

## SELECTING EXHIBIT THEMES FOR PARK MUSEUMS

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Every time we establish or update one of our museums, we have to choose exhibit subjects for it. The choice is important from at least two points of view. What exhibits tell the visitor bears directly on his enjoyment of our areas and also on his attitude toward using and preserving them. In addition the exhibits represent a large capital investment we can justify only if they accomplish their purpose. The problem of selecting exhibit themes is becoming more urgent and at the same time more complicated. Its urgency stems from the increased rate at which we are establishing museums and the amount of public funds going into them. It grows more complex as more organizations adopt outdoor museums as an interpretive means. The more of us are involved, the more factors will influence our choices of exhibit subjects. Currently the National Park Service, many state park systems, municipal and county park boards, the Forest Service, the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, the Bureau of Land Management, the national and provincial park agencies of Canada and perhaps other organizations are actively developing museums in the parks, forests and refuges and recreation areas they administer. Will the same guidelines serve all our agencies? What should these guidelines be?

Lets look first at the field of natural history. A generation ago Dr. John C. Merriam put his finger on the reason why it is particularly hard to choose exhibit themes in this subject area. He was studying the educational needs of Grand Canyon National Park and, of course, found an "infinity of subjects", a "great number of details" available and potentially interesting to Grand Canyon visitors. He saw that the Park's educational program could not be effective if it tried to cover too much. It would have to select and concentrate. So he encountered the problem we still face. Every natural area in which we have or propose a museum contains such a wealth of living forms and illustrates so many principles, processes and relationships that we are forced to be selective in what we exhibit.

The National Park Service has been using museums in its interpretive program for over 40 years. What guidelines has it developed? From the Administrative Manual and other official documents you can derive the following:

1. The exhibits should concern the significant park features
  - a. Helping visitors understand them, and
  - b. Encouraging visitors to go out in the park to see them.
2. The exhibits should treat those subjects which museum display methods interpret best, coordinating what they tell with the content of other parts of the interpretive program.
3. The exhibits should develop a coherent park story.

With these guidelines is there still a problem?

In practice the Park Service has found it hard to apply these long established guides consistently. The first one should work easily. Each park has been set aside to preserve certain outstanding natural features. The park Master Plan identifies them clearly. Therefore these known features are the proper subjects for the exhibits. One difficulty comes when we do not stop there. Should the museum interpret only the most significant features? This question takes us back to the work of the distinguished Committee on the Study of Educational Problems in the National Parks in the late 1920's. Dr. John C. Merriam analyzed the interpretive needs at Grand Canyon. He said, ". . .the educational program of the park must arrange itself around the elements of principal interest. . .giving the best opportunity to see and to understand these most significant features." At the Yavapai Observation Station he applied our first guideline rigorously. The exhibits brought samples of the rock layers, fossils, the river's cutting tools and a few key biological specimens in where visitors could examine them closely. The specimens were exhibited in a way to explain how the canyon was formed, the record of earth history exposed in the canyon walls and what canyon formation had done to the plants and animals. The exhibits went no further. At the same time Dr. Merriam realized visitors would be interested in many other things besides the main features, and what ". . .a well developed program must provide for answers to such questions." His solution was to handle these peripheral but legitimate subjects in other phases of the program—publications, trailside signs and naturalists' talks, for example. Meanwhile, Dr. Hermon C. Bumpus, another member of the committee, worked at Yellowstone. He saw the significant features as "the exclamation and interrogation points" of the park story. At Old Faithful the park museum told the story of the geysers, but Dr. Bumpus asked and answered the complicating question:

Should a museum at Old Faithful confine itself strictly to geyser activities, or should it broaden its function and embrace a wider range of subjects appropriate to the general locality? The wider the local range, the better.

So the museum themes extended from geysers to the geology and physical geography of the geyser basin and on to the local flora and fauna. He included the latter because they were there and interesting per se, not because they shed light on the significant features—the geysers. Here are two traditions established by eminent scholars whose wisdom we rightly venerate. Does the Park Service need to choose between them? If we continue to follow both, when do we stop with Merriam and when go on with Bumpus? (The references to Dr. Merriam and Dr. Bumpus oversimplify the development of these ideas. There were other important members of the committee and all drew heavily on the earlier work by employees of the National Park Service, especially Dr. Carl P. Russell and Ansel Hall.) Because we have practically no objective measurements of what the exhibits do for park visitors, our answer can only be based on judgment. We think the most useful museums in the National Parks give primary emphasis to explaining the really significant features which the park was established to preserve. They supplement this central theme with a few exhibits, for example on the identification of the most conspicuous flowers, on the animals most visitors are likely to encounter, on weather or seasonal phenomena in the park, or even on local history. They choose these secondary exhibit subjects with great care because many park visitors have demon-

strated interest in them. On this point Alan Helmsley, Interpretive Supervisor for the Ontario provincial parks, warns against the pitfall of trying to use our exhibits to teach academic biology or geology. He makes a useful distinction between park interpretation and nature education. In some parks we should keep this in mind in interpreting life zones and the details of historical geology, for example.

