



Lawrence County will celebrate a rich heritage for the Bicentennial, from the natural limestone landscape to its contributions to the space program – including astronaut Gus Grissom.

# LEGENDARY LAWRENCE

## Making Its Mark From Limestone to Outer Space

By Charlee Beasor

It's common knowledge that the original Indiana state capital was not located in Indianapolis, but in Corydon in southern Indiana.

A piece of Indiana lore that is similar, yet less familiar, is that the first county seat of Lawrence County (located south of Bloomington) was not the city of Bedford, as it is today and has been since 1825. Bedford was built as a replica to the original county seat of Palestine, which was abandoned due to its unhealthy conditions.

In a move that harkens to the town reconstruction scene in the 1974 Western satire *Blazing Saddles*, the entire town was moved four miles to the north, and while slightly altered and renamed, was a re-creation of the original.

"There was an outbreak of malaria, and the cemetery was filling up; it was awful. But the powers that be, the fathers of the county, went down to the General Assembly (in Corydon at that time) and said 'We need help,'" offers Marla Jones, business and community development director for the city of Bedford, and Lawrence County coordinator for the Indiana Bicentennial Commission.

"They replotted the entire town, parcel by parcel, building by building."

### Early business history

While Bedford is the "Limestone Capital of the World" and the industry has a rich history in the county (a town doesn't get to claim a status like that lightly), other

industries preceded it.

"The first thing that was really important was pork packing," offers Lawrence County Historian Ron Bell. "In the 1820s to 1850s time period, there were gentlemen packing 8,000 to 10,000 head of pork a year."

Bell, who's held the historian position for more than three years, was born in the county and owned a long-standing dry cleaning company, Bell Cleaners, from 1967 to 2000 (Bell's father ran the company before him for several decades).

Distilleries were also a backbone during the county's early years.

"They shipped out a lot of whiskey on the boats in the early days. There was a pretty good-sized whiskey distillery that was turning out a large quantity at that point in time and at one time was one of the mainstays of the Spring Mill Village. They also turned out a lot of brandies," he notes.

Prohibition, of course, took its toll on that industry.

"I can remember as a boy, they had an office set up in Bedford for the Prohibition to raid the stills that were still being pot farmed in various parts of our area in southern Indiana," Bell recalls.

The limestone industry was active prior to the Civil War, Bell notes, but many businesses closed due to the war and never

reopened. Business began to pick up again when limestone was needed to build a bridge over the White River to bring the Monon Railroad through Bedford. A number of quarries, including the Chicago Bedford Stone Company and Blue Hole Quarry, were shipping stone to Chicago and New York City, he says.

"Most of the Vanderbilt mansions (in New York) are made out of Bedford stone from various quarries. The Biltmore (Mansion) came out of the Dark Hollow Quarries in Oolitic," Bell relays. "The last of the really big-time period (for limestone) was probably 1930-1933. In that time period, there were 22 different limestone mills and 3,000 men working in the limestone industry."

In a major blow, contracts for government buildings and universities began to dry up and no more was business coming in.

"That meant in the mid-'30s, the Great Depression hit Bedford exceptionally hard and (the industry) didn't come back until World War II started," Bell adds.

### Military influence

Fortunately for the region, what started as a Navy ammunitions depot built in Crane in 1941 became the Naval Surface Warfare Center Crane Division that directly employs over 3,000 people today.

Many of the laborers displaced from the

limestone industry ended up at Crane, Bell notes.

“Bedford was one of the communities in Indiana that probably played a part in the production for the Second World War, not only the direct input of Crane, but you had the businesses here in town that were also turning out war munitions or war support. There was a shirt factory here that was making blouses for the Navy; another turning out parachutes,” he describes.

WF Meyers Company, Inc. was founded in Bedford in 1888 and makes precision stonecutting tools. Bell recalls that the company produced precision parts for the war efforts.

Additionally, the plant that today houses GM Bedford Powertrain was originally a limestone mill. It was purchased by the U.S. government in 1942 and became an aluminum engineer aircraft foundry. GM purchased the plant after WWII.

Later, the limestone industry experienced another revival. In 1962, Indiana Steel & Engineering Corp. was founded, and another company – Bedford Crane Service, LLC – grew from the 1902-established Bedford Foundry & Machine Co., Inc. Both are under one roof today.

### Space program roots

Here’s another fun historical fact. Three NASA astronauts hail from Lawrence County: Gus Grissom, Charlie Walker and Ken Bowersox.

Two of the county’s bicentennial projects will honor the NASA heroes and provide continuing education for young people.

The Lawrence County Legacy Tree Project honors both the space program and the county’s lush tree landscape. When Walker flew to space in 1984, he took space gum tree seeds with him and then brought them back to Earth, where the seeds were germinated. For the bicentennial project, a tulip poplar (Indiana’s state tree) and a space gum tree will be planted at each county school campus.

Another project celebrates Grissom’s life, by providing all fourth graders in the county with the opportunity to visit Grissom’s childhood home, his limestone rocket monument and the Virgil I. Grissom Museum at Spring Mill Park in Mitchell.

### It’s a celebration!

All of the celebratory events happening throughout the year in Lawrence County fall under the four pillars set forth by the state’s Bicentennial Commission. They are nature conservation, youth and education, community involvement and historical celebration.

Community partners will celebrate each month with a new theme. For example, March – the month the county was founded – will honor the history of Lawrence County. May is military and defense month. June is limestone month, which coincides with the annual Limestone Heritage Trail.

“It will be even bigger. We’ll have more lectures and exhibits to teach people about the history and geology and how (limestone) has been used over the years,” Jones offers.

Other projects include the Bicentennial Art Exhibit, which will be on display throughout the year at various locations. A quilting class will instruct attendees to create a lap-sized heritage quilt; and several historic barns around the county are highlighted with colorful quilt patterns as part of a driving tour.

Around town, citizens are likely to see the bicentennial-themed bus, which is designed to pique interest and market the county’s efforts. There’s even a special bicentennial coffee blend that was selected by First Lady Karen Pence.

Projects are provided either by community organization support or funded by grants. Jones notes that all of the events taking place have been a community effort.

“This is meaningful and it will bring in a different group of people: somebody from the schools, forestry, just different folks, quilting folks, business folks; it runs the gauntlet. This is a good representation of the citizenry here in Lawrence County,” she states.

“That’s how you get ownership in the community, and it makes it more worthwhile. We encourage people to come and give us their thoughts.”



Various projects will honor the past and raise awareness for Bicentennial activities, such as the Bicentennial bus (pictured behind Gov. Mike Pence), a barn quilt driving trail and events taking place at the Lawrence County Museum of History.

**RESOURCES:** Marla Jones, city of Bedford, at [www.bedford.in.us](http://www.bedford.in.us) | Lawrence County Museum of History at [www.lawrencecountyhistory.org](http://www.lawrencecountyhistory.org)