

# *Bicentennial Can Be Meaningful*

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THE ONE THING that seems to be forgotten — or at the very least submerged — in the nation's observance of the bicentennial of the American Revolution is the Revolution. The launching of the official celebration a few weeks ago with the re-enactment of the Battle of Lexington, Massachusetts, by 1975-style minutemen and redcoats may well have Minnesotans asking themselves: "What is the shape of the bicentennial effort, and how do we relate to it?"

National planning for the lengthy observance, begun almost a decade ago, has been a disaster. Commercialized, politicized, devoid of any historical perspective, the official twenty-two-month celebration of the birth of the American republic 200 years ago has already squandered millions of dollars and several valuable years that should have been devoted to fruitful planning. The result is that there is no national observance worthy of the name.

Similar follies have been committed at the state level, with far too many states, including Minnesota, waiting for federal funds to pay for the major portion of the bicentennial observance. The money, when it did come, was disappointingly small and late in arriving. Also, Minnesota—like most states—has cast such a broad umbrella over its bicentennial celebration that *quantity* of programs rather than *quality* becomes the index of a successful commemoration, and virtually any project is eligible for consideration as a bicentennial event. The successor to the original national commission — the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration — has not improved much on its predecessor. For ineptitude and lack of leadership, it has substituted an incredible superstructure of bureaucracy that has slowed down the flow of what federal funds are available to augment state and local efforts.

Not all the problems, however, can be blamed on the uncertainty and inadequacy of the official national effort, sad though it has been. There is also the public mood. Vietnam, Watergate, the energy crisis, inflation, recess-

sion, and unemployment are hardly the stuff from which a successful national celebration is made. Americans simply are not in a frame of mind to celebrate. It is as though they are echoing what Max Lerner recently wrote: "What a crazy time to hold a bicentennial celebration! No one really wants it; no one's heart is in it. There is nothing to cheer about and little to celebrate. So why go through the motions?"

Yet, I would argue, there is much to celebrate — not with souvenirs, commercialism, floats, and short-lived extravaganzas but with sober reflections on where our nation has been these past two centuries. The bicentennial does commemorate the cardinal event in American history. The United States is the oldest form of government on the face of the earth. It was the fruit of the first successful revolution by a people. It was the first consciously constructed system of government with the consent of the governed, limited though that consent was by today's standards. The American Revolution was a true one in the sense that it threw overboard many of the time-honored institutions of the Old World — the established church, monarchy, aristocratic titles, primogeniture, and many others. That our form of government has endured the stresses of 200 years of turmoil and trauma is itself cause for serious celebration.

SOME SEMBLANCE of a cohesive bicentennial effort has, fortunately, begun to emerge. There undoubtedly will be a number of excellent public events across the country that will re-examine the American experience in a worthwhile manner. The National Endowment for the Humanities, for example, is sponsoring the American Issues Forum. The Minnesota American Revolution Bicentennial Commission has granted financial support to a number of state and local projects that will enrich our collective understanding as a state. Among these are a history of labor in Minnesota, studies and exhibitions of the state's ethnic minorities, an exhibition on Midwest art and architecture, and a number of historic preserva-

tion projects. Undoubtedly, the bicentennial will be most significant at the "grass roots" level with volunteer local effort coming through to make this anniversary truly meaningful.

What the experience may suggest, with memories of the debacle of the Civil War centennial still fresh in our minds, is that a satisfactory, let alone notable, birthday observance is difficult, if not impossible, to carry out on a national scale.

The Minnesota Historical Society believes that the greatest public good that can stem from the 200th anniversary of nationhood is a deepened sense of history on the part of Americans. Because of the painful 1960s and uncertain 1970s, we are attempting to take a 200-year look at American history when actually most of us are looking at the history of the last twenty years with short-range, despairing lenses that unfavorably distort the long-range record.

It is with this problem before us that the Minnesota Historical Society has planned its bicentennial program. Relating Minnesota to the American Revolution in a literal sense is not the easiest task. So much of the Minnesota tradition was forged decades after the American Revolution by waves of immigrants just before and after the Civil War. Yet the links with the Revolutionary War period are there and should be explored. Some of these associations are the subject of this special issue of *Minnesota History* that editor Ken Carley and his associates have put together. Later in the year, on September 27, the society's 126th annual meeting will focus on the American Revolution. A special exhibit of society collec-

tions relating to the Revolutionary War era, including items from the Allyn K. Ford Collection treated elsewhere in this magazine, will provide a further highlight. Finally, the restoration of Old Fort Snelling will enter its concluding phase during the 1975-77 biennium.

The bicentennial may yet provide us with an opportunity to strengthen our social fabric and national spirit — not with re-enactments as at Lexington and Concord and Fort Ticonderoga — but by cultivating our understanding of that remarkable founding generation which, in spite of making mistakes, left us heir to a governmental system that has survived the toughest test of all — that of time.

John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1815: "What do you mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775 in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington."

Recently, a contemporary observer wrote: "As a people we have been through much, have suffered scars, have had illusions stripped away. The effort to find ourselves must be quiet rather than noisy, inward rather than outward, reflective rather than celebrative. Let's skip the bicentennial and do some self-exploring."

Those two statements, 160 years apart, illustrate and sum up the rich potential the bicentennial can have for each of us — in our individual and collective lives.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Gopher Reader II: Minnesota's Story in Words and Pictures — Selections from the Gopher Historian.*  
Edited by A. Hermina Poatgieter and James Taylor Dunn.

(St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1975. 300 p. \$10.95.)

MANY READERS of this review know that *Gopher Historian* was a magazine published from 1946 through 1972 by the Minnesota Historical Society for young people, that for twenty-one years it was edited and to a considerable extent written by A. Hermina Poatgieter, and that it was both popular with its readership and respected by students of history. In 1958, during Minnesota's statehood centennial celebration, Miss Poatgieter and James Taylor Dunn published selections from the

magazine in a collection called *Gopher Reader*, a volume which has remained in continuous use through four printings and seventeen years. Now, during the nation's bicentennial, the same editors give us another splendid anniversary present, *Gopher Reader II*.

The appearance of volume two should not signal the demise of volume one, for the collections supplement rather than replicate one another. Moreover, they differ in approach. Volume one, the statehood centennial *Gopher Reader*, traces the span of Minnesota history from stone-age culture patterns to twentieth-century social organization in a sequence made familiar by William W. Folwell and Theodore C. Blegen. In volume two, the federal bicentennial *Gopher Reader*, state history is placed in a broad context which reflects both national patterns and the concerns of present-day American historians.



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