THE CAMPFIRE

Published bimonthly for members of the National Park Service, Department of the Interior

The campfire is interwoven into the fabric of America. Around it gathered the early explorers, the trappers, the fur traders and the soldiers. Today it connotes companionship, relaxation, and recreation in the out-of-doors. This bimonthly bulletin provides a figurative campfire about which we may exchange ideas that seem to us worth expressing and sharing.

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In previous issues of *The Campfire* the articles used have already been published. This issue is a departure from that procedure. The main article, submitted by Clarence L. Johnson, Park Historian of San Juan National Historic Site, Puerto Rico, happened to cross the editor's desk in manuscript form, not as a submission for publication but more as a matter of the author's "thinking out loud" on a subject in which he is deeply interested. Since the ideas expressed in the article are so provocative--and might so well have been the subject of one of those "bull sessions" often held in the parks around a campfire--we are taking the liberty of presenting them below, in the hope that others may be inspired to send to the Director's Office their own ideas on this vital subject.

To lead off the discussion on Mr. Johnson's article, comments thereon by Chief Historian Kahler are included on pages 3 and 4.

Although we have identified Mr. Johnson as Park Historian of San Juan National Historic Site, by the time this issue of *The Campfire* reaches the field he probably will have transferred to his new post at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, where he will again have the opportunity to delve into the inspirational motif behind the obvious reasons for which another national park area was established.

INTERPRETATION NEEDS IN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

By Clarence L. Johnson

Basically all National Park Service field personnel are interpreters--we differ as to time available, education, training and experience--but all personnel from the Superintendent down to the most recent employee regardless of grade should be able to meet the public and interpret the area to the best of their ability within their limitations.

If an area is well maintained and its intrinsic values preserved and there is no adequate program of interpretation, we are discharging

only one-half of our legal obligation and considerably less of our moral obligation to the visitor.

In many of our areas the visitor can have a pleasant experience without any interpretation--but he could do this also at a ball game, movie, or any other non-audience participation activity that he might like. The good interpreter is an intermediary who provides ears, eyes, and mental stimuli for the visitor. Interpretation implies the explanation of phenomena or events based upon the superior knowledge or experience of the interpreter, and translated into terms readily understandable to the listener. We are all educators but should avoid pedantry. Most people come to an area to learn something about it, or at least in a receptive frame of mind and they should not be disappointed.

The entire personnel of a given area should work unceasingly until they have discovered the significance of the area. This will seldom be found as a statement, stripped of non-essentials, in the legislation creating the area, or in published works on the area. Often there is a hidden significance that is much more vital than that appearing on the surface and which we are now elaborating to the public. If we are not careful, a fort is just another fort, and a battlefield becomes a table of statistics.

The formulation of the interpretive statement for an area is not often easy. For example, the significance of Fort Sumter (as I see it) came to me like a flash during my one visit to that area. While it is true that the "first shot" was fired here to open the war, and that the fort was later retaken by the Union, wherein lies the significance? If the first shot had not been fired here it would probably have been somewhere else and all forts were later retaken by the Union. The true significance lies around the flag and symbolism. When Major Anderson lowered the flag, in surrender, the Union was severed and hopes for reconciliation vanished. Nearly four years later, as he raised the identical flag over the battlescarred remains of the fort, it became a symbol of *One Union Indivisible with Freedom and Justice for All.* Here at Fort Sumter (as on occasions before and after) the flag may temporarily have to be hauled down, but eventually it will rise again in even greater glory and the Union and what it represents will endure. I have not refined this--but to me this is the significance of the fort. Nowhere in the leaflet of the area is the above incident told; it is devoted primarily to the two bombardments which, while interesting, are not unique in the annals of warfare.

On the other hand, I was at Chalmette for several years before the significance of that area became apparent to me. It was a spectacular battle and its effects were widespread, but in terms of contemporary value to current visitors, that is not the significance of the area. There in 1814-1815 was vividly illustrated the true meaning of the word *American.* Behind the ramparts defending New Orleans were white, black, Indian, free and slave, Anglo-Saxons, French and Spanish Creoles, pirates, jailbirds, the militia of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Mississippi Territory, as well as the regular Army, Navy, and Marines. Here then was demonstrated that *an American is anyone who, regardless of race, creed, color, or other condition, is willing*

to aggressively defend this country and the principles for which it stands. Chalmette then becomes more than a glorious event in American history; it typifies an achievement of unity with a common denominator, that must always endure.

