HISTORY NEWS TECHNICAL LEAFLET

A PUBLICATION OF THE
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Telling the Story: Better Interpretation at Small Historical Organizations

by Timothy Glines and David Grabitske,
Minnesota Historical Society

INTRODUCTION:

Interpretation is a five-syllable word with special meaning for those who work or volunteer for historical organizations. It's a word often coupled with two others in our mission statements: collect and preserve.

Unfortunately, it is often the part of our mission that is given insufficient attention. Too many organizations still take the easy route: just arranging artifacts in categories, creating historic tableaux with a few labels, or letting visitors wander through our historic houses. We can do better! Because interpretive programs are the most public and visible aspect of our operations, their quality determines how our organizations are regarded. One does not need to be part of a large organization to do excellent interpretation. Organizations with a few paid employees, or even those with all volunteers, can do it effectively.

The essence of interpretation is story telling. And what can be more natural for human beings than to tell stories? Communications expert Peter Orton tells us: "Stories enhance attention, create anticipation, and increase retention. They provide a familiar set of 'hooks' that allow us to process the information that we hang on them." [1]

How do we tell compelling stories in historical organizations? Before we can answer that question, let us consider what interpretation is; what things to keep in mind when interpreting; and, in what ways museums carry out story telling. Planning an interpretive program is necessary, but cannot be effectively accomplished until the planners understand something about the institution, the goals of the institution and its interpretive program, and interpretation in general.

Recognizing that our organizations need to serve broad audiences makes telling our stories a lot harder. We cannot simply say that one size fits all and expect people to take it or leave it. However, an individual program might be developed by focusing on a segment of the overall audience, particularly on underserved segments.

Historical interpretation translates human stories from the past into meaningful thoughts for people in the present. It makes past experiences instantly understandable by a modern audience. At one historic site with a one-room school filled with benches, interpreters are often questioned by school children making instant associations with their own school. They ask, "How did they do their homework?" What they mean is where, since there are no desks. A clever interpreter replied, "Pupils complete their assignments on laptop chalkboards, called slates." What this interpreter did was create an instantly recognizable concept in the child's mind of a chalkboard the size of a laptop computer.

It can be hard for small local history museums to tell a story well. Resources are limited and small organizations often face the challenge of telling stories in difficult places such as historic houses converted to museum use. But perhaps the most serious challenge is simply a lack of familiarity with interpretative theory and technique. Too often, long-serving volunteers have become attached to certain stories and tours and are unwilling to consider changes that would serve new audiences. Even staff trained in museum studies or public history may have had more courses in administration and collection care than in interpretation. Without effective interpretive programs, our organizations risk becoming irrelevant.

It Starts with Audiences

We should always identify or define the audience for our interpretive programs. For many small organizations, particularly in their formative stages, audience identification may be an afterthought. So, how do we define our audiences? For most historical organizations with geographically defined or place based missions, the audience includes all the people who reside in our geographic service area, not to mention those who are only visiting. It is no longer feasible, especially for those of us funded by government sources, to serve a small slice of the community—for example, those whose ancestors have lived here for four or five generations. Even organizations with missions defined by subject (for example, the history of aviation, fishing, railroads, farming) recognize the need to serve more than "buffs" already knowledgeable about the subject matter.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND: THE OPERATIONAL PLATFORM OF 'TELLING THE STORY'

Why tell a story? The answer is usually found in most of our mission statements: to educate. Local historical societies should be educational institutions. What good is it if we are mere repositories of historical facts and objects? Local history organizations should be able to tell people what all that stuff means.

Telling a story complements our primary educational goal by responding to two major reasons people visit museums and historic sites, namely recreation and entertainment. Although local historical societies should be careful not to let these two helpers eclipse the primary goal, visiting a history museum can be a healthy diversion. At many museums, visitors get to try their hands at certain parts of historical processes by using either reproductions or expendable artifacts from the "educational collection." Such interpretation can be seen as recreational. Other visitors are treated to dramatic vignettes, rides in old wagons and trains, and video documentaries; they are entertained. But such experiences must still tell people something about the past. Educational enrichment must always be first, or local history museums will reduce themselves to historically oriented campgrounds or theme parks.

