

# Bicentennial : Obligation and Opportunity

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For most people, the experience of one national bicentennial would have been enough. But not for me. Here I am, looking down the cannon barrel at bicentennial number two and pondering what aspects of my experience with the U.S. celebration might assist Australian archivists as they prepare for their 200th birthday party. As part of the pondering process, I hasten to disclaim absolute authority for my remarks on two grounds. Firstly, they are products of remembering and, as such, must be innately flawed. Secondly, bicentennials are, by nature, unique expressions of national character, and, as such, are not the sorts of experiences that lend themselves to transfer elsewhere. So, it is with both these facts in mind that the reader should undertake to peruse this writer's humble advice on the fine art of "bicentennialing."

Perhaps a good place to begin might be with a description of the environment which provided the setting for the U.S. bicentennial celebration. This context was to prove most important in determining the character and structure of the bicentennial experience as a whole.

From the first there was total agreement on the touchstone for the bicentennial: The Declaration of Independence. The commemoration was to be a celebration of the "spirit of 1776", and, as such, would be "of the people, by the people, and for the people." But the translation from inspiration to actual events and activities would not be easily accomplished. The U.S. of the 1970's was much changed from that little clutch of rebellious colonies that wrenched freedom from the Crown. Thirty-seven of the States did not exist at the time of national federation. Moreover, more than half of the 200 million plus citizens were of non-British descent; and, of these, some 20% were members of groups who had yet to realise the fruits of the American Dream. Add to these factors the atmosphere of frustration and disillusionment with the Vietnam War that pervaded

American society in the early 1970's, and the task of formulating a bicentennial concept that was realistic and workable was difficult indeed.

Again, inspiration came from the Declaration of Independence with its assertion of the rights of all citizens to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." To this end, it was agreed that the bicentennial would commemorate/celebrate the spirit of American liberty with the aim of improving the quality of life for all, now and in the future. Since every citizen would have his or her own ideal of what the bicentennial should be, planning authorities decided to create a framework of interpretation that permitted diversity and flexibility.

Three major interpretive themes were selected as focal points for bicentennial activities. They were Heritage, Festival and Horizon.

Under the category of Heritage fell publications, research, historic preservation, and activities that commemorated historical events. Festival was a broad brush that embraced all types of celebrations. The Horizon category was designed to cover projects that improved the quality of life for Americans and focused upon the physical and cultural environment. Naturally, these categories were not mutually exclusive, and many of the most successful bicentennial efforts combined elements of all three.

Once the concept and the basic interpretive framework were in place, concern focused upon quality control. The plan was to grant official recognition only to those undertakings which were characterised by quality, sound management, and faithful adherence to the principles of 1776. Decided preference was also stated for projects that demonstrated the potential for long-term benefits to the community. True to the spirit of independence, the major responsibility for the exercise of quality control was vested in the States, rather than in the Federal Government. Each State governor appointed a bicentennial project review committee made up of distinguished citizens representing various professional, civil, civic, and ethnic groups.

Project organisers seeking official status had to lodge a detailed application for endorsement with their state committee who subjected it to careful review. State decisions were then referred to the national level for final approval. Successful projects received permission to make appropriate use of the national and state bicentennial emblems and were listed in official bicentennial publications, press releases, and calendars promoting approved activities to the public. Conversely, project organisers making unauthorised use of the bicentennial emblem or false claims of official recognition were subject to prosecution and embarrassing publicity.

The question of how the bicentennial projects were funded is of special

interest, particularly in these times of fiscal restraint. And the American experience offered some creative approaches to that age-old task. Undeniably, federal government funding was largely responsible for most of the bicentennial projects undertaken by cultural institutions. But private enterprise played a surprisingly strong part, too, often in cooperation with government efforts, rather than independent of them.

Overall, the financial arrangements for the U.S. bicentennial were designed to foster local initiative and to support worthy projects through special grants of assistance or joint venture agreements. Two categories of participation were recognised for financial purposes: not-for-profit (which embraced both public and private institutions and groups) and commercial. Archival institutions and other historical/cultural agencies fell under the not-for-profit category.

