

Tripoli Rocketry Association celebrates 45th birthday



Industry News by Planet News
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 02, 2009

December 1st is an important date to Pennsylvania resident Francis Glenn Graham II. Many rocketeers may not recognize that name, especially if they have just discovered the fascinating world of high power rocketry in the past five to ten years, whether their discovery of the hobby was their first time experiencing it or if they were rekindling a passion from years gone by.

The year is 1964 and it's just three and a half weeks until Christmas. On that first day of December, "Glenn" Graham, as he was known to his friends back then, laid the foundation of a small club called the Tripoli Science Association. The club membership rolls consisted of Graham and several of his neighborhood friends who shared an interest in rocketry, astronomy and other scientific interests.

Graham was a prolific documenter of the club's experiments, painstakingly committing them to writing, complete with dimensions, weights, witnesses, photos and even hand-drawn sketches. Most of Graham's friends and fellow club members probably considered this an extreme practice given how most teenagers approached such things, but his commitment to detail would go a long way to helping his club in the years ahead.



At left, Curt Hughes and to his right, Francis "Glenn" Graham, were co-founders of the original Tripoli Science Association, the forerunner to today's Tripoli Rocketry Association. In this 1965 photo, the two were joined by friend Vicky Kudsy, next to Graham, and Graham's sister, Kathy, on the far right, who didn't mind hanging out with the "geeks."



Early Tripoli group photo, from left to right, Ken Good, Anthony J. Longo, A.J. Reed, Ernie Scavinsky, Francis Graham, Ed Onder, Charmaine Havey and Curt Hughes.

It wasn't long before Graham

found his life in turmoil. His parents were going through a divorce, an action that would uproot young Graham and deposit him in Irwin, Pennsylvania. This move would have a profound effect on Graham and led to a sudden downsizing of his club, down to just one member: him. On his first day of school in his new location, he sought out a student named Curt Hughes, a high school junior who was known throughout the school as "Rocket Man."

Hughes' personal space race began after ordering an Estes catalog from a small ad placed in *Popular Science* in 1962. From that beginning, he lived and breathed model rocketry, scrimping and saving every penny he could get his hands on so he could mail it to P.O. Box 227 in Penrose, Colorado. Three years later would find young Hughes and his family visiting the Estes operation during a family vacation, where they toured the facility and among other memorable sights, got to see the original Estes motor making machine affectionately called "Mable."

As the president of the Irwin Rocket Society, Hughes and other

club members were called upon to present rocket launches to the entire student body at student assemblies, and the club was also allowed to conduct meetings during the school's activity periods. This is where Graham introduced himself to Hughes for the first time.

"One afternoon while our group was meeting in the wood shop an incredibly strange teen, appearing far more 'geekier' than I, came in to meet me," Hughes said in an reflective article he wrote on the subject nine years ago. "His name was Francis Glenn Graham II and he would shortly change my life forever."

Graham, always the passionate person, and someone who recognized a group of like-minded enthusiasts when he saw them, pitched his club concept to Hughes, an action that would result in the merging of the Irwin Rocket Society with the Tripoli Science Association. Graham was intent on not only preserving, but expanding, Tripoli and Hughes was to play a major role in that action.



From left to right, Art Bower, Ken Good, Francis Graham and Carl Sakal at the launch of the first "rack-rocket," one of Ken Good's unique designs, the KG-4 Achilles, on February 1, 1970.



From left to right, Curt Hughes, Ken Good and Art Bower launching a Centuri "Mini-Max" powered Scorpion at the Maple Drive-In movie theater in Irwin, Pennsylvania, in 1968.

"Glenn's mission that day was made clear to me within a few minutes of speaking with him: since Tripoli was now pretty much a membership of one, he recognized an instant source of fellow rocketeers," Hughes wrote. "Tripoli and the Irwin Rocket Society were destined to become one in the interest of Tripoli's growth."

The Irwin Rocket Society was merged into the Tripoli Science Association in the spring of 1965. Meanwhile, Graham's "geekiness" would go on to earn him the undying enmity of the Irwin school district's "geek-bashers," a situation that would ultimately lead to Graham leaving his high school and moving in with his grandparents who lived ten miles away in East Pittsburgh.

"I was deeply concerned when he left our school system that Tripoli, and our friendship, would slowly evaporate because of the distance now between us," Hughes stated. "Shortly afterwards, I got my driver's license and a motorcycle and those fears were quickly put to rest."

During this time, Hughes' friend Arthur Robert Bower, Jr., another Irwin member of the club, started lobbying one of his friends, Kenneth Good, to join the group. Unlike Graham or Hughes, Good needs no introduction. He is the current president of the organization, a role he has served in tirelessly for

years.

"I can well remember Art telling me, 'You have to meet Glen Graham and Curt Hughes. We're starting a rocket club called "Tripoli"', " Good said in an article explaining his rendition of Tripoli's history. "Within what seemed like a very short time, I was a member of this embryonic group of rocketeers, networked around the Pittsburgh area."

By the late 60's, Tripoli would eventually grow into three distinct clusters of activity, today called "prefectures," all in the western Pennsylvania area: the original Irwin group plus groups in Graham's new location, East Pittsburgh, and North Braddock. The organization would go on to grow and expand, endure several name changes, and weather political upheaval.

Today, 45 years since inception, Tripoli has prefectures all over the United States as well as 22 other countries world wide, and enjoys the status of one of the most well-recognized hobby rocketry organizations on the planet. Thanks to Francis Graham, and his vision, as well as the vision and diligent work of others he met and influenced along the way, the Tripoli Rocketry Association exists today, leading the world of hobby, amateur, and experimental rocketry enthusiasts.

"We were all early Tripolitans," Good said, "and we shared more than just a hobby."

Tripoli's original prefecture, Tripoli Pittsburgh, TRA Prefecture #1, will be celebrating this milestone during their meeting on December 6, 2009, at the Churchill Municipal Building Community Room, in Churchill, Pennsylvania, starting at noon and cordially invite those of you who will be in the Pittsburgh area to join them. Please visit the Tripoli Pittsburgh website, <http://www.tripoli-pgh.org/>, for details and directions.

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From left to right, the Tripoli "Old Guard," Art and Sarah Bower, Curt Hughes, Ken Good, and Theresa and Francis Graham come together in the summer of 1995. Little did Good know that this reunion would lead to his return to rocketry and Tripoli.