



*At the U.S. Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville, visitors may get up close and personal with models of the Saturn I and Saturn V rockets and the Space Shuttle. The Saturn V, center, is one of the most prominent man-made structures in the city.*

## **Rocket City** Boosted by the space and military rocket programs, Huntsville, Alabama is a dynamic mix of technology, modern culture, and southern history.

*By Pam Prescott*

FIFTY YEARS AGO LAST SPRING, THE 15,000 residents of Huntsville, Alabama were informed in their Sunday newspaper: "Dr. Von Braun Says Rocket Flights Possible to Moon."

The front-page story in the Huntsville Times was accompanied by a photo of Wernher Von Braun, his wife, Maria, and their 17-month-old daughter. This was the

man who less than a decade earlier had led a team of German scientists in developing the V-2 rockets that plagued England from September 1944 to March 1945.

Huntsvillians could not have fathomed at the time that, through the work of Von Braun and his 117 fellow German scientists, their little north Alabama town was about to be propelled forever from its origins as a cotton-mill town and "Watercress Capital of the World" into new economic

and cultural orbits as "Rocket City, USA."

Today, Huntsville's population is almost 12 times what it was when the German scientists arrived, its economy is buoyed by Redstone Arsenal, which is home to the U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command, the Ordnance Missile and Munitions Center and School, and NASA's George C. Marshall Space Flight Center. More than 50 Fortune 500 companies have operations in Huntsville, and national business

## HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

*Continued from previous page*

publications describe it as having the sixth-greatest concentration of high-tech workers in the United States. With just one in ten residents as natives and 33 percent African American and other minorities, Huntsville is a diverse city that readily embraces change.

### **Cotton-trading roots**

Huntsville has its beginnings in the early 1800s, when John Hunt, a Revolutionary War veteran, built a cabin in 1805 near Big Spring. The spring itself would become the center of Huntsville. A planter named Leroy Pope bought a large area surrounding Big Spring for a new town and asked that it be named Twickenham after the home of his relative, the English poet Alexander Pope. But because of animosity toward the British following the War of 1812, the legislature changed the

town's name to honor the first settler. The settlement was named the seat of Madison County, became the largest in the Alabama Territory, and in 1819, was the site of a constitutional convention in which territorial leaders agreed to petition for statehood and adopted a state constitution. The town flourished as a cotton-trading center for the Tennessee Valley in the 1840s and 1850s and was quickly reestablished after the Civil War as a textile manufacturing center.

Two closed-down cotton mills and the surrounding, still-humble Mill Village residential area on the north side of town are all that remain as a reminder of Huntsville's King Cotton days.

Downtown however, modern life mixes with local history in the area around what is now Big Spring International Park. The natural spring

that attracted Hunt still gushes 27 million gallons of water a day, feeding a lake in the park. The area became the city's first park in 1843 and was renovated in 1968 into an international park with gifts from various nations decorating it, such as cherry trees from Japan, a rose garden from Switzerland, and a light beacon and fog bell from Norway.

Every April, the park is home to Panoply, Huntsville's festival of the arts featuring music, dance, a juried art fair, artists, demonstrations, children's activities and food. Sponsored by The Arts Council of Huntsville, Panoply brings thousands of people downtown to appreciate the arts.

Next to the park and the Courthouse Square is the EarlyWorks history complex, made up of three unique facilities. The EarlyWorks Museum is a hands-on

*Panoply is Huntsville's annual arts fling. The event includes a juried art fair, children's activities, dance and music performances. At this year's event, Juice Newton, far right, looked on as a guitarist with her band played.*



## HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

*Continued from previous page*



history lesson for youngsters, with a 16-foot talking tree that tells traditional folk tales. Alabama's Constitution Village is a reconstruction of downtown Huntsville as it appeared in 1819, with a cabinetmaker's shop, a print shop, a law office, and Alabama's first incorporated library among the buildings represented. Completing the trio is Historic Huntsville Depot, dating back to 1860 and included on the National Register of Historic Places. A 1920s-era streetcar tour of the downtown historic district starts at the depot.