As with the recognition of official status programme, the grants of assistance scheme for not-for-profit groups was concerned with quality, but also with the need to distribute the available grant funds on a representative basis. Eligibility for grant funds was established through a more stringent application process which required sponsors to disclose sources of funds and plans for expenditure. Applicants were expected to fund an average of 50% of total project costs, though this share might be in the form of contributed goods and services rather than hard cash. Clear-cut guidelines regulated the types of allowable expenses. For example, grant monies could not be spent on food, beverages, and entertainment. These items had to be donated or acquired with local funds. Occasionally, the official bicentennial body would undertake a joint venture arrangement with a local sponsor on a 50-50 cost and profit sharing basis. Under these arrangements, half of the profits that were generated returned to the bicentennial authority to supplement the funds in the grants programme.

Naturally an event the size of the U.S. Bicentennial was bound to attract the considerable interest of the for-profit sector. The prospect of a 200 million plus market "bicentennialing" more or less throughout fifteen years (remember, the becoming of the United States officially began in 1774 to be climaxed by the meeting of the First Federal Congress in 1789) was indeed enticing. Clearly something had to be done, from the very first, to harness this tidal wave of commercial opportunity for the public good.

The steps taken to realise this goal were both interesting and creative. Predictably, officials utilised quality control procedures for endorsing the products of the commercial sector that were similar to those applied to the not-for-profit area, but with more complexity. Their first major aim

was to ensure the presence of quality in the wide range of souvenirs and collectibles that carried any official logo or endorsement. The second objective was to develop a way to apply the profits made from commercial bicentennial ventures to the support of bicentennial projects sponsored by the not-for-profit sector. The plans devised for this participation varied with individual states and centred around two key provisions: the eligibility for tax deductions for those who contributed funds to qualified not-for-profit institutions sponsoring projects and the subsequent publicity of such "gifts" through official bicentennial publications and advertising. These incentives created a partnership between the public and private sectors of the economy that made many more, and more substantial, projects possible than would have been realised on public funding alone.

Moving from the general, overall approach to bicentennial planning in the U.S. to the specific experiences of the archival community before, during, and after the Bicentennial, let me divide the discussion into three parts. The first will focus upon the pattern and nature of the demand for archival services experienced during the period. The second will describe some representative and/or creative types of successful projects that archives became involved with as sponsors. The third and final part will comprise this writer's opinion of the types of undertakings that would most benefit the Australian archival community as it prepares for the bicentennial experience.

One of the questions most frequently asked by those of us planning the bicentennial activities for the State Archives of Georgia was "What will people want from the Archives during the Bicentennial and when will they want it?" Though the final answer to this question remained elusive until long after it was needed, data did exist on which to base a conjecture of what might be expected. Only ten years earlier, 1961-1965, the centennial of the Civil War had been commemorated, and records of reference activity from that time provided useful information. Using these figures we pieced together a pattern of anticipated use that was proven reasonably accurate by our subsequent experiences during the U.S. Bicentennial.

What both sets of figures revealed is that the demand for services related to any large commemoration would begin some ten years in advance of the actual starting date of formal activities. Projects most likely to impact upon archival institutions at this time included the national and state planning authorities themselves who most likely will have one or more very large publishing projects under development. From years ten to seven, the scope of such projects will be defined and the archival component will bring a small number of experienced academic researchers with very

specific and intensive research needs to the large archival institutions. While the number of these researchers is few, the impact of their long-term projects can place a heavy burden on archival services, especially reprography, and often the researcher involved becomes such a fixture he or she assumes quasi-staff status. With year six, the number of users broadens slightly to embrace those doing publication or media projects on special subjects or events, particularly serials. These types of projects continue to grow in number and lessen in scope as time approaches year three. It is at this point that most archives began to experience the disproportional impact caused by a rapidly increasing population of citizens-turned-historians. Armed with the mandate to write a local history, they advance upon the reading rooms of archives, large and small, intending to learn the research craft as they undertake their tasks.