To keep education at the forefront, keep four things in mind when planning an interpretive activity: what a story is, how people learn, the potency of interpretation, and basic customer service principles. These guiding principles will keep an interpretive program on target.

What is a story? There are many definitions. One narrative theory called structural-affect,[2] maintains that the goal must be meaningful to the audience, that the audience develops empathy for the protagonist, and that the outcome holds a surprise for the audience. When using the structural-affect model for historical interpretation, the difference is that, rather than a surprise, we impart a human truth at the end. For example, an interpreter

[1] Quoted in Elizabeth Weil, "Every Leader Tells a Story," *FastCompany* 15 (June/July, 1998): 38.

[2] Peter Orton, at IBM's T. J Watson Research Center, http://www.research.ibm.com/knowsoc/ideas_featurestructure.html.

pretending to be a spectator at a vintage baseball game approached modern spectators, saying, "I'm sure this game looks a little different from what you're used to, but I assure you that this is an improvement to what you all played as children." He went on to relate briefly how the rules used in 1860 either codified or altered earlier practice. In doing so he imparted the truth that human beings are constantly tinkering with things, hoping for a better result.

People learn in a variety of ways. However, scientists who study how people learn say we generally learn using our culture and prior knowledge as a platform. We take in new facts, such as antique baseball rules, through a variety of media to assist in problem solving and reasoning to draw conclusions and comparisons with things we already know, such as modern baseball rules. These new facts should spark our natural curiosity. We respond well to structure. If our visitors know the goals of the program, they will be ready to learn.[3]

Using the structural-affect model and understanding that people use what they are already familiar with, the interpreter can make translations with what might be termed "The Three C's of Interpretation." That is, compare and contrast in context. Once we establish the context of the past, we can make comparisons and contrasts with our own situations, as in the example of the "laptop chalkboards" or our familiarity with the rules of the ball game. Context enables us to understand that those who lived before were products of their own time and place just as we today are products of ours. When visitors understand context, contrast and comparison can convey a meaningful history.

Humor can be as useful as it can be troublesome. Used well, it can help further a lesson, drive home a point, and reassure an audience. One reenactor, costumed as a Civil War soldier, used humor to his benefit. He was talking to a class of school children, comparing and contrasting his historical situation with theirs. Just like the children, he had to obey two things that he wished he didn't: time and teachers. His "teachers" were officers who had gone to a special school and received a special piece of paper called a commission. He had to obey time too, because his "teachers" wanted things in good order. In essence, this grown man was being treated like a child. He then wryly commented for the adults present, "Guess that's why they call us Infant – tree." The pun helped at least the adults to remember that being in the army is like being a kid in school.

Historical interpretation and comic strips have a lot in common: both are potent combinations of ideas and illustrations. Cartoonist Berke Breathed, in his introduction to *Classics of Western Literature: Bloom County 1986-1989,* explained what makes stories work for comics. Rather than surprise the audience, a good story relates a basic human truth—the truth of anxiety seen in *Peanuts* character Charlie Brown, for instance.[4] When interpreting history to the public, it is important to connect them to the past on a basic level; doing so builds empathy with human truth, enriching the mind and spirit.