Drivers recount the story of John Hunt and guide passengers through the neighborhood of Twickenham, the largest group of antebellum homes in all Alabama.

Located in the midst of Big Spring Park is the

*Above, A new road was cut through the hills on the southeastern part of Huntsville to Hampton Cove, the city's popular new residential development. The Saturn V rocket model is visible in the distance. In the Twickenham historical neighborhood of Huntsville is the largest group of antebellum homes in the south. The Watkins home, right, was built in 1875. Below, AmSouth Bank looks over Big Spring International Park with its lake. On the shore, Japanese cherry trees surround a light beacon and fog bell from Norway.*



## HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

*Continued from previous page*

Huntsville Museum of Art in its two-year-old, \$7.7 million building. Facing the park is the recently expanded 170,000 square-foot Von Braun Center, celebrating its 25th anniversary as a performing arts and conference center.

Eric Roth, MD, a Houston, Texas native, enjoys visiting the downtown park for its summer series Concerts in the Park. "We take the kids, put a blanket on the ground, and enjoy. It's very relaxing," says the 31-year-old family practice physician. The parents of two children, ages 2 1/2 and 11 months, Roth and his wife manage to take advantage of season tickets to the Broadway series that performs at the Von Braun Center as well.

They chose to move to Huntsville in July of 1999 because it was smaller than Houston, yet larger than the small town of Searcy, Arkansas, where they met as college students at Harding University. After his residency in Columbus, Georgia, he knew he wanted to settle in the north Georgia, southern Tennessee, northern Alabama area.

Huntsville, Roth says, is "a clean, well-run city."

"It has good schools, good restaurants with more always opening, and a lot more shopping than we ever had in Searcy," he says. "It also has less crime and less congestion than Houston, and we don't get the 102-degree temperatures."

Affirming what the Chamber of Commerce boasts about Huntsville's work force, Roth says, "There are a lot of professionals here. I think I know more engineers than I've ever known in my life."

### **Into the space age**

Huntsville's launch into the technological age is as breathtaking as any rocket lift-off. Like the three-stage Saturn V rockets Von Braun's team designed to carry men to the moon, Huntsville's growth has been one explosion after another, boosting the city's economy and technical strength. The

---

**"It has good schools, good restaurants with more always opening, and a lot more shopping than we ever had in Searcy," he says. "It also has less crime and less congestion than Houston, and we don't get the 102-degree temperatures." —Eric Roth, MD**

---

tremendous first phase that overcame the gravitational pull of north Alabama's agricultural tradition was the development of the rockets for the Space Race. The second booster that put it into orbit burned brightly with tactical missiles and other Strategic Defense Initiative developments. The third phase has shot it into what planners hope is a long-range, balanced-economy trajectory that draws its momentum not only from space and defense, but also from commercial high-tech industries.

Huntsville's economy is so strong now that Bill Holbrook, the director of work force recruitment with the Huntsville Chamber of Commerce, says he can't get new employees fast enough.

The local economy did see a downturn in the early '90s when military spending declined and some U.S. Army bases were closed. "But even through that," Holbrook said, "Huntsville ended up with 2,200 more employees stationed at Redstone Arsenal." Nearly 50 percent of Huntsville's economy is related directly and indirectly to federal spending, but today's highly diversified business base would cushion the economy from any major government funding reductions, he says.

"My bottom line is the military and NASA are very secure now, and our economy is so diversified with high-tech electronics and bio-technology, that if there were [military cutbacks], the effect would be only be minor." Holbrook says.

The city's engineering and science base consists of nationally recognized computer companies such as Intergraph Corp., SCI Systems, Avex Electronics, ADTRAN, Inc, and Cybex Computer Products and government contractors such as the Boeing

Company, Lockheed Martin, Teledyne Brown Engineering, and Computer Sciences Corporation. Manufacturing companies such as DaimlerChrysler Corp., Goodyear Dunlop Tires of North America, Ltd., PPG Industries, Parker Hannifin Corp., and Saint-Gobain provide thousands of jobs for skilled laborers.