About this same time, most archival institutions begin work on some bicentennial project of their own or in joint sponsorship with another historical agency, as if they didn't have enough to do in meeting the research demands that, by this time, are growing daily. The rationale behind the institutional bicentennial project is that "the public expects it." The assumption is that if one is an historical agency, then one must produce an appropriate product to commemorate an historic event. The key word in this maxima is "appropriate," the meaning of which is a function of the size of the institution and the magnitude of the historical occasion in question. But more on this subject in the next section covering types of projects sponsored by archival institutions. Both experiences demonstrated that by the time year one preceding the event came around, most of the reference demand originating from project planners was over. They had completed their research and were well into the execution of their projects. There were, of course, the late starters, usually amateur researchers, who underestimated the amount of time needed for their projects; and these impacted heavily during the last year leading up to the initial commemorations, keeping the statistics of demand at a high level.

The records also revealed another interesting fact. With the onslaught of the celebrations proper, research demand remained relatively steady, with slight fluctuations, but the character of the researchers changed. More and more new researchers found their way into the archives, having developed an interest in historical research as a result of the commemorative activities. They had been sufficiently motivated to check out the family legends, trace the history of their property, or do a bit of research on an historical event in their community. School groups led

the statistics for numbers, with the amateur family historians not far behind.

The mention of family history brings up another factor which influenced the growth of demand for archival services during the U.S. Bicentennial, a factor that bore no direct relationship to the commemoration proper, but one that had enormous effects upon archives all over the country, indeed, all over the world. That factor was the publication of Alex Haley's best-selling novel *Roots*. Released in early 1977, *Roots* accomplished what years of preaching the gospel of archives appreciation had not — it brought people, millions of them, through the doors of archives for the first time. And, for the most part, they came to stay, their interest fanned by what they found and by a continuing series of family-focused melodramas on television. Even today, though there has been a decline in the overall statistics since the heady peaks of 1977 and 1978, interest in family history remains high, and the level of use of archives remains well above that of the pre-1976 days.

To this point, we have been discussing the research demands *before* the starting date of the Bicentennial period, but what kinds of services were sought, and by whom, during the celebration era proper? Once the "big date" of the 4th July, 1976 had passed, demand levelled off. The other significant dates of the struggle for independence did not have the same mass emotional appeal for Americans, and the body of research demands associated with the Bicentennial simply merged with a stream of other research interests, notably those generated by *Roots*. Perhaps, more than anything else, it was a period of revival of historical awareness. People were more sensitive to the past, to its importance and preservation, but in a personal way rather than in any great outpouring of funds or support for historical institutions.

Demands for archival services reflected preparations for the commemoration of specific family or local events, such as reunions, town centennials, organisational birthdays, and the like, most of which were unrelated to the Bicentennial. Any anniversary commemorating twenty-five or more years of worthwhile existence provided an occasion for a celebration; and, more often than not, this event was preceded by a visit to the local library, historical society, or archives for information about "the early days." Thus, the level of usage of archival institutions remained relatively high, with the clientele dominated by ordinary citizens pursuing their own personal research interests.

This "new" clientele had a heavy impact upon archival institutions, beginning with the years immediately preceding the Bicentennial and continuing today. The reading room, once the domain of a few experienced

researchers with well-defined projects, had been overrun by hundreds of motivated, but naive, amateur historians with research interests ranging from the minute to the gargantuan. And, in the best tradition of directly representative government, public archival institutions welcomed one and all to the use of their facilities. Any citizen had the right to ask for and receive archival services, including assistance in defining his or her research task, in framing research questions, in selecting the appropriate archival sources, and in making the most productive and proper use of those materials. The impact of this large volume of users which demanded such intensive nurturing from the reference staff was undeniably enormous, especially since it coincided with a public demand for spending cuts for government.

Indeed, beginning with the mid-seventies, the public archival community began to feel the pinch of a new austerity. What this policy of fiscal restraint meant to archivists was no new facilities, major equipment, or staff, no matter how demanding the workload was to become. And so the squeeze was on. Reference demand grew, but not so rapidly as it had in the years preceding the Bicentennial, but the resources with which to meet that demand shrank steadily. Archival administrators were also feeling pressure from outside the reading room. Other government agencies, seeking ways to use their ever diminishing resources more productively, were calling upon the archival repositories for records storage and management services. They wanted to get rid of their inactive records to free space and equipment for current use. Faced with a workload explosion that would not go away, archivists had no alternative but to examine their own operations to see how they might deploy their existing resources more effectively. So it is how the archival institutions responded to this mandate for change during the commemorative period that comprises the most important fruit of the American bicentennial experience for archivists, far more so than any individual project or programme bearing a bicentennial emblem.

