Massachusetts: Bicentennial Begins Here

Elaine Milton

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MASSACHUSETTS:
BICENTENNIAL BEGINS HERE

by
Elaine J. Milton

Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

June 22, 1976
Advisors:
  Charles A. Arnold, Jr.
  Kathleen Collins
  Pamela Edwards
To Cathy Prager and Roxane W. Isbey, Jr.
for friendship and support when I most needed it.
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THESIS PROPOSAL

For
The Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Graphic Arts and Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Title: Massachusetts: Bicentennial Begins Here

Purpose: To interpret the celebration of the Massachusetts Bi-
centennial in such a way that it will serve both as a
record of the event and a visually interesting body of
work.

Submitted by: Elaine J. Milton March 1, 1976

Thesis Board: Chief Advisor -

Charles Arnold, Jr.
Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Associate Advisors -

Kathleen Collins
Lecturer
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Pamela Edwards
Instructor
New England School of Photography
Boston, Massachusetts
Scope of the Thesis:
Since I first became seriously involved in photography, my interest has lain in two major areas: 1. interpretive documentary photography of crowd situations and 2. straight color.

The first area is complex and stems directly from my undergraduate work in psychology. Endless studies in this area have shown that individuals in crowds act very differently than they ordinarily would - more daring, probably due to the anonymity the situation offers. The group seems to be functioning as one body, of one mind, whether at football games, political demonstrations or major tourist attractions. This cross-cultural phenomenon, however, seems to overtake Americans more frequently than people in other countries. They band together in an almost frenzied drive for distraction from reality, constantly inventing new ways to escape and find entertainment and relaxation.

I first began to photograph groups because of their availability. I lived in Boston and like any urban dweller, often found myself a participant in crowds - at public beaches, historical tourist traps, amusement parks, shopping areas, athletic events, etc. This gave me the opportunity to be an observer and I became fascinated by the small interactions within the crowds. I began to try to capture a humor and absurdity which I sensed was present, using photography as the best possible means of recording and communicating what I felt. The works of Garry Winogrand and Tony Ray-Jones influenced me because of their concerns with gesture, irony and juxtaposition.

My interest in photographing the bicentennial is to continue this exploratory process. I do not expect to reach any specific conclusions yet since this area is so complex. However, since all of America is, in a sense, becoming one crowd this year, I feel this will be a major step in my ongoing work.

The area of straight color is directly connected to this. Since color is such a major influence on daily life (witness the demise of black and white television and movies, etc.), I feel that photographing the bicentennial in black and white would rob it of an important dimension. I realize that there are many problems to overcome, for example - large areas of distracting color which
rob the image of its meaning and interest. I have been working entirely with color this year and will attempt, in this project, to solve any problems which I encounter and which interfere with the spirit of the bicentennial.

Procedures:
The thesis will cover a time span from June 14, 1975 to May 30, 1976. All shooting will be done in the state of Massachusetts, primarily in the area around Boston.

The final body of work will consist of approximately 25 to 35 color prints. It will be printed on Kodak Ektacolor 37RC paper, F surface. The format will be exclusively 35mm, utilizing lenses with focal lengths of 24mm, 35mm, 50mm and 135mm. The film will be Kodacolor II exclusively.

The work will be exhibited in the MFA gallery and a final thesis report submitted according to MFA committee requirements.
June 14, 1975

It's an appropriate day to begin a thesis - my birthday, Flag day and the Battle of Bunker Hill. I headed for Bunker Hill early - 9:30 a.m. though the battle wasn't scheduled until 1 p.m. I expected a crush of people and sure enough, they were there. I've learned from experience that it always pays to arrive hours early at tourist type entertainments. Not only does everything seem to begin early, but it seems that the most interesting things happen when groups are setting up for an event or packing up to leave.

The weather was just unbearable - the kind of Rochester grey day that always seems to threaten a thundershower that never appears. It was also unbearably humid and hot, guaranteed to put everyone, including me in a foul mood. I have to learn to overcome the feeling of malaise, since it interferes so directly with my shooting. But the weather does prove my point. Why do so many people show up in crowds where they are uncomfortable (which was quite obvious), unhappy and overburdened (with children, camera equipment, muskets or whatever) ?

