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A Slice of cake in Every Hamlet

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A Slice of Cake in Every Hamlet

By James A. Michener

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Gahan Wilson

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PIERSVILLE, Pa.—One of the most perceptive intellectual concepts developed during the last two hundred years has been the theory of rites of passage. Anthropologists and sociologists have inspected many societies and have found that in most the great, salient moments in a human being's passage through life are best appreciated if they are celebrated with ritual.

Birth, puberty, acceptance into the adult group, marriage, childbirth, ordination, attaining seventy years, death—these are moments of significance, and a person cheats himself if he fails to observe them ritually.

The same rule applies to nations. The great moments of attainment and passage ought to be memorialized, for then history is drawn together and the significance of survival is deepened. The rites of passage become logical times to renew our dedication and to look ahead to challenges no less demanding than those whose passing we celebrate.

It was in response to this profound need that starting around 1966 I began to talk to my friends about the superlative national celebration we ought to launch ten years later in 1976. I knew anything substantial would require a decade of lead time, and even then might be cramped for time and money and imagination. But it could be done.

I was delighted when a commission was launched to get the wheels moving forward, however slowly, and when its members solicited my opinion on what ought to be done I was honored. As a consequence of the seriousness with which I responded, I was later asked to draft the final report to the nation, and I can say what I am about to say with no embarrassment, because I had nothing to do with the actual decisions, only with their expression in words.

The document finally produced was the best I have ever known to come from a committee. It was generous in spirit, devoted to the historical ante-

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cedents of our country, imaginative in conception and forward-looking in purpose. Some of its proposals were stunning; others may have been ahead of their time and doomed to rejection; but en masse they would have given this nation one of the damndest whinging birthday parties of the spirit any country has ever seen.

It fell into the hands of a politically-minded Administration and Congress and was aborted.

Then the spiritual disasters of the Nixon debacle began to settle over us, and two years ago I was forced to conclude an essay in this newspaper with the observation that whereas Richard Nixon looked as if he might survive as President, he had lost the moral authority which would enable him to come before the American people to remind him of their heritage of freedom, decency and hope. The Bicentennial as a national celebration was officially dead, and I said so.

Why then, two years later, do I accept appointment to the Bicentennial Advisory Committee, charged with overseeing whatever kind of celebration we do come up with? I do so because I believe more than ever in the efficacy of the rites of passage. No nation as significant in world history as ours has the right to ignore the conclusion of its second hundred years of successful existence.

We are one of the lights of the world, a beacon to which other nations have consistently looked, even when they did not wish to follow our precepts, and for us to allow our birthday to pass unnoticed would be shameful.

There is another reason. We stand today as the oldest continuing form of government surviving on earth. If you consider all the nations that existed beside us in 1789, when our republican form was initiated with the adoption of the Constitution, every one has had to alter its form of gov-

ernment radically except us.

This is a feat which merits celebration, and although the great Federal effort which I had hoped for was torpedoed, I am encouraged to learn that many of the states are coming up with stunning ideas for local celebrations in 1976, and it is these which the committee, of which I am a member, hopes to encourage.

In Hawaii a group of men is building a canoe duplicating the ones in which their Polynesian ancestors made their way from Tahiti sometime around the year 1300. These men are going to paddle again those thousand stormy miles to remind Hawaii and the rest of the nation just what our ancestors were capable of.

If they succeed, and it seems likely they will, their feat will inspire Hawaiian children for another century, and the historical emigrations which populated the islands will become a reality instead of a history-book statement.

In Colorado a committee of historians is rebuilding Bent's Fort on the banks of the Arkansas River. For years it guarded the dangerous trail from Kansas City to Santa Fé, a notorious hangout for heroes and hooligans. Late in the day Old Bent tried to sell it to the Federal Government, but Washington offered him so little money that rather than accept an insult to his honor he burned the thing down.

If Colorado can reconstruct this fort, around which so much of our western history revolved, it will serve as a magnet for travelers and a joy to schoolchildren for the next two hundred years.

It is in such small festivities of great local significance that we can best celebrate this particular rite of passage, because if we keep the spirit of our nation vital, perhaps we will be in a position to have a truly national celebration when our fourth century begins in 2076.

James A. Michener's latest book is "Centennial."