It was July 20, 1969. Bill Barry begged his parents to let him stay up late. One of the biggest events in history was about to happen. The 11-year-old from Massachusetts didn’t want to miss it.

“I was glued to the floor in front of our black-and-white TV,” Barry recalls.

At 10:56 p.m., Barry watched Neil Armstrong become the first person to set foot on the moon. More than 500 million people around the world also tuned in. Twenty minutes later, they saw astronaut Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin join Armstrong.

For the first time, humans had visited a place beyond Earth. Armstrong stepped onto the lunar surface. He said these now-famous words: “That’s one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind.”

A New Mission
The moon landing fulfilled an ambitious goal set by President John F. Kennedy in 1961. He called for the U.S. to send astronauts to the moon by the end of the decade. The Apollo program was created to accomplish that goal.

But the program had a tragic start. In 1967, the first Apollo spacecraft caught fire. Sadly, all three astronauts on board were killed. Still, NASA, the U.S. space agency, pressed on. Each mission that followed brought the U.S. closer to the moon. Apollo 11 would be the first to attempt a landing.
Danger Ahead

On July 16, 1969, a rocket carrying Armstrong, Aldrin, and crewmate Michael Collins blasted off. It launched from Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Three days later they were more than 200,000 miles from home. They were orbiting the moon. Armstrong and Aldrin climbed into a section of the spacecraft called the *Eagle*. It separated from the main ship. The *Eagle* headed toward the moon’s surface.

But the landing almost ended in disaster. The *Eagle* was about 2,000 feet from the surface. Armstrong noticed a problem. They were headed for a giant crater surrounded by boulders. There were only seconds to spare. Armstrong took the controls and changed the ship’s path. He landed the spacecraft safely. It was only moments before it ran out of fuel.

“The *Eagle* has landed,” he told NASA’s mission control.

Moon Walking

The world watched as Aldrin and Armstrong walked across the moon. They planted an American flag in the powdery soil. They did experiments. They collected dirt and rocks for scientists on Earth to study.

After just over two hours, they climbed back into the *Eagle*. They traveled back to the main ship. They rejoined Collins. On July 24, their space capsule safely splashed down in the Pacific Ocean.

Beyond the Moon

Apollo 11 marked a new era in space exploration. Right now, six astronauts live and work on the International Space Station. There are wheeled robots called rovers that have roamed Mars since 1997. NASA hopes to send astronauts there in the 2030s.

The moon landing inspired a new generation to look to the stars. Bill Barry went on to become NASA’s chief historian. In his job, he shares stories about the July day 50 years ago when the impossible became possible.

—by Jennifer Li Shotz