

U. S. CIVIL WAR CENTENNIAL COMMISSION, 1957-1966

By

James I. Robertson, Jr.

Our nation is only 220 years old, and yet we may be the most cohesive people on earth. The major reason for this, I believe, is the intense absorption we have had in our own history; and when one looks to the past, you quickly see that the largest, most compelling chapter in our heritage is the story of the Civil War. That struggle changed forever America's way of life. The country we love was born in 1865.

For 145 years after Appomattox, Americans have looked back at the Civil War with an unceasing fascination. The biggest boost in this national attention came in the 1960s with the 100th anniversary. The Civil War Centennial was neither decreed nor ordered. It was just something the American people wanted to do: namely, remember the most traumatic and meaningful moment in our coming of age.

Timing was quite suitable. The Korean War was several years in the past; Vietnam was several years in the future. Among the leading demands of a laid-back Eisenhower administration was the idea of an interstate highway system.

Preparations for the Centennial began peacefully enough. In 1957, by voice vote, the Congress created the U. S. Civil War Centennial Commission. It was to have 25 members, consisting of 4 senators, 4 congressmen, 12 presidential appointees, plus representatives from the National Park Service, Library of Congress, and similar organizations. The first chairman was Gen. U. S. Grant III, grandson of the famous Union commander.

Unfortunately, the Commission stumbled from the start. It had many short-range plans but no long-range goals. A Madison Avenue approach caused the Commission to display far more enthusiasm than wisdom. Entrepreneurs had a field-day. The Confederate flag became a design for both beach towels and women's lingerie. Toys of every kind, intended for children of all ages, hit an eager market. Printed works and films made a mockery of history. Re-enactors poured forth as if the nation had undergone another Pearl Harbor.

By the spring of 1961 and the actual beginning of the Centennial, a circus atmosphere prevailed. Bruce Catton, a member of the National Commission and the most familiar Civil War historian of the time, stated disgustingly that the Centennial was becoming "a light-hearted celebration that leaves us feeling that the whole [war] was nothing more than a regrettable but vastly

entertaining misunderstanding between people who were never really angry about anything in particular.”

The new occupant in the White House felt the same way. Despite the aura of Camelot descending over the presidency, John F. Kennedy was a Boston Irishman with a short fuse. In the autumn of 1961, Kennedy purged the commission leadership. A nationwide search began for a new chairman and executive director.

Filling the chairmanship was easy for Mr. Kennedy. He appointed a friend, Dr. Allan Nevins, professor emeritus at Columbia University, author of over 50 books, winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, and then the acknowledged dean of American historians. The ongoing vice chairman of the Commission was Cong. Fred Schwengel of Iowa. I was then enjoying my first teaching position at the University of Iowa, which was in Schwengel's district. We knew one another; and despite my youthfulness and inexperience, he became convinced that I should be the Commission's executive director in charge of day-by-day operations.

I neither sought the job nor did I want it. The peacefulness and beauty of the Midwest are second only to that found in the South. My family was quite comfortable in Iowa City. Yet pressure came from all corners.

Eventually I met privately with Dr. Nevins; the White House gave its stamp of approval; and on December 26, 1961, I went to work in Washington.

A week later, Nevins and I met in the Oval Office with the President. The three of us agreed that henceforth the Centennial Commission would downplay any celebration of a war that took 700,000 lives. Rather, we would commemorate the deeds and sacrifices of the 1860s. The Centennial belonged to everyone, regardless of background, race, or religion. Above all, we would mark the past with reverence, not with revelry.

For the next 3 ½ years, the national commission worked toward those ends. Our major labors were with state and local agencies. There were 34 officially sanctioned state commissions, over 300 local centennial committees. Because of unpleasant events, rumors, and accusations in the formative years of the Centennial, state commissions in the South, Midwest, and New England had formed regional conclaves to protect their sectional interests. It was as if North and South had chosen sides again.

