

Collier's 1952-54

San Antonio & the Genesis of the Collier's Series, "Man Will Conquer Space Soon!"

COLIN DAVEY



Above: Walt Disney, left, and Wernher von Braun, right. Dr. Wernher von Braun, then Chief, Guided Missile Development Operation Division at Army Ballistic Missile Agency (ABMA) in Redstone Arsenal, Alabama, was visited by Walt Disney in 1954. In the 1950's, von Braun worked with Disney Studio as a technical director, making three films about space exploration for television. A model of the V-2 rocket is in background. Image [source](#): Wikipedia. Image [credit](#): NASA.

The *Collier's Man-Will-Conquer-Space-Soon* series arguably made the American space program possible by making space travel seem real in the minds of the American public, thus generating enthusiasm necessary to support the massive expenditure of tax dollars.

And one event arguably made the *Collier's* series possible: the innocuously titled *Symposium on the Physics and Medicine of the Upper Atmosphere*, held in San Antonio Texas, November 6-9, 1951. That event brought Wernher von Braun together with Cornelius Ryan and Chesley Bonestell for the first time.

Although most Americans were skeptical about space travel at the time of the *Collier's* series, space-travel had been largely shown to be technologically feasible. And that was largely due to the efforts of Wernher von Braun.

Von Braun was a student of Hermann Oberth, one of the fathers of rocketry and astronautics (along with Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and Robert H. Goddard.) He started experimenting with rockets and writing about the science of space travel as a teenager in the 1920s. From approximately 1933 to 1950, he was sequestered away working on secret rocket-related military projects, first for the Nazis, and after World War II, for the Americans. But he was unable to apply his craft directly on behalf of his dreams of artificial satellites and trips to the Moon and Mars. In fact, at one point, he was arrested by his Nazi employers

for two weeks for diverting attention from weapons development to space travel.

Once in America, von Braun was freer to discuss his dreams of space travel to whoever would listen, but he hadn't yet found a platform that received the mass public attention he desired. One obstacle he had to overcome was his Nazi past. For example, he was not invited to the Hayden Planetarium symposium. And although he was invited to attend the San Antonio symposium, he wasn't asked to speak. As Fred Whipple said, "at that time, von Braun was sort of in the doghouse, for some people did not want a German engineer sending up our first satellite."¹ Whipple was the chairman of the Harvard Astronomy Department. He had spoken at the Hayden Planetarium symposium, the San Antonio symposium, and was a contributor to the *Collier's* series.

Although *Collier's* associate editor and reporter Cornelius Ryan was very skeptical and uninformed about astronautics and space travel, he attended the San Antonio symposium because he was sent by *Collier's* managing editor Gordon Manning. Several weeks earlier, on October 12, a few *Collier's* reporters had attended the *First Annual Symposium on Space Travel* at the American Museum of Natural History's Hayden Planetarium in New York. Manning was intrigued by what he heard from his reporters, so when he read a brief article about the upcoming San Antonio symposium in the *New York*

Journal American, he decided to send Ryan.²

Manning also sent artist and space-travel visionary Chesley Bonestell to San Antonio. Bonestell, who had done some work for *Collier's* before, developed an early interest in astronomy before developing a career in architectural art. In the 1940s, he combined his artistic skill with his interest in astronomy, developing a uniquely realistic style of space art, which he published in numerous national magazines, beginning with a series of stunning paintings of Saturn viewed from various moons of Saturn, published by *Life Magazine* in 1944. Bonestell had collaborated with space-travel visionary Willy Ley on the book "The Conquest of Space," published in 1949. Ley was the organizer of the aforementioned Hayden Planetarium symposium, and a key contributor to the *Collier's* series.

(It was Willy Ley who originally introduced von Braun to Oberth in 1930.³ In 1935, as the Nazis rose to power, Ley fled Germany to America. In 1946, shortly after von Braun defected to America, he reunited with Ley, visiting him in Queens, N.Y.⁴)

In addition to Ryan, Bonestell, von Braun, and Whipple, several other San Antonio attendees became contributors to the *Collier's* series, including: Fritz Haber, Heinz Haber, Joseph Kaplan and Hubertus Strughold.⁵

By all accounts, Ryan came to
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the conference very skeptical and uninformed about the concept of spaceflight, and was unable to follow the very technical discussions. According to Kathryn Ryan (Cornelius Ryan's widow), at one point, "He was sitting in a room where this rather striking blue-eyed blond German was at the blackboard, chalking all sorts of mathematical equations. Suddenly, there was a sort of collective gasp around the room; there seemed to be a tremendous amount of excitement in the air. Connie [Ryan] happened to be seated next to Chesley Bonestell, whom he knew, and Chesley was as excited as everyone else. Connie asked Chesley: 'What's going on here?' Chesley [who also hadn't met von Braun before San Antonio] replied: 'Dr. von Braun has just shown us a

way to go into space!'"⁶

Von Braun himself relates: "Leaving one of the sessions and stepping [up] to the bar of the hotel... I made the acquaintance of a good-looking Irishman who, gazing at the crystal highball between his hands, was sunk in a brown study. 'They've sent me down here to find out what serious scientists think about the possibilities of flight into outer space,' he growled. 'But I don't know what these people are talking about. All I could find out so far is that lots of people get up there to the rostrum and cover a blackboard with mysterious signs.' I volunteered to help."⁷

Whipple also met von Braun for the first time at San Antonio: "I was delighted to meet him because I felt that he would be the man who was going to put us into space."⁸

Whipple described an evening when he, von Braun and Joseph Kaplan (a professor of upper atmospheric physics at UCLA, and one of the symposium's organizers) cornered Ryan at a table in the dining room. Long into the night, over cocktails, dinner, and after-dinner cocktails, "The three of us worked hard at proselytizing Ryan." According to Whipple, "That evening he appeared to be highly skeptical... Von Braun... [was] certainly one of the best salesmen of the twentieth century. Additionally, Kaplan carried the aura of wisdom and the expertise of the archetypal learned professor, while I had learned by then to sound very convincing."⁹

As a result, according to Mrs. Ryan, "He was absolutely convinced. He came back trying to figure out how to get Collier's interested in space

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stations, spaceships, and flights to the Moon."¹⁰

The first issue hit the newsstands four months later and the rest is history.

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¹Neufeld p 256, Stuhlinger & Ordway p 112

²Liebermann 1992 p 135

³Neufeld p 39

⁴Neufeld p 232

⁵List of attendees from White & Benson

⁶Stuhlinger & Ordway p 113

⁷Neufeld p 256

⁸Stuhlinger & Ordway p 112

⁹Whipple p 128-129

¹⁰Stuhlinger & Ordway p 113

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