



In Faison, the round town on the hill, just about everybody remembers the native son who's about to go into space

Staff photos by Harry Lynch

Faison's pride goes into orbit as native prepares for launch



By **MELANIE SILL**
Staff Writer

FAISON — It's a town a boy could call home, where narrow streets whisper of long summers and after-school adventures and where everyone is a cousin or friend.

On a hot, hot August day, Margaret Martin cranked the awning lower in front of the Faison Pharmacy on Main Street. The "round town on the hill," as town clerk Hazel Kelly calls it, baked under the midday sun. Two boys skidded their bikes to a halt on the sidewalk and ran into the drugstore for ice cream.

William E. Thornton Jr. grew up here in the hard years of the Great Depression and World War II. In a tall white house on the edge of town, he built model airplanes and dreams of flight. Now the house is closed and silent, the grass grown tall and wild, and Thornton — North Carolina's first astronaut — is preparing for his Aug. 30 flight on the space shuttle Challenger.

"We're just so proud of William we don't know what to do," said Jane Faison, a retired teacher who went to school with Thornton.

The whole country will know his name by the time the four-day shuttle flight is over. Thornton, a doctor and medical researcher, will be studying space adaptation syndrome, or "space sickness," a problem that affects, to different degrees, two out of every three astronauts. The 54-year-old astronaut also has gained attention because he will be the oldest American to fly on a space mission.

But even the most avid shuttle followers won't know Thornton the way Faison does. Locals can conjure the memory of the tall boy who jumped out a schoolroom window once when a bunch of girls tried to kiss him, or the teenager who helped support his mother by opening a radio and TV repair shop after his father died.

These recollections of Thornton are part of the folklore of a town whose population of 636 is swelled each summer by one of the Southeast's biggest produce markets. Faison, also proud to claim Cates Pickle Co. as its own, boasts of its home-grown astronaut like a parent

whose child made the honor roll.

Mayor N.F. McColman proclaimed the week of the shuttle launch "William Thornton Week." Banners will hang over Main Street and U.S. 117, which cross in the middle of town.

The real celebration, though, will come later — partly because the town wants Thornton to be there for the hoopla and partly because up to 50 Faison residents will be craning their necks right at the Cape Canaveral launch site to see their friend's takeoff.

"We'll have a pretty good contingent," said Faison postmaster Luther E. Taylor Jr., Thornton's childhood co-inventor and builder.

As Hazel Kelly said, Faison IS is a round town. Its limits form a circle with a one-mile radius from a railroad crossing in the middle of town. Small frame houses give way to newer brick homes on the edge of town. A few older homes rise above their neighbors as if to get a better look at the place. And nearly every inhabitant, Taylor said, remembers Thornton.

They didn't whirl any cats in late-night graveyards, but Taylor and Thornton were as inseparable as Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer during childhood years when everybody was poor and the best fun was found in inventing things. Taylor got some attention of his own by flying hot-air balloons a few years ago and likes to take to the sky in his ultralight airplane "and shake this town up a little." But he enjoys the quiet life of Faison and memories of his childhood buddy who became an astronaut.

"One of the maddest times I ever got at William Thornton was when I built a boat out of these three great big washtubs," Taylor said. The boat was joined with a crosspiece, and when it was finished, he set out with Thornton and three other boys to test it in the frog pond in front of Taylor's house.

"Well, we got down there and William got first try in the boat," Taylor said. "He got in there and dove down in his pocket, pulled out a piece of paper and spread it out in front of him, and said that he MUST chart the frog pond before we could be safe to go out.



Luther Taylor: good contingent



Jane Faison: so proud

"We screamed and we hollered and we threw sticks, and we could not make that fellow come out until he had charted the frog pond. That was just how William was."

Thornton invented many things, but Taylor added his share, including a homemade diving helmet fashioned out of an old water heater, a piece of Plexiglas and a hose. Taylor finished the helmet in February when both boys were 17.

