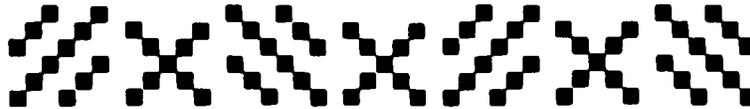


The American People and the Centennial of 1876

*Walter Nugent**



As your program states, my topic is "The American People and the Centennial." When I was asked to come here, it was to say something about "how the country observed the 1876 Centennial." I have broadened that just a bit since I can't resist grinding some of my favorite axes about that fascinating and in some ways dreadful decade, the 1870s. So let me begin by describing some of the many Centennial celebrations, then go on to some of the attitudes which people of that day had about the Centennial and what they thought it represented, and finally try to describe for you a bit of the context which surrounded the Centennial observance, both in 1876 itself and in the 1870s in general.

Despite the vast differences in American life as it is in 1976 and as it was in 1876, which led among other things to differences between the Centennial and Bicentennial celebrations, there were nevertheless certain similarities. One of them was that in both cases a considerable amount of advance planning went on. We will probably never know for certain just how the idea of a Centennial celebration originated, and in the third and fourth quarters of the nineteenth century, there weren't the cadre of professional organizers of historic anniversaries such as have been with us since the Civil War centennial of the early 1960s, many of whom simply re-addressed their talents to the Bicentennial after the Civil War centennial wound down and who will probably round out their careers by organizing

* Walter Nugent is professor of history, Indiana University, Bloomington. In a slightly different version the following address was delivered at a luncheon meeting of the Indiana University Conference on Historic Preservation at Vincennes University, September 25, 1976. A few minor changes have been made to the text of the original speech to adapt it to the printed medium; otherwise, the address is printed here essentially as it was given by Professor Nugent. Nugent has recently published *From Centennial to World War: American Society, 1876-1917* (Indianapolis, 1977).

celebrations to mark the two hundredth anniversaries of the Treaty of Paris, the Constitution, and on down through the Louisiana Purchase and beyond. I have heard nothing yet about a celebration to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Bland-Allison Act (February 28, 1878), but it would not surprise me. One of Parkinson's laws states that work expands to engage existing personnel, and the historic anniversary business is obviously no exception. In the 1860s and 1870s, however, Americans were as yet innocent of the natural laws of bureaucracy. No professional organizers of anniversaries were around because the country was not yet old enough to have any hundredth anniversaries of much significance. If anybody had even wanted to celebrate the centennial of the Stamp Act in 1865, Appomattox stole its meager thunder. In the 1860s and 1870s the notion seemed to develop from a number of sources that the Centennial of the Declaration of Independence ought to be made something special. Some people were thinking about it as far ahead as 1866. Professor William Peirce Randel, in his 1969 book on the Centennial, traces the idea of a Centennial observance, in the specific form of a great national exposition, to two men, John L. Campbell and General Charles B. Norton.¹ Campbell was a professor of mathematics, natural history, and astronomy at Wabash College [Crawfordsville, Indiana], and in 1866 he suggested the idea to one of the Indiana senators and to the mayor of Philadelphia. General Norton published an article in a British journal in 1866 also suggesting an exposition, and his thoughts were reaffirmed the following year when he served as United States commissioner to the Paris exposition, or world's fair, of 1867. At that time, of course, the great successes of the Crystal Palace exposition in London in 1851 and subsequent world's fairs, including the one in Paris in 1867, were fresh in many people's minds. Those expositions were intended, principally, to display the great material progress of the industrial age, and they did succeed in reinforcing the idea of progress in the minds of nineteenth century Europeans and Americans, who were, in retrospect, perhaps inordinately fond of the idea. But those expositions did not, as a rule, mark or coincide with any historic anniversary of great significance. It thus seemed especially appropriate that the United States, which had not yet put on a show of that kind but which felt that it too had plenty of progress to brag about, combine

¹ William Peirce Randel, *Centennial: American Life in 1876* (Philadelphia, 1969), 283.

the display-of-progress idea with a celebration of the greatest historic anniversary the country had yet known, the centennial of national independence. Thus the contents of the Philadelphia exposition and of the speeches and hymns that went with it stressed, virtually without fail, the idea of "look what we Americans have done, spiritually and materially, in the century of our independent existence."

The national government had been in the habit of sending commissioners and exhibits to other countries' exhibitions at their official request, and it seemed natural for those interested in promoting a centennial exhibition to approach Congress for help. Congress first considered the matter raised by Campbell and Norton in 1870, and in 1871 it passed a bill approving the Exhibition officially. But there was a joker in the deck. The 1871 law said that the Exhibition "should be held under the auspices of the United States; at the same time leaving it to the people to raise the necessary money therefor by voluntary contributions"²: a public anniversary, but to be run by private enterprise. In early 1872 Congress further blessed the effort by creating a Centennial Commission, chaired by ex-Governor Joseph R. Hawley of Connecticut, and a Centennial Board of Finance which was authorized to conduct a public sale of up to ten million dollars in stock. But there was still no public appropriation.