Preparations for this battle had probably begun long before I got to Charlestown - revolutionary groups and musket societies were already milling around, jokingly threatening each other and me and checking their flintlocks. The area around the monument, of course, was marked off (with camouflage material - anachronistic) and guarded by police, anxious to see the last of me. It angered me (no doubt) that news and press people always get the best vantage point to view things. The six o'clock news gives everyone who was at an event a better chance to find out what was going on. I won't be bitter about being unable to get a press pass - I did try AP and UPI - but will look on it as another challenge in this problem. I thought a telephoto lens might help, but it also always seems that the tallest men are at the barriers and I never feel quite comfortable shooting over my head.

Bunker Hill itself added problems for me. There is a short, steep hill with a knoll around the monument. From the street, it is quite impossible to see the battle area, crowds notwithstanding. I can only hope that other events are in better locations. But again, that is part of the challenge that a good street shooter can overcome.
I was surprised to learn how well the battle had been choreographed. It was predetermined who would "die" and where they would fall to make the whole scene as realistic as possible (though I can't imagine they took notes 200 years ago). I was impressed by how seriously the participants viewed the pageant - certainly a painless way of absorbing American history. With all the commercialism and hoke surrounding this bicentennial, it was good to see some people taking it the way it was originally intended.

I used Ektacolor film today, but I understand that Kodak is phasing it out almost immediately. I hope I don't keep running into problems like that because I would like to keep my materials as consistent as possible. I have tentatively decided to switch to Kodacolor II, since I feel certain Kodak will not remove that from the market also. I would guess that that particular film is also the favorite of the tourists in the crowd which somehow seems appropriate.

I suppose the major problem to grapple with in the coming year is how I feel about the bicentennial itself and how this will affect my shooting. I always had a love/hate relationship with touristy places which took a turn towards cynicism. Personally though, I am feeling much less sarcastic about everything and I keep wondering how this will ultimately affect my work. My great fear is that once the cynicism is removed, I will turn out a boring body of snapshots. But is it possible to completely remove the cynicism? I just don't know. Today as I was shooting, I felt anger, discomfort and impatience. The weather, police, crowds and noise aggravated me to a point where I wanted to leave. And I felt nasty. How this will show up in the final work, I can't yet tell. I just hope I can learn to overcome it all before I next shoot.
July 4, 1975

My friends Cathy and Becky came to visit for the weekend, both knowing that I had to shoot for my thesis. I was afraid that they would become albatrosses, since I'm accustomed to shooting alone. Fortunately, that was the least of my problems.

I had the film from Bunker Hill developed and was very unsatisfied with the results. I showed it to Pam Edwards, but she didn't seem to think it was a poor as I did. Perhaps I'm being overly critical of the results since it is the biggest project I have ever undertaken and I really feel the need to prove myself. At any rate, I have decided that as long as I am away from school, I will take the film to Colortek on Newbury St. for development and contact printing. I doubt I could continue without constantly viewing and evaluating the results of each shooting session.

It was difficult to decide on a location today since every town was having parades and celebrations. I discovered the "Bicentennial Times", published monthly by the Massachusetts Bicentennial Commission and listing all events in the state. They were very nice and agreed to put me on their mailing list which seems like a major coup after the press pass debacle.

I decided to begin with Boston's own celebration at Government Center. That may have been a mistake since crowds were rather thin there. It hadn't really occurred to me that each neighborhood would have something of its own, but Boston is very neighborhood-oriented and there was no real need to venture into the city. I discovered, however, a Polaroid photo booth where anyone can have their picture taken as a Revolutionary. It became apparent that nothing much was going to happen in Boston and I decided my chances would improve in Cambridge.

Harvard Square was teeming with people and though I had missed half of the parade, there was still a good hour to go. Shooting parades is really impossible. The color is there, but the interest is usually lacking. Or, to put it bluntly, if you've seen one parade, you've seen them all. The excitement though, is infectious and I felt a thousand times better than I had in Charlestown last month. Even the TV cameramen seemed to disappear (at least temporarily) and I felt confident that by photographing the bystanders, rather than the participants, I was getting something.
The parade ultimately ended up on Cambridge Common where George Washington's great, great grand-nephew was going to play George and review the troops a la 1776. Since this wasn't to begin for a couple of hours, I took the opportunity to photograph the preparations and immediately felt that I had gotten something good. My instincts are rarely wrong since most of my shooting is spontaneous and directly related to my feelings. I will have to see if they held up when I get these developed.

