



Red White & BOOM

LOOK IN AMERICA'S MIRROR AND YOU'LL SEE OJAI

Story & Photos by Joe Sohm





On the 4th of July, fireworks explode over the Statue of Liberty, while in Ojai, our Independence Day Parade brings out all and sundry elements of Ojai, including the the drum circlers.



Among America's 4th of July rituals are the placing of flags on the graves of founding fathers (here, John Adams, who, in an incredible coincidence, died the same day, July 4, 1826, as his colleague and sometime rival, Thomas Jefferson — on the 50th anniversary of the nation's founding). Fire engines festooned with flags are a local tradition, as are setting out parade-route chairs several days before the 4th along Ojai Avenue.

ICONS AND MEMORIALS only go so far in weaving our nation into a single fabric. Our Founders needed a ritual, a national celebration, and the nation's birthday, July 4, 1776 seemed ideal. When the American citizen was born, our founders rightly thought it needed to be immortalized with fireworks, parades and events. Philadelphia started the July 4th tradition when America was just a year old. Over time, it spread across the continent all the way to Ojai.

Prior to the Fourth of July, America's biggest holidays had been Election Day, Commencement Day and Training Day, which reflected our colonial priorities of democracy, church and militia.

Yet there was no single day unifying us. We were so ritual-deprived we had to import Britain's Guy Fawkes Day, or Bonfire Night, which is still celebrated in parts of New England on November 5th with parades and bonfires. Thanksgiving wasn't proclaimed a national holiday until Abraham Lincoln did so in 1863. And it took decades to emerge as the non-sectarian holiday we celebrate today with parades, football and turkey dinners.

We Americans tend to make our celebrations serve multiple purposes, and the Fourth of July is no exception. Notable July 4th events include: the opening of West Point in 1802, the laying of the cornerstone of the Washington Monument in 1850, France's gift to America of the Statue of Liberty in 1884, the American flag being hoisted over Adolf Hitler's

barracks in Berlin in 1945, the 50-star flag waving for the first time in 1966, the Pathfinder Mars landing in 1997, the laying of the cornerstone of the Freedom Tower in New York in 2004 and the re-launch of the Space Shuttle Discovery in 2006.

Nothing captures the Spirit of 76 better than the All-American notables who were born on the 4th of July, including: our 30th President Calvin Coolidge, America's playwright Neil Simon, "the father of American Music," Stephen Foster, America's Columnist, Ann Landers, NY Yankees baseball owner George Steinbrenner and President Obama's daughter, Malia. While Louis Armstrong claimed to be born on the 4th of July 1900, Satchmo, always a showman, was "probably" born a year and a month later on August 4, 1901.

But more moving, and further evidence that fact is often more powerful than fiction, were the unlikely deaths of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both on the same day — July 4, 1826 — the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Five years later, James Monroe died, July 4, 1831. And on June 28, 1836, the 60th anniversary of the day the Declaration of Independence was submitted to the Continental Congress, James Madison, the Father of the U.S. Constitution, died. That the second, third, fourth and fifth Presidents of the United States appeared to intentionally choose their death date to indelibly imprint upon us the significance of our democratic beginnings is indeed

prophetic.

Regarding Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Adams dramatic exits, both were on their deathbeds, keenly aware of the significance of the 50th anniversary of July 4th. Best of friends in their youth, turned political enemies by middle age and back to friends in retirement, they were physically separated by hundreds of miles, but spiritually united in their dreams and hopes for future generations of Americans. To them, July 4th mattered. And they were determined to etch its meaning into the history books just as they had done so with the American Revolution.

On the eve of July 4th, in the wee hours of the night, Mr. Jefferson awoke and asked . . . "is it the 4th?" Hours later, he would be lost to the ages. Not knowing of Mr. Jefferson's passing, John Adams was once again preoccupied that Mr. Jefferson would upstage him, when he spoke his final words, "Thomas Jefferson Survives." But our second President often prematurely jumped to conclusions and he might have been relieved to know that it was he who outlived Mr. Jefferson by five hours. A better way to remember Mr. Adams' are his more hopeful words stated on his last day on earth, "It is a great day. It is a good day."

Whether it's July 4, 1826 or July 4, 2016, it is indeed a great day to be an American . . . and resident of Ojai. If Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Adams were able to attend our Independence Day parade, the thing that might elicit a chuckle from

them are all those empty chairs lined up days in advance. But, more meaningful to them, would be to see how many citizens want to get a great seat for Ojai's "pomp and parade" and in so doing, be eyewitness to how America's birthday played out "from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward for evermore."

Joseph Sohm is a photo historian, honorary lifetime member of the Ojai Studio Artists and author of "Visions of America". Signed copies are available by email at Joseph@visionsofamerica.com. Additional info at joesohm.com. ☺

