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Celebrations, Commemorations and Collections: Delivering Immediate Impact and Creating Lasting Value

Good morning! Thank you, Christine, for that introduction! I was honored to be asked to give the plenary speech at this year's Society of Ohio Archivists Annual Meeting. I should mention that I speak to you today, not solely as an archivist, but as a cultural heritage professional, more broadly. I do have my MLIS from Kent State and I have worked directly with digital archives and collections in the past, but, as I'm sure most of you know, OHS' collections are wide and varied in terms of the breadth and depth of material culture, with archival materials making up just one portion of that collection. The majority of my professional work has been in the seemingly strange, transitory netherworld which attempts to connect archival materials with the 3-dimensional "ephemera" collections that the Society holds. In truth, I may not be so alone in this, as I suspect many of you also deal with the many complications and opportunities that come with such an arrangement. But what it also means is that I'm going to focus less on "archive-specific" issues this morning, and more on some of the broader concerns that all cultural heritage organizations face, not the least of these being archives themselves.

So, where do we begin? Well, the title of this talk is "*Celebrations, Commemorations, and Collections: Delivering Immediate Impact and Creating Lasting Value,*" and I was asked to focus on the Civil War Sesquicentennial as a primary lens with which to have this conversation. That title may seem pretty straightforward - in fact, it did to me at first - but there is actually a lot to unpack in that statement. In order to unpack it, I am going to focus on 4 things:

1. What do we mean by "celebrations" and "commemorations" and why is that distinction important?
2. What did they do the last time there was a CW anniversary?
3. How are the commemoration efforts differently today and why?
4. What does all of this mean for each us as we consider our own opportunities for current and upcoming Sesquicentennial projects?

I am going to focus on the Civil War as a case study, but the big ideas I'll talk about translate well to any commemoration event, whether it is the bicentennial of the War of 1812, centennials of things like the statewide flood of 1913 or the inauguration of Warren G. Harding in 1921, or an important local event in the city or county that you represent. I'm also going to spend some time focused on digitization projects specifically, as these present unique challenges to us in the commemoration context which we'll discuss in more detail near the end of this talk.

Pt. 1 - Definitions

So, I say there is a lot to unpack from the title, because, well, just look at the first part of it: Celebrations, Commemorations and collections. A nice alliteration, but those are three rather distinct things. Even just the first two: Celebrations and commemorations, which seem like pretty similar ideas - when examined more closely actually mean very different things, if you think about it.

The word celebrate in relation to an anniversary, for example, is defined in Webster's as "marking (as an anniversary) by festivities or other deviation from routine." And if you think about it, when we celebrate something (a birthday, a graduation, a retirement, a football victory) it is usually with great fanfare and joy.

A commemoration, on the other hand, suggests an altogether different kind of experience and intent. Again, according to Webster's, to commemorate is to "Call to remembrance" and to "mark by some ceremony or observation"… No talk of festivities there. Commemorations tend to mark things we believe to be solemn or require some reverence that requires something other than a celebratory atmosphere. By today's standards, certainly, events that result in human casualties and shocking loss (such as 9/11, the current military conflicts, the Holocaust, WWII, the list goes on and on) would seem to fall under this second category, including those where people argue that the reasons or outcomes related to the events are fair, righteous or justified.

Why do I mention this? Well, as we think about what it means to mark the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War and consider our own efforts, the question of whether it is a celebration or a commemoration is an important one.

Pt. 2a – The Centennial

This question has been one of the most important ones asked among the numerous state Sesquicentennial committees around the country today, tasked with organizing, promoting and supporting the various CW150 efforts currently underway. I'll talk about that in more detail in a bit, but, as the old cliché goes, those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it, and so the history of the last time the Civil war was celebrated is an important one to consider.

