

A view of Bettendorf Castle's eastern side.  
Most everything associated with this castle, including  
the picket fence, drawbridge, and weathervanes, were  
hand-made by its creator, Theodore Bettendorf.



# THE MYSTERY OF Bettendorf Castle

{ BY JEFFREY WESTHOFF }

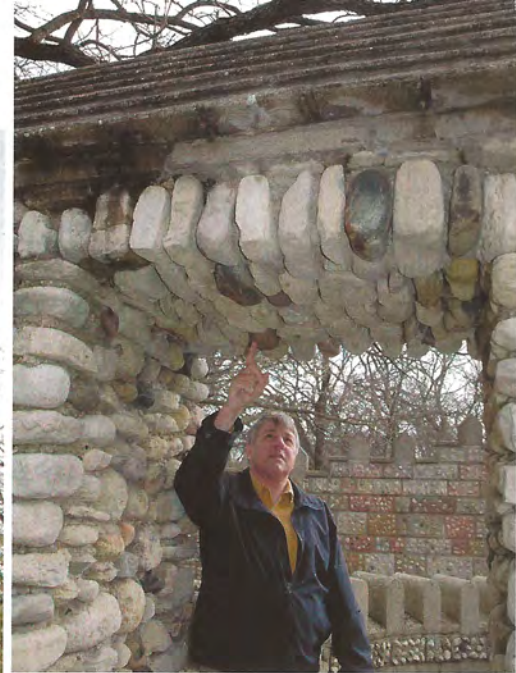
**G**ROWING UP IN A CASTLE CAN BE A BIT LIKE LIVING IN A HARDY BOYS BOOK. That's how Bill Strohl felt during the boyhood afternoons he and his younger brother, Danny, spent exploring the chambers of the Bettendorf Castle, the Fox River Grove landmark that sits upon a bluff overlooking Northwest Highway. Bill was 12 when his parents, Michael and Judy, bought the Bettendorf Castle in 1985. One day he and Danny decided to plumb the depths of what the castle's original owner and builder, Theodore "Ted" Bettendorf, called "the dungeon." Actually, the circular tower was a mineshaft Bettendorf used to quarry his own building materials. Bettendorf had anchored iron bars in the wall to serve as a ladder. Flashlights in hand, the boys climbed down to the second level. They opened the hatch in the floor and peered into level beneath. "All you could see when you opened the lid was sand," Bill recalls.

They descended to that level and dug in the sand to discover another hatch. As they lifted the hatch, sand spilled to the unexplored space below. "It was kind of like an Indiana Jones movie," Bill says. He was certain no one had been that deep into the dungeon since Bettendorf owned the castle. When they reached the bottom, 50 feet below the surface, the Strohl boys made a surprising discovery.



The Vianden Castle is the inspiration for the Bettendorf Castle in Fox River Grove, Ill. Located in the north of Luxembourg, it is one of the largest fortified castles west of the Rhine. In modern times, restoration began on the castle in 1962 and was completed in 1990. The Vianden Castle is open to visitors year-round.

Danny, Michael and Bill Strohl stand on the drawbridge that is suspended over a moat. Michael holds the mysterious Spanish sword that was found buried deep beneath the ground in the “dungeon” mineshaft left behind by Theodore Bettendorf.



