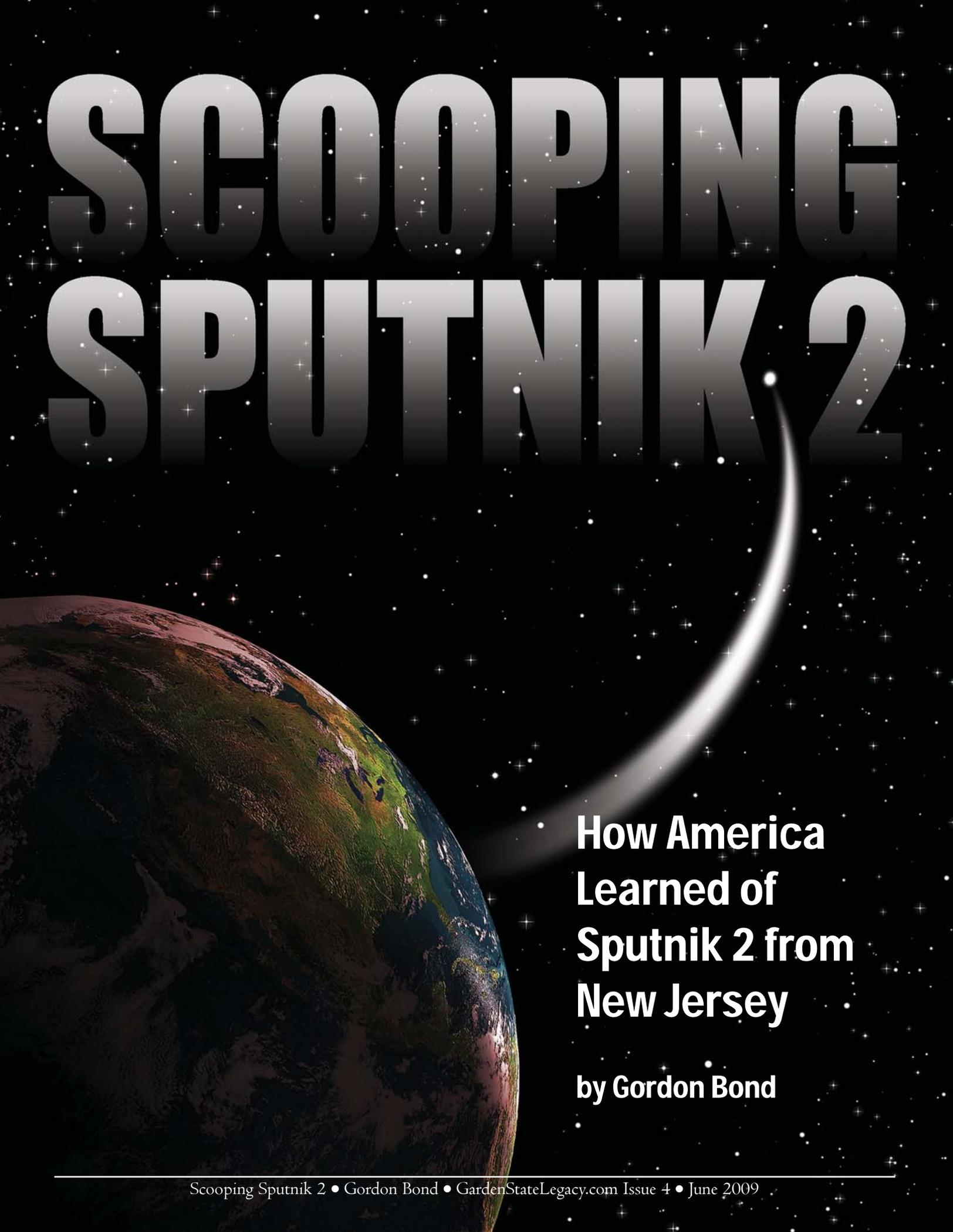


SCOOPING SPUTNIK 2



**How America
Learned of
Sputnik 2 from
New Jersey**

by Gordon Bond

It was shortly before 1:00 am when the voice crackled out of the static. "Stand by for a special bulletin," it commanded in Russian.

George Chaplenko, a 33 year-old living in Perth Amboy, NJ, listened closely. He could easily understand what the announcer on his short-wave radio was saying—not only because he had recently immigrated from the Ukraine, but also from having been conscripted into the Russian Army during the Second World War.

As he listened to the broadcast coming through the darkness from Moscow, perhaps he had a flicker of a memory from those days. And of being captured by the Germans and sent to the forced labor camp. He need only to have glanced at the identification numbers tattooed on his wrist to be reminded. But he also needed only to look at his wife, Tanya. They had met at the camp and their wedding picture was taken on a U.S. Army jeep brought when the Americans liberated them. An Army chaplain did the honors.

A bright young man, Chaplenko and Tanya came to the United States in 1949 as refugees, where he found work as a chemist and engineer with the Singer Sewing Machine Company.

