

SNG-Bicentennial planning underway-12-19-16

2018 great opportunity for homegrown Illinois celebration

By Jim Nowlan

The state of Illinois has at long last started thinking about a bicentennial celebration for Illinois, admitted as a state December 3, 1818. [Next door, the State of Indiana devoted seven years to planning for its 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, which Hoosiers have been celebrating this year.]

Gov. Bruce Rauner has appointed sports marketing whiz Stuart Layne (Mariners, Celtics, others) to staff the 40+ worthies the gov recently named to a bicentennial commission.

Given the short time available, Layne needs our help, and we across the 1,200 or so communities of Illinois can sure use his.

The state has less than no money, so Layne hopes to attract corporate sponsorships that will pay for such as major touring historical exhibits, in return for the opportunity to link companies to the people of Illinois.

I am a little uncomfortable allowing, say, Anheuser-Busch to take credit for our state's greatness. But, hey, this is a brave new world where governments, especially ones that are broke, are often being shorn of what some see as, at best, collateral responsibilities.

I guess we should take help where we can get, and be thankful.

"The bicentennial is a marketing opportunity that comes around only every hundred years," says Layne, who envisions the state and its bicentennial as somewhat akin to a sports team with a big arena.

Layne hopes to stimulate legacy projects that will have long-lasting effects, such as a permanent exhibit for the founding in Springfield of the NAACP.

As a one-man band, Layne lacks the time and “the bandwidth,” as he calls it, to create many big events.

So let’s us make this a sparkling, homegrown celebration, from Galena to the colossus at and around Chicago to Cairo.

That’s what Springfield poet Lisa Higgs is doing. With experience at planning for Minnesota’s sesquicentennial a few years ago, Lisa has brought together in the capital city area scores of history, literature and arts buffs, marketers and others.

Lisa and her band of volunteers plan, for example, a series of debates about the great issues that Illinois has faced over two centuries, and the group is challenging Springfield area residents to volunteer 200 hours of service.

“Every community has one or more annual festivals,” Lisa notes. “If, for one year, each festival could focus on local history and culture, we could have a good celebration.”

You and I can play a part, by stirring up enthusiasm—and offering to pitch in—at our local library, historical society, schools, town hall, park, county bar association and service clubs to celebrate all that has made Illinois a linchpin across history for our nation’s growth and greatness.

The obvious luminaries Illinois has spawned are obvious. Just a few include John Deere and Cyrus McCormick (agriculture); Sandburg, Dreiser (in his formative years), Bellow (literature); Chicago “hot style jazz” and the Chicago Symphony (music).

And more than our share of presidents, including of course Lincoln, whose humanity and hallowed leadership still inspire around the globe. Where do I stop?

And, of course, our own forebears:

In the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Chicago entrepreneurs and the hog and corn farmers of Illinois and the Midwest combined their genius and hard work to generate what may have been the most explosive economic expansion in the history of the world (See William Cronon, “Nature’s Metropolis,” 1991).

The expansion produced the wealth that in turn generated our many world-famous cultural institutions such as the Art Institute of Chicago, named in 2014 the best museum in the world by TripAdvisor. This wealth also built the strong, vibrant communities such as yours and mine, which helped make us who we are.

But right now, Illinois is in a funk, no doubt about it.

So the bicentennial is an unparalleled opportunity to do what, amazingly, Illinois has never in its history done: Look back, then assay where we are, and think ahead and organize to be where we want to be in 10-20 years and beyond.

Layne tells me his commission will meet in the second week of January, and that a group of creative marketing types will about that time lay out some branding and messaging ideas.

Layne also promises he is building a dynamic website that will link all of our local events for the world to know about, to help sprout a thousand wild and wonderful blooms across the state.

Wouldn’t it be splendiferous if—if only for at least one brief shining moment—the bicentennial can help us reset the pictures in our heads of who we are, where we came from, and then kick us in the tail to make things better for those coming after us.