Just as some local history programs allow recreation and entertainment to eclipse the primary goal of education, others allow artifacts either to become the story themselves or to be more important than a human story. According to cartoonist Bill Watterson, in his anthology *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book,* great ideas save boring illustrations better than great illustrations saving boring ideas. This is true for local history organizations as well. An artifact without a story or an interesting idea is not particularly educational. Many historical society collections contain the same items as the historical collection down the road. To someone who has heard about the general use of a sadiron, even the best surviving example of a sadiron will no longer be interesting. Who used this sadiron, and what was that person's significance to your mission? Every artifact was used or made by a human being: it's the human story that is interesting, not some obscure tool a modern person doesn't use or recognize. The fact that some other person used the object makes translation of the story possible and meaningful. Objects must support the story you are telling.[5]

At a former state capitol building, the only two people on one tour admitted to the guide they both worked at another historic site. The guide had no stories to tell on his hour-long tour, just explanations of how curious artifacts were used. Instead of orchestrating a conversation about significant proceedings, grand architecture, interesting politicians, and important legislation, this guide knew only about the artifacts. When his visitors already knew about the artifacts, his tour was compromised and less meaningful. Perhaps because of limited training he did not know that objects could help him tell stories about the special community he was living in; and, therefore he was not able to provide a very good customer service experience. Few visitors know the meaningful local stories that we know, even if they live in our area—so it is best to take advantage of what makes our places special to live in.

The final key to effective interpretation is good customer service. We must pay attention to the interests of our visitors by telling meaningful stories, making sure not to fatigue them mentally with breathless depth or fatigue them physically with no chance to take it all in. Be kind and helpful. Take time to get to know them so you can kindle curiosity with the supremely interesting human stories you have to tell. As Watterson suggests, as long as you have the opportunity to speak to someone, you might as well say something useful.

---

[3] John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking, editors. *How People Learn: Brain Mind, Experience, and School.* Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. National Research Council. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999). http://www.nap.edu/html/howpeople1/ch1.html.

[4] Berke Breathed, *Classics of Western Literature: Bloom County 1986-1989* (Boston, MA: Little Brown & Company, 1990): two. Bill Watterson, *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews & McNeel, 1995): 6.

[5] Watterson, 32. See also, Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), particularly chapter 4, "Transcending the Object."

Being kind and helpful will lead you to what one interpreter summed up as "Know all, tell some." One guide with a theatrical background saw the story she was paid to tell as being like lines in a play. She would not let visitors leave until she had concluded her "performance." You can fatigue audiences with an exhaustive narrative. Withholding less crucial parts of the story can be a kindness. Visitors often sense when something is missing, and if their curiosity is aroused and they are so inclined, they will ask. Another interpreter described this activity as "digging holes." Dig enough holes, and curiosity will trap the visitor in one of them. They will have to ask a question to get out.

Good customer service at our history museums means getting to know our guests even minimally so we do not bore them with things they already know. We must learn where our guests are coming from, if we expect to build on their knowledge. It means not putting up barriers to their experience. We must describe the experience ahead so the visitor is prepared to overcome challenges like stairs, long walks, no working restrooms, no water, unusual temperatures or light levels, and so on. In short, customer service is the consideration of human needs. By considering our guests' needs, we show that we are fully engaged in their experience.

These four ideas—what a story is, how people learn, the potency of interpretation, and basic customer service skills—kept firmly in mind can produce enjoyable, high-quality interpretive educational opportunities. They can be applied to all kinds of interpretation. They drive curiosity by using the powerful combination of ideas plus good illustrations.

Themes for Interpretive Programs

Given the wide range of human activity, historical organizations have no shortage of topics from which to choose. Of course, some stories lend themselves better to one interpretive medium than others. Some stories can be told well by an exhibition, for instance, but not in a walking tour.

INTERPRETATION'S MANY FACES: VEHICLES OF INTERPRETATION AT LOCAL HISTORY MUSEUMS

Local historical organizations tell their stories in a wide array of interpretive media. We tell stories in museum exhibitions, in public programs conducted at historic sites and house museums, in programs conducted offsite in the community, and through other media, such as publications, where our interaction with an audience is indirect.