His work hours brought him home at 11:00 pm—just when the long distance frequencies he was interested in come in clearest due to atmospheric ionization conditions. So, in the small hours of November 12, 1957, he was focused on that voice coming from his short-wave radio. He had only recently started listening in, thanks to an article "Listen to the Voices of the World" in that month's *Popular Electronics* that provided the program schedule for the 20 meter band broadcasted from Moscow.

Figuring this "special news bulletin" had to be something important, he switched on his tape recorder, and what he heard shocked him. "We have just launched a second Earth satellite."

Not only had the Russians again beaten the U.S. in the nascent "space race," but this time they upped the stakes by sending a living being—a dog—into orbit. This was big—the proverbial "stop the presses!" kind of big. Excitedly, Chaplenko started calling the newspapers, including *The New York Times*. Reporters receiving the calls at one in the morning, from an excited man with a foreign accent, about the Reds sending a dog into space were not amused. He

was dismissed as a crank and told to turn off his radio and go back to bed. Still, he insisted on leaving his name and telephone number.

Hours later, word was coming from London that they were picking up an English language version of the same announcement. Suddenly George Chaplenko's phone didn't stop ringing.

Space Race

It is perhaps difficult for us today to appreciate the shock this news was to the American psyche. We had been feeling pretty good about ourselves after our role in winning World War II. We had emerged on the world stage a true global power. Thanks to two oceans and friendly neighbors, the industrial might that powered our war effort was left unmolested. The huge demand for consumer goods by a society weary of the Great Depression and austerity measures of wartime launched a period of economic prosperity not since paralleled. The only clouds on our bright, shiny horizon were the Soviet Union and Communist China, each of which presented competition for the spoils of Europe and Asia, respectively. But, certainly, the nation that had just won a world war and invented frozen TV dinners could take on all-comers!

The terrible power of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan were still fresh in our collective memories. And these city-obliterating bombs were mere firecrackers compared with the increasingly powerful bombs being developed at the time. There was a marriage going on of this technology with the rockets the Nazis had used towards the end of the war to worry London. It was only a matter of time before the orders of magnitude grew great enough that missiles, topped with nuclear warheads, could deliver their awful packages across the globe.

Viewed in terms of a war for the ideological dominance of the world, the very thought that the Soviets could launch payloads into orbit led directly to a scary conclusion. At first, it was just a basketball-sized beeping sphere, but now it was a capsule with a living creature. Tomorrow it might be a nuclear bomb. And, if they could achieve a permanent orbit, so the logic went, they could hold the entire United States hostage with the threat of lobbing warheads on us at will—and there was nothing we could do about it. There are technical reasons why this probably could never have really happened. But this vision of an

atomic age Sword of Damocles would drive much of the thinking behind the American space program for a generation.

So the news that crackled out of George Chaplenko's radio in those early morning hours was more than just a stunt. It was Russian one upmanship in what was seen as a deadly serious competition.

Laika

Sputnik 2 was the second in a series of spacecraft that would be launched by the Soviet Union between 1957 and 1961, initiated by the International Geophysical Year. The name translates into "co-traveler," or in this context, a "satellite" to Earth. It would be applied to a wide range of robotic craft, ranging from the simple beeping sphere of Sputnik 1 to test craft for manned flight to probes to the Moon, Venus and Mars.

What made this second launch different from anything attempted before by either the USSR or the US was that Sputnik 2 carried a live passenger, a dog named Laika. She was a three-year-old mongrel found wandering the streets of Moscow—the scientists figured such a stray would already be tough from life on the streets in the cold and heat. Her story, however, is a sad one. No attempts would be made to recover the spacecraft, dooming her to become the first casualty in space. The "training" she endured was harsh, keeping her in progressively smaller cages to get her used to being in a tiny capsule. One of the trainers brought her home to play with his children as a last gesture of kindness before sending her on her one-way voyage.

The plan was that Laika would be euthanized with a poisoned serving of food after ten days. In 2002,

however, Dr. Dimitri Malashenkov confirmed what some had rumored. A thermal control system had malfunctioned and Laika died of stress and overheating only hours after launch.

There had always been something unsettling about Laika's fate. Organizations against cruelty to animals throughout the world roundly criticized the Soviets for it. In 1998, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Oleg Gazenko, one of the scientists responsible for sending Laika into space, expressed regrets. What little they actually learned about the ability of higher organisms to live in space simply did not justify the death of Laika.

It is worth noting that in the four subsequent Sputnik missions involving dogs, retrieval would be incorporated (though one mission failed, resulting in the deaths of the two dogs onboard). The United States used monkeys and chimpanzees with varying degrees of success.

The ethics of using animals in a range of testing is still hotly debated.

George

Once the truth of the launch had been confirmed, the rush was on in the media to get the scoop—and for a while, the only U.S. source for information was that chemist with the funny accent from Perth Amboy they had dismissed as a crank!

The New York Times ran a piece titled, "Jerseyan First to Report News; Perth Amboy Chemist Hears Broadcast from Moscow Announcing Launch." The entire piece cites George Chaplenko as the source.