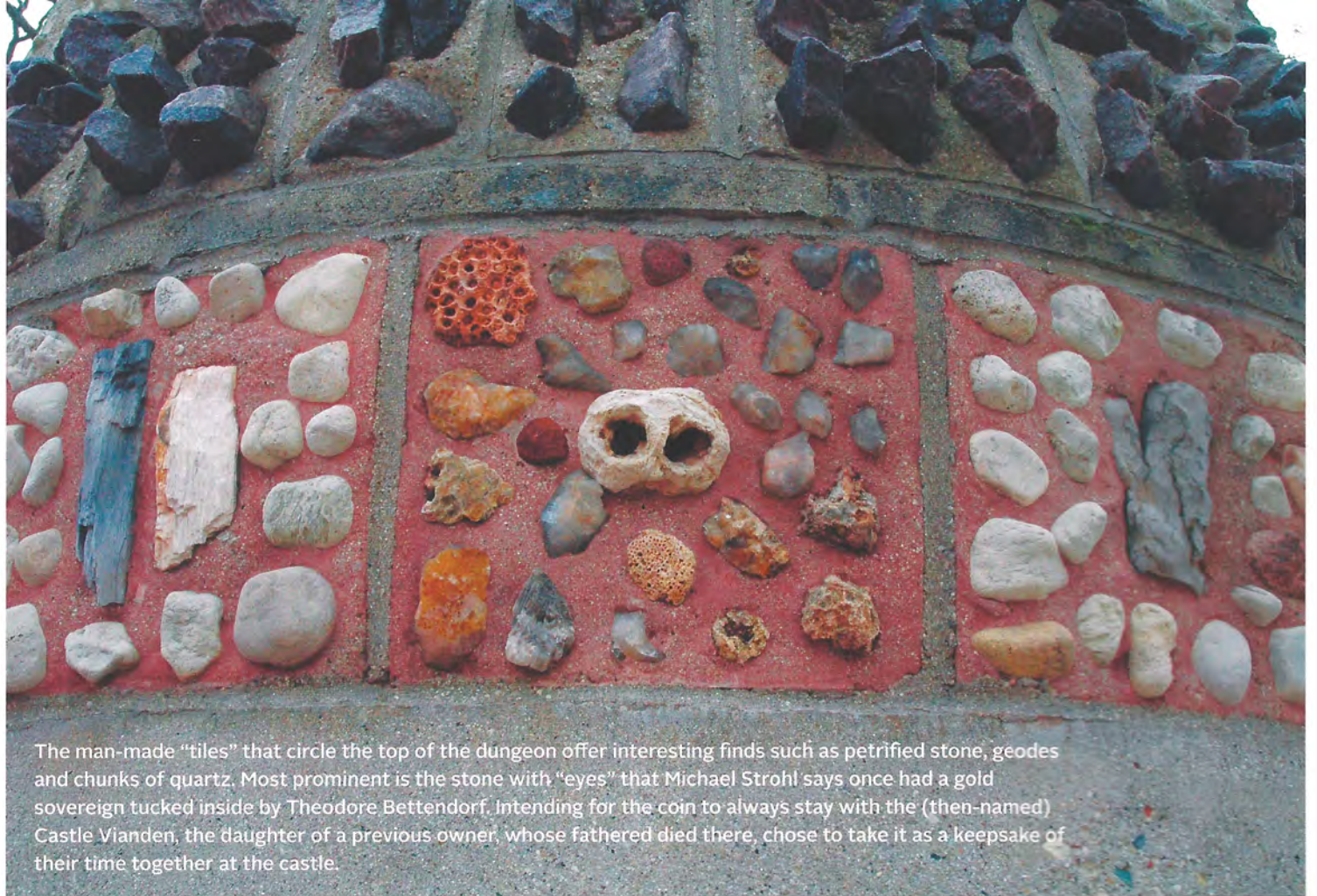
Michael Strohl marvels at the craftsmanship and engineering of Theodore Bettendorf. Here, he explains how the castle architect used wooden forms upon which clay was placed; and then how he set stones in place with concrete between them, and after curing, washed out the clay, leaving the archway consistent in design from top to bottom.

**It was there, partially buried in the sandy floor.** A large, rusty sword of medieval design. The only clue to the weapon's origin was the word “Spain” stamped in the blade.

To this day, the Strohl family has no idea how the sword came to be in the far recesses of their dungeon. They assume Bettendorf left it down there, but can't guess why. Still dark with rust, the sword now complements a suit of armor in the living room. Smiling at the memory of the sword's discovery, Michael and Bill regard it as a fun mystery of the Bettendorf Castle.

