

MAKING INTERPRETATION FIT

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About six years ago, a visitor walked into the museum here at Fort Laramie and asked, "Why am I here?" Had the Park Historian crassly replied, "Because you drove in here!" it would have immediately alienated the man, probably causing him to leave the park abruptly. Had his reply been even the rather superficial and disinterested, "Because you wanted to see Fort Laramie, I guess," chances are also good that he would have left the park deflated, without a satisfactory answer to his question. Fortunately neither of these answers were offered. Behind that simple, direct question, "Why am I here?" that man was earnestly asking, "What is so important about this place that I should drive out of my way to visit it, and what does it or what should it mean to me?" As it turned out, he got a good answer to his question--the historian answered more than just the words of the question, he answered the spirit of it! But I wonder . . . how many visitors each year to our parks and recreation areas get superficial, if not deflating or insulting, answers to questions similar to this man's "Why am I here?" We pay lip service to the concept that "Parks are for people." but do our actions--in the form of interpretive programs--contradict or reinforce our utterances? As those of us at Fort Laramie see it, our real challenge as park and recreation professionals, managers and interpreters alike, is to formulate and carry out interpretive programs which not only "fit" the area but just as importantly "fit" the needs of our visiting public.

Here at Fort Laramie, we learned sometime ago that people do have an interest in the Fort and the role it played in the westward expansion of the United States, but very few are interested in all the excruciating details of all its history. And unfortunately many of my fellow historians find this realization to be a "bitter pill" indeed to swallow. I think this point helps emphasize the fact that we need to provide the means by which our visitors can identify with the events that took place at Fort Laramie.

I am not suggesting or even hinting at the idea that we should provide the public with everything they think they need or want, that would result in both chaos and disastrous incompatible uses. However, we do need to understand, and in many instances, provide those things in our parks with which visitors can identify. Once we complete that step, we can use those points of identity as vehicles through which we can skillfully lead them to a more meaningful understanding of the values which are being protected and interpreted.

Though it may seem unnecessary to even mention it, not every park visitor will identify with the same things. Each is an individual. He responds and reacts to different stimuli. Therefore, as I see it, our interpretive operating programs need to be many-faceted, to try to reach as many people as possible.

We quickly realize then that more things determine the scope and details of an interpretive program than just the area values, important as they may be. Take for instance Fort Laramie National Historic Site, the physical features within park boundaries are outstanding: 21 buildings and ruins, four of the buildings refurnished; numerous foundations; known sites of many more structures; surviving ruts of the Oregon Trail; one of the oldest Iron bridges west of the Mississippi River. Yet Fort Laramie did not gain its prime status of importance among Western forts while it was operating in a vacuum! The land with its particular features and resources virtually dictated Fort Laramie's entire history! I contend that twice the land itself gave Fort Laramie a new lease on life. We have long been aware of the existence of such influences, but only recently have we addressed ourselves to a concentrated concern for the role of these factors of ecology. I think we can best call them environmental determinants of the area.

While the area values and the environmental determinants are both important, a program based solely on these two determinants would be most ineffectual, as we have already seen. Consideration must be given to visitor needs! And that is more easily said than done! First, we just don't know a lot about him. Behavioral scientists are working at understanding this complex animal we call "Man," but they have a long way to go. Secondly, even when we identify and understand those needs which motivate people to visit parks and recreation areas, we find they are varied, not only from person to person, but quite often a variety are at work within a single individual.

For a moment, let's take a look at a few of the needs the visitor is seeking to fulfill when he enters a park. He might be looking for rest . . . relaxation . . . re-creation, in the fullest sense of the word . . . or perhaps just plain old escape from his "work-a-day" world. The next fellow may not want to escape from his world, but he sure would like to be involved with something different . . . a little variety . . . he needs some stimulation . . . perhaps he wants to be challenged. Then, there is a self-centered force within each of us which psychologists call "ego." We all have the desire to feel worthwhile . . . to gain recognition! Some park visitors will fulfill this need by "bending the ear" of the Ranger on duty at the museum desk to tell him what he read about some aspect of the park story in some book. Man also needs to have some knowledge of reality and the opportunity to increase that knowledge. Here, too, the needs and desires differ . . . from one extreme to the other! One man's quest for knowledge of reality might be quenched simply by the first-hand knowledge of what physically exists at a park--it's the "I've-been-there-they've-got-a-lot-of-old-Army-buildings-full-of-antiques" reaction. Another fellow might not be satisfied until he understands the precise place of Fort Laramie in the broad sweep of events that shaped the history of these western United States. And that's a big order. When we are aware of many of these needs and desires which may need to be met, we just might be a little less eager to fulfill the sacred mission of correcting every error in fact that the visitor holds about Fort Laramie, and do it all before he drives out of the gate an hour and fifteen minutes from now. Not only is such a thing a physical impossibility, but in trying to do so we would probably destroy any chance of that visitor gaining

anything meaningful from his visit. (Here's another place that some of my "heavy-breathing" historian associates seem to see an empire crumbling around them.)

