On July 20th, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin took the first steps on the Moon. Two-thousand-nine marks the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission – a pivotal moment in the history of space exploration.

I’m Matt Anderson, a curator with the Minnesota Historical Society. In honor of this anniversary, we’re taking a look at some of the space-related items in the Society’s collection. These objects show the many ways in which Minnesotans were involved in the evolution of space exploration.

Before Armstrong and Aldrin took their legendary steps, there were many others involved in building the space program and its required technology. In the MN150 exhibit at the Minnesota History Center, we highlight the architect of the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo space missions: Dr. Robert Gilruth. Dr. Gilruth grew up outside of Duluth in the 1930s and attended Duluth Junior College. He later earned an aeronautical engineering degree from the University of Minnesota. Gilruth helped to design the capsule for the Mercury missions, and eventually became the director of NASA’s Manned Spacecraft Center in Texas. Gilruth oversaw 25 manned space flights during his career.

Object: Moon Rock and Minnesota State Flag Plaque (1977.3)

A highlight of the Society’s collection is this commemorative plaque, which includes an actual lunar rock and a miniature Minnesota state flag. The plaque was presented to the state by NASA after the last manned moon mission, Apollo 17, was completed in December 1972. The flag was carried to the moon aboard the spacecraft America, and the rock was collected from the Taurus-Littrow Valley.

Object: Space Pen (1978.53.56)

Hubert Humphrey served as Vice President during some of the most heated years of the space race, and several items in our collection are from him. This Parker ballpoint “space pen,” one of only 250 made, features a pushbutton made from a recovered fragment of the Atlas rocket that launched John Glenn on his historic 1962 Earth orbit. The pens were given to dignitaries in honor of NASA’s tenth anniversary in 1968.
Object: Saturn V Rocket Model (1980.17.60)
This model of the Saturn V rocket was presented to Humphrey to commemorate his support of the Apollo 8 mission, and to honor his role as Chairman of the National Space Council. Apollo 8 was the first manned mission to escape Earth’s orbit, and the first to orbit the moon, when it launched in 1968. The Saturn V propelled all of the Apollo missions, and – even today – it remains the largest and most powerful launch vehicle ever operated.

Object: “Pinky” Nelson Flight Suit (1990.199.1)
Raised in Willmar, Minnesota, astronaut George “Pinky” Nelson played an important role in the Space Shuttle missions of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Nelson flew aboard the Challenger, Columbia and Discovery orbiters in his career, and logged some 411 hours in space. In 1990, the Minnesota Historical Society acquired one of Nelson’s flight suits. Used from 1983 to 1985, the suit is made from light blue cotton and was worn during shuttle take-off and re-entry. It was designed for comfort as well as functionality. Several pockets, with either Velcro or zipper closures, are available to hold tools and other equipment.

From astronauts, to engineers, to politicians, many hands helped us reach beyond the sky. We’ve highlighted just a few of the many Minnesotans involved in space exploration. We encourage you to visit the Minnesota History Center to learn more about them.