



# A Lifetime of Problem Solving

**LARRY LARKIN ('60) HELPED MAKE HISTORY IN AMERICA'S SPACE PROGRAM AND LEVERAGED THE EXPERIENCE FOR CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER.**

Larry Larkin's interest in engineering emerged out of necessity. Growing up in the aftermath of World War II, he found that material goods were scarce. If you wanted something, you would likely have to build it yourself.

"You couldn't purchase new cars or appliances, so people had to think creatively about how to get what they wanted," Larkin says. "I couldn't buy a radio, but I could build one."

Larkin's affinity for problem solving eventually brought him to Northwestern, where he studied electrical engineering against the backdrop of the Cold War and the early days of the United States' space program.

After graduating in 1960, Larkin found himself at the forefront of one of the era's most important and historic science and engineering endeavors, Project Mercury, America's first human space flight program. There, he helped develop the electrical systems that would assist astronauts, including such notable pioneers as John Glenn and Alan Shepard, on their return to Earth following time in orbit.

"To walk out of school and into that environment was the most exciting time of my life," Larkin says. "You couldn't have experienced a more stimulating career in research and applied engineering."

Larkin assisted in the design of the Mercury capsule's nose cone recovery system, responsible for deploying parachutes, issuing a radio beacon to ground control and recovery vessels, and

releasing a flotation collar all at pivotal moments during the capsule's descent and water landing. Looking back, he credits his McCormick experience for the right approach to tackle the problem.

"The practical skills I learned, like designing vacuum tube circuits, became obsolete soon after I graduated," Larkin says. "But Northwestern also taught me how to look at data and reach a creative solution, which was far more helpful while working on Project Mercury."

Now retired, Larkin has directed his problem-solving skills toward a lifelong passion: restoring historic boats. A resident of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, Larkin is an established historian of the town's boating culture, having published two books on the subject. His most recent, *Grand and Glorious* (Sealark Publications, 2002), memorializes Lake Geneva lifestyle and the community's relationship to boats at the start of the new millennium.

While Larkin has always recognized a classic boat's aesthetic elegance, he notes his engineering career has built a newfound appreciation of what's underneath the frame. "There are lots of little problems within the complex electrical and mechanical systems that need to be fixed during any restoration," Larkin says. "I've learned to appreciate how all of those parts interact together to help a boat run its best."

ALEX GERAGE