

Rockets Over Alaska

Rocket covers from the Poker Flat Research Range, 1972 - 1975

Purpose: This exhibit tells a part of the launch history of the Poker Flat Research Range, Chatanika, Alaska, as documented by launch covers. This exhibit shows a cover series related to the Poker Flat Research Range.

Scope: The cover series started in 1972 and ended in 1975. The covers were not created by the research range or by range personnel, rather they were created by neighbors of the range.

The entry for each cover contains information about the launch commemorated. The covers were created by the cover makers using the public announcements from the research range at the time of the launch. Further information for the exhibit comes from the official records of the rocket range. Not all the covers are dated on the exact date of a launch, due to launch schedule changes and business hours at the post offices involved. There are cases where two different cachets were used for the same launch. There are some covers for launches not in the official records.

Three organizations conducted launches from Poker Flat. They are identified as follows:

DNA – Defense Nuclear Agency

NASA – National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Sandia – Sandia National Laboratory

Historical Perspective: On January 12, 1968 a B-52 bomber crashed into the harbor at Thule, Greenland. The wreck left one hydrogen bomb on the bottom of the harbor and the wreckage of three more scattered over a wide area. The Danish government responded by severely limiting American military activity in Greenland. One of the results was that United States suddenly needed a new arctic launch site for research rockets. As it happened, some scientists had already been thinking about a launch site north of Fairbanks, Alaska. Thus, was born the Poker Flat Research Range. The Poker Flat Research Range, named for the book “Outcasts of Poker Flat” by Bret Harte, is a part of the University of Alaska Geophysical institute. It is the only major rocket launching facility that was built and is owned and operated by a university.

The Covers: In 1972, Bud and Mary Fyten of Chatanika Alaska began to produce covers to mark each launch. The Fyten’s asked each interested collector to send a supply of stamped self-addressed envelopes which would then be canceled on the day of a launch. The covers would then receive a cachet created with a series of ink stamps.

In February 1975, the Fyten’s moved away from Chatanika and the cover business was taken over by Roger Thompson. The production of covers seems to have ended with the end of the 1975 launch season as no additional covers have been found from this series.