With a foundation now laid, we would now like to have you look at Fort Laramie's interpretive program with us. In the "grass roots" sense, our operating program is basically how we have or how we will respond to our own basic determinants--area values, environmental determinants, and visitor needs. These determinants remain essentially the same over the years. Yet the effectiveness of an interpretive program needs to be constantly evaluated and operations changed to up-grade it if necessary. On the surface this seems to be a strange paradox, however, a closer look discounts even that. Factors reflecting the times modify any interpretive program.

Since situations will vary . . . To make this discussion meaningful, let's examine the modifying factors of the program we know best--Fort Laramie's. Philosophies, trends, and techniques do not remain static, currently a number affect our program.

First, we have one of the "axioms" of modern interpretive planning; each facet of a program should complement the next; rather than duplicate each other in function. The story we tell here at Fort Laramie is complex. Thus we must use each medium (that is: signs, talks, tours, audio messages, publications, etc.) to do the job it does best. We would waste time and effort, and probably bore the visitor if we tried to tell a complete story of Fort Laramie in an orientation talk, an audio or audio-visual program, the signs in the field, a guided tour and in several publications.

Second, each year more and more people visit Fort Laramie and we see little on the horizon which would reverse this trend. These increased numbers of visitors come for a variety of reasons--this we know. And it is important that we know the reasons, but to go into them here would sidetrack our thread of thought. Suffice it to say that we are aware of many of the reasons and do consider them in our planning.

Thirdly, two important interpretive concepts forged their ways to the fore in the National Park Service circles within the last two years--we have found it undesirable and impossible to disregard either one of them. One--the Living History Demonstration--you have already experienced . . . the other--Environmental Concern-- makes its presence known in much more subtle ways.

The charm of the Living History Demonstration lies in the ease at which visitors become involved with the events of the past here at Fort Laramie. With seemingly no effort at all they become involved with the scene and its captivating history--and at that moment our visitor enters the highest plain of interpretive communications. . . personal experience.

The second of these important concepts has been with us for years, but we haven't always paid attention to it. Now Environmental concern urgently summons our action. As we all deal with conservation daily . . .

we know its urgency! We also know that time for action is rapidly eroding away . . . the task is enormous! However, those of us here at Fort Laramie realize that first things must come first in dealing with this vital issue. We cannot hope to environmentally educate until our visitors become aware that environment does affect their daily lives and has since life began. Furthermore . . . if we can fashion interpretive programs that present environment in such a way that the visitor feels he's making a personal discovery, then I am sure our efforts will have much greater impact . . . Who knows? . . . we may even win over the skeptic or the hostile foe.

A case in point from personal experience is perhaps in order here. About six weeks ago, while returning from a National Park Service course in Interpretive Management Operations at Grand Canyon, I had a brief lay-over at Denver's Stapleton Airfield. To my pleasant surprise, I found an old friend--whom I hadn't seen for quite some time--also awaiting the same flight to Scottsbluff, Nebraska. I was soon introduced to another gentleman, with whom my friend, Mr. Paul Christian, had been visiting. Since Mr. Christian knew my profession, the topic of conversation soon centered on the latest happenings at Fort Laramie, especially the progress of the living history demonstrations. The public has enthusiastically accepted the demonstrations--I was proud to relate that without hesitation. But, I continued, I was sincerely concerned that the visitors might be regarding these demonstrations as entertaining gimmicks and perhaps were missing the real message. The second gentleman, whom I later learned was a professor of modern physics at M.I.T., challenged me on the substance of the "real message." I unhesitatingly replied it was to make visitors aware of their environment . . . that they might be spurred to do something to at least slow the human destruction of our environment. He again challenged me . . . this time contending that it was an unworthy, if not illegal, use of federal funds to promote such a message at a National Historic Site. We should be telling of our national heritage instead. Having just had "my batteries charged"--so to speak--at the training course, I stood my ground and defended my position . . . at least for a while. Then I realized we had reached an impasse in communication. I backed off and tried a different approach. I explained how land, and its features and conditions, shaped Fort Laramie's historic destiny. He bought that approach . . . that was exactly what he thought we should be doing. My stand remained unchanged . . . only I didn't call it environmental education or even awareness, but it was--in its most vital sense.

Once we Americans become aware of the world around us, then we can be successfully exposed to environmental education; after that all of us should be ready to make responsible decisions when it comes to the alteration of our environment. Here at Fort Laramie, we plan to promote environmental awareness everywhere possible in our interpretive program. But you can be sure we won't bombard the visitor with words such as "environmental awareness" and all its companions!