#### **FROM LUXEMBOURG TO FOX RIVER GROVE**

To begin this account of the Bettendorf Castle with a tale of boyhood exploration is fitting, because the story of the Bettendorf Castle begins with another boy exploring another castle a century ago and half a world away. Theodore Bettendorf was born May 15, 1889, in Luxembourg, a tiny European country nestled among the borders of France, Germany and Belgium. On a promontory high above Bettendorf's home village of Vianden stood a medieval castle that shared the town's name.



The man-made “tiles” that circle the top of the dungeon offer interesting finds such as petrified stone, geodes and chunks of quartz. Most prominent is the stone with “eyes” that Michael Strohl says once had a gold sovereign tucked inside by Theodore Bettendorf. Intending for the coin to always stay with the (then-named) Castle Vianden, the daughter of a previous owner, whose father died there, chose to take it as a keepsake of their time together at the castle.

Built between the 10th and 14th centuries, Castle Vianden was (and still is) one of the largest fortified castles west of the Rhine River. The Romanesque castle was unoccupied when Bettendorf was a boy, and like many children of his village, he would play on the castle grounds and explore the building’s passageways. At the time, a restoration program was under way to repair the castle, which was partially demolished in 1820 and continued to deteriorate. Michael Strohl believes that the young Ted Bettendorf observed the workers restoring the castle and remembered their techniques years later when he turned his home into a tribute to Vianden Castle.

That time came in 1931. Bettendorf had immigrated to the United States 11 years earlier and settled in Fox River Grove. He purchased a small, three-room frame house atop the bluff overlooking Route 14, then a dirt road. Bettendorf thought his home looked flimsy, and joked that a stiff wind might blow it over the bluff’s edge. He decided to fortify the walls with a stone veneer. Sometime during the process, Bettendorf chose to turn his modest home into a model of the castle from his childhood. He built turrets on to the house’s corners, giving it a distinct look of medieval times.

**THE CASTLE GROWS**

Even after Bettendorf had encased his house in stone and mortar, he kept going. Using a postcard of Castle Vianden as his guide, Bettendorf turned his property into a castle grounds with his house as the keep. He added crenelated battlements with walkways, a guard tower and a gatehouse with functioning drawbridge. He built decorative features such as a fountain and an overlook on the bluff’s edge. He built functional features such as a garage and coach house. He dug a cistern for a



The “dungeon,” located on the castle grounds, offers an entryway into what was a multi-layer mineshaft, built from the top down. The mineshaft offered a source of building materials hauled up by using a pulley system turned with a Model T winch. The Strohls dug through several feet of sand to reach the second wooden hatch door that led to the lowest compartment. Today, a plastic skeleton sits on the bottom for fun.



The coach or carriage house is shown in the back of this photo, with the 'dungeon' to its right. This is a view of the castle grounds from the top of the drawbridge tower.

water supply.

Michael Strohl, who is in the construction trade, marvels at the precision of Bettendorf's work. "This castle is actually architecturally perfect," Michael says. "Every circle is a perfect circle. Every wall is perfectly straight."

Bettendorf's self-sufficiency didn't end with his building skills. He also procured and manufactured his construction materials. He would drive around in his Model T Ford looking for pieces of the glacial rock he needed for the walls. Most of Bettendorf's building material came from a source closer to home. When Bettendorf dug a foundation for his house, he discovered the building sat upon a rich bed of the project's two most necessary materials, stone and torpedo sand. Bettendorf sank two narrow, circular mine shafts into his property (they would become the guard tower and dungeon). Using the winch on his Model T, Bettendorf hauled the material with a pulley system to the surface. He would mix the sand into mortar, then pour the mortar to hold the stone in place. He worked all year long. As the cold weather arrived, he poured concrete blocks which cured in the mine shafts all winter.

Bettendorf, who remained a lifelong bachelor, accomplished all this over the course of three decades. He worked as a machinist for Brach's Candy Company in Chicago and commuted to the city by train each weekday. He built his castle on nights and weekends. From the 1930s through the '60s, villagers could look to the top of the hill and watch as the castle went up stone by stone, building by building. Speaking to the *Chicago Sunday Times* in 1942, Bettendorf said, "If I'd known then [in 1931] what it was going to turn into, I would have been afraid to attempt it."

