



In last season's *Louisiana Cultural Vistas*, we anticipated the upcoming tricentennial of New Orleans in 2018 by looking back at earlier anniversaries. Mostly what we found was a mix of indifference, bad timing, high expectations, hidden agendas and dashed hopes.

Stars seemed to align for New Orleans' 250th anniversary in 1968. Although the nation was once again at war and social unrest at home dominated the headlines, conditions locally lent themselves to a full-blown commemoration. The oil boom had injected economic rigor into the city, a new shipping channel fomented a bold new "Centroport" in the east; skyscrapers were rising downtown; NASA had brought the space industry to town; big new corporate hotels had catalyzed tourism; and although a population exodus was already underway, inner-city crime and decay had not yet set in.

In 1965 the city's Executive Committee for the 250th Anniversary of the Founding of New Orleans, headed by hotelier Seymour Weiss, hired The Rogers Company to survey stakeholders and develop a proposal for the bisesquicentennial. Guided by a philosophy that "a celebration is something to be—not just something to see," Rogers entertained 35 different ideas—ranging from an anniversary halftime show at the Sugar Bowl to special state license plates—plus nine possible industrial expositions and a host of special events and educational activities. Subcommittees agreed that the anniversary would be focused around a monthlong springtime climax, of which no more than one-third should shine light on the "the city's historic and cultural past," with most attention going to "the city's dynamic and promising future." Business would be celebrated through an international trade fair involving the Port of New Orleans' world shipping partners, and science would be hailed at a major museum of science and industry, complete with a planetarium and oceanarium. Afterwards would come Space Week, Port of New Orleans Week, Downtown Retailers Week, Food Week and French Week.

As happened for the bicentennial in 1918, early visions for the bisesquicentennial suffered from excessive grandiosity. To be sure, the Committee succeeded in educating the citizenry about the significance of the date and in sprucing up the cityscape. But nothing even resembling a science and industry museum got built. Nor was there any great international trade fair, although the International Trade Mart and the brand-new Rivergate Exhibition Hall got an elaborate dedication ceremony on April 30, themed to the anniversary and coordinated with dual conferences by the Organization of American States and the Alliance for Progress. With so many international guests in town, a black-tie anniversary

PREPARING FOR **2018** BY REVISITING **1968**



A commemorative coin was cast to honor the 250th anniversary of New Orleans.

banquet was held on May 7 in the Roosevelt Hotel, owned by none other than Seymour Weiss. There, hundreds of luminaries were joined by dignitaries from France, among them Ambassador Charles Lucet.

What made the bisesquicentennial successful was not a dazzling mega-event or an iconic building, but good old New Orleans improvisation. Indeed, a fair number of The Rogers Company recommendations actually came to fruition, although it's difficult to determine whether it happened courtesy of top-down planning acumen or inadvertently via bottom-up localism.

What resulted was a fairly busy year-long smattering of activities that were a little about business, nothing about science, a lot about culture and all about fun.

Schools, for example, incorporated the anniversary into their curricula. Mardi Gras krewe-themed floats to it. The New Orleans Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra presented a special performance featuring a newly commissioned piece. Xavier University staged an anniversary opera, and the Delgado Museum of Art mounted an *Arts of the Americas* exhibit. The Louisiana Historical Society organized public lectures and a tour of the "Bienville Trail" to Biloxi and Mobile. The

government of France sent treasures and rare colonial documents for a special exhibit at the Presbytère. Researchers and historical associations published new scholarly treatises and popular city guides, some of which are still in print today. Writer Marcus Christian published a commemorative poem entitled "I Am New Orleans," which, despite being one of the few pieces to allude to the darker chapters of local history ("I knew Envy and Hatred, Shame and Despair"), circulated widely in reprints. Commemorative coins and medals were struck, artists created dinner plates, department stores held special sales and banks and corporations released everything from calendars to books. Local entities essentially made the celebration their own. If The Rogers Company endeavored to make the anniversary "something to be—not just something to see," they succeeded, perhaps accidentally.

Local government and its affiliates carried their weight as well. The Committee and the Louisiana Tourism Development Commission, for example, sent the Olympia Brass Band to perform around the world. The International House sent New Orleans-themed exhibits to the German-American Volksfest in Berlin, while the International Trade Mart opened a Louisiana exhibit at Expo 67 in Montreal. Mayor Victor Schiro himself traveled to the Hispano-Luso-Americano-Filipino Congress and brought home a half-million-dollar anniversary gift from Spain

for the construction of Plaza de España. The Orleans Parish Landmarks Commission, meanwhile, dedicated a plaque at Bienville's last home in Paris.