Choosing themes or subjects for interpretation should start with mission. It is certainly acceptable to do interpretive programs that go beyond an organization's mission, but the mission should be the primary screen for program selection. Geographically based historical organizations should have no problem knowing where to start, but it is important to take the time and effort to identify the historical themes that tell the story of your area. List the broad themes that help people understand the forces that have made your area what it is today. Your themes may have much in common with those of other areas in your region, but there will surely be some variations unique to your area.

Expand the list of historical themes by writing brief narratives about each one. Connect them with a timeline that includes specific people, places, and events. Then add lists of resources that you could use to develop interpretive programs. These will range from manuscripts and government records to oral histories, artifacts, and books. The information you collect about your historical themes should be dynamic. That is, you should always be adding new material and you should review the themes in light of new historical research.

While developing a list of historical themes is an essential part of planning interpretive programs, another way is to identify more universal themes that can become a framework to connect the history of your area. Think of the big themes that apply to everyone: families, making a living, health, bereavement, and so on. Historian Joseph Amato calls on local historians to look into other themes, some so common that we don't think about them, for instance the senses.[6] How have the sounds and smells of a community changed over time? Amato would also have local historians study and interpret the emotional history of their communities through topics like anger and madness.

According to the National Park Service, themes connect tangible objects with intangible concepts and universals. For further information please see the NPS Web site for the online booklet *History in the National Park Service: Themes & Concepts.* www.cr.nps.gov/history/hisnps/NPSThinking/themes_concepts.htm

Museum Exhibitions.

It is not easy to create an effective exhibition. Unlike other forms of interpretation, which can be tailored to different audiences, museum exhibitions need to work with multiple audiences. They can only do so if they are well planned and executed.

The first step is to recognize that exhibitions are more than displays. A display of neatly arranged and categorized farm or fishing implements with a few labels does not tell a story. Even an arrangement of items in a recreated domestic setting, such as a 19th-century kitchen, does not tell much of a story. Neither technique does anything to engage museum visitors. National Park Service historian Freeman Tilden told us

[6] Joseph Amato, *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History,* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002): 60. For another approach to developing historical themes, see Tom McKay, "Choosing a Local History Topic: Beginning With Concepts," in *Exchange,* newsletter of the Wisconsin Historical Society's Office of Local History Volume 24, Number 7 (January/February 1982). Available online: http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/localhistory/articles/concepts.htm.

nearly 50 years ago: information is not interpretation.[7] Tilden defined interpretation as revelation based on information. Barbara Franco, the director of The Historical Society of Washington D.C., explains that museum exhibitions ought to create memorable experiences.[8] When we plan an exhibition, we need to be conscious not just of what a visitor will see, but of what the visitor will do. Dan Spock, head of the Exhibits department at the Minnesota Historical Society, elaborates: "Exhibits are a mode of communication, but this process is primarily non-verbal, minimally textual, works more in the 'gut' than in the 'mind' and is inherently a two-way street, a kind of dialogue of meaning-making between visitor and museum." [9]

Spock also recognizes that visitors bring a variety of knowledge, experience, and associations with them to the exhibition. Visitors use these things during a museum visit to create new experiences in a "personalized synthesis." He feels that the story is the most common and natural way to move "the personal meaning into the social sphere, into the world of other people where it can be shared and understood." Good exhibitions enable these kinds of experiences.

Isn't all of this impossible for the small historical organization with limited resources? Not necessarily. Even the smallest organization can do excellent exhibitions that address multiple audiences. Of course, it all starts with a clear goal. What is the exhibit about? What story does it tell? What are the primary messages you want visitors to take away after they have seen the exhibit?

Two key words to keep in mind while doing this are layering and interactivity. Layering recognizes that visitors will experience a museum exhibition in a variety of ways. We are all familiar with people who hurry through an exhibition and take very little time to read interpretive panels. Others, however, will spend a great deal of time and read everything. Most people are somewhere in the middle. The process of designing and fabricating exhibitions needs to consider all these visitor styles.

