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Remarks Re: A National health Museum

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This short piece is included in this archive because I wish to draw attention to the National Health Museum and my role in it. An oversimplified history would take us back to the Civil War and the fact that the Surgeon General of the Army put his microscopes and some other memorabilia into one place which became known not as the Health Museum—but as the building that housed it, namely, “the old red brick building”. Many present members of Congress were brought by their parents to see the artifacts and monstrosities on exhibit in “the old red brick building” which passed for the only thing resembling a health museum in the nation’s capitol.

It is said that there were approximately a quarter of a million artifacts that were stored not only “in front of the house” but also in storage areas in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia.

The next event of note was that Lady Byrd Johnson got friendly with the Hirschhorns and did health and any kind of a health museum a terrible disservice by getting Democratic support in Congress for the untruth that “the old red brick building” which was a national land mark was so not because it was a building but because it had a special collection in it. This was in a sense true but the law, which did have to do with buildings. Mrs. Johnson had “the old red brick building” declassified as a historic landmark, it was torn down and the Hirschhorn Museum of Art, in a shape of a bagel, was erected on its site on the mall. The half-hearted promise that a new building would be found for the collection in “the old red brick building” was never pursued and the artifacts were added to storage areas and a very small “front of the store” collection was housed in one of the buildings of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. This is some distance from the other sites that draw tourists to Washington, it necessitated a trip through a downtrodden neighborhood, and when the persistent visitor arrived at the site there were six parking spaces and a very small exhibit.

My major office was on the 7th floor of the Humphrey Building on Independence Avenue. And right in the front of that building along the edge of a reflecting pool I saw

literally hundreds of high school classes making their spring trip to Washington stand to be photographed. It slowly dawned on me that those youngsters could be stimulated to pursue almost any field available to them as a career but nothing in Washington would stimulate them in health care, medicine, nursing, and other health allied professions.

I talked about it here and there and eventually a committee was formed. And eventually an organization called "The National Health Museum Foundation" was established as a 501-C3 non-profit corporation and as soon as I left my second term as Surgeon General I assumed the presidency of that foundation.

The next step was to work with the Army, the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, and others and try to make plans for a building to house the considerable collection mentioned above. However, my chief aim was not to build a curio shop but to have a health education center that would stress prevention. Our plans grew on that solid foundation.

The foundation eventually gave way to the National Health Museum and we had a skeleton staff which included a director. And we had the support initially of a lot of people in Congress who had fond recollections of "the old red brick building" and were not terribly pleased with the way Lady Byrd Johnson had managed to get it off the mall.

However, economic times changed. In the beginning we had been told that the government would build the building for us on a site on or near the mall and that they would make an appropriation annually to this end so that eventually the building would be unencumbered with debt. Later the bottom more or less fell out of the economic support and some of our strongest senatorial supporters moved on to private life. The first thing that anyone asks is, why isn't this a part of the Smithsonian? That is the first place that we went and the Smithsonian made it very clear that they were interested in health, hoped that we would succeed in our endeavor, but that they wanted nothing to do with health because it was just too complicated on top of everything else they were trying to accomplish in the world of museums in Washington.

Another factor that most people don't think about was this: If anyone wished to build a health museum anyplace in the country it could be done very promptly, it could be built as simply as being constructed of poured concrete. It could be expected to be up and going in four years collecting revenues from visitors. On the other hand a museum built in Washington is a national monument and instead of poured concrete one has to have something like imported Italian marble. In addition to that there is an unbelievable list of agencies and authorities through which all kinds of permissions have to go which include the Capitol Planning Commission, the White House Architect, the Capitol Architect, the Arts Commission of Washington, and on and on it goes. In modern days the time from having a pep rally at the site of a museum planned for the future and the actual date of breaking ground runs about 15 to 19 years.

I stuck with the museum from 1988 until 2001 and then resigned from the chairmanship of the board because I felt that the kind of money we would now have to seek from the

private sector could best be raised by somebody of wealth and I certainly was not that somebody. This is being written in the summer of 2003 and we are truthfully no nearer a site then we were at the time these remarks were first delivered.

I would like to, but think it is not appropriate, to report to the user of this archive the pettiness, the self-seeking, the dog-in-the-manger attitude that we ran into from members of Congress, officials in the District of Columbia, private entrepreneurs, and multiple government agencies. There are people who don't want to see a health museum in Washington unless there is in some way that they can get the credit for it and there are others that seem to be nothing more high-minded than spoilers.

The attached remarks are those that I made in enthusiasm and sincerity before I came to have the cynical jaundiced view I now carry.

I think the vision is worth reading about.