The ceremony itself was a disappointment. A 21 cannon salute produced so much smoke that it seemed as if a London fog had descended on the common and obscured George completely. I wandered off to photograph the outskirts of the crowd, where it seemed to me all the real action was taking place. When you are in the middle of a group, it feels as if you have become part of a giant organism that moves as one body. It can be a very bizarre feeling and makes photography impossible. I am learning to overcome that - remove myself and shoot the body from outside. It seems to work better.

I didn't feel the least bit nasty today which I consider a major accomplishment. I also don't think now that the images will be boring because I can feel a light humor coming through. I have to be confident that it will continue.

Color really seems the perfect medium for this project. Everyone seems to be accommodating me by wearing red, white and blue. The problems I had anticipated with distracting colors are not materializing. I hope it continues.
July 15, 1975

I have evaluated the results of July 4 and am very pleased with the way things have begun to go. I realize I have quite a lot of shooting ahead of me, but I know now that it will be possible to produce a good-to-excellent body of work.

I have been thinking a lot about my shooting methods. I usually pre-focus the lens at f/11 and shoot quickly and instinctively. It is difficult to explain to people, but I just know when there is a photograph and when there isn't. When a scene really presents itself, I often shoot half a roll of film, knowing that the image is there somewhere and if I go to enough sides of it, I will find it. I used to shoot eight or nine rolls a day, but in this project I have only been doing four or five. Perhaps I'm less anxious to use the film because of the price of color materials. At any rate, I am doing as well as I ever have as far as images that I would consider for the final grouping.
July 26, 1975

Hot again today and sunny. I keep hoping for bad weather because I don't want it all to look like mid-summer fun in the sun. I went up to Newburyport to photograph their Heritage Days celebration which was really a treat because I have never been there. My excitement about my thesis is growing, negative feelings receding. Pam insists it is because I took Silva Mind Control and as a graduate, I should believe it. I'm sure I'm just being stubborn, refusing to believe that an Alpha state of mind can influence my life that directly. I think that being away from RIT and becoming more self-directed again is what is actually making the greatest difference. I must admit that I have always preferred to learn by making my own mistakes rather than listening to those who profess to be older and wiser. It may be a mistake, but it had worked well until this past year.

At any rate, it is a little known fact that the patriots in Newburyport burned tea almost six months before the Boston Tea Party. And so, on some sheets of tin, the seafarers burned empty, cardboard cartons with the word "tea" written on them. It seemed like a silly idea, especially because it was hot to begin with and the people had pressed in close, not realizing that the heat and smoke from the boxes would start a small stampede. I was as caught up in it as everyone else, though, and for once, was in the front line. I doubt the images are great, but it was fun. I was happiest to not the absence of both the press and the usual police barricades. It was all a friendly, folksy kind of celebration with a strong town spirit.

The town itself is in the midst of a colonial reconstruction. I spoke to a number of townspeople who were proudly pointing the improvements. It was much more personal than the other events I have attended and I'm really excited about how good I feel. If I can only keep this attitude through the winter.
August 8, 1975

I'm getting discouraged again. I have never felt so many ups and downs before. I'm fairly confident that I can finish up on schedule, but at times, it all seems so overwhelming. I guess I can blame it on the rain, the heat and the fact that my car's radiator blew up last week. The photographs thus far have been fairly satisfying, so I have no real right to complain.

Shooting today felt like a real bust though. I went to the battle of Gloucester not believing they would hold it in the downpour that began two days ago. The bicentennial office assured me that they would hold it even if there were a tidal wave and the city washed away. I am constantly amazed at the dedication of the participants, but can't help wondering if even this will hold up for an entire year.

The battle was set for 5 p.m. on the beach. I got my wish for bad weather and wet sand and now I regret it. The great difficulty of shooting in the rain is trying to change film and/or lenses quickly.

The battle had to do with West Indian smugglers, the British and the good people of Gloucester. There was even a sound truck to remind us all that 200 years ago it was hot, sunny and the wind was blowing in the opposite direction. The pageant almost aborted when the ships couldn't maneuver close enough to the beach for the smugglers and British to jump overboard. The most amusing note was that not enough patriots showed up for the reconstruction and the beach was eventually defended by three children (10, 6 and 3) and a cardboard cannon. The children won, of course.

