

Looking Toward the AAG's Centenary

The AAG is on the threshold of turning one hundred years old. Why should we care? After all, the number 100 has a veneer of significance only because we happen to be inheritors of a base-ten numbering system. It could certainly be argued that a 100th anniversary is no more important than a 99th or 101st one.

Yet neither organizations nor societies can function without some common understandings, which are renewed (and sometimes recast) through agreed-upon rituals. Institutions ignore rituals at their peril; if opportunities for reflection and celebration are missed, the invisible bonds that hold them together will almost certainly unravel. Surely, then, we should make the most of the opportunity before us in this centennial year.

I would urge each of you to find ways to mark the AAG's centenary. Plan a special event in your department or institution (and a get-together at the Annual Meeting); commit yourself to writing something on the importance of geography for a general audience (the subject of a future column); contribute to the AAG's Centennial Fund, or advance a geographical initiative of importance to you. If even half of our membership does something special, what an anniversary it will be!

The AAG is planning a variety of special events to mark the centenary, many of which will take place in conjunction with our annual meeting in Philadelphia on 14-19 March 2004. The upcoming annual meeting promises to be truly exceptional in size, scope, and substance. Many are working toward this end, including our central office, the AAG's Centennial Coordinating Committee (chaired by Stan Brunn and Don Janelle), the Local Support Committee (chaired by Arlene Rengert and Denyse LeMaire), and the

Local Program Committee (chaired by Percy Dougherty).

The Annual Meeting is undoubtedly our most prominent ritual in the AAG. A landmark anniversary provides an opportunity for an annual meeting that is even broader in scope than usual. (Some of you may still remember the special 75th Annual Meeting.) A variety of special events are planned, ranging from a set of high-profile plenary sessions to a celebratory evening gala. To commemorate the AAG's first 100 years, the meeting will include a "hall" showcasing historic items and a fascinating set of films put together by Wes Dow from the "Geographers on Film" series. A number of specialty groups are organizing sessions focused on where we are and where we are going. Additional events are being planned around the meeting, including an exhibit entitled *The Earth Exposed* by geographer Stephen S. Young (Salem State College) at Philadelphia's Kline gallery and the hanging of a commemorative plaque at the University of Pennsylvania, where the AAG first met in 1904.

To accommodate all this, the Centennial Meeting will run a day longer than usual. The registration fee will also be higher, to help defray the cost of special events and two commemorative publications that all attendees will receive. But I hope you will plan to attend as much of the meeting as you can. Come and give a paper—or just come (to register, visit www.aag.org/annualmeetings/index.htm). Even though these are not the easiest times financially, and travel uncertainties abound, I hope most of you will include the AAG's Centennial gathering in your plans. This is not a meeting to be missed!

Of course, the centennial celebration will not be confined to Philadelphia. Special forums will appear in the *Annals* and *The Professional Geographer*; the AAG will release a long-range plan that comes out of a multi-year planning process; and the staff, officers, and Council members are working to capitalize on the centenary to advance specific AAG projects and initiatives.

By its very nature, a centennial observance signals a concern with tradition, but it need not be obsessed with the past. Some of our members have urged a forward-looking approach to the centennial. I share the spirit behind those urgings. At the same time, I would caution us against emulating

the lack of interest in history and context that is so frequently on display in public decision-making today. Neil Smith's new book, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (University of California Press, 2003), provides a powerful reminder of just how important an understanding of the past can be in forming an intelligent assessment of the present.

As we approach the AAG's centennial, then, let us look forward to the future while honoring and learning from our past. The story of our past has its ups and downs, but to ignore it is to risk falling into a faddish futurism. The centenary presents us with an opportunity to assess our intellectual and social community. It is an opportunity we should embrace with enthusiasm as we embark on our second century. ■

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