Visitors in a hurry need something to grab their attention. It might be large artifacts that are visually compelling. Or, spatial design can capture attention by drawing the eye to a particular area. These speedy visitors need to see exhibit headings in very large type size if we expect them to understand the message we are trying to convey.

Other visitors, those who might take more time for the exhibition, can be stimulated with other techniques. They are more likely to look at more museum objects, photographs and documents. They may also read text blocks and labels. To be effective, labels or text panels need relation to actual things in the exhibition. Too often, smaller museums retain labels for items after changing their exhibit. Also, be succinct because most visitors will not read lengthy descriptions.

Some visitors, of course, will take much more time. We can engage them at even higher levels. They are more likely to want to share what they learn with others if they are in a group. They are the visitors who would sit down at tables with reading materials that allow them to explore more content. And they are more likely to interact with employees or volunteers who do demonstrations or portray historic characters.

Interactivity refers to techniques in which visitors are no longer passive but can take an active role in an exhibition. Interactivity is not just a passing fad. We know from numerous studies of learning development that people of all ages remember much more about an experience if they participate actively, as opposed to simply reading, seeing, or hearing something. In museum exhibitions, interactives can be simple or complicated. Most smaller organizations lack the resources to design, fabricate, and maintain complicated interactives, so it is best to use tried and true techniques. Things that work well include allowing people to handle reproductions or artifacts from the educational collections, role playing, games and puzzles, simulations of work situations, and mastering crafts and tools through "make it, take it" programs.

Spock says learning works best when it is informal. Exhibition visitors learn more when they are active participants and not preached to by an authority. Planners of good history exhibitions need to understand visitors' prior knowledge with a particular subject and use it to engage them. Spock suggests using stories of human experience common enough to be familiar to today's visitors, emphasizing the voices of real people from the past. He also advocates exhibitions representing the diversity of peoples, communities and roles to engage visitors' empathy and emotion. Spock does not avoid controversial issues in exhibitions, but presents clear, balanced accounts that do not impose one viewpoint over another. He believes visitors are perfectly able to decide for themselves, even allowing issues with contemporary parallels or implications to come to the foreground. Lastly, exhibits are to be welcoming, aesthetically pleasing, comfortable, and accessible to all.

Public Programs in Our Museums.

Public programs generally are history programs with some kind of human interaction. Every local history organization does public programming in some way. Perhaps the most common public programs are guided tours with a docent.

Researchers who study how people learn tell us that most people's tolerance for listening is limited to eight minutes. Many docents are aware of this and make sure they do not spend any longer than eight minutes at any one station. They also notice obvious body language from visitors who begin shifting their weight to relieve tired legs. When visitors are physically uncomfortable, they cannot listen as well.

[7] Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage,* revised edition (Nashville, TN: AASLH, 1967): 9.

[8] Barbara Franco. "What's New in Exhibits?" *Cultural Resource Management,* No. 5, (2000). National Park Service http://crm.cr.nps.gov/archive/23-05/23-05-14.pdf.

[9] Dan Spock, presentation titled "Exhibits: More than Displays" at workshops for Minnesota's Historical Organizations, spring 2002.

Costumed interpreters lead a growing number of guided programs. There are many variants, from strict first person, where the interpreter never strays from a certain time period, to third person that does not necessarily even need costumes. Small organizations might need to rely on community members who have developed a program well suited for its audience. Often reeanctors, living historians, thespians, and interpreters are passionate about their subject and willing to provide programs at little or no cost. However, the organization should not allow just any program to happen. These sorts of programs require planning and evaluation too.

As with every other program, when you bring in someone from outside your staff or regular volunteers, it is wise to write out what you expect from, and what you will provide to the costumed interpreter. Be aware that costumed interpretation has its own language, so acquaint yourself with basic terminology. There are different kinds of costumed interpreters:

- reenactors are the basic hobbyists for whom enthusiasm knows no bounds;
- living historians study and document things often to extreme minutiae;
- thespians can give powerful and memorable performances; and,
- professional history interpreters generally value education above all.

