


# Stars and Asteroids Forever

By Steve Szilagyi

 Lynn Bondurant grew up in rural Missouri, like Mark Twain. And just as Mark Twain's characters lie by the Mississippi River watching the boats, the young Bondurant used to lay on a blanket, staring up at the night sky – watching the stars.

"We spent hours out there," he recalls, "trying to match the stars in the sky to the dots on the charts."

Bondurant is still watching the stars. As chief of the Office of Educational Programs for NASA Lewis Research Center since 1981, he's taught several generations of children to see them too. Now, as part of the City of Cleveland's bicentennial celebration in 1996, Bondurant wants the whole city to look up at the sky.

As co-chair of the "Teaching Cleveland" Bicentennial Committee, he's planned a series of stellar events that promise to bring a cosmic dimension to Cleveland's 200th Birthday Celebration.

It was by the efforts of Bondurant that Cleveland now has an official bicentennial star. Bondurant scoured the sky until he found Tejat, in the constellation Gemini. The light from Tejat that reaches earth on July 22, 1996, will have left the star exactly two hundred years earlier – the exact date Moses Cleaveland was stepping out of his boat onto the shores of the Cuyahoga and remarking: "This looks like a nice place for a city."

"If all goes according to plan," says Bondurant, "light from Tejat will come through a telescope and be the trigger that launches the whole bicentennial celebration on Public Square."

Bondurant hopes to close out the year with a signal from a NASA spacecraft zooming out into extraterrestrial space. A perfectly appropriate tribute to the city,

for as Bondurant points out, "Cleveland's Lewis Research Center has played an important role in developing NASA's interplanetary craft."

In addition to the opening and closing of the bicentennial year, Bondurant has developed a project to keep Cleveland star-struck for the whole 365 days in between.

Along with co-author Cindy Hill, Bondurant has written "Cleveland History through the History of Starlight," a new book that will take readers of all ages through the bicentennial year with star charts, historical time lines, fascinating sidebars, "Points to Ponder" and enough solid science to make it a first-rate primer for the astronomically uneducated.

Among the book's striking features are the star charts, one for every month of the year. These show the night sky as it would appear above a person standing directly on the East Ninth Street Pier. Stretching around the perimeter of the charts is a view of downtown in dizzying circular perspective from the Pier.

"The book has activities that can involve the whole family in looking at the stars," says Bondurant, who has raised two children of his own and lives with his wife Kay (a teacher in the Lorain city school system) in Avon Lake.

"There's a lot of beauty in all this," he says, wistfully noting that "children spend too much time in front of TV, and not enough time under the dome of the sky."

For Bondurant's Ph.D. dissertation, he interviewed over 100 fifth graders and discovered exactly how they perceived the stars and the heavens. Over the course of his career, he's taught high school biology (he has a master's degree in zoology) and junior high school science. He has also been a planetarium director.

But the big events of Bondurant's career have been with NASA. He was a writer-lecturer at the Goddard Space Center and education officer at the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum in Washington. "My blood,




sweat and tears are in that building."

He recalls vividly and sadly people and events surrounding the Challenger disaster and spent a year putting together a curriculum and coordinating activities at the Challenger Space Science Center in Alexandria, Virginia.

Working on the bicentennial projects has given Bondurant a new enthusiasm for his adopted city. "To get to know a place, you have to get involved," he says. "I've really fallen in love with Cleveland. I feel this freshness here. This city has so much to offer. It just captures you."

Bondurant has arranged for yet another astronomical tribute to the city he loves. In 1988, world-renowned astronomer Eleanor Helin, Ph.D., of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, discovered a new asteroid, the 6,296th to have been noted up to that time. As the discoverer, Helin was entitled to name the new object. Thanks to the efforts of Bondurant, the International Astronomical Union has approved the name "Cleveland" for Helin's discovery.

"Cleveland" is a three-mile wide hunk of rock, orbiting the sun once every 2.6 years. "Cleveland" will honor the city in perpetuity," says Bondurant, a man who takes the long view as part of his job.

"We look up at the sky and wonder if anybody's out there," he says. "But in fact, we are out there ourselves, reflected in the stars. I see Tejat, and think how that light has come down to us from the time of Moses Cleaveland. I've come to realize, history never dies. It lives forever, along corridors of light." 

*Steve Szilagyi lives in Lyndhurst.*