The second guideline established for National Park Service museums, that they should choose the kinds of themes exhibit methods can present most effectively, applies to all our agencies. We seldom use museums alone but combine them with personal services, audiovisual, publications, and especially wayside interpretation. Once we have selected the themes to be interpreted, which ones do we assign to the museum? On what basis do we decide to treat one subject in museum exhibits, another in an AV presentation, still another in guided field trips or campfire talks or publications? When should we use two or more media to reinforce or enrich the same theme? The Park Service faces this dilemma frequently in trying to decide the relation between the subject matter of an exhibit room and an AV program when visitors will use them one after the other in the same building. The difficulty in using the guideline is apparent. It requires a high level of informed judgment—judgment guided by experience and perhaps even more by the findings of educational psychology and other behavioral research. We need more scientific data on the peculiar attributes of our various interpretive methods. Meanwhile we should analyze the strong and weak points of each means, base our decisions on that and then observe the results as critically as we can.

Remember that exhibits show specimens—the real things, in ways that can arouse interest and invite study and comparison; and that they let each visitor take what ideas he wants at his own pace without regimentation. AV presentations make less allowance for individual differences, but are well adapted to give continuity, explain things involving movement, and also to communicate emotion. Personal contacts often hold the visitor longer so can probe deeper into subjects or include more territory. All three work only so far as they cause corresponding action in the visitor's mind. Publications usually get read after the park visit so their role is more often to recall, reinforce and extend the experience.

National Park Service museums consistently show the application of the third guideline, that the exhibits should tell a coherent story. It has given them their most distinctive characteristic and conforms to deep human traits. As a selector of exhibit themes, however, the park story approach involves some difficulties. For one thing, it sometimes clashes with the other two guidelines. When you weave the explanation of significant park features into a developing narrative, you often find that some essential parts of the story are hard to exhibit. They turn out to be subjects the second guideline would assign to another medium. They are the abstract ideas that require words rather than objects or pictures to present; or they demand specimens we cannot obtain; or involve a sequence of progressive changes that a moving picture, for instance, could show much better. Should we include these subjects in the exhibits anyhow in order to keep the story intact? The importance of the narrative approach needs reappraisal. In doing so one old and one newer factor should be weighed. Although park museums have been presenting exhibits in a story-telling sequence for a generation or more, most visitors still seem to go through the museums sampling at random. They usually see the exhibits in the proper order, but only stop and look at portions of the story. Most new park museums are in visitor centers which also

have an AV program. When the park story contains many hard-to-exhibit themes, the museum in some cases should relinquish the main story-telling chore to the AV program and supplement it with exhibitable themes which follow the thread of the story and enrich it by showing original objects which demonstrate or support the main ideas.

National Park Service practice represents only one line of development in outdoor museums. Another started at Bear Mountain, Palisades Interstate Park, under Dr. Bumpus and William H. Carr of the American Museum of Natural History in 1927. Many museums in state and municipal parks have followed similar lines since then. The guidelines they have worked out for selecting exhibit themes differ from those in national parks, and may be more applicable in some other parks, forests and recreation areas. The essential difference lies in the presence or absence of significant features paramount to the park. National Park museums are site-centered because they are part of the apparatus for preserving and interpreting the features the parks were created to save. At Bear Mountain, on the other hand, the museum was located in "the playground of New York City" where a few undeveloped acres offered a bit of unspoiled nature easily accessible to people. Here Dr. Bumpus and his colleagues hoped to use the commonplace objects of nature in a highly imaginative way to open visitors' eyes and stimulate their interest in natural history. They wanted people to learn about and enjoy their natural environment. The Bear Mountain Museum supplemented a system of nature trails. Exhibits in the museum were those that could hardly be placed outdoors. Museum and trails were so closely integrated that it is hard to consider them separately. Both aimed ". . . to develop intelligent enjoyment and interest in natural history generally, and to teach the principles of conservation." The museum frankly respected the visitors' wishes for the dramatic and appealing side of nature exposition not to be satisfied with facts alone. It avoided conventional and permanent displays. It changed subjects with the advancing season and cultivated an informal laboratory atmosphere. After 10 years of experimenting the museum exhibits were designed to crystallize the stories told along the nature trails. Living specimens in the museum enabled people to learn to identify the local forms and then led visitors on to learn about life histories and ecological relationships. From this example the guidelines for selecting exhibit subjects in an area not having especially significant features seem to lie in a sensitive study of visitor needs and interests to find what aspects of local natural history can best bring people into sympathetic appreciation and enjoyment of their natural surroundings.

Turning to park museums with historical and anthropological subject matter, do the same three Park Service guidelines still apply? Certainly museums at historic and archeological sites have benefited particularly by using the first, which holds them to the significant features of the park story. Their most obvious difficulty comes at the beginning and end of the narrative. How far should you go beyond the local limits of time and place to relate the events or people of the park story with the broader picture into which they fit? How much do you tell a Gettysburg visitor, for example, about the Civil War before and after this battle? Experience shows that we should try to interpret only as much beyond the park itself as is essential to give the park its true meaning. It is dangerously easy to lose sight of the criterion of significance, also, when a park museum includes local history as a secondary theme. Subjects in history and anthropology usually fall neatly into story form, typically chronological, so the third guideline fits readily. But often key elements of the

narrative resist effective display. This clashes with the second guide, which says exhibits should be used to interpret the subjects they can handle best. Distracted museum planners find they must decide whether to try to exhibit significant abstractions or choose less significant subjects. At the root of the dilemma is the hard fact that much of history and much of anthropology involve important ideas which objects and pictures do not explain or clarify. The answer lies partly in the wise coordination of the whole range of interpretive methods including exhibits—our second guideline, and partly in a deeper understanding of what the history or anthropology of the park can contribute to the visitor. This final guideline offers no easy path.

