

Huntsville earned nickname 'Rocket City'

This year marks the 50th anniversary of NASA. In two years, the Marshall Space Flight Center will also mark its 50th anniversary. Huntsville, home to the Marshall Center, has been known as "Rocket City" since the 1950s.

The adoption of the nickname started when the rocket team led by Wernher von Braun moved to Huntsville in 1950 to begin work on Army missiles and rockets. The Marshall Center was formed in 1960 by transferring thousands of Army engineers, scientists and administrators into NASA. The Army continued its mission in Huntsville and the Marshall Center expanded to meet the demand for the Saturn V moon rockets, other NASA launch vehicles and requirements for space exploration.

The nickname Rocket City stuck. A look through the Huntsville telephone books during the 1950s and 1960s reveals the pervasive use of the name. Barbershops, taxi cabs, hotels, motels, sports teams, dance teams, as well as the city itself, used the Rocket City Label.

Over time, businesses and other institutions have adopted new slogans to describe the missile and space activity in Huntsville. However, the term Rocket City remains one of the most common ways to identify the community.

Von Braun was enthusiastic about Huntsville from the beginning. "For me, it was Love at first sight," he said. The advantages of Huntsville included the existing Redstone Arsenal facilities, abundant Low-cost electric power from the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Tennessee River - both for water supply and transportation - and the open space. "In selecting this site, of course," von Braun recalled, "in our field, we had to consider that these rockets would be making a lot of noise."

After the arrival of the Army's missile agency in April 1950, Huntsville started its meteoric growth, from a population of 16,000 in 1950 to 48,000 counted in a special census in 1956. The 1960 census put the population of the city at 72,000; another special census in 1964 gave the population as 123,000; and in 1970 it was 136,102. According to the Huntsville/Madison County Chamber of Commerce figures, the city's population had grown to more than 156,000 by the year 2000. At the same time, Madison County's overall population had grown to more than 275,000.