I just used the term "celebrated" deliberately there, because the events of 50 years ago WERE VERY DELIBERATELY intended to BE celebrations! The Centennial event planning was intended to be a very top down process with very specific outcomes in mind. As noted historian Robert Cook describes it in his book, *Troubled Commemoration*, interested parties, including the National Park Service and eager amateur Civil War enthusiasts lobbied Congress for the creation of a federal commission to oversee planning. In September 1957 Congress indeed created the US Civil War Centennial Commission, or the CWCC. This body was empowered to foster public

interest in the Civil War and encourage the formation of state agencies to promote local commemorative events. Much of the centennial planning and celebrations of the late 1950s and early 1960s were focused on the traditional "Big man, big event, big monument" philosophy that has so typified classic historical commemorations. To this point, 80-year-old Ulysses S. Grant III, grandson of the famous Ohio-born general and president, was named chairman of the federal commission overseeing the centennial events. Centennial organizers in the late 1950s wanted the event to be a genuinely popular and national one. Grant III wrote a column for the Oct. 16, 1960 issue of This Week magazine in which he promised, "Colorful ceremonies will be held, exhibitions of war trophies and mementos organized. There will be memorials, parades, new historical markers and a great many special ceremonies."

As you know, history is complex and the history of the Civil War is certainly no exception. Indeed, the cultural memory and examination of it has shifted and changed continuously over the subsequent decades, to the point that there are still debates over the reasons for the war and the effects of its outcomes. In 1960, many people of a certain age (including Grant III) had even had direct personal connections to grandparents or others who had participated or been affected by the war and its immediate aftermath, giving them real, visceral connections to an event that had changed the course of history for the country and the world. So, the intent of the organizers was to celebrate the efforts of these gallant men on either side of the conflict who had fought for what they believed was right (the most American of ideals, really); But far less attention was seemingly paid to what those actual ideals were, whether they be questions of slavery, state's rights, civil rights or reconstruction and its aftermath, just to name a few. Add to that the complex social and political environment of the early 1960's, in which the centennial was taking place, and the excitement and intended "colorful ceremonies", "parades" and "memorials" of the organizers were severely dampened by the very real questions, challenges, and social upheavals facing the culture. It has even been argued that the parallels between the issues of the 1860's to those of the 1960's were directly magnified and intensified by awareness raised by the Sesquicentennial efforts.

This is not to say that the Centennial was an abject failure… The celebration gave birth to a generation of rabidly enthusiastic civil war buffs, professional historians and researchers, including many of the people who have made it a priority to commemorate the Sesquicentennial half a century later.

Pt. 2b – The Sesquicentennial

Which now brings us to the question of what is happening with the CW150 commemoration efforts today... How has the past influenced the decisions being made and what are the desired outcomes of the Sesquicentennial efforts moving forward?

As I mentioned earlier, in preparing for the sesquicentennial, organizers have used the lessons learned from the Centennial, to try to anticipate the many successes, challenges and failures that come with a venture like this one. I believe that this, combined with the development of twenty-first century America's self-reflective, post-modern perspective, has led many of the commemoration efforts, and their hoped-for outcomes, to look far different than they did 50 years ago.

First and foremost, is the shift away from the top-down, mediated organizational approach that had a federal commission, established by congress, attempting to direct efforts unilaterally across the country. Today's efforts have taken on a much more organic, bottom up approach, with each interested state creating their own commissions, with their own priorities, agendas and initiatives. This is not to suggest that there is NO coordination happening. In fact, there is, what might best be described as, a loose collaborative of state Sesquicentennial coordinators that hold regular quarterly conference calls to discuss issues, coordinate programs and generally serve as a sounding board to support the efforts that each state is undertaking. But rather than being run by a federal commission, this effort was state initiated and is organized through the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH). The National Park Service, the Civil War Trust, and a few other national organizations now play a role, but they came on board only after the states had pulled the collaborative together.

The second big shift is the very deliberate move from a focus on "celebration" to one of commemoration. This does not mean that there are no object exhibitions, "colorful ceremonies" or re-enactments being scheduled (in fact there was a re-enactor's encampment event on the West lawn of the Ohio Statehouse just last weekend). But, what it does mean is that the overall focus of the efforts is directed toward balancing these more celebratory "big banner" events with events that allow for more inwardly focused examinations of the conflict and its causes. As an example, the very first event held by the Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission was not an encampment, or a bell ringing or a cannon firing, but rather a symposium on the causes leading up to the breakout of war.