The commission and the board of finance had some early success in selling the stock, but, like railroads and investment bankers everywhere, they were stopped cold by the panic of September, 1873, and the ensuing depression. Somewhat short of their goal, they approached Congress again in May, 1874, and again were denied help. They struggled on, but in January and February, 1876, were desperate and once more asked Congress for funds, this time for one and one half million dollars.³ The congressional debate was extensive for such an amount. Some members questioned the constitutionality of such an appropriation to a private group. Others were simply being stingy. Senator Eli Saulsbury, a Delaware Democrat, made a telling point when he observed: "There are hundreds and thousands of men to-day trembling on the very verge of bankruptcy, while there are hundreds of thousands who have not the common necessities of life; and yet the taxes wrung from the

² U.S., Congress, Select Committee on the Centennial, *House Report no. 1*, 44 Cong., 1 Sess. (U.S. Serial Set 1708), January 6, 1876.

³ *Ibid.*; U.S., Congress, *Senate Miscellaneous Document no. 5*, 44 Cong., 1 Sess. (U.S. Serial Set 1665), December 8, 1875.

people are to be taken by this bill and appropriated to a celebration in Philadelphia.”⁴ Some members doubtless had before them a resolution from the New York Woman Suffrage Society, pointing out that women pay one third of the taxes in the country “and yet they are to-day suffering under the same slavery which oppressed our ancestors a century ago. They are taxed without representation and governed without their consent. In the face of this flagrant injustice, a Republic that calls itself free proposes by its Congress, where not one woman’s voice is heard, to impose upon a disfranchised and unrepresented sex the enormous burden of half a million of dollars, to be given to the dominant sex to help them in their rejoicings over a liberty from which these taxpayers are excluded. . . . We indignantly protest against this outrage.”⁵ And one member of Congress, the Democratic Senator Samuel McCreery of Kentucky, urged Congress not to authorize money but instead to resolve that the American people should observe July 4 by making it a national day of prayer. This was too much for Senator Theodore Randolph of New Jersey, another Democrat. Quoth Randolph:

I am as firm a believer, sir, in the efficacy of prayer as any man in all this land. . . . I regret I was compelled under the circumstances to vote against so pure, so peaceful, and so pious a proposition. But sir, I have always been taught to believe that, effective as prayer is, there is another Christian duty and that lies in good works. . . . The Centennial Commission have come asking an appropriation for what they deemed to be a commendable object, and my friend from Kentucky offers them prayer. His knowledge of biblical history, no doubt, far outruns mine, but I do not recollect to have read that ever so small an edifice was built by prayer alone. The Senator from Kentucky proposed in place of the centennial exhibition to have a day of universal prayer. In its stead he would have praise, without a jubilant note; thanksgiving, without the feast; gratitude, without a cent of cost. Is that the way, sir, the American people are to show their appreciation of what “God hath wrought”?⁶

Randolph carried the day, and the appropriation passed the Senate by a healthy margin, 41 to 15. The vote was not sectional; though the nasty-minded historian might have suspected that support would increase the closer a congressman’s district lay to Philadelphia or that members from the former Confederate states would oppose it, the bill received votes from members who came from diverse parts of the country. President Ulysses S. Grant signed the appropriation bill, and the commissioners, thus fortified, plunged forward.⁷

⁴ *Congressional Record*, 44 Cong., 1 Sess., IV (February 11, 1876), 1037.

⁵ U.S., Congress, *House Miscellaneous Document no. 45*, 44 Cong., 1 Sess. (U.S. Serial Set 1698), January 13, 1876.

⁶ *Congressional Record*, 44 Cong., 1 Sess., IV (February 11, 1876), 1024-25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1035, 1037, 1148.

The Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition opened on schedule on May 10, 1876. It was by no means the only centennial celebration, as we shall see, but it was definitely the focal point of the nation's efforts. The commissioners had caused five principal buildings, and some smaller ones, to be erected in Fairmount Park, two and one half miles northwest of downtown Philadelphia.⁸ To reach it, one could choose from among five passenger railways, horse-drawn busses, or steamboats up the Schuylkill River. The main building had a floor area of twenty acres, and the others—Machinery Hall, the Ladies' Pavilion, Agriculture and Horticulture halls—were not much smaller. Many foreign governments had sent exhibits, including costumes, industrial products, and minerals: Germany sent some large artillery pieces made by Krupp, France sent seventeen thousand dollars worth of Haviland vases from Limoges, Mexico sent a two-ton iron meteorite, and the bey of Tunis sent a threshing machine of a type supposedly in use since the time of the Carthaginians. The United States government, though reluctant to appropriate money directly to the Centennial commissioners, ended up spending \$639,000 on exhibits and in other ways. The Smithsonian Institution provided an elaborate exhibit, including an ethnological display: "The plan embraced the presentation of twenty or more tribes, from the Esquimaux of Northwestern Alaska to the Seminole, and from the Passamaquoddy Indians of Maine to those of San Diego . . . a large force of taxidermists is at present engaged . . . in doing the necessary work." The Smithsonian officials were especially proud of this display because they felt that it was "quite reasonable to infer that by the expiration of a second hundred-year period of the life of the American Republic, the Indians will entirely ceased [*sic*] to present any distinctive character, and will be merged in the general population."⁹ Machinery Hall contained the huge Corliss engine. Exhibits were scattered throughout the several buildings, so many that one Hoosier newspaper reported that it would take a person four weeks to get to know the whole thing. To the befuddlement of European visitors, the Exhibition was closed on Sundays, the

⁸ The following description of the Centennial Exposition is drawn from U.S., Congress, *House Report no. 144*, 44 Cong., 2 Sess. (U.S. Serial Set 1708), February 1, 1877; U.S., *Senate Executive Document no. 74*, 45 Cong., 3 Sess. (U.S. Serial Set 1831), March 3, 1879; Randel, *Centennial*, 288-302; Indianapolis *Sentinel*, July 5, 1876.

⁹ U.S., Congress, "Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution . . . for the Year 1875," *Senate Miscellaneous Document no. 115*, 44 Cong., 1 Sess. (U.S. Serial Set 1665), April 7, 1876.

result of sabbatarian pressure; but, as the result of other pressures, alcoholic beverages were sold on the grounds while religious tracts were forbidden. Soft drinks, including Hires' root beer, cost three cents. Anyone unable to afford that could get a free drink of water at the fountain provided by the Catholic Total Abstinence Union, a huge affair topped by a sixteen-foot-high statue of Moses. Inside the grounds were three restaurants, one of which charged, not without comment, twenty-five cents for a cup of coffee, while another, a French place, was called "impudently extortionate" by William Dean Howells when he visited there.¹⁰

Despite the prices, and the muddiness of the not-quite-finished grounds, seventy-six thousand people showed up on May 10 for opening-day ceremonies. The Liberty Bell rang for half an hour. Theodore Thomas led an orchestra of 150 and a chorus of 800. Then came the opening festal march, commissioned of and composed by one "Richard Wagner, of Germany," as a government document laconically put it.¹¹ It is said to have been the worst piece of music that Wagner ever wrote. I checked that judgment with a colleague in the Indiana University School of Music who had a lot of responsibility for the school's celebration of the Bicentennial, and he confirmed it; to have resurrected it for 1976 would have honored neither Wagner nor the Bicentennial. President Grant gave an opening speech consisting of about six convoluted sentences, which could not have lasted more than three minutes and which could not be heard, according to the newspapers, beyond the first few yards. Bishop Simpson of the Methodist church followed Grant and more than made up for the president's brevity with an opening prayer which one reporter charitably called "lengthy."¹² Another, however, said that "Bishop Simpson's prayer was appropriately the longest address of the occasion. It was very good, and had less than the usual information to God that He has given all His favor to us and has left the rest of mankind to shift for themselves."¹³ The grand chorus sang the first and last verses of the "Centennial Hymn," with music by John K. Paine and words by John Greenleaf Whittier. Then Dudley Buck conducted his "Centennial Cantata," with words by Sidney Lanier. Grant accepted the Exhibition from Governor

¹⁰ Quoted in Randel, *Centennial*, 298.

¹¹ U.S., Congress, *Senate Executive Document no. 54*, 44 Cong., 1 Sess. (U.S. Serial Set 1664), 1876.

¹² Quoted in Randel, *Centennial*, 291.

¹³ *Goshen Democrat*, May 31, 1876.

Hawley on behalf of the nation and descended from the stand to tour the grounds with the year's most distinguished official visitor, the Emperor Dom Pedro II of Brazil.