None is necessarily better than another, but consider what each type can do for you. Each type has its pitfalls, as well. The reenactor may be enthusiastic, but can he relate well to the public? Is he well versed in his subject? The living historian, sometimes referred to as 'hardcore,' can lose sight of the broader educational message because she is far too interested in the type of stitches and the number of stitches per inch in her garments. The thespian, while powerful and memorable, may not easily interact with your audience while running the course of the 'script.' A professional history interpreter, while primarily an educator, may be willing to sacrifice some small parts of accuracy for the greater educational good.

Also be aware that the method a costumed interpreter uses may or may not be appropriate. Tom Sanders' excellent article on interpretation points out, "First person in its purest form does have some drawbacks." Cultural differences, willingness to 'play the game,' limitations of the time period or of social class being enacted, and so on sometimes get in the way of the educational goals we set for programs.[10] Of course, thinking about method applies to all our programs.

Costumed interpreters often function at historic sites, historic house museums, and "pioneer/historical villages." Historical environments are often the best places for costumed interpreters to work. Visitors can easily walk with their predecessors, feel like them, and even begin to imagine themselves living as their forebearers did. Here visitors can readily learn about the lives and motivations of people in the past. Of course, such environments also present other challenges such as adequate staffing, proper maintenance, a consistent message, staff morale, training and discipline, and the cost of clothing, reproductions, and other consumables.

Other public programs use onsite interpretation just like docents and costumed guides. Many local history organizations have regularly scheduled meetings at which there is usually some kind of program, often a guest speaker. Slide shows, documentaries, lectures, sing-a-longs, facilitated sharing sessions, book readings, and other such programs are vehicles for telling some important story of your community.

Public Programs in the Community.

Local historical organizations offer many public programs off site. These programs include tours guided by brochures or a recreational activity guided by a historian.

Many small history museums partner with local heritage preservation organizations to produce walking tours of historic downtowns. Likewise, countywide historical museums develop driving tours of historic places in their region or create historical marker systems which, when coupled with a brochure, tell a story about a much larger area. Even more broadly, multiple historical museums may create a theme tour, such as a tour of historic sites related to children's authors.

Recreational opportunities led by a historian are increasingly popular, and history museums are responding. Tour groups might ride bicycles down a path converted from an old railroad line, or through multiple historic areas in larger towns that would be impossible to cover on foot. Some specialized walking tours require a guide, especially those focusing on faint traces of historic sites long razed. In areas with snow, a historian might accompany groups on snowmobiles, snowshoes, or cross-country skis past familiar historic sites that evoke a different feeling and association than they would in the summer. Enos Mills was a tireless advocate in the 1910s for National Parks and the learning opportunities afforded in them. His many books and magazine articles are still good advice for modern guides, whether they are leading groups through pastoral or urban wildernesses. The popularity of site-specific tours today is much the same as it was in Mills' day: people are too busy to stop and consider what they are speeding past.

Cemetery walks are a popular combination of walking tours and costumed guides. Here, after extensive biographical research, volunteers and staff sometimes portray former residents who return to life near their headstones and present a brief story to tour groups. Sometimes a historian leads a cemetery walk. The tour might encounter any number of "ghosts" or markers, but they all relate to some overall theme. To that end many cemetery walks will feature themes like women activists in the community, victims of major natural disasters, railroad workers and their families, and the community's military veterans.

A combination of recreation and history occurs at

[10] Tom Sanders. "Thoughts on Effective Living History: Interpretive Suggestions," *Midwest Open Air Museums Magazine,* v. 11, n. 1 (Spring 1990): 10.

recreated “bat and ball” games. Interpreters, volunteers and the general public play “base ball,” rounders, cricket, and other versions of ball games—often in appropriate reproduced apparel, but always by the historically documented rules. While the public or demonstrators who participate may have fun and learn about the game, not many sponsoring institutions take the time to make the story of the game relevant to the public watching the event. These types of games make translating history easier because baseball is such a common experience for so many Americans.