I know I sound unhappy today, but I'm still soaked and was frustrated having to shoot wide-open at a 30th. I can't believe any good came of it, but as shooting experiences go, I can see the amusing side. It was also a change to be obligated to myself to shoot regardless of what I felt like or what the weather was. I hope, now, for a return to sunny weather (perhaps slightly overcast).
September 21, 1975

I guess I'm pinning most of my hopes on tomorrow, though I did some shooting today. Benedict Arnold's march to Quebec, sponsored by Kentucky Fried Chicken and Dr Pepper, began on Cambridge Common this afternoon. A group of patriots put up a tent city which they were carefully guarding lest any intruders (like me) accidentally walk across the boundaries. A wagon train (out of place in time) also appeared, apparently beginning a cross-country trek. I must admit tonight that the crowds were sparse and I was bored. I only shot one roll because there really was nothing to shoot. Since I drove from Rochester for this weekend, I am disappointed. Tomorrow will be better.
September 22, 1975

Today was infinitely better, probably the best day's shooting I have yet had. I made a tentative decision to view the bicentennial in a fun, humorous way and keep all sarcasm out of it. When I finally edit my contact sheets, everything may change. For now though, think positive.

It amuses me that I am beginning to recognize the people I have been photographing. The patriots and vendors are always the same. I can't help wondering if they recognize me, since I seem to be shooting many of them over and over.

I can't really say much happened in Newburyport today. The same people who were in Cambridge yesterday set up the same camp and mostly hung around until Benedict Arnold and the Kentucky Fried truck showed up. It was pretty funny watching the colonials guzzling Dr Pepper and chewing on fried chicken. The feeling was actually that of a giant, formal party. The military protocol of 1775 was followed to the letter, leading one man to be chained up for not saluting properly. But on the outskirts of camp, there were fife and drum groups, people dancing around and messing around in the Finast parking lot across the street. I don't really have anything specific to say tonight about the work. It is just becoming easier and more fun. I think the summer has been overkill. I want to just let the contacts sit because I have been re-editing them weekly and still feel it too early to make any final decisions.
December 16, 1975

I have let my thesis slide a bit because there have been no bicentennial events in months and I have been pretty caught up in school. To date I have shot over 20 rolls and could probably put together a show now. It is getting easier to edit contacts, but I know I can make no final decisions until probably April.

Today was the Boston Tea Party re-enactment, 202 years after the original. I got to the ship hours before the event was scheduled, as I've become accustomed to doing. I got a little nervous that no one would show up, but of course, they eventually did. It turned out to be very lucky that I'd gotten there so early because they stopped allowing people on the ship and forced them to watch from the bridge, which would have been disastrous for me.

I was rather disappointed in the lack of Indians. It was impossible today to distinguish the British from the Americans since they were all dressed alike. It also seemed a little strange that they recreated the tea party in the afternoon since I had always thought it was at night. The dumping of the tea was done so quickly I almost regretted the lack of a motor driven camera. At any rate, I shot 3 rolls very quickly and feel again that I got something.

I'm about to put another moratorium on shooting. There are no events planned, as far as I can find out, until March. I guess there must have been a slacking off 200 years ago, too. Winter is not a terrific time to wage war, I suppose.

I don't know what else to say just yet. Everything has been going along smoothly - shooting, tentative editing, color. I bought two 50' x 20" rolls of color paper, the same emulsion batch. It will certainly save me money and because it's the same emulsion, make printing easier. I've been looking around at different mat boards, trying to make a decision on what to use. From my portraits, I've learned that you just can't choose one color of grey or white and stick with it. It may be that the final solution will be to use light, off-white conservation board. I had hoped to find grey, really, but in combination with the grey gallery walls, it will probably look terrible.
March 17, 1976

I had planned on going to Boston on March 5th for the Boston Massacre, but it was cancelled because of fear of racial difficulties due to the school busing problems. The busing situation had quieted down for a long time, but it seems to be heating up again. I'm a bit worried as to how this is going to affect my thesis - if they begin to cancel the events or have continued problems like they did today, I may be in a lot of trouble.

I got a 24mm lens for my Pentax. Up until today, I had never used anything wider than 35mm - my standard lens. I find I see in 35 these days and even using 50mm feels like telephoto. Owen claims that it is impossible to take a bad photograph with a 24mm, but I can see there might be problems. You have to be awfully close to use the lens and get something other than a full-length portrait. I'm also not too excited about the amount of edge distortion. The distortion has its place, but I'm not sure this thesis is it.

I went to South Boston (Dorchester Heights) for the British evacuation of Boston and landed up in the middle of an anti-busing demonstration. I again arrived very early and shot quite a lot before the ceremony started (and before the busing crowd showed up). In fact, I ran out of film before the British began firing on the patriots from across the bay.

