

# BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

By Cory Ahlersmeyer

## State Preparing to Make the Most of 200th Birthday

The old saying that you can only make one first impression also applies to celebrating a 200th birthday. The group helping to make sure the state takes advantage and leaves a lasting mark is the Indiana Bicentennial Commission.

In 2011, former Gov. Mitch Daniels appointed a 15-member panel to plan and execute a statewide celebration commemorating Indiana's 200th birthday. The commission, co-chaired by former Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman and longtime congressman Lee Hamilton, identified four key pillars: History & Celebration, Youth & Education, Nature Conservation and Community Involvement.

"Our goal is to make sure the bicentennial is something that is celebrated in unique ways across the state by as many Hoosiers as possible, and to also leave a legacy," says Perry Hammock, executive director of the Indiana Bicentennial Commission.

In 1916, Indiana's centennial, the big leave behind was creation of the Indiana parks system. Building on that legacy, the commission is working to establish the Bicentennial Nature Trust.

Through the Nature Trust matching grant

program, more than 6,600 acres of land have been purchased and repurposed for public use.

The commission is also focusing on many additional projects, independent initiatives taken up by Indiana organizations to leave a legacy behind on a smaller scale. The yearlong celebration officially begins on December 11, 2015.

### History – Hoosier style

Another key pillar identified by the commission as vital to the celebration of the bicentennial is engaging Indiana youth.

In Indiana, state history is taught in the fourth grade. With the exception of teachers who work it into other lessons, that history is never again officially a part of the education curriculum.

"This is an issue we really wanted to address," offers Becky Schlomann, coordinator of bicentennial programs at the Indiana Historical Society.

*Hoosiers and the American Story* is a companion book complementary to the United States history lessons that are taught in eighth and 11th grades.

"When a U.S. history teacher is teaching a national topic like the Civil War or the Industrial Revolution, he or she (now) has access to examples relating to Indiana," Schlomann details. "It doesn't just have to be about what was happening in the South during the Civil War, but also how those topics affected Hoosiers here at home."

This project is not just much ado about a book.

Funded by a Lilly Endowment grant, the Indiana Historical Society is also presenting statewide workshops for teachers and administrators on ways to better incorporate both the book and Indiana history into broader history topics at all grade levels.

"We are serving about 100 teachers at a time," Schlomann reports. "We are providing them with tons of resources, including free copies of the book."

The Indiana Historical Society isn't just focusing on the past, but also looking ahead. Of particular importance is to promote better citizenship.

"We believe if you know more about the place where you come from, you are much more likely to be a better steward of your home state, a better citizen."

### Courthouse squares

Indiana's small town courthouses are distinct; in only a handful of other states do courthouses pull double duty as the county seat and public square – hosting festivals, parades and other gatherings.

Chris Flook, telecommunications instructor at Ball State University, is working to update the state's records of those courthouse squares. Flook is traveling the state documenting and surveying the iconic locations.

"This project is based on a study by the Knight Foundation in 2008 called 'Soul of the Community,'" Flook explains. "It looked at what kept young people in small towns instead of going to the same three or four big cities."

The study found four key drivers, two of which were the aesthetics of the community



Ball State University telecommunications professor Chris Flook travels the state, including in nearby Madison County, to update the documentation of Indiana's courthouse squares. See Page 92 for information on how you can submit photos for a special publication.

(parks and architectural styles) and the places to gather like bars, coffee shops and festivals.

Small town courthouse squares are often surrounded by restaurants and small businesses, areas ripe for gathering.

“I hope in a few years this project will act as a part of a catalyst to keep your people from looking away from Indiana after college,” Flook says. “Or maybe (the small towns) even become a destination after graduating.”

The photo survey is also an effort to update archives.

“I go through archives all the time. I’ll find a photo and say, ‘Thank goodness someone took this photo in 1890,’ ” Flook says. “The idea is that it helps researchers, historians and preservationists 50 or 100 years down the road.”

### Getting involved

While many communities are fostering projects to commemorate the 200th anniversary of statehood, others are in need of assistance.

Hammock notes the following from some communities: “One of the things people are saying is, ‘We’re laying off people, we’re cutting back. Our county has no money; what can we do?’

“This is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to celebrate this milestone in Indiana history,” Hammock concludes. “Some of these



Superintendent of Public Instruction Glenda Ritz participates in a teacher workshop on incorporating *Hoosiers* and *the American Story* into history curriculum.

projects are only \$500.”

Size and scope are less relevant than this one opportunity at recognizing Indiana’s 200th birthday. Indiana businesses are encouraged to get involved.

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**RESOURCE:** Indiana Bicentennial Commission at [www.indiana2016.org](http://www.indiana2016.org)