

VIRGIL I. GRISSOM MEMORIAL



Spring Mill State Park

Mitchell, Indiana 47446

(812) 849-4129

DNR

Indiana Department of Natural Resources
Division of State Parks and Reservoirs

<http://heroicrelics.org>

THE GUS GRISSOM STORY

Virgil Ivan Grissom was the second United States astronaut to go into space. He was captain of America's second suborbital flight and was preparing to lead the three-man crew of Apollo I to the Moon.

He was born at 8 a.m., April 3, 1926, at nearby Mitchell, Indiana, the oldest of four children of Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Grissom. His IQ showed 145 when he attended Mitchell's Riley Elementary School (destroyed by fire in 1960).

In 1944 he graduated from Mitchell High School, now renamed Virgil I. Grissom High School. He was too small (5'4", 98 pounds) to make the basketball varsity. He had both morning and evening newspaper routes and in the summers worked as a fruit picker in nearby orchards and as a retailer's clerk. He and his parents were members of the Church of Christ.

Greatly interested in the technology of building and flying airplanes, as a high school student, he completed one year of pre-cadet training in the U.S. Army Air Corps.

This was during World War II. In August, 1944, he was inducted into the Air Force at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indianapolis, and began training at Brooks Air Field at San Antonio, Texas.

On July 6, 1945 he was married to Betty Lavonne Moore, a classmate at Mitchell High School, and was then transferred to Boca Raton Air Base in Florida. With the war ended, he was discharged in November, 1945, with the rank of Corporal.

In September, 1946, he entered Purdue University under the G.I. Bill. He graduated in February, 1950, with a Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering.

He promptly joined the Air Force and was assigned to Randolph Air Force Base in Texas and then to Williams Air Force Base at Phoenix, Arizona. In May, 1950, their first son, Scott, was born at Seymour, Indiana.

Cadet Grissom received a commission of Second Lieutenant in March, 1951. His silver wings carried a salary of \$400 per month. In December, 1951, he was sent to Korea.

With the 334th Fighter Interceptor Squadron he flew 100 missions in less than six months, and was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal.

Home from Korea, he was assigned for four years to the exacting Air Force Institute of Technology at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, and then to the famous Test Pilot School at Edwards Air Force Base in California. He specialized at Edwards in checking out advanced-design fighter planes and emerged as one of the Nation's most highly regarded test pilots.

Gus Grissom logged more than 4,600 flight hours as an airplane pilot, with 3,500 hours in jet aircraft.

VIRGIL GRISSOM'S CAREER AS AN ASTRONAUT

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, for many months, had been screening the Nation's best flyers for astronaut potential. In April, 1959, NASA announced selection of the first seven pioneer pilots. Gus Grissom was one of those seven, who were promptly dubbed "The Gemini."

He was age 33, had grown to 5'7", and had attained a weight of 155 pounds.

In January, 1961, Grissom went to St. Louis to

see his Project Mercury space capsule being completed. Named the Liberty Bell 7, it was taken to the launch pad at Florida's Cape Canaveral on July 1.

Three weeks later, on July 21, Grissom made his famous suborbital flight. The capsule was lost at sea in the splashdown, but the mishap taught NASA much regarding recovery techniques. The flight's effect on the Nation was unprecedented.

Astronaut Grissom was received enthusiastically at the White House by President John F. Kennedy. New York City gave him a hero's welcome in a momentous parade down Fifth Avenue. Subsequently he received Indiana's Distinguished Service Award from both Governor Matthew E. Welsh and Governor Roger Branigin, being the only Hoosier ever to be so honored twice.

There were many other honors bestowed by enthusiastic Americans. The National Geographic Society presented the Thomas D. White Award. Mitchell renamed its high school building for him and also designated Baker Street, where he had been reared, as Grissom Avenue.

The astronaut himself, a very modest hero, eagerly looked forward to new ventures.

On March 23, 1965, he was command pilot of the first manned Gemini flight, when his capsule, the Molly Brown, was boosted by a Titan II rocket to three orbits about the Earth.



The flight lasted 4 hours 54 minutes and traversed 81,000 miles. The USS Intrepid skillfully recovered the space capsule and its crew.

Again a jubilant Nation hailed Gus Grissom and his copilot John W. Young. On March 26, 1965,

President Lyndon B. Johnson decorated Grissom with the Space Agency's Exceptional Service Medal. On March 29, it was another Fifth Avenue parade. On March 30, there was a parade through Chicago's Loop.

In June, Lieutenant Colonel Gus Grissom came back to Mitchell and presented to his high school the Flag which had flown over the U.S. Capitol the day of the Gemini flight.

The next February—in 1966 Virgil Grissom, Edward White and Roger Chaffee were designated by NASA as the crew for the long-anticipated Apollo I Moon flight. On April 5, they began their rigorous training.