Attendance dropped to fifteen or twenty thousand a day for a while but of course picked up strongly in early July as the Centennial Fourth, the "day of days," approached. The celebration was certainly a boon for the railroads; tens of thousands of people converged on Philadelphia, and an Indiana editor remarked: "The only great question, the solitary article of discussion, is founded like a rock on the noble words, 'Goin' to the Centennial, hey?'"¹⁴ Many did, despite summer heat and fear of a smallpox epidemic (though not legionnaires' disease). Business activity ceased for five days, from Saturday, July 1, through Wednesday, July 5. Saturday brought opening speeches. Then quiet marked the Sabbath and most of Monday. On the evening of July 3 things began in earnest. Five thousand GAR veterans led a torchlight parade which also included ten to fifteen thousand "workingmen, political clubs, civic societies," and so forth. The parade reached Independence Hall at midnight, when a bedlam of bells, whistles, guns, and fireworks erupted. The "Star-Spangled Banner" was sung and the Doxology said, and the assembly dispersed about 2:00 a.m. At seven the next morning, on the Fourth, another parade formed. As an estimated half-million people watched, the parade passed through the streets, under triumphal arches last used for Lafayette's visit in 1824, until it reached a reviewing stand.¹⁵ There stood the newly nominated presidential candidates, Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel J. Tilden; Dom Pedro; a Swedish prince; a Japanese general; and several governors and mayors. Grant did not show up, to the chagrin of many, but sent Vice-President Thomas Ferry to represent the United States government. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia read the Declaration of Independence from the original manuscript which his namesake had signed. Bayard Taylor gave his "Centennial Ode," which one reporter complained hid "its ideas in a labyrinth of language," a quality which he previously thought Sidney Lanier had a monopoly on. Then came the main address by William M. Evarts, the lawyer and former attorney general who the next year was to become Hayes' secretary of state. The speech covered one and one half full-sized newspaper pages in five-point type. Many papers printed it in full, perhaps because, as a jubilantly unkempt rhetorical garden, it was impossible to

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, July 5, 1876.

¹⁵ *Indianapolis Sentinel*, July 5, 1876.

summarize. The choir sang the "Hallelujah Chorus," the crowd sang "Old Hundredth," and then all dispersed again to await a huge fireworks display that evening at the Exhibition grounds.

Philadelphia, with its Exhibition, was the focus of the Centennial celebration, but of course the occasion did not go unobserved elsewhere. Parades, fireworks displays, and speeches—all of monstrous size—occurred in Brooklyn, in San Francisco, and in Akron, which was blessed with the presence of "Lomer Griffin, the oldest man in America, aged one hundred and seventeen," according to one newspaper. American consuls and ministers abroad held diplomatic banquets and balls. Thirty thousand Irish gathered in Dublin, formally adopted an address to President Grant, watched fireworks, had a torchlight parade, and heard Charles Stewart Parnell speak. When Parnell referred to the Eastern Question, the crowd cheered for Russia and against England. Chattanooga had a sunrise parade a mile and a half long and held what was claimed to have been the "grandest celebration ever, south of the Ohio River."¹⁶

In the Indiana heartland towns small and large observed a rare three-day holiday from Sunday the second through Tuesday the fourth. The proceedings were fairly similar, their elaborateness largely a function of the size of the place. But it might be useful to detail two or three of them to give an idea of how Hoosiers, the great majority of whom—like most Americans—lived on farms or in country villages, celebrated the Centennial Fourth. At New Albany much of the activity came on the third. A parade formed in the evening, led by two men dressed as Generals Washington and Lafayette. A police band followed them, then the "Continental Guards," another band, a lodge called the "Phantoms of the Nile" with a float carrying an eleven-foot wooden crocodile, then two lodges of the International Order of Workingmen, the Junior Order United American Mechanics, the fire department, and "other societies." The mayor and city council followed in carriages. At midnight there was a one-hundred-gun salute. On the next morning another parade, a long one, wriggled out to the fairgrounds. Several thousand people watched. Trains arrived every half hour bringing more people. The New Albany *Ledger-Standard* reported that "the national song, America, was sung by a chorus of one thousand voices" (the "Star-Spangled Banner" was not to become the official national anthem for almost another sixty years). Someone read the Declaration, and after a speech by a

¹⁶ New Albany *Ledger-Standard*, July 5, 1876.

Reverend Dr. Gierlow, the crowd broke up—most of it apparently spending the rest of the day at picnics, which seemed to have gone on at every available spot, involving dancing, sports, and more speeches. One picnic, at Five Mile Lane, included an oration (according to the paper) by “Prof. J. T. Smith, of this city, [who] got on the track of the American Eagle, overtook him, and tore from his narrative every pin feather, leaving the emblem of the nation in a mutilated and shabby condition.” Bonfires, booming guns, and fireworks punctuated the whole day. The evening of the Fourth was very quiet; everyone seemed to be resting up.¹⁷

At the other end of the state, in Goshen, rain poured down on the evening of the third but stopped at midnight. “Then came the ringing of bells, the cannon’s loud roar, the rattle of musketry, the cracking of pistols and snapping of firecrackers, until the grey of the morning.” People poured into the public square at noon for prayer, music, a reading of the Declaration, and an oration, followed by a tub race on the canal and a firemen’s tournament. The fireman’s band and the Goshen Cornet Band provided music for a parade. There were sports and horse racing. More firecrackers sounded that evening, until midnight, when (the local editor said) “another centennial rainstorm put out the fire and closed the scene.” He added that no accidents happened all day, and “we saw but one man drunk, and he belonged to South Bend.” All this occurred even though the City Council had turned down a request for funds to pay for the celebration; a private committee raised the funds.¹⁸