Requiring visitors to participate is one way to ensure both a memorable and actual learning experience. A unique combination of outdoor recreation and historical experience is found at Connor Prairie, a historic site near Fishers, Indiana. They decided to address a highly sensitive subject, namely African American slavery. The program is “Follow the North Star,” and requires all the visitors to participate in the program as a group of runaway slaves. It is a somewhat physical program covering a lot of ground at night, where they meet various historical interpreters, from slave hunters to abolitionists and Quakers. Through first hand experience, visitors learn what it was like to be a runaway slave in the mid-nineteenth century.

At one Canadian museum that presented a lesson on the War of 1812, guests were randomly handed note cards on which were written quotations from original participants. The lesson focuses on an academic mystery: who held the cannons at Lundy’s Lane on July 25, 1814, and when? With the aid of a narrator, each participant stepped forward to “testify” to what was seen that night. At the end of the program, the narrator asked visitors to solve the mystery and concluded by briefly describing the academic debate. The point of the program is not only to show a past human activity, but also to show how those events still affect people today. The visitors developed empathy for multiple protagonists through individual points of view.

All public programs should carefully consider educational goals. History organizations must make sure all their programs meet the mission in some way and are evaluated to see whether the program furthers its mission. Evaluation does not have to be complex, just conducted methodically to produce meaningful feedback in guiding the future of the program.

Publications and Other Indirect Programs

One of the most common ways that local historical organizations tell stories is through research, writing and publication. Unlike the other interpretive programs discussed, publications do not require someone to visit the museum or historic site or register for a program. Much of what has been said about other interpretive vehicles applies. Just be careful to note that publications have a different impact than a temporary museum exhibition or a costumed portrayal at a historic site. Publications are more widely accessible both geographically and temporally.

Whether books or essays, publications differ in another way from other interpretive programs. The historical writer has a fundamental responsibility to tell the reader how she knows what she writes. This means telling the reader about primary and secondary historical sources and making it clear how they are used.

Local history publications also allow for the retelling of history when new information is available. Although reprinting an old history might be a fine project, a better one—although much more difficult and time consuming—would be to undertake new histories, which, in the words of Carol Kammen, “change what needs to be altered and challenge what needs to be questioned.” [11]

In recent years, historical organizations have begun to undertake other forms of interpretive programs such as the production of curricular material for schools and now interpretive programs on Web sites. At this time, larger organizations are mostly producing such programs, but in the future they will likely become common in smaller local organizations as well. These programs require solid planning, maintenance, and evaluation just like any other interpretive program. Additionally curricula require collaboration with the teachers whom you intend to use it.

CONCLUSION: WE CAN ALWAYS DO BETTER

Local historians know their work is never done. Just planning, researching and implementing an interpretive program is not the end. All programs need to be evaluated, and then adjusted to improve or discontinue them if need be. Large historical organizations regularly evaluate projects, but smaller organizations without the same resources can do the same. In fact, increasingly, government, foundation and corporate funders demand that evaluation be a component of every program.

Done well, interpretation helps audiences connect with the past in personal ways by drawing on first-person accounts of human activity. The best interpretive programs are well organized, based on sound historical research, and have clear objectives. They are tailored to diverse audiences and ways of learning. While keeping education at the forefront, they let audiences draw their own conclusions about the past. With interpretative programs, we play the ancient and honorable role of storyteller. When we tell stories well, no matter whether our organization is large or small, we know we are carrying out our mission.

Timothy C. Glines is Manager of Outreach Services and David Grabitske is the Grants Assistant at the Minnesota Historical Society's Historic Preservation, Field Services and Grants Department.

[11] Carol Kammen. *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What it Means.* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1986): 38.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alderson, William T., and Shirley Payne Low. *Interpretation of Historic Sites.* Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1985.