"I lived on a lake, and so William came out and took off his clothes on the dock and put that helmet on to test it," Taylor said. "There had been ice on the lake a

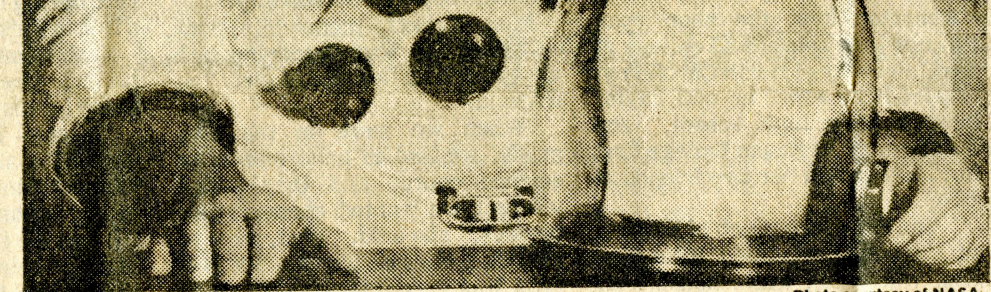
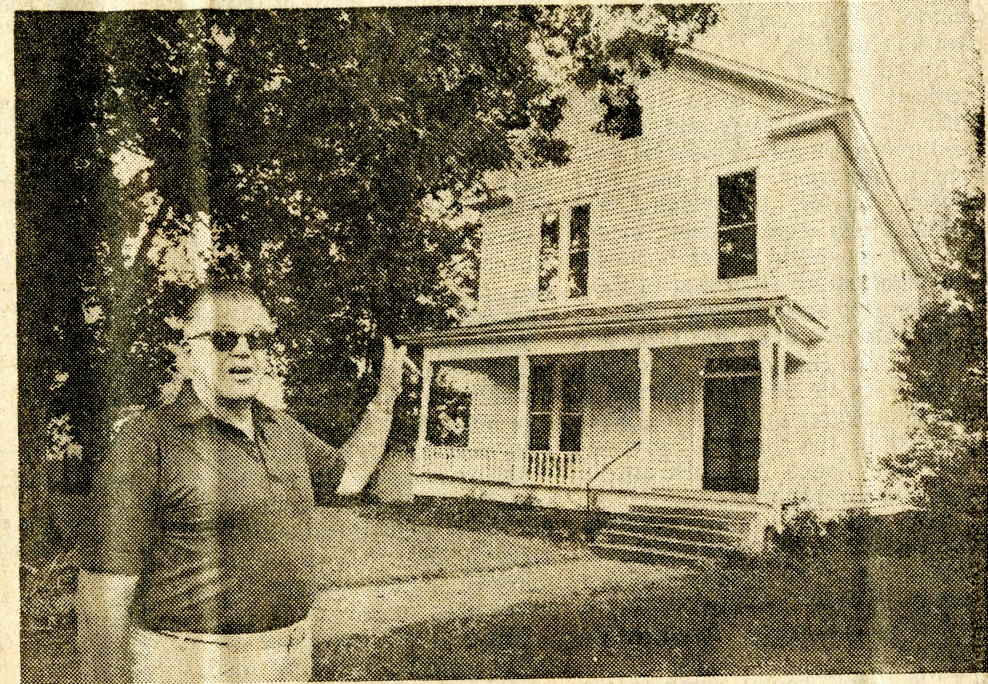


Photo courtesy of NASA

Astronaut William E. Thornton Jr.: the pride of Faison, population 636



Esthal King points to Thornton house, where many inventions were made

few days before, and that rascal went right on in. It worked!"

Taylor and Thornton gathered bamboo reeds to build a plane bigger than the models they both loved, but they never got around to building a big enough engine. Another adventure came with a spark-gap transmitter Thornton designed with spark plugs, a Model T spark coil, a battery and an antenna wire.

"He set up a spark-gap transmitter at his house, and I set up one in the chicken house behind my house, and we communicated at night with our spark-gap transmitters," Taylor said. The boys

turned on portable radios to pick up the coded signals, which interrupted regular radio and TV transmission.

"Well, this didn't last very long because my grandmother, who lived with us, figured out what was messing up the TV," Taylor said with a laugh. "I came home one day and my little radio station was torn down."

Thornton was 11 years old when his father died. A few years later, he opened a radio and TV repair shop in a little building on Main Street. Friends liked to stop

Faison folks proud of the frog-pond explorer

Continued from page 1C

by the shop to swap stories and talk to Thornton while he tinkered over the innards of a radio or television.

Thornton kept the shop open through high school and college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he and Taylor headed after high school. Jane Faison went to Peace College first but later joined her two friends at UNC.

"You didn't see much of William at Carolina," recalled Miss Faison, whose big white house near the Cates Pickle Co. was the site of many birthday parties while she and her friends grew up. "He came home every weekend to work in his shop."