At Terre Haute fire bells and church bells rang at 4:00 a.m. on the Fourth. Then a thirteen-gun salute greeted the sunrise. At 5:00 a.m., brass bands assembled. At ten there was a parade “consisting of military, the fire department, benevolent orders, representations of industries, trades, with patriotic devices, etc.”; at noon, firing of a salute, music, reading of the Declaration, speeches, “followed by games and other amusements”; and there were fireworks that evening.¹⁹

The citizenry of Dubois County celebrated no less vigorously, but many of them did so in the German language and with certain German touches. At Ferdinand the Fourth began with a festive church service (Gottesdienst), including a *Te Deum*. At noon there was a reading of the Declaration—the *Freiheits-Erklärung*; at one, a theater presentation at the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, July 3, 5, 1876.

¹⁸ *Goshen Democrat*, June 28, July 5, 1876.

¹⁹ *Terre Haute Saturday Evening Mail*, July 1, 8, 1876.

roomy tobacco house of Hermann Beckmann; at three a raffle, other events, more theater at the Lokal; and in the evening a grand centennial ball. Neighboring German villages had much of this sort of thing, plus brass bands and picnics, and the German-language Huntingburgh *Signal* published a poem, in very typical and well-ordered nineteenth century German heroic style, entitled "To the hundredth birthday of our Republic." I won't burden you with all nine verses, but one is especially interesting:

Free are we from other powers,
No more England's slaves or servants;
Thus leave joyful banners waving,
And now festive celebrating,
Of this great day.²⁰

The Indianapolis celebration was naturally the most elaborate in the Hoosier state. At sunrise on the Fourth a one-hundred-gun salute opened the festivities. The weather looked grim and was described as follows in one of the papers:

Early in the morning dense and lowering clouds filled the face of the heavens, and up to 9 o'clock sent down heavy and spiteful showers of rain, which threatened to entirely destroy the pleasures of the occasion. But at that hour a rift appeared in the clouds, and the strong northwest winds having broken the ranks of Jupiter Pluvius, succeeded in entirely routing them, and by noon the sun burst forth in an almost cloudless sky, and the day proved to be as pleasant as any Fourth of July in the history of the oldest inhabitant.²¹

A parade began at 10:30, while 150 children filed into Monument Circle and sang the "Star-Spangled Banner" and "the national hymn America." The parade led off with bands, followed by the police department, then tableaux-vivants—we call them floats—the first about Indians, including "a forest and camp on wheels in which the sturdy warrior stood guard over the pale face captive, while his companion cast his eyes in the distance to anticipate the subtle foe. The ancient savage sat unconcerned beneath a tree smoking his pipe, and the tender squaw sighed as her eyes dwelt upon the sad face of the captive"²²; thus John Smith and Pocahontas. Not surprisingly

²⁰ Huntingburgh *Signal*, June 29, July 6, 1876. The original reads:

Frei sind wir trie and'ren Mächte,
Nicht mehr England's Sklaven, Knechte,
D'rum laßt Freudenbanner wehen,
Und uns festlich nun begehen
Den großen Tag!

²¹ Details about the Indianapolis celebration are taken from the Indianapolis *Journal* and Indianapolis *Sentinel*, both for July 5, 1876.

²² Indianapolis *Journal*, July 5, 1876.

there were no tableaux representing Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse, whose engagement with George A. Custer about ten days before had evoked headlines like "The Red Devils."²³ Next in the parade were fifty members of the Turnverein, followed by a tableau about the Pilgrims' landing done by the Harmonic Singing Society. "Upon a wagon drawn by six horses was placed a vessel to represent one of the boats of the Pilgrims, and in this there was a group of the pious Puritans, male and female, in appropriate costume, looking benignly upon each other, and by their appearance seeming to grasp the liberty of the great country before them. A band of ill-costumed horsemen, possibly Kuklux, occasionally half surrounded them, somewhat in the manner of the savages of Massachusetts Bay."²⁴ Then came a company of German cavalry, impersonations of Lafayette and Rochambeau, the Fraternelle Française, three German singing societies (the Liederkranz, Lyra, and Männerchor), the state guards, with artillery and marching band, various lodges and trade unions (the butchers, brewers, and others), a wagon carrying Hayes-Wheeler signs, a band from Anderson, carriages carrying Governor Thomas A. Hendricks and other state officers, the fire department with seven polished engines and nine hose reels, and finally four or five Irish societies with a float carrying thirteen young girls in white, with badges for each of the original states, and banners saying "Erin go Bragh" and "E Pluribus Unum."