Perhaps, now at this point, it would be timely for us to consider some of the types of activities undertaken by archival institutions during the Bicentennial, including those which brought lasting changes in programme scope, organisation, and operation. For the purpose of our discussion, I have chosen to limit my comments to those activities that were not only timely and topical, but which were substantial enough to have been subsequently incorporated into the ongoing archival programme of their host institutions. The reason I have taken this approach is that, in times of fiscal restraint, so-called one-shot or one-off projects generally do not constitute the best use of scarce archival resources. The best projects are

those that are natural outgrowths of archival processes and functions or which seek to facilitate the effective provision of archival services. Ideally, these same projects also reflect the changes in operational processes and priorities that are essential to resolve the previously described crisis of workload growth in the face of diminishing resources.

One of the most common types of Bicentennial efforts involved the production of *finding aids*. The most familiar of these was the *guide*, either to repository *holdings* or to materials relating to specific *subjects* such as ethnic groups, agriculture, military affairs, or to *graphic materials* like photographs and maps. Some highly specialised guides pinpointed especially *desirable record types* such as diaries or personal correspondence. Unfortunately, under pressure to have "something ready for the Bicentennial," many institutions demonstrated myopic tendencies, preferring to concentrate on the creation of one or two published productions, rather than on improving the overall system for developing and updating finding aids. Those institutions who chose a more comprehensive approach did not complete their task as quickly, but they too ended up with several attractive and useful products. Furthermore, they had developed the manual and automated systems to produce further finding aids in multiple formats, as well as to update the existing ones. Their process-oriented approach enabled them to *invest* and add to the resources they would have used for a one-off publication effort to develop a system that would serve the institution with a wide variety of publications.

Related to the use of archival resources is another type of publication that enjoyed great popularity during the Bicentennial, the "how-to" brochure or booklet. The purpose of this type of publication was to educate or orient the potential user to enable him or her to make the best use of the archival institution and its resources. While these publications were effective when sent out with mail inquiries or distributed to new researchers, they had their maximum impact when they were utilised as part of another popular Bicentennial programme, the "how-to" workshop or seminar. An interesting feature of these types of publications is that archival institutions were often able to attract outside support to defray the costs of publication. Local typesetters and printers were persuaded to donate their services in return for a credit line on the finished publication, as were other civic-minded institutions or businesses who paid for the paper and binding. Most of the participating firms credited the cost to their advertising budgets and considered it very good value indeed.

Two other types of publications, the facsimile documents packet for school children and the "beautiful book", deserve discussion here for three



reasons. Firstly, they are often the first types of publications that come to mind when staff members ponder "what sorts of publications should we produce for the Bicentennial?" Secondly, they can be very difficult and expensive to develop and to produce in appropriate quality. Finally, they are also very likely to remain unappreciated on storeroom shelves unless proper planning for distribution and promotion has been an integral part of the production process from the very beginning.

Should your institution be considering either one of these types of publications, may this writer offer a piece of advice? Undertake the venture into the world of specialised publishing with caution. As archivists we know two things. We know the glories of our own holdings, and we know what we, personally, would like and appreciate in the way of publications. What we need to be concerned about is what we *don't know* because that's what gets us into trouble. We don't know what it costs to produce absolute facsimiles of our archival treasures. We don't know what teachers and students need in terms of original materials or how they will use them in the classrooms. We don't know the intricacies of the book trade, particularly of how to make an undeniably beautiful book of limited appeal sell. So, with that indelibly in mind, the archivist contemplating such publications should do one thing and one thing only. Be an archivist. He or she should *aid the efforts of others* in this enterprise, be they the Department of Education, a particular school, or, in the case of the *libre bella*, a commercial publishing firm. Advise in establishing the focus and scope of the publication and in selecting research materials appropriate for its content. Avoid becoming mired in the details of the research or production processes. The archival institution must always protect itself and its materials from improper exploitation and establish as the minimum condition for permission to publish enforceable assurances of proper credit lines and of reproductions that are faithful to the originals in both form and context. Above all, archivists must not be seduced into believing that publications of archival materials make substantial profits. Most of the successful ones merely break even, and the so-called "best sellers" usually provide only enough profit to go to reprint.