Subsequently Navy Captain Young commanded the Gemini X (1966) and Apollo X (1969) missions. He was then assigned to command the Apollo XVI flight.

On the afternoon of January 27, 1967, with launch date nearing, the three pilots were in the Apollo spacecraft at Cape Kennedy, continuing countdown tests which had already produced three delays. At 6:31.03 p.m. fire was reported. They were unconscious within 20 seconds, suffocated by toxic gases. They were in their space suits and body burns were not severe.

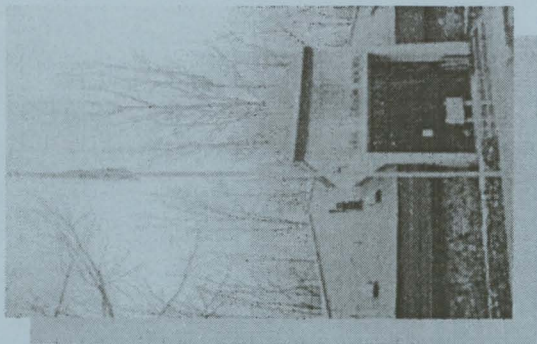
After separate funeral services in Texas, the astronauts' remains were flown to Washington.

One of our nation's remarkable processions in history preceded burial at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. Six black horses pulled the caisson, three with saddles empty. Fellow astronauts John H. Glenn, L. Gordon Cooper and John W. Young walked on the left side. Astronauts Donald K. (Deke) Slayton, Alan B. Shepard, Jr., and Scott Carpenter were on the right side.

At the Arlington services were President Johnson, many members of Congress, military and space officials, and former neighbors from Mitchell and Houston.

Three F-101 fighter planes flew overhead just before taps was sounded.

Present also were his widow, Betty Grissom, and his sons Scott (17) and Mark (13) and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Grissom.



VIRGIL I. GRISSOM MEMORIAL

The Virgil I. Grissom Memorial is a tribute to the Mitchell-born astronaut who was a pioneer in America's exploration of outer space.

After the tragedy, the Indiana General Assembly, then in session, promptly enacted legislation to create the Virgil I. Grissom Memorial.

As a boy, Gus and his two brothers and his sister had frequented Spring Mill State Park, just three miles east of Mitchell, Indiana on Highway 60. It was logical that the memorial be placed there.

The Indiana Department of Natural Resources, in planning the memorial, sought a distinctive design that would symbolize man's aspirations to explore space.

Also, the Department insisted that all items in the memorial be actual mementos of Gus Grissom's life or authentic presentations of material that would inform visitors regarding his relationship to space pioneering.

The original exhibits, some of them on loan from the Smithsonian Institution and others, will be augmented or replaced from time to time as new material becomes available.

The memorial was formally dedicated by Governor Edgar D. Whitcomb on July 21, 1971, just 10 years after Gus Grissom's first space flight.

It is hoped that visitors to the Virgil I. Grissom Memorial will avail themselves also of other attractions at Spring Mill State Park. Throughout his amazing career Gus Grissom never tired of the relaxation he enjoyed at Spring Mill, and especially of the perennial Hoosier pastime of fishing.

The Virgil I. Grissom Memorial is intended to interest and to enlighten visitors of all age groups.

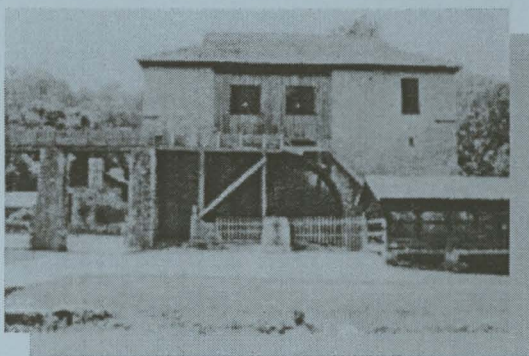
Gus Grissom was completely convinced that man stands only on the threshold of almost inconceivable future adventures. He was determined that his beloved United States of America should remain the leader of this exploration.

SPRING MILL STATE PARK

Step back in time and visit Spring Mill's pioneer village located in Spring Mill State Park. A massive water-powered grist mill, powered by water from the nearby Hamer Cave, is the focal point of the reconstructed pioneer village which flourished in the 1800's.

Spring Mill State Park was established in 1927. Its 1,319 acres include not only the Grissom Memorial but also a restored pioneer village with a museum and a large water-powered overshot wheel (1817) which is completely operational, caves with unique blind fish, a dense stand of virgin hardwood, camp sites, hiking trails, and facilities for boating, fishing, swimming, horseback riding and picnicking.

The modern Spring Mill Inn is open throughout the year. Reservations for overnight lodging are made individually. The Inn serves meals daily.



The State of Indiana has provided the home life and/or education for numerous American aviators and astronauts. Indiana's industries have produced many components of the devices which have made possible United States progress in civil and military aeronautics.

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