Huntsville's Cummings Research Park is the second largest industrial technology park in the nation, behind only Research Triangle Park in Raleigh, North Carolina.

### **Medical teamwork**

Barbara Richman, MD is a pediatric anesthesiologist and pediatric intensivist at Huntsville Hospital, where she came two years ago to help build the pediatric intensive care unit. She moved to Huntsville to rejoin Alice McDuffie, with whom she had worked as an attending fellow physician at Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee.

"She needed a partner, the ICU was small here, and it was going to grow. I knew it was an opportunity to work with other pediatric subspecialties.

"This is a growing place, but it's still a smaller place where there are subspecialty physicians, and you kind of know everybody. Then there are the pediatricians and they know everybody and see us subspecialists as part of the team," says Richman.

In addition to the general professional camaraderie she describes, she also has found a support system among the women physicians on staff.

"Besides Dr. McDuffie and me, there are two pediatric neurologists and a pediatric endocrinologist, which is more professional, subspecialty women than you find in

## HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

*Continued from previous page*

### **POPULATION:**

Huntsville: 173,870, Metro area: 343,820

### **CLIMATE:**

Annual rainfall: 57 inches

Annual snowfall: 2.8 inches

Average High/Low Temperatures:

January — 48/29, July 89/69

Days of sunshine: 106

### **TRANSPORTATION:**

**AIRPORTS** — Huntsville International, nine miles southwest of city

**BUS** — Greyhound, HTA public transit

**INTERSTATES** — Interstate 65 south to Birmingham (98 miles) and Mobile (357 miles) and north to Nashville, TN (122 miles); U.S. 72 northeast to Chattanooga, TN (105 miles)

### **COST OF LIVING:**

Indexed at 90.9 (100 is average)

Average home price: \$130,640

### **MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME:**

Huntsville: \$45,989, Metro area: \$44,149

most places. And it's small enough that you know each other well enough that the support system is very good."

As an example of that professional safety net, Richman explains that she and her colleagues respond to each other's calls for assistance around the clock, no questions, no gripes. "You just know, if they call in the middle of the night, it's serious and they need you."

Huntsville Hospital, a not-for-profit, two-hospital organization, is adding a third pediatric intensivist to the team as it continues to enhance its Huntsville Hospital East as a women's and children's hospital, which has the only pediatric emergency room in northern Alabama. The system also is focusing on enhancing care for its older patients as it conducts a search for a gerontologist and a neurologist specializing in stroke treatment, according to Helen S. Gammons, with Huntsville Hospital's physician services department.

Huntsville Hospital has 901 beds between its two campuses, making it the largest hospital in the state. It serves a regional population of 700,000 in northern Alabama and southern Tennessee. The city's other hospital, Crestwood Medical

Center, has 120 beds and is owned by Triad, formerly Columbia/HCA. In the last two years, both hospitals have spent a combined \$80 million in expansions and remodeling.

### **Warm, sunny...and dynamic**

Outside the hospital walls, Richman enjoys the dynamism of Huntsville. An Indianapolis native who trained and practiced in her hometown, she worked in Louisville before going to Nashville, so she's familiar with several cities.

"Huntsville is changing a lot. It's growing, it's upbeat," she says.

Describing herself as an incurable gardener, Richman, 46, relishes her southward migration. "As I've moved farther south, what I've enjoyed is that it is so sunny. Here in Huntsville, there's this incredible number of unique gardening stores where you can get really cool stuff."

She enjoys the colorful crape myrtles which bloom all summer long, but she especially appreciates the camellia bushes, Alabama's state flower, because they bloom in winter. "Just when you're starting to feel gloomy, these beautiful flowers bloom."

A single mother of three daughters with her 10-year-old and 15-year-old still at home, Richman also appreciates the safety of her neighborhood.

"I don't worry about them," she says. "It's safe enough for them to ride their bikes through the neighborhood, they bike to the pool, and school is close enough that they can ride their bikes to school."

