

Our 200th Birthday: What We Have to Celebrate

by Margaret Mead

in this validation of local culture and of local folk artists.

By giving every culture its equal access to audiences, its equal time on the air, and its equal weight in education, we can come closer to the realization of the principles of Jefferson's declaration. Twentieth-century communications systems and recording devices, in fact, make it possible for the oral traditions to reach their audiences, to establish their libraries and museums, to preserve and record their songs, tales, and dramas directly in sound and vision without writing and printing them in another medium. So today we see Native American tribes recording for their own archives their own sacred literature, broadcasting age-old sacred rituals over their own local radio stations for the spiritual refreshment and education of their youth.

Thus, neither universal education nor communication need necessarily destroy local traditions, provided that the many customs and the many media channels we possess are shared so as to provide support for a multiple heritage. But the cultural myopia of the past must be put aside so that the unwritten, non-verbal traditions may be endowed with the status and the space they deserve.

The next hundred years should put the principle of cultural equity on a par with the principles of political liberty and social justice on which our national life was founded, so that every region and every group may pursue happiness in its own way.

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The best thing about a summer festival is that we can celebrate out of doors in green places where many people can come together—men and women, young people and old people and very little children, families and friends and strangers, echoing one another's pleasure in the event. That is the style we set long ago for the annual celebration of our country's birthday. The Fourth of July is pre-eminently an outdoor holiday—a day for family picnics, a day for celebrations on the greens and commons and plazas of villages and small towns, a day for outdoor games and for fireworks at dusk, a day on which people gather to enjoy themselves and one another.

So it is especially appropriate that one of the principal ways we have chosen to celebrate this year of America's 200th birthday is with outdoor, summertime festivals. And it is even more appropriate that in these festivals we celebrate ourselves as a people—as Americans—in all the extraordinary diversity of our inheritance, our present-day lifestyles, the kinds of work we do and the entertainments we have kept alive out of our so-varied past or have newly fashioned for ourselves in every region of our land. As people holding these festivals we are at one and the same time the celebrators, the audience and the objects of celebration.

Yet almost everything to do with celebrating the Bicentennial this year has aroused criticism from many people. This is not a time to celebrate, these people say. We have seen a President resign. The tragedy of the Vietnam war continues to haunt us. We are in the midst of an economic recession.

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sion. To give ourselves over to celebration and enjoyment, even on our 200th birthday, say the critics, is callous and heartless.

It is quite true we are living through difficult times. But life does not stop for difficult times. The celebration of our 100th anniversary as a nation also took place in a time of trouble. In 1876, the country was still struggling to recover from the devastation and deep division of the Civil War. In addition, Americans were faced with problems of political corruption and with the effects of a disastrous recession. It was not a good time. But taking pride was a good thing. We gained strength and looked to the future.

The celebration of our country's 100th birthday, in 1876, which reached its climax in the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, was very different from our Bicentennial in its central emphasis and in the part played by everyday Americans. More than 8 million people—foreign visitors as well as Americans—flowed into Philadelphia between May and November of 1876. But they had no active part to play. They came as spectators, to marvel.

One of the high points of that exposition was a magnificent display of paintings and sculpture, porcelain and textiles from Europe and the Orient. For most Americans this was their first opportunity to enjoy great art, including the work of living artists. It was also the first national occasion at which American artists and sculptors could exhibit within a brilliant international context. For the great American museums of fine arts were still in the making, and began to open their doors to the public only in the decade after the centennial exposition.

Equally memorable—and probably far more exciting for a great many Americans—was a tremendous display of every kind of industrial and commercial technology, brought to the exposition from all over the industrialized world of the 19th century. In this display Americans shone as experts who were as innovative and accomplished as any in the contemporary

world. In the application of science to technology we were already finding our place among the leaders.