Limiting factors also modify the basic determinants of an interpretive program. We have one here at Fort Laramie which we can and must overcome. At present, we have not completed an up-to-date Interpretive Prospectus. Its completion has high priority among our 1969 Interpretive Goals. But there are other limitations reflecting the times, and unfortunately we

exercise little control over them. Physical developments here have lagged to a point that we need an interim program--Prospectus or no Prospectus. We, like most of you--I am sure, will never have all the money and manpower which we are positive we need. And we feel the pinch of these limitations most acutely now! However, to sound a positive note in an otherwise negative field, we have at Fort Laramie contended that the ability to bridge the chasm between these restrictions and effective, quality interpretation is limited only by the imagination and dedication of those who plan and operate the interpretive program.

Taking all these modifying factors into account . . . our response to our basic determinants has been . . . and will continue to be . . . a multi-faceted program. It has to be! Otherwise we'd be untrue to our own convictions.

Right now the program encompasses about a dozen different mediums . . . though we've not always been so fortunately blessed. For a year or two after the Park's establishment in the late 1930's, CCC boys did their best to provide visitors with a meager background of the Fort's history. During World War II and the immediate post-war years, the Service had all it could do to just protect the site and make emergency stabilizations for the most threatened structures . . . any interpretation at all was "frosting on the cake." Signs for the buildings and ruins appeared soon . . . an historical handbook with a self-guiding tour followed. By the late fifties, the addition of a permanent Historian and some seasonal Historians to the staff made guided tours at long last a reality--even though it was through the empty buildings! Next on the scene came the temporary museum exhibits in this room. They've been revised a number of times . . . but they are still temporary! Finally, through an unselfish and gracious gift, refurbished houses opened--one by one. For a while it seemed that the refurbished houses emphasized the idea that a guided tour for every park visitor was a most desirable goal. Now we are not so sure it is . . . in fact we have as much as said in an official report it isn't necessarily!

Perhaps I can show you what I mean by a well-rounded, multi-facet program by dissecting our interpretive program . . . item by item . . . calling attention to each facet.

The most versatile and most responsive resource any interpretive planner has is the human being . . . the Interpreter. We have . . . as previously noted . . . too few of them. That fact notwithstanding, we make use of personal services in a number of ways.

Guided tours still have their useful place, though we feel that there are more effective means to reach each visitor at Fort Laramie. Perhaps you're wondering upon what did we base our conclusion. Most importantly, even if we had all the personnel we could use--which we don't!--the physical layout of most of the historic buildings greatly restricts the size of manageable tour groups. Turning back to the positive, we expect to use guided tours to accommodate organized groups who make advanced arrangements. These groups . . . especially school groups and cross-country tours . . . often operate on close schedules, and keeping the group together is of paramount importance. The conducted tour scores well in that consideration.

Instead of extensive use of guided tours, we have used the "assigned station" concept during the past three years. Seasonal interpreters assignments are at the refurbished historic buildings . . . we view their purpose there as an area of dynamic interpretive responsibility . . . not just a boring duty post to be "stuck at" or "shackled to." We hope they do, too.

However, the exclusive use of the "assigned station" has a built-in pitfall . . . it denies the visitor a cohesive, stimulating orientation to the Park. We've tried an audio message in combination with these museum exhibit panels . . . but it does not quite do the job! The audio message is fraught with formidable limitations . . . it's too long-- people walk away from it . . . it's also long on overburdening facts and short on stimulation . . . and it's not necessarily located in the right place. This coming visitor season we are going to replace it with scheduled orientation talks out in front of this building. With a limit on personal services during the remaining 9 months, we'll bring the audio message repeater back out of summer storage, and press it back into use . . . but this time using an appropriately written message . . . placed in the most effective place for the season.

The most unsung, but essential phase of personal services is, of course, the interpreter dispensing information at the museum desk. It will be quite a while before the electronics engineers and technicians develop a machine or a system with enough versatility to replace the human in this activity.

Some parks make extensive use of "Mail out" slide-sound programs for off-site use . . . perhaps in time we will, too. However, now we rely primarily on personal services to carry out our off-site interpretive services. Since early last Fall, we've used programs emphasizing environmental concern and awareness . . . and they've met with good . . . if not enthusiastic . . . response! On more than one occasion I had received the comment, "That's the most sense a talk on Fort Laramie's history has ever made to me." And so far, all of the people making that remark have been well exposed to Fort Laramie at least ten years . . . many of them much longer.

The Living History Demonstrations also show personal services in one of their most productive and fascinating roles. We've discussed this to some extent . . . for personal reasons I'd like to table this until a little later in the presentation.

