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## Neil Armstrong's hometown goes all out for 40th anniversary of moonwalk

By *HOWARD WILKINSON*  
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WAPAKONETA, Ohio — For 40 years now in this western Ohio town, native son Neil Armstrong is never far away, even though he only rarely returns to the place he once called home.

To the world, he is the first man to walk on the moon — the Apollo astronaut the whole world watched on grainy, ghostly TV images on July 20, 1969, as he stepped off the lunar module ladder and left his boot print in the chalky moon dust.

But in Wapakoneta, where the teenage Armstrong, the shy and quiet son of Steve and Viola, learned to fly, he is not only the first man on the moon; he hung the moon.

It's their moon now.

"I can't help but think of it every time I walk out at night and see the moon in the sky," said Charlotte Williams, who owns a small bookstore in downtown Wapakoneta, a few blocks from the old drug store where Armstrong worked as a boy. "We are proud of what Neil accomplished. We feel like we had a part in history."

Every July, Wapakoneta holds a Summer Moon Festival to celebrate its lunar connections, but this year, because it is the 40th anniversary, it will be a Summer Moon Festival on steroids, with eight days of activities in town and at the Neil Armstrong Air and Space Museum that began July 13 and run through Monday.

The Thirsty Dog Brewery in Akron is micro-brewing a special beer for the occasion — Lunar Lager. The Chattanooga Bakery in Tennessee will display the world's largest Moon Pie, weighing in at 55 pounds and 45,000 calories.

**"Cheese artist" Sarah Kaufmann from West Chester will transform an 1,800-pound block of cheese into a life-sized astronaut.**

Local restaurants will offer special menu items for the "Taste of Wapakoneta," including a hand-breaded tenderloin sandwich called The Flying Saucer; the 3,2,1 Lift Off power breakfast, loaded with protein; a monstrous Blue Moon Sundae and the One Giant Sandwich for Mankind, featuring one-third of a pound of beef.

Over at RJ's Coffey Cup, they'll be serving a Martian Burger with Crater Cheese (hamburger with Swiss), Moon Rocks (fried mushrooms), Alien Fries and Orbit Rings.

Walking up and down Auglaize Street, the main drag in Wapakoneta's downtown, it becomes clear that most business owners have a hard case of moon fever. Nearly every shop has a display of some kind in

its windows related to Armstrong and the 1969 moon landing — covers of old Life magazines, commemorative moon landing Pepsi cans, fancy, upholstered chairs with a space theme.

Elly Archer, a Wapakoneta native, was a young wife pregnant with her first child during the 1969 moon shot; she remembers vividly how many in the town were on edge because of the obvious dangers Armstrong faced on the lunar mission.

"I remember being nervous, worried, not knowing if he would be safe," Archer said. "It was kind of nerve-racking."

After he became a household name and earned his place in history 40 years ago, Armstrong did not return to his boyhood roots. Instead, he went to Cincinnati, where he taught engineering for years at UC and where he still lives in retirement in Indian Hill. A recent appearance with the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra at Riverbend was one of his rare public appearances.

The last time Armstrong was in Wapakoneta, Barber said, was two years ago for the 60th reunion of his Blume High School graduating class.

"Some people complain that he never comes around here," Barber said. "I don't get it. What does he owe us? Nothing, really."

"He was shy and quiet as a boy; and he did not change as a man," Barber said. "All the fame, all the recognition — he didn't seek it. It was a function of what he did. And I understand that. We don't own him. But we're proud of him. And that's why we celebrate him."

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