

[TEXAS HISTORY]

REMEMBERING COLUMBIA

On February 1, 2003, the space shuttle *Columbia* broke apart, killing its crew of seven and raining debris along a 250-mile-long path in East Texas. The population of Hemphill tripled overnight as thousands came to search for the crew's remains. For the 15th anniversary of the disaster, the town's Patricia Huffman Smith NASA "Remembering Columbia" Museum will host a book signing by the authors of *Bringing Columbia Home*. We recently caught up with them, retired Shuttle Launch Director Michael Leinbach and writer Jonathan Ward. —Paul Zieke

Where were you that day? Leinbach: I was one of the chief people to greet the astronauts on landing. We were out on the runway in Florida, waiting for the double sonic boom that always announced the shuttle's arrival three minutes before landing. It never came.

What were the first signs in Hemphill that something was wrong?

Ward: People in East Texas woke to a series of sonic booms as wreckage fell along a path stretching from near Dallas to Fort Polk, Louisiana. Some heard sounds like helicopter blades, as pieces of metal spun through the air and crashed into the ground.

How did people in Hemphill respond? Ward: One of the great parts of this story is how the local population rallied to help the searchers. It was the stuff of which legends are made. Roger and Belinda Gay were asked if their Veterans of Foreign Wars hall could provide sandwiches. Belinda started making hundreds of phone calls. People showed up with chicken, mashed potatoes, pies, everything you could think of. The town provided somewhere between 30,000 and 60,000 meals, completely out of the goodness of their hearts.

What lessons can be learned from the Columbia recovery? Leinbach: We had folks at FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency] tell us that it was the largest recovery response in American history. More than 100 agencies came together, with no bickering. We learned a lot about the ship and about the shuttle program.

IF YOU GO

"Remembering Columbia" will host a daylong commemoration Feb. 1, with the book signing at 10 a.m. 375 Sabine Street, Hemphill. (409) 787-4827; nasacolumbiamuseum.com.