The final type of publication which we shall discuss as an appropriate Bicentennial effort is the compilation or edition of original source documents, either in hard copy or microform. During the U.S. Bicentennial, many archival institutions undertook to publish at least one volume of edited source documents, usually a new increment of a previously published series that was never finished for lack of funds. Again, the project was often undertaken largely because it was allegedly "ready to go." The time-consuming work of selecting and editing the contents

had been done years before, resulting in a "finished" manuscript imminently eligible for publication. Certainly the possession of a potential "instant achievement" could put one's institution well ahead on the Bicentennial scorecard, but such an enterprise is not without its dangers. What reputable editor or scholar would take the work of another and publish it without scrutiny? Not many. And it is a rare editor who would be able to resist the impulse to improve upon the work, thus making it more his/her own. So much for the advantage of a "ready-to-go" publication.

Whether one improves upon the work of a predecessor or starts from the beginning, editions of original source documents are, undeniably, among the most appropriate types of publications for archives to produce. Carefully selected for research potential and responsibly edited, they can also be very cost effective, particularly if produced in microform rather than hard copy. They also offer an additional advantage to repositories serving large geographical areas because high use series can be distributed to libraries in outlying regions, making research possible for these remote areas.

Microform editions of high volume document series such as *Gazettes* or of early newspapers have special appeal. The availability of such publications would enable many research institutions to discard their voluminous hard copy holdings of these materials and many more libraries, both here and overseas, to purchase or complete sets of these important serials. Furthermore, publication projects of this magnitude would encourage co-operation (and potential co-investors), since it is unlikely, particularly in the case of newspapers, that one institution would have all the extant issues needed for the film edition.

Most all of the publication projects described above would meet the public's expectation that the archives must mount an "appropriate effort" for the Bicentennial. But other activities could also satisfy that requirement, the most visible of which are the educational programmes comprising workshops, seminars, and conferences to assist researchers in the use of archival resources.

Educational or instructional programmes vary widely in size, complexity, and duration, but all share common attributes and, properly planned, can yield considerable gains for their archival sponsors. Whether one is preparing for a simple "how-to" instruction session in the reading room or for a national conference on the colonial heritage, the essential ingredients for maximum success are the same. All classes, seminars, workshops, and conferences should meet the highest standards of quality in both content and presentation. But more importantly, each programme

should be a natural product of the archival enterprise. That is, it should support or flow on from institutional efforts to acquire, preserve, and make archival materials available for research use. By adhering to this maxim, archivists can use educational programmes to strengthen their institutions as a whole. Through the instrument of educational programmes, archivists are able to communicate regularly and more effectively with a variety of client groups. These occasions of face-to-face contact in pursuit of mutual interests can present both sides with unparalleled opportunities for beneficial exchanges. From the archivist's point of view, it is a chance to demonstrate the value of archival work and the need for continuing support. The user, on the other hand, hopes that discussing his/her research needs with interested archivists will bring about that most desired of results: better access to materials pertinent to his/her research interests.

What were some of the educational programmes that proved most successful during the U.S. Bicentennial? Far and away the most popular type of educational programme was the "how to do research" class. These consisted of half an hour or so of instruction by a knowledgeable archivist or volunteer and were held during working hours so that participants could utilise their knowledge immediately in the reading rooms. Subject content for the classes varied according to the interests of the clientele. Most combined instruction on how to refine a research problem and to use finding aids in the reading room with tips on sources for particular subject inquiries, such as for family history. Basic classes in research techniques, using the archives, and introductory family history became permanent offerings in many archival repositories. Some archives found it beneficial to offer a sequence of classes building towards increasing levels of expertise. Often these culminated in a weekend workshop for advanced students.

As one might expect, literally hundreds of one-off historical seminars, workshops, and conferences were held as official events of the U.S. Bicentennial celebration. It is interesting to note that, although the subject content of many of them had little to do with the events of the American struggle for political independence, these meetings were welcomed as inquiries which improved the quality of life and were included under the Bicentennial theme of "Horizon." Thus the Bicentennial provided groups and States that had no direct connection with the eighteenth century experience with opportunities to explore the richness of their own heritage.