Out at Grand Canyon the theme is the river, but I wonder how many people go away knowing the true magnitude of its work. A sign somewhere along the rim saying in large letters: CAUTION! RIVER AT WORK, with the explanation in smaller letters, "It has been working for_____years. Each year past this point it moves the equivalent of_____trainloads composed of 50 cars each," would give the visitor some idea of what has been, and is, going on in this famous canyon.

Sometimes we have to live and work with an area for several years before we appreciate its true significance, as was my experience at Chalmette, and this is true at San Juan. If here all we have are bigger and better fortifications than elsewhere under the American flag--so what? While we are becoming aware of the enduring significance of the area, we have not as yet been able to capture it as well as did Charles G. Thomson in speaking of the giant sequoias. He did not see them only as the world's largest and oldest living things, but said: "In their majestic shadow, fretting men may well pause to ponder values--to consider the ironic limitations of threescore years and ten." He thus strikes a vital chord--man's search for the eternal and the short space for the search. All of us at San Juan are thinking over our problem. We have the answer but it has not been reduced to its essence--but one day soon it will appear.

In some areas the interpreters are aware of the intrinsic value of the area and do a nice job of presenting it to the public. In others both the interpreters and their visitors are like old Kasper and his grandchildren in the famous poem *The Battle of Blenheim* by Robert Southey--"It was a great victory," but neither knew why it was fought.

The great importance of developing an adequate interpretive statement, as early as possible after an area is established, is that it is the only sound nucleus around which the interpretive program can be built. It constitutes the irreducible minimum that we hope visitors will take away and cherish as a part of the national heritage. In its concise form and in variations it should be presented to every visitor. The entire interpretive program will be no better than the thought that goes into the preparation of the interpretive statement and its presentation to the visitor.

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CHIEF HISTORIAN KAHLER'S COMMENTS

In his penetrating article, Mr. Johnson has touched the heart of the problem of education and interpretation in the national parks. As former Director Newton B. Drury so felicitously said, "Most of the people who visit the national parks, whether they realize it or not, or whether they put it into words, are impelled to visit them because of the quest for a supreme experience. The gleam of glaciers on a

mighty mountain; the shimmering beauty of a lake indescribably blue, resting in the crater of an extinct volcano; the thunder and mist of water falling over sculptured granite cliffs; the colorful chapter in the book of time revealed by the strata of a mile-high canyon gashed by a rushing river; the sight of strange new plants and animals living in natural adaptation to their environment and to each other; the roar of surf waging its eternal battle with the land; the silence that hangs over the ruins of the habitations of forgotten peoples; the lengthening shadows of the towering Sequoias--these and a thousand other vivid impressions are at the heart of the experience that national park visitors travel many miles to seek."

Unfortunately, many persons are unable to achieve this supreme experience merely by entering a national park and standing in the presence of one of their Nation's great natural or historical treasures. The wonders and beauties of Nature are not always obvious, even to persons of broad general understanding. The cowboy riding up to the edge of the Grand Canyon can realize that "something happened here," but it takes more than a glance down into the abyss to enable him to appreciate the awesome force of eroding water and the vast span of geologic time. As Mr. Johnson points out, Fort Sumter to many people is just another fort until someone describes it as a symbol of national unity.

This truth was evident to Congress when it created the National Park Service in 1916 to conserve the Nation's great natural and historic objects and "to provide for the enjoyment of the same." Without proper interpretation, many people would fail to realize the thrilling experience they anticipated upon visiting a park and would, hence, derive less enjoyment from their visit. Therefore, the obligation of the National Park Service to explain the meaning of the parks is plain.

As Mr. Johnson makes clear, the keys to providing this understanding are the interpretive statements--those brief but inspiring sentences which are designed to make clear the true significance of each area administered by the National Park Service. We are faced with the task of constantly searching out ways by which those statements can be improved, for only as these guides to interpretation tell their messages with truth and penetration can "we remain true to our high calling as trustees for the great things of America." The task of refining a statement of significance requires insight and labor. As Alexander Pope said,

"Slowly make haste, of labor not afraid,
A hundred times consider what you've said.
Polish, repolish every lay,
Sometimes add but oftener take away."

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