

As UFO Interpreter

Ex-Journalist, 83, Seeks Shuttle Berth

By DEBORAH HASTINGS,

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Alita Dickerson, a former reporter and newspaper publisher, was awakened by the telephone at 6 a.m. Monday. Dickerson, who turns 83 today, is not accustomed to getting such early calls. In fact, living alone in her small Pomona apartment, she is not used to getting many calls at all.

But Dickerson has applied to become the first journalist in space, and reporters from across the country wanted to know why.

Dickerson, who published the Smackover (Ark.) Journal from 1947 to 1951, is having a hard time understanding what all the fuss is about. "Being 82, that adds to the situation, but I don't think it adds to the problem," she said recently in her Southern drawl.

Neither does NASA.

"Being 82 would not hinder her at all," said Jennifer McKill, executive director of the Assn. of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication, which will select a candidate according to NASA's criteria.

"There is no age requirement," McKill said.

Applicants must be employed as journalists, with five years' experience in print or broadcasting. Free-lance journalists must be able to prove that their sold works are equal in quality and quantity to those of a full-time reporter.

Dickerson has not been employed by a newspaper since she left the Journal in 1951. She says she last wrote an article for a newspaper in Lewisville, Ark., about three years ago and published a book of poetry in the 1960s.

"If she can prove to our people that she has sold enough pieces to be considered a full-time journalist, obviously she has just as good a chance as anyone else," McKill said.

About 1,800 applications have been received, but McKill declined to say who has applied. "Several of what we consider to be big names have applied," she said. "And no, Walter Cronkite has not applied."

A final candidate and an alternate are expected to be chosen in



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Alita Dickerson

April for an opening on September's space shuttle flight.

Dickerson said she has abilities that make her unusually suited for the spot, qualifications that she included in her application letter.

"I've seen UFOs and talked to them," she said. "I believe that we're going to have some space contact soon, and this mental ability I have to talk to them will come in handy."

Dickerson's first contact with a UFO was in 1969, she said, when one hovered above her home. "They said they were too busy to talk to me."

Dickerson has never been one to let social conventions stand in her way. In the 1930s, when women were rarely seen in newsrooms, she wrote for the Shreveport (La.) Times and other smaller, weekly papers in the South.

In 1947, she said, she took over the Smackover Journal, a weekly newspaper in her home county about 40 miles north of Shreveport. Dickerson said she poured herself into her work to help recover from the death of her first husband.

In 1951, Dickerson left Arkansas for Florida with her new husband, a journeyman printer. Three years later, the Dickersons headed for California.