

Iowa's King of Camelot

"Camelot — Camelot," said I to myself, "I don't seem to remember hearing of it before. Name of the asylum, likely."
—Mark Twain
"A Connecticut Yankee
In King Arthur's Court"

Stubble pokes through white-frosted fields that buckle like a ruffled blanket, a blanket that unravels effortlessly as the car's wheels pull on the thread of U.S. Highway 59.

With each pull, a new wrinkle is exposed. Then, one more dip, a turn onto State Highway 175, and there it is... Ida Grove — a modern-day Camelot caught in the folds of northeast Iowa's terrain.

Like the Camelot of old, almost. Oh, there are cars now. And electric lights. And... well, a collection of modern embellishments. But tucked among this weave of paved roads and modern frame houses, the midday sun glitters off a marvelous assortment of towers and castles, misplaced, it seems, by some mischievous medieval architect.

The structures are there through the courtesy of Byron Godbersen, a 64-year-old inventor and



entrepreneur. He built them. And few who visit Ida Grove soon forget the legend he's established in this town of 2,285 residents.

Maybe a visitor first notices Godbersen's hill-top castle just south of town. Godbersen and his wife, LaJune, live within its towering walls. Their children live in medieval-looking homes nearby.

Or maybe one first notices the town's airport with its castle-like hanger.

Or is one's attention first captured by the eight-acre Lake LaJune Godbersen has gouged from a cornfield just beyond the landing strip? Or perhaps his Swiss chalet? Or the fifth-scale duplicates of the H.M.S. Bounty and the Cape Hatteras lighthouse? Or maybe it's that wonderful medieval structure tucked into Lake LaJune's west shore? It was, after all, the first castle Godbersen ever built.

It looked so empty there, Godbersen explains, pointing out of the chalet window toward the scaled-down castle. He usually eats lunch in his chalet. It is his private restaurant and he often entertains business associates and friends there.

Today's lunch is over now and Godbersen sits sideways to the table, propping his right elbow on the arm of his chair. He rests the short fingers of his bulky hand against wind-burned cheekbones. The fingers frame tanned eyelids that fold over at the outside corners of ice-blue eyes. The top button of his blue shirt is unfastened and his T-shirt peaks through the "V" at his neck.

He thought the lakeside castle would be "neat," he explains, in even tones that signal the story is often told. He says he came up with the idea while flipping through an encyclopedia.

He immediately sketched plans and had the castle built. Godbersen apparently became caught up in the thing. He currently is building his 13th major medieval structure.

Godbersen and his employees have built:

- A medieval tower — flanked by two sloping walls and topped by a United States flag — that serves as the city's marker.

- A medieval stone-towered suspension bridge in the middle of Ida Grove's nine-hole golf course.

- A medieval castle housing the Ida County Courier. (Godbersen says he entered the newspaper business because he felt the Ida County Pioneer Record did not encourage healthy business expansion in the county. He has since sold the paper but still owns the printing company.)

- A medieval-looking Skate Palace Godbersen donated to the American Legion.

- An assortment of medieval-looking businesses, including a shopping plaza and the building where Byron's Originals, fifth-scale model airplanes, are designed. Across from Byron's Originals, employees are shaping castle-like walls around Godbersen's first Midwest Industries building where some of the entrepreneur's first inventions were designed and constructed. But Godbersen does not take refuge in these



castles. They are not the asylum of an eccentric but symbols of the wealth he shares with the community.

In fact, Godbersen seems to follow Thoreau's advice: "If you have built your castles in the air your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

The foundations for Godbersen's castles have been built on his knack for turning considerable skills — and his hobbies — into profits.

The 1984 assessed value of land and buildings owned by Godbersen and his companies was set at more than \$4.07 million. However, the actual value of the properties is greater. The real value is adjusted because Iowa grants industry tax exemptions and because some of Godbersen's land is zoned agricultural.

No one is certain of Godbersen's total wealth, however, and Godbersen won't say.

"We make enough to pay our bills, pay our payroll and buy improvements that we need," he says. "We make enough to stay in business."

But Godbersen has not always been wealthy. He grew up on a farm near Mapleton, Iowa, and milked cows, he says, instead of participating in high school athletics. Godbersen says he was graduated, "just barely," in 1942.

"I wasn't a very good student. I think I'm bright, probably. I understand a lot of things a lot better than a lot of people do."

Two years after graduation, Godbersen entered the Army where he was trained as a paratrooper before being sent to the South Pacific. During his two years of service, he and LaJune courted by mail.

They were married two months after he returned to the United States in 1946. Then, he took some agriculture courses and rented "240 acres of some of the roughest land you ever saw" from his father.

"We said the hills were bigger than the farm."

For eight years, Godbersen worked this land. And he had a fair amount of success. But he is candid in talking about his distaste for farming.

"I've always said my wife didn't like feeding chickens and I didn't like milking cows."

Because of this, Godbersen was determined to do something else. Years of building and fixing farm gadgets had honed his mechanical skills. So he put that talent to work.

Godbersen devised a hydraulic hoist that made it easier to load and unload pickup trucks and then developed a way to mass-produce and market it. He and luck found each other.

"I've had a lot of luck," he says. "There are two kinds. There's a kind where you throw up a coin and if it comes up heads or tails — you win one way or another. And there's the other kind that

you spell w-o-r-k. I've had a good share of both."

When the first hoist was completed, Godbersen showed it to area equipment dealers. The first one to see it couldn't understand how something so simple could work so well and made Godbersen demonstrate the hoist several times.

Then he caught Godbersen in a little white lie. The dealer asked how many hoists Godbersen had sold.

"Several," answered the inventor.
"How come the serial number is 1?" the dealer asked.

Godbersen says he admitted this was the first hoist manufactured but resolutely backed his product. The dealer bought, and Godbersen returned home to fill the order.

Since then, serial numbers for all Godbersen products start at 1,000, he says.

Godbersen moved from the farm to Ida Grove in 1954 when orders for his hoist started pouring in. He worked in a shop with his friend, Russ Coil. Godbersen said they made their own parts and welded the hoists together for less than \$40. Dealers bought the hoists for \$90 and sold them to farmers for \$118, he says. Sales snowballed.

"I just can't take any credit for genius on that thing except building it," he says. You can't miss, he says, when a product sells for almost three times what it costs to build it and those sales occur before the product is manufactured.

Other businesses saw the same opportunity. Within five months, 13 established companies were manufacturing his hoist. Godbersen was awarded a patent on the hoist, however, and that stopped the competition. It was a good thing. He says the other companies would have undercut his prices because they could build the hoist more cheaply.

With money earned from hoist sales, Godbersen bought a 13-foot boat, built a trailer for it and went on a family vacation to Ten-Mile Lake in Minnesota.

He had been selling hoists for two years and was looking for another item to sell during the spring. While on vacation, he noticed that hoists, used to pull boats from the water, bumped and scraped the crafts' hulls. He says he thought he could build something more efficient.

"I was working on this thing in the attic of this little house for about three days," he recalls. "My wife came up and simply said, 'If this is what you're going to do, spend all your time up here, then we may as well go home.'"

They left the following morning.
"I went right to work on it and showed it that fall at the Minneapolis Trade Show. I've been selling it since."

In fact, the boat hoists — along with boat trailers — now outsell his original product