

Dwight T. Pitcaithley

## The American Way of Memory

The Pulitzer Prize winning historian, Michael Kammen, wrote in his introduction to *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, that “we arouse and arrange our memories to suit our psychic needs.” While Kammen was describing a very human trait, that of dredging up and shaping collective memory to suit specific situations and eras, he also was making the rather obvious observation that memory is shaped one way or the other depending on whose recollections one is evoking. Americans don’t view the present through a single lens so why should they be expected to view the past in a unified way. This fracturing of public memory is evident, for example, in the public debate over the 50th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945, the development of National History Standards, over the meaning of multiculturalism, and the legacy of slavery.

Public celebrations of the past, including the dedication of monuments and statues; centennial, tercentennial, bicentennial, and quincennial remembrances; festivals; and other acts of collective remembering, while generally produced around a dominant historical narrative, all possess subthemes and even counter-narratives that tell different stories. The public “sorting out” of these often conflicting histories generally tells us more about who we are as a society than who we were. The Columbus quincennial, for example, for all the antagonism it provoked, was not a reflection of the past, but an indicator of how the current generation of Americans thought about the past. It also made this country think a little deeper than it had and ask more meaningful questions about the past not the least of which was “How can a place be ‘discovered’ if it is already populated?” Public or collective memory is inherently related to public forgetting. Monuments, memorials, and anniversaries often are designed not to help us understand the past, but to generate support or evoke empathy with one view of the past to the exclusion of often competing views.

One might revise the Orwellian slogan “Those who control the present, control the past,” to read “Those who erect memorials, control the past.” Memorials have a sense of authority and permanence that belies their highly interpretive nature. Take, for example, two acts of public remembering, one growing out of the Civil War and one from the Spanish entrada into the American Southwest. In 1959, the Children of

the Confederacy attached a marker to the Texas State Capitol titled “Children of the Confederacy Creed.” The plaque reads:

Because we desire to perpetuate, in love and honor, the heroic deeds of those who enlisted in the Confederate army, and upheld its flag through four years of war, we, the children of the South have united in an organization called “Children of the Confederacy” in which our strength, enthusiasm, and love of justice can exert its influence.

We therefore pledge ourselves to preserve pure ideals to honor our veterans, to study and teach the truths of history (one of the most important of which is that the war between the states was not a rebellion nor was its underlying cause to sustain slavery) and to always act in a manner that will reflect honor upon our noble and patriotic ancestors.

While one might debate endlessly the notion that secession and the firing on Ft. Sumter constituted a rebellion, there is no denying a Southern perception that the revolutionary philosophy of 1776 was alive and well in 1860. The *Charleston Mercury* noted on November 8, 1860, “the tea has been thrown overboard; the revolution of 1860 has been initiated”; Senator Alfred Iverson from Georgia argued in December 1860 that “While a State has no power, under the Constitution, conferred upon it to secede from the Federal Government or from the Union, each State has the right of revolution, which all admit”; and two years earlier Alabamian William Lowndes Yancy commented, “if we can do as our fathers did, organize Committees of Safety all over the Cotton States,...we can precipitate the cotton States into a revolution.”<sup>1</sup> Regarding the sentiment that slavery was not the underlying cause of the war, Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Alexander Stephens, not to mention Sam Houston and the secession congresses, would all be somewhat perplexed by this rejection of the fundamental basis for sectional disagreement. Texas Governor Houston opposed secession and in 1861 predicted, “Our people are going to war to perpetuate slavery, and the first gun fired will be the (death) knell of slavery.” Likewise, President Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, observed that “These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war.” But the simple plaque in the Texas State Capitol is not accompanied by explanatory information; the viewer is left alone with a seemingly definitive statement about the past cast in bronze.

Several years ago, the descendants of the Spanish conquistadors in New Mexico erected a statue to Don Juan de Oñate in Española. Oñate, grandson-in-law of Hernando Cortes, headed the Spanish advance into present day New Mexico in 1598, ultimately establishing the first Spanish settlement in the American West, opening the Camino Real from Mexico City to what would become Santa Fe, and founding the livestock and

mining industries in the area. He also dealt forcefully and fatally with the native New Mexicans who lived in the pueblos along the Rio Grande and to the west. Indeed, in 1599, the inhabitants of Acoma Pueblo resenting the Spanish incursion and the accompanying demand for provisions resisted and killed 13 of his men. Oñate ordered the village sacked and burned and the survivors punished. As a means of demonstrating his authority over the 70 to 80 men who survived, he ordered all those over the age of 25 to have one foot cut off.<sup>2</sup> Four hundred years later, a group of Native New Mexicans retaliated. During a moonless night last January, the Indian SWAT-team, armed with an electric saw, approached the bronze statue of Oñate and amputated his right foot, "boot, stirrup, star-shaped spur and all."<sup>3</sup> In a statement released to the press, the group claimed responsibility and announced, "We took the liberty of removing Oñate's right foot on behalf of our brothers and sisters of Acoma Pueblo."

The power of memory. What is victory to one society is certainly defeat to another, and later efforts to commemorate the event will always be fraught with contentiousness until a forum or formula for mutual respect and accommodation can be devised. George Armstrong Custer's momentous defeat along the Little Bighorn River occurred 122 years ago, but until recently the only memorials were to the men of the 7th Cavalry. A soon to be unveiled memorial will remember the Sioux and Cheyenne who fell that June day—a rearranging of our psychic memory. The monument represents a long overdue acknowledgment of respect for the Native American perspective while for others it constitutes a diminution of Custer's place in our pantheon of American heroes.

Memorials to and celebrations of the past can also, like the new monument at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Memorial and several articles in this issue of CRM, reveal aspects of the past that have been neglected or simply overpowered by the dominant narrative. This revising or editing of our collective mem-

ory is normal, healthy, and often highly instructive. The public remembering of the past forms an important part of contemporary society. How we think about the past and how we arouse and sort our memories reflects much about who we are as a community. Our collective remembering of the past will always be fragmented as there are multiple lenses through which we can view the past (was the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima an end or a beginning?). Our need to remember and commemorate and celebrate is a need to affix ourselves on the spectrum of time, to anchor our psyche in reassuring corners of the past. This process is enriched the more we recognize that remembering has multiple avenues and memory takes not a singular form, but is shaped and reshaped according to our needs.

The articles in this issue constitute an invitation for readers to consider how the past has been remembered and how our perceptions of the past continue to change. Several of the articles deal with contested memories; others explore issues that have been more ignored than contested; while still others make us think differently about aspects of the past we thought we knew. Anniversaries, as evidenced throughout this issue, allow us to commemorate and reflect upon the past. A well designed anniversary provides an opportunity for us to pause and reflect upon what and how we think about the past, and perhaps, enable us to broaden our sense of how our "psychic needs" affect our sense of the past and, moreover, what about the past should be remembered.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination*, 1978.
- <sup>2</sup> Ramon Gutierrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away*, 1991.
- <sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, February 9, 1998.

Dwight P. Pitcaithley, Ph.D., is Chief Historian of the National Park Service.

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Cultural Resources (Suite 350NC)  
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