The focus on commemoration also offers an occasion for self-reflection as to just how our generation is choosing to use the opportunities afforded us by the sesquicentennial anniversary. Just last week, I had a very interesting conversation with Jackie Barton, the CW150 Coordinator for the state of Ohio, who told me (and I'm paraphrasing here) that this civil war remembrance has been a commemoration as much for the public history community as it has been for the general public. She is fascinated by the fact that the sesquicentennial seems to be focused much more on examining HOW we commemorate, as it is on the commemoration activities themselves. Questions like "how do we reach out to minority communities" and "how are we record our own decisions about this commemoration" are just as important as scheduling the musters and creating the object exhibitions that are the traditional anticipated outcomes of a commemoration initiative. One of the biggest questions the state coordinators have tried to stay cognizant of is the question of "How we make sure that 50 years from now the BI-centennial

committees know why the decisions we've made were made the way they were." This was not something that Ulysses S. Grant III and his committee seem to have been very concerned about…

The final major difference between the efforts of today and those of the 1960s is the shift away from a focus on "big man, big event, big monument" and more to a focus on personal stories and viewing the war through the lens of the everyday people that lived and experienced it and its aftermath. How interesting it is that those people who had the very real first person relationships with those who lived the events should be so committed to promoting the larger national stories, while we, using the 150 year old primary sources available to us in our collections and our communities are so intent on trying to call out those individual, personal stories that help to make the facts of the Civil War come alive in this very bottom-up way.

--------- Pt. 3 ---------

So, now let's turn from "What they did or are doing" to you and "what you are doing or are hoping to do…"

Understanding the thinking about how and why other people have conducted their commemoration efforts is important for shaping your own plans, but every situation is different and at some point each of us has to consider our own collections, resource, community needs and desired outcomes that will dictate what path we ultimately take in our own commemoration or celebration efforts.

To this end, I'd like to use the last part of my talk with you today to suggest some key things to think about as well as some questions to consider as you embark on your own initiatives.

The first thing to ask yourself is simply: Why? Why are you putting resources into the commemoration effort in the first place?

- Because it is mission critical?
- Because your community expects it of your organization?
- Because it is a convenient lens by which you focus your activities?
- Because there is a larger message you are trying to share?
- Because it is an opportunity to expand your audience by tacking on to the energy of the commemoration movement?
- Because it provides a vehicle to leverage things like partnership opportunities or Conservation/preservation efforts of collections for future generations

There are no right or wrong answers here, and what are perfectly legitimate reasons for one organization may be the absolute wrong reasons for another. The point is that it is highly

recommended that you be aware of why you are undertaking the work, so that you have a guidepost by which to measure whether or not you are meeting expectations or straying from the original purpose of the exercise.

The other critical thing to ask yourself is: What is the legacy of the work you are doing? What are the long term implications of this commemoration effort?

- What is the relevance of your efforts for today and for the future? Why should people care?
- What stories can your collection tell that will enrich the dialog and leave your community in a better place after the commemoration is over?
- What kind of tools and resources are you leaving behind, beyond the limited length of the commemoration itself? Are you doing anything that will benefit the next round of commemorations?
- Are you able to provide a fresh perspective on the old ideas? What are you talking about historically that can provide opportunities to re-examine popular beliefs or provoke greater discourse about collective memory of the event being commemorated.
  - War of 1812
    - Provides an opportunity to talk about the Indian removal and an awareness of the descendants that live in OK today
  - Civil War
    - Issues of race, women's roles in society, technological advancements

This idea of longitudinal thinking with regard to commemoration efforts is an important one to the Sesquicentennial discussion, as I indicated before. This is especially true with regard to one other key consideration relevant for our current commemoration efforts that the Centennial generation could not have even fathomed as a possibility 50 years ago. That is the explosion of digital technology and the new media available which can connect people to the ideas and stuff that make up our commemoration efforts. As archivists, we are largely focused on the collections our organizations hold and are interested in finding ways to connect these collections to our users and communities, both virtually and in person. The ability to share collections digitally, to allow for self-curation and to help others share their personal connections to the larger Civil War story has opened up whole new channels of interaction and connectivity. But with these new possibilities come new expectations and challenges as well.

Part 4 – Commemorations now and in the future

In the time I have remaining, I'd like to take a few minutes to explore the impact of digital collections and discuss some of the key considerations I believe are vital to a successful commemoration project.