While the one-off historical conference or seminar was a popular phenomenon during the U.S. Bicentennial and will likely also be manifest here in Australia, I would urge archivists not to pursue such one-shot efforts to the exclusion of activities that will have more lasting value for

their programmes. One way to ensure that balance is maintained is to co-sponsor large or specialized meetings with other research institutions or associations. In that way, the burden of planning and cost can be shared, and the experience may create a base for joint endeavours in the future.

Any discussion of Bicentennial activities in the U.S. would not be complete without some attention to the "Festival" or fun aspects of the commemoration. After all, what is a birthday party without a celebration? And everyone wants to come home from the party with a favour. The realisation of that opportunity lay in ensuring that "a creative touch of history" was present in every celebration, and that the archives received publicity for providing said touch.

The key to success in an endeavour of this type is involvement in the community or group decision-making process. Since it is unlikely that "ask the archivist" will be first in the minds of those in charge, the archivist must actively promote his/her ideas directly to those in charge of events and activities which lend themselves best to an historical component. What are some of these suitable opportunities? They are as unlimited as one's imagination, but here are some examples. Publicity for celebrations usually includes graphic illustrations. Does the archives have any prints, posters, photographs, or advertising art that, whole or in part, might provide a motif? The mind boggles when one contemplates the sheer number of official (and paid-for-by-others) stickers, posters, tickets, t-shirts, scarves, vehicles, banners, balloons, handbills, media advertisements, and so on that would carry such a design feature, with a credit line to the archives, of course.

Another way to add dimension to community celebrations is to incorporate an historical element into the festivities. Old style marches, holiday commemorations, balls, contests, races, and barbeques can feature period costumes, re-enactments, ceremonies, dishes made from old fashioned recipes, and/or toasts of yesteryear, to mention only a few of the possibilities. The archives might distribute a leaflet describing these recipes, toasts, hospitable customs, and ceremonies (and brief details of the archives programme) as a souvenir of the occasion.

Whether your institution decides to produce publications, sponsor educational programmes, contribute "touches of history" to commemorative events, or do all or none of the above, it cannot be denied that a bicentennial represents both opportunity and obligation for the archival community. Such commemorations provide archivists with once in a lifetime opportunities to promote the use of the documentary materials in their care and thereby provide a basis for the continuing appreciation and support of heritage in general and of archives in particular. The

obligation of archivists to demonstrate that they have been faithful stewards of public trust is an equally powerful motivator for action. It is a fact that archival institutions are more visible during major historical commemorations. During these times, like no other, the public expects archives to reaffirm their worthiness and produce programmes appropriate for the occasion. The bigger and more important the celebration, the greater the public expectation and demand for archival services.

Faced with the two-edged sword of opportunity and obligation, what can archivists do to reap maximum benefits from the bicentennial experience? The answer is found in one word: plan. Plan for impact and for action. Act now to meet users' demands for more effective services and initiate your own worthwhile programmes of long term benefit. Be sure that what you undertake is a natural outgrowth of your archival mission to acquire, preserve, describe and make records available for research use. Think through your policies and processes to see where they might be made more effective. Are you serving your constituency or only that small portion that can easily visit the archives? Study your reading room layout, reference procedures, and finding aids with the goal of making them more logical and understandable to researchers. Initiate efforts to acquaint users with the information they need to use the archives with confidence. Measure the anticipated effort, cost, and impact of any potential project against the benefits it promises. Double the first two elements, then cut the last in half to see how things add up before you commit the first man-hour to the undertaking. Above all, be selective and make your efforts on one project yield results for another. For example, if you are producing an exhibit, use the same research effort to create a slide show or videotape and to publish a booklet on the subject for sale.

While the list of internal programme improvements one might suggest for any archival institution could go on indefinitely, the time has come to make the final and most important point. The Australian bicentennial is not approaching, it is at hand. For all archivists it carries an undeniable obligation to serve the research needs of those who seek our aid. Whether or not that obligation turns into a genuine opportunity is largely up to individual practitioners. If archivists seize the chance and benefit from the experiences of those who have gone before, this bicentennial can become a celebration of great archival achievement for Australia.