

DECK LOG

Dahlgren Heritage Museum



Moderator Ed Jones with panelists Margie Stevens, Elissa Steeves, and John Morton.

A View of the Base “Through a Child’s Eyes” in the 1950s and ‘60s

By Ed Jones

It was a packed hour for the several dozen people who attended the museum’s June 22nd forum, “Through a Child’s Eyes,” at the University of Mary Washington’s Dahlgren Campus. This forum was designed to accompany the exhibit “The Dahlgren Way: King George County and the Dahlgren Naval Base (1945-1974).” The three-person panel offered childhood tales of growing up on the base in the 1950s and ‘60s. Also featured was a personal portrait of the esteemed Dahlgren mathematician, the late Dr. Charles Cohen, from his daughter, Elissa. There was even a touch of Hollywood at the forum — *Star Wars*, no less.

Margie Stevens of Westmoreland County, John Morton of Annapolis, and Elissa Cohen Steeves of Blacksburg sketched an idyllic

picture of their childhoods on the base. The kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school was filled with creative, committed teachers. As one panelist noted, when you said hello to a man biking by your house, you realized he might be a scientist heading up a top-secret weapons project. From water-skiing in the creek to sledding down one of the gentle hills on base, Dahlgren was a colorful combination of attractions.

During that same period — the ‘50s and ‘60s — Dr. Charles Cohen was a key participant in important Navy initiatives at Dahlgren. His research into the Earth’s pear-shaped gravitational field helped to lead to the development of GPS systems. At the forum, Elissa Steeves reminisced about Dr. Cohen as a father and about how focused he was on his projects well into his 90s.

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John Morton's dad was the commanding officer of the base in 1960 and '61. A few years after his time at Dahlgren, John embarked on careers that ranged from scientific writings to acting. Among his film and TV credits is the role of Dak, Luke Skywalker's co-pilot in the *Star Wars* sequel *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Margie Stevens also spent her working life on the base, having recently retired from her career at NSWC. Her mother headed the music program at Dahlgren School in the 1950s and '60s.

Check our website in upcoming weeks for news about other museum forums. For more information on our special exhibits, visit <https://www.dahlgrenmuseum.org/special-exhibits>.

Exhibit on Dr. Charles Cohen, a True Renaissance Man

By Gillian Both, Exhibit Designer

Dr. Charles Cohen was an esteemed mathematician at the United States Naval Weapons Laboratory from the 1940s through the '70s. During his decades-long career at Dahlgren he helped pioneer computer technology, was heavily involved in the submarine-launched ballistic missile program (SLBM), and conducted important research into the gravitational field of the Earth.

On June 22, Elissa Steeves, Dr. Cohen's daughter and a Blacksburg resident, along with her friend Joann Sutphin, took a tour of our new "Pioneers of the 20th Century" exhibit featuring Dr. Cohen. As the friends walked through Dr. Cohen's life, Elissa was happy to recall memories and share stories about the objects and photos included in the exhibit. Her professional accomplishments are featured in the part of the exhibit discussing Dr. Cohen's legacy, and the *Virginia Master Gardener's Handbook*, which Elissa helped author, is one of the items on display.

My tour took them decade by decade through Dr. Cohen's fascinating life: we traveled from his birth in 1911 in Baltimore, Maryland; to his college career at Johns Hopkins University, which he entered at the age of 15; then into the bush of the Belgian Congo, where he worked for four years; and *[continues]*



Elissa Cohan Steeves and Gillian Both holding Mabel Both

finally back to America and into Dahlgren with his new wife, Edra, in the early 1940s. Elissa and I excitedly discussed Dr. Cohen's harrowing journeys from Africa to America then to Peru and Edra's narrow escape from a collapsed railway bridge. Charles' adventures overseas were only the beginning of his story.

Elissa was happy to see a photo of her family with her grandmother, who lived with them on base and was affectionately called "Wahnie." Dr. Cohen's recreational habits of playing tennis and badminton preceded his notable career achievements. Intermingled with his impressive accomplishments were newspaper clippings of Edra's and Elissa's adventures on base, from flower shows to Girl Scout sailing clubs, Garden Club talks, and art appreciation classes. Just as Dr. Cohen wove mathematics into everyday life, I wove his personal life in with his career.

Dr. Cohen's impact on computer development (helping bring the NORC to the base), his involvement within the SLBM program (creating the first six-degree trajectory of freedom simulation), and study of the planets (specifically Pluto's orbital path) and Earth's gravitational field in relation to the mean sea level impressed the guests, who both felt that the equations Dr. Cohen calculated on a daily basis were past their understanding.

Elissa and Joann received pamphlets and bookmarks that pair with the Cohen exhibit and our "Pioneers of the 20th Century" exhibit series. After their tour they attended

our forum "Through a Child's Eyes" (see previous article), which included a video sneak peek of Dr. Cohen's life as displayed in the exhibit (<https://www.dahlgrenmuseum.org/special-exhibits>).

This exhibit was generously funded by a grant from the Community Foundation of the Rappahannock River Region. You can see it at the museum Wednesday through Sunday from 10 am to 4 pm.



Dahlgren Heritage Museum's

Dueling Pianos

**Saturday
November 11th**

**Estate at
White Hall Vineyard**

**Stay tuned for
times and
ticket information
on our upcoming
fundraising event
with The Flying
Ivories.**

THE FLYING IVORIES

TELLING THE STORY AND REFLECTING
THE SPIRIT OF THE NAVY at DAHLGREN
AND THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITY


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Reimagined Dahlgren Heritage Museum Website

Our highly-anticipated, newly-designed website (<https://www.dahlgrenmuseum.org>) officially launched on the first of this month. Thanks to the museum team of Alan Dean and Amanda Genter, research efforts by members Bob Dibble and Paul Lusher and former intern Jennifer Glazebrook, the insights and creativity of website designer Deborah Newman (www.petitetaway.com), and the support of the board, we have a new public face on the internet.

There are several new features to which we would like to draw your attention:

- View a video welcome from our foundation president on the home page.
- “Meet Our Team” allows you to see and learn more about our board and staff members.
- Find links to traffic cameras for the Nice/Middleton Bridge under “Plan Your Visit” – “Directions” to help you in your travels.

- Not only will you find a list of scheduled events under “Plan Your Visit” – “Events Calendar,” but you can now register for those events directly through our website.
- Learn about special exhibits, including a video of the new exhibit on Dr. Charles Cohen, and our featured artifact of the month under “Exhibits.”
- Gain easier access to our “Sound Bytes of History” features.
- Want to become a member or make a monetary donation? You will find that under “Support.”
- Do you have a topic that you would like us to research? Are you interested in submitting an article for consideration for publication on our website? Considering donating an artifact to the museum? You will find forms for all of those things under “Contact.”

There is so much to explore on our new website! We hope that you will visit the tabs and scroll through the pages and keep coming back as new material and new features are added.



P. O. BOX 816, DAHLGREN, VIRGINIA 22448

WWW.DAHLGRENMUSEUM.ORG

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Thank you for your support of the Dahlgren Heritage Foundation! With your help we are educating the community on the Dahlgren story, running a museum, and working towards hosting more interesting and exciting events.

We wouldn't be able to do any of this without you. We look forward to another great year, and we are thankful for your membership. Donate by mailing a check to: P. O. Box 816, Dahlgren, VA 22448 or visit www.dahlgrenmuseum.org and click Membership.

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