Speeches began at the Statehouse at 12:30. They had been momentarily delayed because somebody forgot to provide chairs for the dignitaries. The governor called the meeting to order. Then came prayer, a reading of the Declaration, and an oration of healthy length by Byron K. Elliott. That afternoon there were balloon ascents, including a wedding aloft, horse racing, and a one-hundred-piece fireworks display. The firemen managed to get a stream of water to rise 250 feet in the air for seven minutes, until a water main broke from too much pressure. Picnics happened everywhere, and, as in smaller towns, stores and houses were covered with patriotic decorations.

So it went. Examples could be multiplied, but obviously the Centennial Fourth was great occasion everywhere, a happy pause in the middle of the depression of the 1870s. At Philadelphia the Exhibition continued to play to large crowds, which increased as the weather cooled in the fall, and by the time it closed on November 10 it had collected over eight million paid

²³ *New Albany Ledger-Standard*, May 12, 1876.

²⁴ *Indianapolis Journal*, July 5, 1876.

admissions, probably meaning upwards of two million different people.

Now to ask two or three questions about the Centennial, especially the Centennial Fourth. Was it commercialized? There were some indications of this, but fewer than one might expect, even given the fact that advertising as we now know it was hardly yet in its infancy. There were, of course, no references to the Buy-centennial as there were in 1976, though one newspaper made an analogous comment, that the Philadelphia Exhibition celebrated a "fifty-centennial," which was the price of admission to the grounds at Fairmount Park.²⁵ L. S. Ayres, in a primitive display advertisement in June, did advise ladies to buy new hats so as to look their best on the Centennial Fourth.²⁶ The German paper in Huntingburg carried an advertisement for the "Centennial Wein-und-Bier Saloon."²⁷ A physician from Goshen, named Coover, visited the Exhibition with his wife and daughters, stopping in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to see again the room he was born in, seventy years before. According to the Goshen paper, "the Doctor gives a very interesting account of things there as they appeared to him; and comes to the conclusion that after all the exhibition is one grand advertising scheme, as well as one of the greatest shows of the age."²⁸ But perhaps Dr. Coover was just being crotchety. Philadelphia itself undoubtedly prospered. The high prices of food and drink at the Exhibition have already been referred to; they occasioned, almost inevitably in that day of Petroleum V. Nasby and lesser dialecticians, a dialect joke: a customer from Arkansas, at one of the restaurants at the Exhibition, complained about paying a dollar for a cup of coffee and a roll. Restaurant keeper: "Vell, sare, ze price he may luke large, zat I admete; but zen, sare, reflect that you nafer hafe another shance like zese for une hundret years."²⁹ The *chutzpah* prize of the Centennial, however, probably should go to one General James D. McBride of Ohio. The general, according to an 1879 report of the United States House of Representatives' Select Committee on the Centennial, had put together "a work of art" bearing the signatures of "the administrators of the United States Government at the beginning of the Second Century." McBride wanted Congress to buy it for \$5,000, which he claimed was "but half its value." The committee advised the

²⁵ New Albany *Ledger-Standard*, May 12, 1876.

²⁶ Indianapolis *News*, June 15, 1876.

²⁷ Huntingburgh *Signal*, October 19, 1876.

²⁸ Goshen *Democrat*, May 31, 1876.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, June 21, 1876.

House not to so legislate. McBride was perfectly entitled to sell copies of his "work of art" as a legitimate private speculation, said the committee, but it went on to say: "Unlike those who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the men who signed General McBride's document did not pledge their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to perform any hazardous or noble act for their country or for the benefit of mankind, and your committee do not believe they expect or desire any eulogy from the present Congress."³⁰

In short, a degree of commercialization there undoubtedly was, and had the Americans of that day been familiar with the mass advertising techniques and the media of this day, the commercialization might well have been greater. But one is more impressed with the absence of Centennial profit making and with the rarity—given the normal Yankee willingness to make an honest buck and the fact that it was an age of patent medicines and quackery—with which the Centennial opportunity was seized for shabby exploitation.

Much more evident is the widespread participation in the celebration and the seriousness with which the occasion was taken. How widespread was it? We have already seen evidence of that, and plenty more exists: the "personals" columns of small-town newspapers were studded with the names of local citizens who went to Philadelphia despite the fear of smallpox and the scarcity of hotel space, including a man named George Dietz of New Albany, who walked to Philadelphia, in his seventy-ninth year, using a hickory walking stick which he said he had cut himself in 1810 on the future site of New Albany.³¹ Something like twenty-five thousand out-of-town visitors converged on Indianapolis, then a city of sixty thousand, and similar migrations occurred all over the country. Everybody took part, or so it seems. It was, as the German editor from Huntingburg put it, "a triumph of the individual freedom of the people."³² And it was something special. The term "Fourth of July oratory" was already a cliché, and fire-crackers and parades were longtime commonplaces. But frequently one finds a note that the Centennial Fourth was an opportunity for national rededication. The Americans of the time were much given to laughing at themselves, as we have seen, but they never laughed at the Centennial itself or what

³⁰ U.S., Congress, Select Committee on the Centennial, *House Report no. 94*, 45 Cong., 3 Sess. (U.S. Serial Set 1866), February 4, 1879.