If done well, digitization projects can provide lasting value as long-term resources with a reach far beyond the scope of the original commemoration event, including as the foundation for a more comprehensive digitization program within an institution or a cooperative. Without proper foresight and planning, however, these projects can leave behind loose ends and confusion that can bother an organization for years to come. Even digital projects with short-term expectations can have lives online and in the minds of users far beyond their intended scope - considering the consequences of this possibility upfront can benefit the project and your organization long-term. In short, you should be considering from the very beginning if you will provide access to the resources beyond the life commemoration and if so, how you plan to make that happen.

So, what are some of the inherent opportunities and challenges to be aware of when developing a commemorative digitization effort? When planning for effective long term access, I recommend considering the following six elements:

1. Standards and Best Practices: Are you creating metadata that is harvestable if you need to transfer your information from one host or software to another? Are you creating preservation quality files that will be accessible for as long as possible?

2. Rights and Reproductions: People will want access to the resources they find and will want to use them for purposes ranging from personal enjoyment to scholarly research to commercial publication. Have you considered what to do when those requests come in, often unsolicited? Will you decline all requests for reuse, or do you have a structure in place to handle those requests? Will you charge for access? Who will receive the fees?

3. Ownership: One of the benefits of creating a digital repository is that you can pull objects from disparate sources together into one comprehensive portal. Maintaining intellectual control over ownership rights is an essential element to successful long-term access. When working with materials from multiple sources, make sure that ownership is clearly defined in the metadata and/or the project records. This is especially true with digital collections that include submissions from private individuals.

4. Audience: Recognize that a simple Google search will bring users from all around the world to your resource, from middle school history teachers in Cincinnati to Civil War buffs three states over to college students doing research in Prague. Determining who your intended users are, while recognizing the inherent value of your project for everyone else is a really important element.

5. Community: Digital collections that include submissions from private individuals can be a great way to build community support and document significant historical collections in

private hands. In the past, digitizing items from your own organizational collection would probably have been enough for most users, but the ease of digitization, the rise of social media and the raised awareness that the Sesquicentennial has caused, encourages private citizens with Civil War materials to look for ways to share their collections with the world.

6. Preservation Expectations: When digitizing collections, you are already handling your fragile objects and doing the time-intensive work of scanning or photographing them. Therefore, you might as well do it to a set of standards that limits the need to repeat the work in the future. Digital preservation standards are based on the ability to sustain and access digital surrogates of your collections pieces over time and creating these images to a certain set of standards is usually as simple as making some minor adjustments to the settings on your scanning software.

Most of today's long-term digitization programs originally started off as short-term projects. Even if you have no current plans to extend your digitization efforts beyond the scope of your commemoration project, preparing for this potential transition up front can make a big difference over the life of your project and the future of your digital assets. When developing your Civil War digitization project, I would recommend you consider creating a product that stands alone, but that can serve as a foundation for future digitization initiatives not yet conceived of.

Specifically consider the following questions:

- Is the technical infrastructure flexible enough to expand should our digitization efforts grow beyond this specific topic or event?

- Are we using standards for metadata, imaging and online delivery that insures project interoperability – the ability to connect and work with other software and technology platforms we already use, like our website – moving forward?

- Are we documenting our practices and procedures, to avoid future duplication of work and ensure we can answer questions about our policies and procedures in the future?

- How and when will we evaluate our work and learn from our mistakes?

Ultimately, never lose sight of your ultimate goal of connecting users to resources and always check your progress against the guidepost you have set for yourself for why you have undertaken the commemoration project

Conclusion

So, that about wraps up my comments for today. We've traveled pretty far in the last half hour or so… from Ulysses S Grant III sitting on his famous grandfather's knee to a discussion of

metadata standards and digital project interoperability, but such is the life of a modern day archivist intent on commemorating the Civil War! Right?

Anyway, as a way of concluding this morning, I'd just like to re-emphasize on last time the lasting impact on a community that a commemoration done right can have, regardless of whether based on physical collections, programmatic elements, digital assets or something else. I'd also like to remind you that there is help out there.

Ohio's CW150 program has been up and running for several years now and is a great resource for connecting individual organizations to the resources and community that can help kick start your Sesquicentennial project and enrich the very important resources you are bringing to your communities. I hope that you've found this discussion useful and somewhat interesting and I look forward to hearing all about the many projects on the horizon or already underway. Thank you and enjoy the rest of this year's SOA Spring Meeting.