"The first report of the launching of a new Soviet satellite came this morning from a New Jersey chemist...This transmission preceded the English broadcast that was picked up in London," *The Times* reported. "Mr. Chaplenko, who was born in the Ukraine and came to this country as a refugee, immediately called The New York Times. He reported that he first heard the announcement at



Upper Left: the interior of Sputnik 2.

Above: Laika

Left: Soviet stamp celebrating the launch of Sputnik 2.

12:45 A. M. It was repeated several times, he said.”

At first, it wasn't clear what time the satellite had actually been launched. Chaplenko inferred from the broadcast that it had to have been the previous day, Saturday, November 2, 1957.

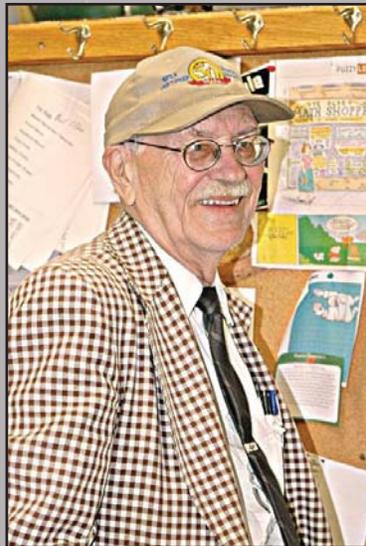
Wondering what else the Russians might have in store and sensing the opportunity for a scoop, *The New York Times* gave George Chaplenko the assignment of listening in on subsequent short-wave broadcasts for more news. While there was no new space news, he did record and transcribe the entire speech of Nikita Khrushchev on the anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Thanks to George, *The Times* Foreign News Editor had the text hours before the normal channels of translation via London. “I might make this short-wave listening a business instead of a hobby if my luck continues,” he quipped to *Popular Electronics* magazine, who issued a press release in honor of the coup scored by one of their readers.

Indeed, the magazine reaped a windfall of sales—the issue Chaplenko had used to find the correct wavelengths was selling off the newsstand shelves.

For his efforts on their behalf, *The New York Times* paid George Chaplenko \$25.

Chaplenko would go on to earn a Bachelors in Mechanical Engineering and a Masters in Spectroscopy. He put the latter to good use at then-SPEX Industries in Metuchen, NJ, where he made spectrometers. Over the years, he would even have

numerous patents to his name. But perhaps most telling of his intellectual prowess is a story his old friends still fondly tell of how, long after he had retired, Singer still called on him as a consultant to solve particularly tough engineering problems.



George Chaplenko

Picture by Hank Adams

He also indulged a lifelong passion for amateur astronomy by making homemade telescopes and joining Amateur Astronomers, Inc., a club based in Cranford, New Jersey, in 1972. He served as A.A.I.'s Vice President (1974-1977) and President (1977-1980) and is still fondly remembered as someone who encouraged young people to join and become active—sometimes to the annoyance of the older, more staid members. These days, many of those young people—who refer to themselves as having been the “young Jedi Knights”—are now the elder statesmen of the club and carry

on the tradition of making sure young people are welcomed and encouraged.

He served as the group's Corresponding Secretary from 1984 until his death on November 16, 2004.

George could often be found outside A.A.I.'s Sperry Observatory, in his loud checked jacket and baseball hat, a cigarette always in his hand and a ready smile or corny joke. His warmth and generosity is still remembered. It remains a source of pride that the western hemisphere first heard the news of Sputnik 2 thanks to this Ukrainian refugee from Perth Amboy and his late night short-wave radio hobby.



Amateur Astronomers, Inc., the club George Chaplenko served for many years, was honored by having an asteroid named after it in 2006! This was done, in part, as a personal honor to George by the astronomer who found it. Below is an account from AAI's newsletter, *The Asterism*, from August 2006 by then-President, Vincent Henderson:

On Sunday, July 2, 2006, I received an email from a professional astronomer named Joe Montani who is Senior Research Specialist at the Lunar and Planetary Laboratory of the University of Arizona. Joe used to live in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and

was a member and a Qualified Observer at AAI from 1968 through 1978. He became very close friends with George during this time. Starting his professional career with articles that were accepted in *Sky and Telescope* magazine in the 1970s, Joe was applauded and encouraged by George to reach for the stars.

Joe speaks sincerely about the kindness George showed him, saying how much of an inspiration he had been. George had a gift for working with young people and guiding them in their love of astronomy.

Joe told me that, in 1997 using the 36-inch Spacewatch telescope at Kitt Peak...he dis-

covered a minor planet which he named in honor of AAI. The new name for the minor planet is (9667) Amastrinc or AmAstrInc. Although he was aware that Joe was working to get the name approved by the International Astronomical Union for several years, George was keeping it for a surprise gift to our club [George passed away before the name was approved]. Even though he couldn't tell George of the final approval himself, it is very important to Joe that the membership of AAI becomes aware of this designation and that George was his inspiration for it...Thank you George. You continue to enrich AAI and the lives of its members to this day!