A variety of non-personal mediums can be employed to supplement and complement the personal services . . . more actually than those used here. Some day we hope to have an audiovisual production for orientation . . . perhaps a sound-slide program . . . perhaps even a movie . . . but we haven't even space to put one now. We do make use of a number of non-personal mediums . . . and to varying degrees of their best advantage. The audio message repeater has already come under scrutiny.

These museum exhibits (point out) provide both a visual orientation and the interpretation of the fort's material heritage which do not fit

naturally into the refurnished houses. It's temporary . . . we know much can be done for improvement . . . but it will have to wait for the permanent visitor center across the Laramie.

It's easy to overlook one of our most useful mediums for interpretation . . . I guess we view it as part of the scene. I am referring to the units of refurnished rooms in our restored historic buildings. They interpret life on the military fort . . . sometimes unassisted . . . sometimes through the pages of the self-guiding tour booklet.

We also use a variety of publications to supplement the personal services. Our "mini-folder" provides the "What to see and do" on site. The sales folder and the Historical Handbook supply an inexpensive story of Fort Laramie . . . both in short form . . . and long. Our self-guiding booklet for the refurnished houses fills in the gaps between the orientation talk and the personal services of the interpreters at assigned stations. We know it has limited effectiveness . . . efforts are now underway to revise the booklet . . . using an up-graded format. This will be but the latest in a series of efforts to provide the best possible self-guiding material under the circumstances . . . and it won't be the last. (Note: Illustrate each as it is mentioned.)

If we limited ourselves to these four uses of the printed page, we'd be missing a most useful portion. Many visitors seek information and interpretation in depth that is available in few other places than books and pamphlets. Along this line, we in the Park Service have been fortunate indeed . . . a number of years we were permitted to spend part of our duty day tending the operations of a cooperating Association . . . it took an act of Congress to do it though. Fort Laramie Historical Association, like every other NPS Cooperating Association, provides an opportunity for visitors to purchase quality publications and educational visuals (post cards, posters, maps and slides) with information in depth about the park and its story. The effectiveness of such a program can be limited . . . limited, of course by the "ability to buy" on the part of the visitor . . . however, it can be even more limited by the care in which the sales items are selected . . . and as you can see here by the attractiveness of the sales facility and by the accessibility of the books. You see here the before and after . . . we have remodeled one, the other one will be remodeled, too. We expect it will make a difference. Oft times, too, publications you need to fill a certain interpretive gap is unavailable from any publisher . . . perhaps it's out of print . . . or maybe its never been published. The association can help here, too. . . it contacts a printer and becomes its own publisher. We produced our self-guiding tour booklet by this route. We also have hopes of reprinting a novel of social life at Fort Laramie at the height of the Indian Wars . . . it's been out of print for over 50 years . . . though at one time it was a household book. It's titled Laramie, Or Queen of Bedlam . . . it's scene is the fort's oldest building and Captain Charles King, once an officer here, authored it.

We regard our signs and field exhibits as essential links in our total program, too. We intend to keep the informational signs to a minimum . . . and those we do have should be primarily directional. The

remainder should convey a message . . . either in illustration or text . . . not just regurgitate a long series of facts. It's not always easy to do this and we've still got a long way to go . . . but we have firm resolve to turn intention into reality.

I have purposely left the Living History Demonstrations until last. During the course of this paper, we've presented the "what" and the "why" of our operating interpretive program . . . as we see it. But we've said little about the "how" . . . you've already had quite a bit of that in this conference. However, we plan to zero in on one technique that we feel we can present best . . . the Living History Demonstration. As soon as I wind this up, I'll turn the podium over to our seasonals . . . they are our experts in this field. They will brief you on some of the "what" and a good dose of the "how." However, before I do . . . I am going to spell out something that you have by now deduced . . . our prime interpretive goal at Fort Laramie. We will be more than happy, when we can honestly say, "We are not only conserving and interpreting the physical remains of a once proud fort, however commendable that may be; but more vitally we have conserved and interpreted the evidences of how soldier, his family and his civilian contacts and close associates met and lived with their environment to tame a frontier."

But we could never hope to do it without the "front line troops" to "deliver the goods." We're fortunate indeed to have four (three) young men from three (two) universities in three (two) different states to handle this portion of the presentation. They were all part of our staff of seasonal historians last summer . . . and we hope to have the pleasure of having them all back this season. Keith Beers, from the University of Wyoming at Laramie will lead off . . . then you'll hear from Dave Berry, also from the University of Wyoming (and Ken Korte from Chadron State College, at Chadron, Nebraska) . . . you've already seen Ty Probasco . . . aside from providing moral support to Keith, he's primed to answer any questions you might have . . .

Oh! yes . . . he's one of Dr. Wilcox's students at Colorado State University . . .

Keith, . . . its yours!