Whereas the May 7th banquet at the Roosevelt Hotel climaxed the diplomatic recognition of the bisesquicentennial, popular celebration peaked a week later in the form of a major jazz festival. The city had attempted to launch such an event in the early 1960s, but those efforts were thwarted by waning fights to maintain segregation. With Jim Crow now a thing of the past, the 250th anniversary seemed like a perfect opportunity to relaunch what had been officially organized as the New Orleans International Jazz Festival, Inc. Kicked off with a nighttime musical parade through the French Quarter, "Jazzfest '68" entailed four concerts over four days at Congo Square and the Municipal Auditorium, featuring the likes of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. This original Jazzfest and a follow-up in 1969 may be viewed as predecessors to the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival launched by George Wein in the same location in 1970. Wein's version moved to the Fair Grounds in 1972, where it grew to draw hundreds of thousands of people annually. Its origins, however, may be traced to the 1968 anniversary — surely that event's greatest lasting contribution.

Looking over the history of foundation anniversaries, certain themes emerge that might inform the tricentennial.

- For one, expect the unexpected. Wars and major transitions of government have occurred during or near all four of New Orleans' prior 50-year anniversaries, and it's worth noting that the next one will straddle two mayoral administrations.
- Allot plenty of planning time: tardy launches increase the odds that grand visions—which seem to run rampant at these times—fall flat.
- Decentralize the effort. Encourage citizens and civic organizations to mark the occasion on their own. All communities within local society—neighborhoods, schools, businesses, nonprofits, universities, religious groups, social clubs—should make the occasion their own and celebrate it in a way that means something to them. That's what happened in 1968, and it proved fortuitous. Doing so not only guarantees widespread civic involvement and a full suite of diverse activities, it also reduces the risk of big projects faltering, as happened in 1918.

Approaching anniversaries offer an opportunity to motivate the timely completion of municipal projects, and even if they fail at first, they have a strange way of eventually coming into fruition. That Bienville statue planned for 1918? Eventually one was dedicated in 1955, and it now stands at the foot of Bienville Street. The Joan of Arc statue from 1918? Erected in 1972, the equestrian figure now stands on Decatur by the French Market. Plaza de España, from 1968? Spanish Plaza was installed eight years later, to mark the bicentennial of the United States. That oceanarium? Not quite, but 22 years later, New Orleans did get a world-class

aquarium. And Jazzfest '68?—well, need I say more? For all their propensity to flounder, grand ideas posited for anniversaries have an uncanny way of eventually coming into reality.

The desire to peg the foundation to a single auspicious date—despite that documents really do not point to one—has spawned an amusingly wide range of fiat dates. By one account, the 1968 Committee decided that April 16 was the "true" city anniversary—a date that just happened to be the birthday of French Ambassador Charles Lucet, who was the guest of honor at the lavish May 7 banquet. Forty-five years later, when Mayor Mitch Landrieu delivered his State of the City address, also on May 7, his aides cheerfully tweeted that "New Orleans was founded 295 years ago today. Happy Birthday NOLA!" I replied to inquire about the source of that information—and was pointed to Wikipedia, which confidently declared that "La Nouvelle-Orléans ... was founded May 7, 1718. ... "Its source was not stated, but I strongly suspect that the contributor got that date from a commemorative program

distributed at the May 7, 1968, banquet! I took this exchange as a reminder that the remembrance of history says as much about the present as about the past.

Finally, in contemplating 2018, there are weighty questions of content and interpretation. What, exactly, are we "celebrating"? Not only our history but our historiography has transformed fundamentally in the past half-century. (How much so? Consider that a consultant recommended that the New Orleans-themed 1968 Sugar Bowl halftime show feature "crossed American and Confederate flags," an "antebellum girl," and former Nazi rocket scientist Wernher Von Braun as the guest of honor.) Within the discipline of history today, and increasingly throughout American society, triumphalism and exceptionalism

have given way to critical theory and cultural relativity; elitism and hagiography have fallen for inclusivity and diversity. In regard to New Orleans, "The French," who figured front-and-center in 1918 and 1968, must share the 2018 stage with, among others, the Africans, the Creoles, the Irish, the Sicilians, the Slavs, the Germans, the Spanish, the Vietnamese, the Americans—and the Native Americans. Slavery, segregation, poverty, disease, disaster and environmental destruction, which went all but ignored in prior anniversaries, demand a place in the next one.

Thus the challenge of the tricentennial: how do we unify a society around a major commemoration when the three centuries being commemorated have been plagued by all too much disunity? Historical anniversaries, we may surmise, serve a number of civic purposes, only two of which are celebration and promotion. Others include, or should include, collective remembrance, reflection, statement-making about the past we regret and goal-setting for the future we want.



Jazzfest '68 served as an inspiration for the future New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

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