The day did get absurd when the demonstrators began singing and refused to get off the platform. I'm not going to get into a political discussion, but I was angry, primarily because they were getting in my way and because the entire event was almost closed down.

Well, it was a long day and I don't want to get repetitious or make any other judgements until I see these contacts. The shooting was good, but not fun and not comfortable.
April 1, 1976

I've begun to seriously edit my contacts now. Always in the back of my mind is Kathy Collins' remark that I need an action shot. I haven't got one yet, but I still have a chance with the battle of Lexington later this month.

I'm having daily ups and downs as time grows shorter. I don't know how strong a lot of the individual images are and I keep hoping that as a body they will be strong. I realize that to expect a show of 35 strong photographs is ridiculous and would probably even look bad since they would all be fighting for attention. I just can't help having doubts and thoughts of packing it all in and doing portraits. I can't think of the last good critique I had or the last bit of praise I heard. That makes me doubt myself even more. I will be having a board meeting soon and that will make or break the whole thesis.

The editing process is ludicrous. I already have 30 rolls of film to deal with - more than 1,000 images. I'm not really having difficulty with my attitude - the sarcasm is very absent, though I do poke some fun. I also have a good mix of subjects - individuals, groups and mixtures. All my theories of groups becoming one body (similar gestures and expressions) are holding up, as well as the idea that uniqueness comes through. I'm very pleased to have proved that point. I'm also glad the color worked so well and so easily with the images to make a record of this bicentennial.

Actually, I'm confused. I feel both good and bad about the work and I'm ready for outside opinions.
April 19, 1976

What a day! The perfect way to end up my shooting. I had to leave my house at 3:30 a.m. to be in Lexington by the time the battle started at 5 a.m. When I got there, I discovered the largest crowd I had ever seen at one event. My telephoto lens finally came in handy (the first time I ever actually used it) and although the usual barriers were up, I didn't feel any real difficulty. When the battle actually started, I couldn't see a thing, but used the old photo trick of holding the camera up and aiming in the general vicinity of the fight. I hope I got something (for Kathy, anyway).

When the battle ended (and I might add that there was an announcement that the battle will never again be recreated on Lexington Green), I followed the crowd to Concord for 8 a.m. ceremonies at the Concord Bridge. As usual, it was a matter of deciding what events to photograph since so many were taking place simultaneously. On the way to Concord, I ran across all the British troops in a parking lot, hanging out and eating Dunkin' Donuts. I shot at least a roll of film there while fending off a soldier who was trying to pick me up.

At the bridge in Concord, I found a large crowd waiting for whatever was eventually going to happen (I still don't know what actually transpired). All I remember now is shooting like a fiend, feeling happier and better than I ever had and confident that I was coming up with a high number of good images.

It gets increasingly difficult to talk about everything now. It seems to just be finally falling together and I don't know how or why. Today was my last shooting session - a grand total of forty rolls of film. I'd better just leave off here before I repeat what I've been saying all year.
Conclusion:

It's all over - done and accepted. But I'll back up a bit. My thesis board meeting was just incredible. I was terribly worried about it because it fell so close to the end and it seemed to me that they had a real life and death power. Since all my shooting was done, I had visions of having to begin all over with a new project. Fortunately, the meeting went better than I had a right to expect. The three members of my board were all very enthusiastic about the work and the four of us seemed almost in complete agreement about which images should be in the final body of work. I did feel strange listening to praise which had been so long in coming. It did put away many of my doubts, though. And I was happy to hear positive things from three people whose opinions I really respected.

Things began to get difficult during my printing when the Colenta broke down and the water in number 9 was out, preventing me from even using the drum. But somehow, it all worked out and I had the show printed and matted almost a full week before it was due to hang in the MFA Gallery.

I must admit now that I have never felt so good about my own work. I am completely unaccustomed to the amount of praise I have been getting from everyone. The opening, too, went quite well. Everyone was drunk (or was it just me?) and stuffing themselves with hot dogs and apple pie. I had to throw people out of the gallery at midnight because no one wanted to go home.

The relief I feel now is just amazing. I also feel rather at a loss for things to do. The release of pressure was so sudden and surprising - I think I have post-partum depression now that I've been delivered of the baby I carried for 11 months.

I can't make a final statement now. Everything I learned and overcame is included somewhere in this report. I can only say that it worked out better than I had ever imagined and I am sorry it's all over.