Thornton got a physics degree, trained in the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps and continued in electronics engineering and instrumentation with the Air Force. Taylor, meanwhile, became a high school science teacher and taught in Western North Carolina before returning to Faison for good about 20 years ago.

It was 1967 when the town got word that Thornton — who had gone back to UNC and earned a medical degree in 1963 — had been tapped for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's astronaut program.

J.E. Andrews, a former Faison mayor and Mount Olive College director, said he and Thornton's other former classmates were "tickled and proud" for their old friend.

"It didn't really surprise me

that they chose him (to be an astronaut) because he was one of the smartest guys that I ever knew," Andrews said. "And the last time that I saw him, he hadn't changed from his boyhood personality."

Miss Faison, meanwhile, was delighted for Thornton, who had always been a favorite of girls "as a friend."

"When we were in the 11th grade, we had to have one more science course and they asked whether we wanted chemistry or physics," she said. "Well, most of us didn't want either one, but William was very interested in physics. So the rest of us said all right, if William wants physics, we'll take physics. He practically taught that class."

Years went by, years in which Thornton won awards like the Air Force Legion of Merit, the NASA Exceptional Service Medal and Exceptional Scientific Achievement Medal and an American Astronautical Society honor. He moved to Houston with his wife, Elizabeth Fowler Thornton, and two sons after entering the astronaut program.

Thornton also invented a scale to measure weight during weightless conditions, participated in a 56-day simulation of a Skylab mission, developed a treadmill for in-flight exercise on the shuttle, investigated several questions during Skylab experiments and developed procedures and techniques for other shuttle missions. He registered 35 patents.

But Faison's astronaut stayed on the ground for more than 16 years, except for jet flights in

which he logged more than 2,500 hours.

"William was afraid that he would age out," said Miss Faison, one of several friends Thornton sees during his two or three annual visits to Faison.

Last month, Thornton told reporters he will be primed and ready for his four days in space.

"After — how many years is it now, 17? — and after having made various simulations and being locked up and talking and watching and all the rest, I guess I get tired of being a bridesmaid," he said. "Also I have, I think, an unprecedented opportunity here, as a scientist."

While Faison was talking about Thornton, Thornton was unavail-

able to talk about Faison. A NASA rule keeps astronauts away from reporters in the weeks before a flight.

Thornton's mother, now about 95, lives in a nursing home in Houston. His wife, a native of England whom Thornton met at UNC, and children still live there, too. But the people of Faison feel like family when it comes to Thornton.

"You won't find anything wrong with William Thornton," said Roscoe Cooper, who's been running J.R. Cooper's Grill on Main Street for 50 years. "He's nice all the way through."

Billy Cooper, who lives a few doors down and across the street

from the old Thornton house, has a cache of NASA photographs of Thornton that he guards carefully. And Hazel Kelly keeps a scrapbook of Faison, with three-quarters of a page devoted to Thornton.

To Jane Faison, Thornton is the same boy who teased her in grade school, joined the Presbyterian Church with her at age 12 and delivered papers with his dog, Buck, who put tooth-marks in the newspaper.

"This is just so wonderful for him, and for us, too," she said. "As Luther (Taylor) said, the only thing that would be better is if we got to go along."



FAVORITE THINGS

A few of our favorite things:
Louisville Stoneware, "Pass the Plate" cookbooks, and
applied aprons.

309 Metcalf St.
New Bern, N.C.
633-5254
10-5 Mon.-Sat.



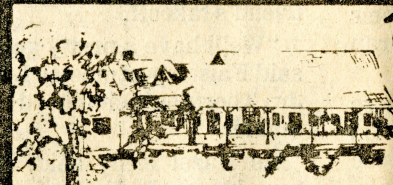
**The
French Country Inn
Ltd.**

*Recommended by
TRAVEL HOLIDAY
Guide for Fine Dining*

SELECTED
WINE LIST
• ABC PERMITS

CUISINE ILE DE FRANCE
Week of August 17

• FRENCH PROVINCIAL CUISINE
Chef Owned and Operated
For reservation Phone 919/965-5229
Hours: 7:00 'till ? Wed., Thru Sat.
309 West Railroad Street
SELMA, North Carolina



COUNTRY & PRIMITIVE ANTIQUES
ARRIVING DAILY

CHEEK'S ANTIQUES INC.

Special Summer Sale

on Sterling Silver Place Settings

Highlighted Special

1992 1992

Wilkinson's

pleasing you, p