The Centennial Exposition gave us a chance to be proud—justifiably proud. As we can now see, looking back, a principal aim of the exposition was to display our accomplishments in the production of objects, both in the fine arts and in industry and technology. What we particularly wanted to demonstrate to ourselves and to the world was that the United States, after only 100 years of nationhood on a new continent, could stand alongside the greatest European industrial nations.

Today we have become critical of technology. And if we compare our 1976 festival celebrations with the festivities of the Centennial Exposition, what is most striking is the change in emphasis from material objects to human beings. *Then* the celebration focused on the marvels of the *things* Americans had made and the new objects and processes that were still in an embryonic stage of development. *Today* we are celebrating *people*.

The Festival of American Folklife is a case in point. This Festival is taking place on the Mall during the summer of 1976, in the green and open space between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. The Mall has been called the "axis of the nation." In a sense this national festival also is an axis. For the people taking part in it are gathering from all over our country and many foreign lands, and, once it is over, they will stream away to other festive celebrations.

In the year of 1976, Native Americans are coming to Washington from every area of the country, celebrating their ways of living both in the lost past and in the modern world. Ethnic Americans of the most diverse cultural heritages are joining together with their contemporaries from the lands of their cultural origin. Black Americans are celebrating with their cultural cousins from Africa and the New World. Working Ameri-



Dr. Margaret Mead, world-renowned anthropologist whose 75th birthday coincides with the Bicentennial year, shown with her daughter and granddaughter. Photo by Robert Levin, Black Star.

cans focus on the pride, the skills and the traditions particular to the countless occupations which support and make productive our land. In other sections of the Festival families and children explore their games, their rituals, their pastimes, their celebrations—all the customs and folkways that both decorate life and make it meaningful. In still another part of the grounds, Regional America examines the features of life that make a geographic area seem home to the people who live there—the crops, the special occupations, the buildings, the sounds of speech and music.

Clearly this national festival is a people-to-people celebration in which all of us are

participants—now as organizers, now as celebrators, now as audience, as hosts and as guests, as friends and neighbors or as strangers finding that we can speak the same language of mutual enjoyment. And so the tide of celebration flows, now to the center and now to the most distant parts of the country and new links are created between past and present, between Americans and their contemporary cultural cousins in many lands, between working Americans in many occupations, and between families and children who find that, though different, they are also alike.

Comparing the Centennial and the Bicentennial, we can also see a deep, pervasive change in our relations with the rest of the world. A hundred years ago we were passionately eager to let the whole world know that we are fast becoming one of the giants of the earth and that we could already compete with the best in many fields.

Today we have invited people from many countries and from every continent to come celebrate with us.

In a way, it seems to me, this means that while we are celebrating the different kinds of people who are Americans and the different things that Americans have done with song and dance and food, workways and playways, old traditions and new social inventions, we also are celebrating the diversity of human beings everywhere in the world. This is so new a commitment that it comes and goes fleetingly in our awareness, but it is there.

Now, as in 1876, we are living through difficult times. Famine, war, recession—these we cannot and must not put out of our minds. And for the very reason that we are celebrating people, not things, we cannot escape from recognizing the complexity of our unsolved problems of living together as a nation and of acting with responsibility in the world. Nor can we fail to recognize how slowly and, at times, how very unwillingly we Americans move in the very directions in which, ideally, we want to go.

But I believe that what we have been

learning about our heritage—individually, as families, as communities and as a people who belong together—can clarify our view of ourselves and give us a more realistic understanding of what our capacities as a people are. And I am convinced that if we can enjoy—really, deeply enjoy—an enriched experience of other Americans and so, too, of peoples elsewhere in the world, we shall be able to take heart in facing problems that are unsolved and otherwise may seem insoluble.

A festival that celebrates people in their extraordinary diversity needs no justification. What it requires of us is that we extend and expand our capacity to enjoy one another and to live responsibly with one another. This we can build on for another hundred years.

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Celebrating on the Mall—Serbian and Croatian American participants join cultural cousins from Yugoslavia in holiday singing, dancing and feasting at the first Old Ways presentation in 1973.

