinger and Rutherford left the antenna and went into another room, thinking Baysinger's dream wouldn't come true.

Then Rutherford went back into the control room — and heard something on the radio. He called Baysinger in, telling him he thought he heard something.

"And, lo and behold, there was Neil Armstrong's voice," Rutherford [told the BBC](#).

The signal wasn't of high quality, but it worked, Baysinger said.

"We could hear the television coming down the hall, and our first realization that we were actually hearing what was going on is when we heard it coming back off the TV down the hall, and it was the same thing we had just heard a few seconds ago," Baysinger said.



Larry Baysinger looks over the antenna he designed and built in his backyard to receive voice communications from the Apollo astronauts during their walk on the lunar surface of the moon. Photo by Jay Thomas, The Courier-Journal. July 21, 1969
Photo By Jay Thomas, The Courier-Journal

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Larry Baysinger's recording of the Apollo 1...

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Baysinger and Rutherford took steps to make sure what they were hearing was actually coming from the moon and not just a signal from the television broadcast.

The pair moved the antenna several times to ensure its accuracy.

All told, Baysinger recorded about 35 minutes of conversation between the Apollo 11 astronauts.

The recording only included the communication between the astronauts, without the responses from NASA. This demonstrated that the signals Baysinger picked up were from the astronauts themselves and not from NASA's broadcast, he said.

What he heard was Armstrong and Aldrin talking to each other on the moon's surface, captured on the recording.

The two astronauts were discussing the moon's visibility and condition of the soil when Armstrong and Aldrin had a brief interruption.

"Uh, Buzz, you're on the cable," Armstrong said, as a nation, and Baysinger, listened.

Afterward, Baysinger and Rutherford "didn't keep a secret" about their eavesdropping, Baysinger said.

Rutherford documented his experience listening to the moon landing with Baysinger for the Courier Journal in an [article](#) titled "Lunar Eavesdropping."

The far side of the moon: [What is it, why we might grow potatoes there](#)

'Gosh, we did it. ... It worked'



Radio operator Larry Baysinger eavesdropped on Apollo 11 moon landing

Radio operator Larry Baysinger, of Louisville, eavesdropped on the first moon landing on July 20, 1969. *Sam Upshaw*
Ir. Louisville Courier Journal

Baysinger's feat faded into the background of history until Chris Graney, a professor of physics and astronomy at Jefferson Community and Technical College, happened to have a conversation with Rutherford.

In 2009, Rutherford was working as an assistant editor of the Record, a Catholic newspaper for the Central Kentucky area. He interviewed Graney about his research of history and astronomy at JCTC.

As the men spoke, Graney said their conversation shifted into a discussion of unusual science in Louisville. Rutherford brought up Baysinger's moon landing radio project.

Graney's interest was piqued, though at first he said he was skeptical because he'd never heard of it. He said he asked Rutherford if the story had been published in the Courier Journal.

Immediately, Graney found himself in the University of Louisville library looking through microfilm to find the article.

Graney, who said he always had an interest in the history of astronomy, took time to learn more. What he learned from exchanging phone calls and emails with Baysinger and Rutherford was published in 2010 in an [article](#) for the National Association of Amateur Radio.

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Copy photo of a room called a "ham radio shack" by Larry Baysinger. Baysinger is an ex-military radio operator who modified radio equipment to eavesdrop on communications during the first moon landing. July 18, 2019 Photo Courtesy Of Larry Baysinger

Graney has tried to find records of other Apollo 11 eavesdropping projects

other than Baysinger's in the years since. He hasn't found any.

Though Graney suspects there were probably other Apollo 11 projects like "Lunar Eavesdropping," he said Baysinger's was the only one recorded with an article and the original audio digitized and shared.

What Baysinger was able to accomplish was a scientific achievement because the project served as an independent verification of the Apollo mission, a "big deal" in science, Graney said.

Some still question whether what Baysinger and Rutherford picked up 50 years ago was from the moon. Graney, who had been in touch with ham radio operators who tested the validity of Baysinger's project, said it was just barely doable.

"If you listen carefully, the audio is not exactly the same as what's coming from NASA," Graney said. "I think you don't hear the ground control because you're hearing the backpack-to-backpack communications."

And he did it all in Louisville.

"That's kind of a unique science thing and done by ... an average Joe right, not someone with a big budget or a contract from the government or something like that," Graney said. "Just a guy who wanted to do kind of a science thing and who wanted to make sure we were getting the full story."

Fifty years later, Baysinger looks back on his Apollo 11 experiment with "jubilation."

"Gosh, we did it," Baysinger said. "... It worked."

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