#### PART OF HISTORY

Ted Bettendorf built his castle in Fox River Grove through interesting times. He began his project during the Great Depression and the tail-end of the Prohibition era. Across the street that is now Northwest Highway, was an establishment that offered food, music, dancing, and liquor. There, liquor

was distributed through the Chicago mob, and space was offered as an occasional hiding place for gangsters of the Al Capone mob, including "Baby Face" Nelson and John Dillinger. This colorful, local history would give way to World War II in 1939 as the United States and the world that Bettendorf came from saw great change.

In September 2011, the McHenry County Historical Society awarded the castle a plaque that signifies its historical and architectural significance. Ted Bettendorf's efforts are integral to the castle's history, says Grace Moline, chairman of the society's Historic Sites Committee. "The committee was highly impressed that this was the work of one man who built it by hand, basically from memory."

The Strohl family believes the plaque serves as an important recognition of the Bettendorf Castle's stature. "We've always known it was an historic place," Bill Strohl says. "This made it official." The Strohls also have applied to have the castle listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ted Bettendorf died Sept. 20, 1967, at the age of 78. He continued to work on the castle until shortly before his death. Because Bettendorf left no heirs, his castle was put on the auction block. The auction took place Oct. 3, 1968, and attracted national attention. More than 25,000 people toured the castle during open houses leading up to the sale. They found an interior that was nearly empty. Bettendorf, the bachelor who spent his spare time making the exterior of his home so regal, had slept on a mattress on the floor. He is buried in Fox River Grove.

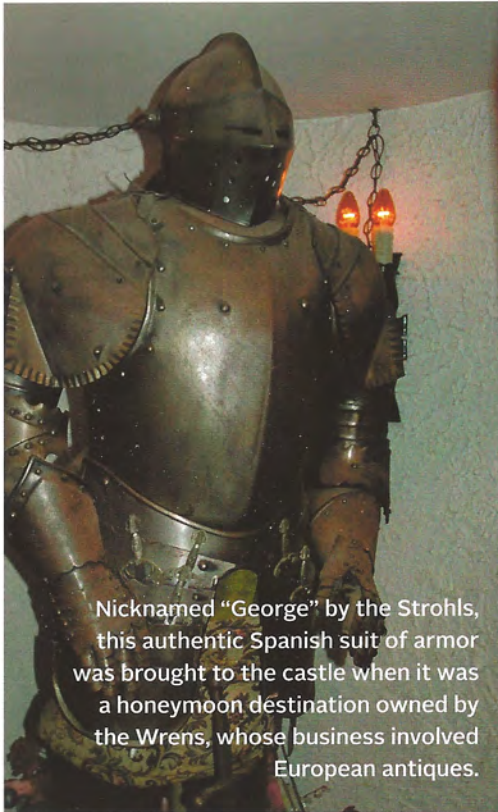
#### HONEYMOON DESTINATION

Mary and Herman Wren, a couple who owned an antique store called Aladdin's Lamp in Highland Park, won the auction with a bid of \$81,000. One of their competitors, according to Michael Strohl, was the crooner Bing Crosby. At the end of the sale, auctioneer Teddy Duggins told the *Chicago Tribune*, "This certainly was the oddest piece of property we've ever sold."

With plans to turn the castle into a rental property, the Wrens remodeled and updated the castle's rooms and brought in European furnishings from their antique store. They also added the suit of armor. When their renovation was complete, the interior of the castle matched its exterior. The castle was

A view of the wishing well, looking to the west.





Nicknamed "George" by the Strohls, this authentic Spanish suit of armor was brought to the castle when it was a honeymoon destination owned by the Wrens, whose business involved European antiques.



Theodore Bettendorf was a machinist by trade who hand-made the iron drawbridge chain links (see photo below) and this door knocker.



soon open for business, and the Wrens primarily advertised it as a honeymoon hideaway. In 1976, the price for a three-day stay was \$225.