³¹ *Huntingburgh Signal*, June 29, 1876.

³² *Ibid.*, June 1, 1876. "Die amerikanische Ausstellung ist ein Triumph der individuellen Freiheit des Volks."

they believed it represented. One of the rare critical comments—and it is an exception which proves the rule—came from a Terre Haute editor, who claimed: “There has been no celebration here worth speaking of for several years. ‘Independence Day’ is a name that has grown antiquated, out of date—almost obsolete. It should not be so. This is the year in which to revive it and relearn its old-time meaning. . . . Don’t be afraid of indulging in the ‘spread eagle’ style of rhetoric. It is just the thing.”³³ The ideological content of the speeches and editorials of the Centennial observance was not especially complex. Indeed it was rather predictable and not always infused with utter fidelity to historical fact—as when one writer, upon learning “that George Washington had a street fight with a political opponent, and was knocked down by him just as a common man might have been,” declared that it was “time to stop searching through the old records.”³⁴ You can imagine what such a man would have thought of Charles A. Beard’s *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, but Beard was at that moment only a two-year-old in Knightstown [Indiana]. Certainly the content of Centennial rhetoric and, I think it is safe to assume, the ideas in the minds of a great many people who were inarticulate was serious. I could prove it to you by reading William Evarts’ speech on July 4 at Philadelphia; but that would be overkill, and we (or soon only I) would be here all afternoon, because Evarts may have exceeded them all in length if not in originality. The Centennial statements normally contained the following elements: thankfulness that the fathers had taken the fateful step that they had in July of 1776; intense pride that government of, by, and for the people had been instituted then and had continued for a hundred years; recognition that government by the consent of the governed continued to provide an example to the other people of the world—as one writer put it, “a beacon light which shall lead them out of civil and religious thralldom”; and a belief that free institutions provided “the surest foundation” not only “for civil and religious liberty” but also for “national prosperity.” Often, too, the orations recognized that America was not perfect, “that however much . . . [the American people] may be separated in regard to the measures necessary to secure to the fullest extent the enjoyment of the privileges conferred, that they are a unit in regard to the preservation of their liberties and in honoring the patriotic men who pledged their fortunes,

³³ Terre Haute *Saturday Evening Mail*, July 1, 1876.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, July 8, 1876.

their lives and their sacred honors to secure the priceless boon of civil liberty." And finally, the statements noted that the second century was about to begin: "To-morrow is the opening of the new century, and let all the people rejoice and give thanks for the blessings enjoyed and seek divine protection for the future, that they may hand down the precious heirloom of human freedom to their children unimpaired."³⁵ The theme of rejoicing was heartfelt; the belief in perfect ideals, even amid an imperfect world, sincere.

A few words should now be said about the context of the times. In that context the simple joyfulness of the Centennial celebration stands out in some relief. We may think, some of us today, that the Bicentennial has been tarnished—not irretrievably corroded, but tarnished—by Watergate, the Vietnam imbroglio, political assassinations, civil unrest, and other unhappy events of the last decade or so. All of those things are certainly not encouraging, but look at the context of the Centennial: a deep depression in the national economy, ruinous and cruel to many capitalists and workers alike. It was a natural calamity, lasting over five years from 1873 through 1878, which nobody knew how to stop, least of all by concerted government action; a storm that simply had to be weathered. Besides that, there was corruption in high places. The whiskey ring scandal had broken the previous winter, implicating even Grant's secretary, Orville Babcock. On the Centennial Fourth the secretary of war, William W. Belknap, was under impeachment for selling Indian trading posts for his own profit. The outcome of the ensuing presidential election was to be corrupted, almost certainly, by widespread vote fraud. The problems go on and on. Reconstruction was coming to an end, not with a bang but a whimper, its idealistic hopes a forlorn memory and the freedmen forgotten and on their way to southern rural peonage. Custer's fracas at the Little Big Horn was another reminder of the nation's inability to come to humane terms with the Indians. There was increasing use of patent medicines containing opiates and other narcotics and, as a by-product of the depression, the first appearance of tramps, the industrial dispossessed who were incomprehensibly, in middle-class eyes, given to violence toward limb and property. Major cities were practically bankrupt because so many people had so little money with which to pay their taxes.

