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'76 Bicentennial Plans Cut Back as Mood Shifts

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WASHINGTON, July 3—The public and Congressional lack of interest, partisan politics and long inaction have resulted in a considerable scaling down of the nation's plans to commemorate its bicentennial.

A shifting mood, widespread

Independence Day

Following is a list of services affected:

Public and Parochial Schools—Closed.

Parking—Sunday rules in effect.

Post Office—Closed except for special delivery.

Stores—Most department and retail stores closed.

Banks—Closed.

Stock Exchanges—Closed.

Sanitation—No regular refuse collection.

"The bicentennial," remarked James Morton Smith, director of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, "shares two attributes with death and taxes: It is inevitable, and it is uneasily anticipated."

That may be an unduly pessimistic assessment, but it illustrates the frustration and disappointment felt by many persons involved in planning for 1976. And yet, as Mr. Smith also pointed out, there will be a bicentennial, despite the myriad problems that have plagued planning that began

Continued on Page 40, Column 6

Continued From Page 1, Col. 2

in 1966.

At that time it was assumed that, in addition to smaller-scale events across the country, the main focal point in the nation's celebration would be a huge federally sponsored international exposition in Philadelphia, Boston, or Washington—a repetition in many ways of the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876.

But the bicentennial, as it is shaping up, will involve little Federal participation or initiative. There will be no grand expositions, no parks, no new buildings or monuments. Instead, each state and town—with limited Federal assistance—will commemorate the nation's anniversary as it sees fit.

Lubbock, Tex., for example, will assemble a representation of a frontier ranch, complete with "the big house," bunkhouse and corrals, on a 12 acre site on the campus of Texas Tech University.

California plans a traveling heritage exhibition with documents, maps and tapes of famous speeches that will be transported by truck across the state.

Indiana is considering a plan under which young people will be asked to search out and stake the route traveled by the explorer George Rogers Clark.

Boston will refurbish its historic "Freedom Trail" and commemorate events ranging from the midnight ride of Paul Revere to the Battle of Bunker Hill.

New Jersey plans to build a "Liberty Park" on a 450-acre waterfront site in Jersey City.

These are but a few of the thousands of projects that will be undertaken across the country in connection with the bicentennial. They are part of an effort to make the nation's observance of the bicentennial extend to every town and city, and not just to a few locales.

Plans for Philadelphia

As recently as the spring of 1972, however, a \$1.5-billion international exposition in Philadelphia was considered the keystone of the bicentennial. Planning for the event had begun in 1957, and had proceeded for 13 years before President Nixon endorsed the project in 1970.

But less than two years later, Mr. Nixon reversed himself, declaring that he had "reluctantly concluded that we cannot prudently go forward" with the costly and by-then controversial plan.

Another large-scale project, a \$1.25-billion plan for a federally sponsored bicentennial park in every state, met the same fate as the Philadelphia exposition when it was rejected last May after initial endorsement.

The demise of the two grand plans was a consequence of the changing conception of what the bicentennial should be. "The new concept of the bicentennial," a White House official who has worked closely with the project said recently, "is that it should be creative, humanistic, intellectual, getting away from bricks and mortar, from buildings and facilities."

1973



The New York Times/George Tames

Anne Armstrong, counselor to President Nixon, who deals with plans for 1976 observance, at a news session with officials of American Revolution Bicentennial Commission in Washington. They are Lynn R. Carroll, left, program aide, and Hugh A. Hall, acting director. Mrs. Armstrong hopes events will show people's "belief in this country."

To a great extent this new conception reflects the change in national attitudes that has occurred in the last decade. Colorado's rejection in a referendum last fall of the Olympic Games scheduled—as part of the bicentennial—to be held there in 1976 underlined the new suspicion of huge events with exorbitant costs.

And that point was not lost on bicentennial planners. "We've learned very well the lesson of the Olympics," said State Senator Chester Atkins, co-chairman of the Massachusetts Bicentennial Commission, which is studying ways in which the impact of a projected 5-10 million visitors can be dealt with in 1976.

