OSU plays guessing game with birthday celebrations

By Mary Hartshorn
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Ohio State is like a woman who keeps people guessing about her age.

In 1920, Ohio State celebrated its 50th anniversary. Twenty-eight years later, the 75th anniversary was celebrated. Then, 22 years later in 1970, the university celebrated its centennial.

So when should Ohio State celebrate its birthday? Some people think it should be celebrated on the date the university was established, March 22, 1870. Others think it should be celebrated when classes were first held three years later, Sept. 17, 1873.

Raimund Geerler, university archivist, said the date celebrated is a matter of interpretation. He said the 1870 date is usually celebrated because that is when the Cannon Law was enacted. The Cannon Law established an agricultural and mechanical college in Ohio.

Former OSU President Novice G. Fawcett wanted to celebrate the centennial in 1970, Goerler said. In 1895, the 25th anniversary was celebrated using the 1870 date.

In a 1945 speech, then-OSU President Howard Bevis noted it was the university's 75th year, but the anniversary passed without a celebration. Instead, in 1948, the anniversary was celebrated using the 1873 date as Ohio State's birthdate.

This was the beginning of a controversy over which year the 75th anniversary should be celebrated.

The Oct. 7, 1948 Lantern carried an article headlined, "Is The University 75 or 78 Years Old? School Seal Says 1870 Was Birth Year." The article said, "The Ohio legislature established the school in 1870, but classes didn't begin until three years later. So this year is actually the 75th year of classes, which after all are the real business of a university and a much better basis for celebration than a legislative act."

On the cover of the 1948 program book for the 75th anniversary is written "Program Commemorating the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Opening of Class." Inside the cover is a statement by Bevis, "Greetings and a most cordial welcome to the ceremonies of the occasion of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the founding of this University."

In Bevis' address he said, "The academic year 1948-49 was memorable for its celebration of the university's seventy-fifth anniversary. Though the University was technically established in 1870, it actually opened its doors to students in the autumn of 1873, and this significant date was chosen for commemoration."