Richman and Roth both live in Hampton Cove, Huntsville's fastest growing community and a planned development that touts a "small town lifestyle and cutting edge technology." The 2,800-acre development with space for 1,700 homes, features the largest swimming pool in Alabama, a tennis club, a fitness center, a new 538-acre Nature Preserve, neighborhood shopping, high-speed Internet ac-

cess, an elementary school, and plans for a new middle school.

Hampton Cove also is adjacent to 54 holes of golf on the Robert Trent Jones Golfing Trails, part of an award-winning statewide network of public golf courses. The trails, built in the early '90s, were an investment of the Retirement Systems of Alabama as a way to diversify its assets and enhance the state for vacationers and retirees.

By far the biggest attraction in Huntsville is the U.S. Space and Rocket Center, which, as the world's largest space museum, draws more people to Alabama than any other attraction. Opened in 1970 by the Alabama legislature at Von Braun's urging, the Space and Rocket Center has welcomed more than 10 million people—an estimated 400,000 annually.

The Center is the home of the original NASA Space Camp and Aviation Challenge, which last year drew 19,720 participants. Another of Von Braun's ideas, Space Camp began in 1982, five years after his death, as a way to encourage interest in the space program. Children ages 9 to 18 may participate, and there are parent/child sessions as well as adult academies. Space Camp Florida opened in 1988 in Titusville, and Space Camp California opened at Ames Research Center in Mountain View in 1996.

When not building rockets or performing a simulated Space Shuttle mission, Space Camp participants get to use the Space and Rocket Center to learn the history of space exploration. Every historic moment in the U.S. space program is represented, from Explorer I to the Space Shuttle. And it's a showcase for the defense missiles that have been developed at Redstone Arsenal since before Von Braun's arrival in 1950. From the old-timers Redstone and Jupiter to some of the newest Redstone-produced systems in the field, such as Chaparral, Hawk, and Avenger, all are visible in Rocket Park, the

## HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

*Continued from previous page*

outdoor display of Army missiles and NASA rockets.

They're all dwarfed by the 363-foot-tall replica of the Saturn V rocket. Used in 12 Apollo flights and one flight to put the Skylab space station into orbit, Saturn V was the largest rocket in America's space program.

Erected in 1999, the replica is now the most prominent man-made feature of Huntsville's landscape.

"It's this huge thing with blinking lights on it that you can see driving into town on Highway 565 and from anyplace downtown," says Peter Baldaia, the chief curator of the Huntsville Museum of Art.

"What's interesting about Huntsville for a visitor is that you get a real sense of the history of the city and its contributions to Apollo and the other aspects of the aerospace industry," he says. "There are these little rocket monuments at intersections all over the city that constantly remind you that you're in the Rocket City."

Fortunately, because of the community's diversified economy, "you don't get a sense of Huntsville being a production center for weapons of mass destruction," Baldaia says. "But, it's true, there is a lot of weapons and defense in this town."

Nonetheless, the Rhode Island native is enthralled by life in this Southern town. "In many ways, Huntsville is a little oasis that has a lot of things going for it that other parts of Alabama don't have," he says. "Five to 10 miles outside the city, you're in rural Appalachia."

Low housing costs make Huntsville attractive too. Vinit Mahesh, MD, a pediatric pulmonologist and an associate professor in the University of Alabama's family medicine training program at Huntsville, said he bought a 4,200 square foot house with an adjacent guest house for less than \$300,000 when he moved to Huntsville from Birmingham five years ago. "It's very affordable," he says.

Referring to homes built on the hills above Huntsville, Baldaia describes the ambiance of the city. "You see these homes, these incredible palaces, perched on the mountainside," he says. "You can tangibly see the wealth in this place and the level of comfort that people enjoy."

Thanks to the rocket industry, Huntsville has been propelled from its roots as a cotton market to a high-tech industrial and research center...and beyond. Yet it remains a safe, comfortable place to live. ■

*Pam Prescott is a free-lance writer based in Roscoe, Illinois.*