I spent the better part of a year mending fences. My major argument was that a lack of sharing, and a lack of compromise, had brought on the great civil war. Hence, unless we shared and cooperated with one another on its anniversary, the Centennial would be meaningless. That all of the state and

local agencies eventually came under one roof I consider the ~~one~~ ^{CLOSEST THING TO} ~~miracle~~
~~performed in my lifetime.~~ ^{A MIRACLE I WILL EVER PERFORM.}

The National Commission took the lead in the first major efforts to preserve historic sites and grounds. It oversaw state and local programs; it coordinated activities to avoid repetition of effort; it provided military bands and escorts when possible. We sponsored a number of programs with national appeal—notably the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, held at the Lincoln Memorial and televised nationwide by the three major networks. We published books and issued monthly bulletins. For financial reasons, the Commission had to discontinue a handbook for children after distribution of 100,000 copies only whetted the appetite.

From first to last, we urged local participation. Local history is the seed from which a nation's annals bloom. We encouraged the collection, preservation and, if possible, publication of Civil war documents. Good relations with the National Archives and the Library of Congress made Civil War research easier than it had ever been. Congressmen gave us assistance, and we gave them a new avenue for reaching constituents.

What the national centennial commission did not do was perhaps as important as what it did achieve.

We would not endorse any product, despite the constant pressure of books, films, toys, clothing, trinkets, and the like that poured steadily into Commission headquarters.

We did not sanction battle re-enactments. In fact, in January, 1962, President Kennedy issued an order prohibiting re-enactments on federal property, especially national battlefields.

We received criticism for not stopping the flood of useless printed material gushing forth in the Centennial. However, for a federal agency to try and block publication would have been a gross infringement on the rights of free speech and free press.

We could not and would not stop whatever festivities any group wanted to stage. To do otherwise would have violated the right of free assembly.

The Centennial Commission went far in sparking a deep awareness of the torturous journey America has made to the present. The National Park Service never enjoyed such popularity as battlefield visitation was in the 1960s. The various centennial agencies (national, state, and local) produced over 230 books and pamphlets. They ranged from a booklet on Michigan women in the Civil War to a superb 15-volume roster of North Carolina soldiers.

Naturally, negative sides existed to the Centennial. Sharp disagreements prevailed throughout those years over the value of re-enactments. It was also a tragic coincidence that as the Civil War centennial was beginning in full force, so was the civil rights movement. We in the Washington office sought hard to bring cooperation, but the atmosphere often was against it. Some black Americans understandably did not react positively when, at centennial functions, the Confederate battle-flag stood alongside the Stars and Stripes. At the same time, some Southerners were adamant that the standard for which their forefathers had fought and died was not going to be put in the closet. That battle continues today.

Even though I had written and produced a highly popular booklet for children, I still criticize myself for not advocating more publications and programs for the nation's young people. Let us not make the same mistake again.

The Centennial Commission promoted reconciliation in everything it did. I thought then—and I remain convinced now—that the American people were more solidified in 1965 than they were in 1961. That in itself may have been the Commission's supreme contribution. Certainly it developed a successful commemoration that echoes still across the land.

Achieving the same results in the Sesquicentennial may be difficult. The general mood of the country is markedly different from that of the 1960s.

We live in a more negative age. The Congress continues to drag its feet on a Sesquicentennial Commission bill. Politics, rather than a sense of history, is the major determinant. This is not surprising in light of the fact that history nowadays is a secondary subject in much of basic American education.

Nevertheless, I know from fifty years as a college professor that the Civil War is not going away. It stands too big on the American landscape; its long-range effects are too extensive to be ignored.

The Civil War Centennial was a wake-up call for a people dozing in their history. Let us hope that the Sesquicentennial may be a new call: to patriotism, to country, and to a hallowed remembrance of those men of blue and gray who gave their lives because they loved America more than they loved life itself.

To forget what they did would be to abandon completely what they gave us.