

TWO ON THE AISLE (for October): BACKSTORY ON “OCTOBER SKY”

For Homer Hickam, it all began with Sputnik and the dawn of the space age.

History was changed on October 4, 1957, when the Soviet Union successfully launched the artificial satellite that orbited the Earth, seen clearly enough from anywhere around the globe, and heard by a detectable radio pulse as it sped about 98-minutes in each revolution.

It ushered in new political, military, technological, and scientific developments with a crisis that created a space race as a new part of our cold war with Russia.

It also opens the movie “OCTOBER SKY” as we find Americans in the streets, straining to see it while an announcer makes the announcement of its arrival over the U.S. From there we are introduced to young Homer Hickam, whose life changes dramatically as he watches the tiny bright spot swing across a star-studded sky.

More backstory: In real life, as in his autobiographical novel and the script eventually translated to the Hollywood screen, we get to know “Sonny” Hickam during his transitional years in a West Virginia high school. We meet his parents – his mother, a steady influence on the family of four (older son Jim, the football hero of Big Creek High School & his younger brother Sonny, a dreamer who has little desire to follow the lot of most males in the small mining community who either leave for greener pastures elsewhere or remain to work in the mine – and face the dangers they are all aware of. Young Hickam, after the news of Sputnik followed by the burgeoning space developments with Werner von Braun at Cape Canaveral, sets his mind to become part of that exciting new development.

Our fellow was born Homer H. Hickam, Jr. on February 19, 1943, raised in Coalwood, West Virginia, graduated from Virginia Tech in 1964, became a U.S. Army First Lieutenant during the Vietnam war, winning a bronze star and finally leaving as a Captain.

By this time he began to reveal his divergent brilliance – as a magazine writer and, later, a novelist of some merit. His second book, “Rocket Boys,” which was monumentally successful globally, finally brought to the screen as “October Sky” in 1999.

Meanwhile, he had worked as an engineer for the U.S. Army Missile Command, then became employed with the National Aeronautics & Space Administration at Marshall Space Flight Center, then at NASA and then worked on many Spacelab & Space Shuttle missions, including the Hubble Space Telescope deployment mission - training astronauts for their space duties as well. Prior to his retirement in 1998, he was the Payload Training Manager for the International Space Station Program.

Now, most of all, aside from SCUBA diving and amateur paleontology, he loves to write. With his wife and their cats he shares his time between homes in Alabama and the Virgin Islands.

All that, encapsulated into one amazing human being who lived to successfully, daringly, fulfill his dreams.

The movie “October Sky” reveals an exceptionally well crafted, well cast, well directed cinematic introduction to the budding part of Homer's life, shuttled from a possible unknown as a miner in a small West Virginia mine to the fame for which he was destined. The movie, a real stunner, filling with warmth, laughter, and family dramas, concludes with an epilogue that reveals to the viewers the true people characterized during the preceding 107-minutes. Believe me, it's unforgettable!