These were just the visible problems. Beneath the surface of day-to-day events changes were already taking place which

³⁵ *New Albany Ledger-Standard*, July 3, 5, 1876.

would transform American society in its second hundred years, especially the first half of it, even more than it changed in its first century. In the 1870s farmers ceased to be a majority of the labor force, and that was the first of several indicators that the traditional agrarian way of life was ending, giving way eventually to the metropolitan majority of today.³⁶ The depression of the 1870s revealed a deep estrangement between labor and capital—most explosively in the bloody interstate railroad strike of 1877 but in other ways as well—heralding the so-called “labor problem” that would bedevil American society for another seventy years or more. The sources of immigration were beginning to change, bringing groups of people who would sorely test the Centennial celebrants’ commitment to the idea of America as a beacon to the world’s oppressed. Many of the native-born were to fail that test. John D. Rockefeller and his associates were quietly gaining control of nearly all of the oil refining in the country and would shortly incorporate the Standard Oil Trust as the nation’s first real monopoly and first really big business, together with certain railroads.

Thus the Centennial celebration was a relaxed and joyful moment amid very hard and troubled times, harder and more troubled than our own. But I do not think it is appropriate to close a survey of so happy an occasion as the Centennial on a somber note. It may well be that a historian at the Tricentennial in 2076 would be able to tell us a lot of unpleasant things about ourselves of which we are blissfully unaware. And certainly the Centennial celebrants, for all their problems, did not have to face the main difficulty confronting the founders in 1776—seven years of war, at bad odds, against a very powerful enemy. After all, 1876 was a year not without its interesting events in addition to the Centennial. Mark Twain published one book that year, *Tom Sawyer* (though Horatio Alger published two). Thomas A. Edison patented the mimeograph. Melville Dewey produced the first version of his decimal system, and Henry Roberts the first edition of his *Rules of Order*. The Supreme Court started hearing arguments on the Granger cases. Alexander Graham Bell and Elisha Gray each filed patent applications for the telephone, and Melville Bissell came out with the carpet sweeper. Although Jesse James was on the loose, Bat Masterson arrived in Dodge City to bring it law and order. The summer was hot, but you could get a ten-pound cake

³⁶ U.S., Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (bicentennial edition, Washington, 1975), series D 16-17, D 76-77, pp. I:127, I:134.

of ice delivered to your door for sixty cents a week.³⁷ The puzzling contrast between Grant's mighty success as a general and his lackluster somnolence as president was explained by the *New York Sun*: the man in the White House for the past eight years was not Grant at all. Grant had had an accident during the 1868 campaign, and the Republicans, fearful of losing the election, had replaced him with a double named N. Plover, "some western bum."³⁸

The American Chemical Society was founded in 1876, as was the American Library Association and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, as the first educational institution in America devoted primarily to graduate training and research. President Daniel Coit Gilman of Johns Hopkins invited Thomas H. Huxley, the noted British exponent of evolution, to give a set of opening lectures. Randel, in his book on the Centennial, is quite fond of one of Huxley's passages as a reflection on the Centennial; and so am I, and with it I will subside. Huxley said:

I cannot say that I am in the slightest degree impressed by your bigness, or your material resources, as such. Size is not grandeur, and your territory does not make a nation. The great issue, about which hangs a true sublimity, and the terror of overhanging fate, is what are you going to do with all these things? What is to be the end to which these are the means? You are making a novel experiment in politics on the greatest scale which the world has yet seen. Forty millions at your first century, it is reasonably to be expected that, at the second, these states will be occupied by two hundred millions of English-speaking people, spread over an area as large as Europe. . . . You and your descendants have to ascertain whether this great mass will hold together under the forms of a republic, and the despotic reality of universal suffrage; whether state rights will hold out against centralization, without separation; whether centralization will get the better, without actual or disguised monarchy; whether shifting corruption is better than a permanent bureaucracy; and as population thickens in your great cities, and the pressure of want is felt, the gaunt spectre of pauperism will stalk among you, and communism and socialism will claim to be heard. Truly America has a great future before her; great in toil, in care, and in responsibility; great in true glory if she be guided in wisdom and righteousness; great in shame if she fail. I cannot understand why other nations should envy you, or be blind to the fact that it is for the highest interest of mankind that you should succeed, but the one condition of success, your sole safeguard, is the moral worth and intellectual clearness of the individual citizen. Education cannot give these, but it may cherish them and bring them to the front in whatever station of society they are to be found; and the universities ought to be, and may be, the fortresses of the higher life of the nation.³⁹

³⁷ Randel, *Centennial*, chapters 2-3, 9-11, *passim*.

³⁸ "ein westlicher Bummel," according to the *Huntingburgh Signal*, which reproduced the *New York Sun* story, June 8, 1876.

³⁹ Randel, *Centennial*, 65-66.