But in part, too, the change in concept was necessary because of the troubled experience of the American Revolu-

tion Bicentennial Commission, which was created by Congress in 1966 "to plan, develop, encourage and coordinate activities to commemorate the nation's 200th anniversary."

From its inception, the commission has been crippled by a lack of direction and a chronic shortage of funds. Although established by Congress in 1966, the commission received no operating funds until three years later. It has had a succession of temporary directors and has faced almost continual uncertainty about its future.

Only in the last three years has the commission accomplished anything very substantive, and yet at the same time it has come under severe Congressional criticism for being politically partisan, overly commercial and inefficient.

This criticism reached a climax last August, after a number of embarrassing internal documents were released to the press. In one memo, for instance, the commission's acting director, Jack Levant, suggested that the bicentennial "could be the greatest opportunity Nixon, the party, and the Government has as a beacon of light for reunification and light within the nation and the world."

Disclosure of the documents focused Congressional attention on the controversial commission's activities. Mr. Levant resigned, reportedly after a special study by the General Accounting Office alleged improprieties in the way he was being paid.

Two subsequent investigations of the commission by the G.A.O. and the House Judiciary Committee dismissed for the most part the charges of political interference and undue commercialism. But, the House committee reported, "Our investigation reveals a startling lack of concrete ongoing programs either initiated, stimulated or coordinated by the A.R.B.C."

Both studies attributed this lack of accomplishment to the commission's unwieldy structure, and recommended that it be reorganized. President Nixon followed the suggestion, and in February proposed dismantling the 50-member commission and replacing it with a bicentennial administration headed by a more powerful director.

Late in May the House approved the basic outline of the Administration's plan, but refused to invest the bicentennial administrator with the independent power White House officials insisted was necessary for increased efficiency and to attract "a person of tremendous national stature" to the job.

The reorganization plan has now been referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which will hold hearings on the House bill next week. Committee staff members are hopeful that the Senate will act on the plan before Congress adjourns the first week in August.

Hugh A. Hall, acting director

of the commission for the last year, denies any discouragement. "I'm more optimistic than I've ever been," he insisted in an interview last week.

"We can go out of business tomorrow," he added, "and the bicentennial is going to be a success."

His assertion reflects the largely coordinating role the group has adopted for itself. The commission's principal achievement to date has been its assistance in establishing the bicentennial commissions that now exist in every state, the territories, the District of Columbia, and many cities and towns.

The commission also developed the three major themes that will be emphasized by these groups — Heritage '76, Festival U.S.A. and Horizons '76, which commemorate the nation's past, present and future respectively.

Despite these efforts, a majority of bicentennial officials questioned recently by the New York Times in seven states were critical of the commission.

"We aren't getting any direction or support," said A. K. Johnson, director of the Georgia Bicentennial. "The Administration is somehow giving the impression that they want the states to do all of this. It just doesn't seem right."

Each of the seven commissions complained that it was hampered by lack of funds.

For many persons involved in planning, an underlying hope has been that, as the commission suggested a few years ago, Americans will strive "to forge a new national commitment, a new spirit of '76, which vitalizes the ideals for which the Revolution was fought; a spirit which will unite the nation in purpose and dedication to the advancement of human welfare as it moves into its third century."

One group, the People's Bicentennial Commission, emphasizes the revolutionary principles of the Founding Fathers as the basis for a new movement for social change. Another, the Afro American Bicentennial Corporation, hopes to use the bicentennial as a "vehicle" for improving the lives of black Americans.

And Anne Armstrong, the White House aide who deals with the bicentennial, sees the event in another light. "It might well be a method to show one's belief in this country and what it can be," she said.

But others are skeptical. "I have made some study of previous centennials," said Richard McCormick, a Rutgers history professor, who is a member of the Bicentennial Commission, "and I don't think it is going to produce some marvelous turning point or bring the country together or produce some great change that will bring us into nirvana."

"We have a tendency," he added, "to let our expectations go too far."