Deciding they would rather devote time to their antiques business, the Wrens sold the Bettendorf Castle to Linda and Peter Petmezas in 1976. The Petmezas moved into the castle and made it their private residence, ending its days as a honeymoon destination. When the Petmezas family decided to sell the castle in 1985, it made the front page of the *Daily Herald*.

Michael Strohl, who lived in Arlington Heights at the time and wanted to move to a less crowded town for his young sons, read the *Daily Herald* story over breakfast that morning and immediately called the real estate agent named in the article. "I woke her up," he recalls. "She didn't even know it was in the paper." Michael made appointment to see the castle at 10 that morning, the first day it was on the market. He saw the property before any other potential buyer. "I shook her hand when we left, and I bought the castle." He chuckles with a hint of triumph at the memory. "After I bought it, she had 100 calls."

Michael says he and his wife bought the castle not just for its history, but its beauty. "It's just gorgeous. How could you not love it?" he says. "Getting up every morning and walking outside, it's like being at Disney World."

### KEEPERS OF THE CASTLE

Michael's primary business when he bought the castle was exterior building restoration, and his sons have followed his career path. Over the years they have been restoring the castle, one project at a time. "This is the perfect fit for us," Michael says, "because it is what we do, exterior restoration."

Like artists who restore Renaissance masterpieces, the Strohls have been meticulous about retaining Bettendorf's vision as they make repairs. When they replaced stone shingles on the turrets, each was cut by hand in the exact shape. "Every one had to be cut the same way and put back in the

same order," Michael says. When they restored the underground garage, "We built it exactly the same way Teddy did," Bill says. When they repaired the fence, they made sure the posts matched Bettendorf's originals. "It was like he was here guiding our hands as we were doing it," Michael says. "It was unbelievable."

Michael admits such home improvement projects are expensive, but says, "It's better to keep it up than to lose it to the elements." He sees himself as "the steward of the castle," tasked with preserving an important local landmark for future generations. "It's my responsibility to take care of it, then pass it on."

Michael also has become an amateur historian of his home. He has filled binders with photographs of the castle through the decades along with newspaper and magazine articles from across the country. Soon after moving into the castle, he began talking with longtime neighbors to collect their memories of Bettendorf.

As he looks about his home, Michael admits he remains in awe of the man who built it with two hands and a Model T. "If you look at a man who did this all by himself, don't you think he's an unbelievable person? It's superhuman."

Michael admits he found another mystery of the Bettendorf Castle, also located in the dungeon. This mystery isn't about something found in the dungeon, but how Bettendorf built it. As Bettendorf dug deeper, he lined the shaft's walls with concrete to prevent the mine from collapsing. Any contractor could build a concrete wall from the ground up, Michael says, but he knows of no other built from the ground down in such a way. How Bettendorf did it baffles him. "I've asked everyone," Michael says. "I've asked architects. I've asked builders. No one's come up with an answer."

He may never know the answer. Yet a castle isn't truly a castle without a good mystery. U

PHOTO: APRIL GRAVES/LIGHTDRAWNSTUDIOS.COM



Ella Londergan poses for the 2012 "Beautiful Things with WINGS" Calendar (Fairy Edition) at the Bettendorf Castle. Produced by April Graves and with support from the Strohls, proceeds from calendar sales go to WINGS, a local nonprofit organization that helps women and children who are affected by domestic violence.

To purchase a calendar or notecards, visit [wingsprogram.com/store/calendar.html](http://wingsprogram.com/store/calendar.html)



## The Famous Bettendorf Castle

THE CASTLE UPON A HILL IN FOX RIVER GROVE BECAME FAMOUS DURING THE LIFETIME OF THE MAN WHO BUILT IT, TED BETTENDORF. HE ALWAYS REFERRED TO HIS HOUSE AS CASTLE VIANDEN, NAMED FOR THE CASTLE IN HIS NATIVE LUXEMBOURG THAT INSPIRED HIS CELEBRATED HOME RENOVATION PROJECT. LOCALS CHANGED ITS NAME TO BETTENDORF CASTLE AFTER HIS DEATH IN 1967.