Amato, Joseph. *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing local History.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

Ames, Kenneth L., Barbara Franco, and L. Thomas Frye, Eds. *Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits.* American Association for State and Local History, 1992.

Baker, Charles L. "Planning Exhibits: From Concept to Opening," American Association for State and Local History Technical Leaflet #137, 1981.

Brochu, Lisa, and Tim Merriman. *Personal Interpretation: Connecting Your Audience to Heritage Resources.* Fort Collins, CO: InterpPress, 2002.

Coda, James C. "Planning and Creating Effective Exhibits on a Limited Budget," Ohio Historical Society *Local History Notebook,* Part I (July/August, 1994), www.ohiohistory.org/resource/oahsm/notebook/julaug 1994.html; Part II (September/October, 1994) www.ohiohistory.org/resource/oahsm/notebook/sepoct1994.html.

Collins, Rives, and Pamela J. Cooper. *The Power of Story: Teaching Through Storytelling,* 2nd edition. Allyn and Bacon, 1997.

Ernst, Kathleen. "Conquering Burnout: A supervisor's approach to dealing with interpreter burnout," *Midwest Open Air Museums Magazine* 9/1 (Spring 1988).

Ernst, Kathleen. "Conquering Burnout: An interpreter's approach and advice for fighting burnout," *Midwest Open Air Museums Magazine* 9/2 (Summer 1988).

Gordy, Christopher D. "The Complex Field of Living History: Through the Eyes of its Students," *Midwest Open Air Museums Magazine* 18/2 (1997): 6-11.

Hein, George E., and Mary Alexander. *Museums: Places of Learning.* American Association of Museums Education Committee, 1998.

Mackintosh, Barry. *Interpretation in the National Park Service: A Historical Perspective.* Washington DC: History Division, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 1986. Online version of the book: www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/mackintosh2/index.htm

McKay, Tom. "Exhibiting Wisconsin's Local Heritage", a series of articles in *Exchange,* newsletter of the Wisconsin Historical Society's Office of Local History, available online at www.wisconsinhistory.org/local history/exhibit_plan.htm.

Midwest Open Air Museums Magazine. Published since February 1980, it has many articles on interpretive approaches to various aspects of history.

Mills, Enos. *Adventures of a Nature Guide and Essays in Interpretation.* Friendship, Wisconsin: New Past Press, 1920.

National Park Service. *History in the National Park Service: Themes & Concepts, 1993.* www.cr.nps.gov/history/hisnps/NPSThinking/themes_concepts.htm

Robinson, Cynthia, and Gretchen S. Sorin, *Going Public: Community Program and Project Ideas for Historical Organizations.* Bay State Historical League, 1999.

Rosenzweig, Roy, and David Thelen. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life.* Columbia University Press, 1998.

Roth, Stacy F. *Past into Present: Effective Techniques for First-Person Historical Interpretation.* Raleigh, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Sanders, Thomas. "Thoughts on Effective Interpretation," *Midwest Open Air Museums Magazine* 11/1 (Spring 1990): 10-11, 21.

Thomson, Ron. *A Different Path for Historic Walking Tours.* AASLH Technical Leaflet #194, 1996.

Tilden, Freeman. *Interpreting Our Heritage.* Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1957.

Trapp, Suzanne. *Signs, Trails, and Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People and Places.* University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point Foundation Press, 1994.

© 2003 by American Association for State and Local History. Technical Leaflet #222, "Telling the Story: Better Interpretation at Small Historical Organizations," included in *History News,* volume 58, number 2, Spring 2003. Technical Leaflets are issued by the American Association for State and Local History to provide the historical agency and museum field with detailed, up-to-date technical information. Technical Leaflets and Technical Reports are available through *History News* magazine to AASLH members or to any interested person. Membership information or additional Technical Leaflets may be acquired by contacting American Association for State and Local History, 1717 Church Street, Nashville, TN 37203-2991, (615) 320-3203; fax (615) 327-9013.