

BEFORE TILDEN

"A Profession Emerges"

By Tom Danton, Interpreter, MWRO

The profession of Interpretation did not begin in 1957 with Freeman Tilden's "Interpreting Our Heritage." Tilden was an observer of interpretation. He traveled throughout the park system and experienced the parks, their stories, and their interpretive efforts, both the uplifting and the dismal. Tilden began analyzing how visitors experienced, understood, and appreciated their parks and what role the Interpreter played in making it all happen. His observations and conclusions were recorded in "Interpreting Our Heritage" (1957).

Tilden did not create interpretation, he merely helped to revitalize it and give it much-needed focus and direction. The book of interpretation had numerous chapters before Tilden came on the scene. Nevertheless, many new Interpreters only open to the chapters written in 1957 and after. Consequently, the evolution of the profession and the contributions of famous past Interpreters are generally obscure.

Perhaps we should make a distinction between instinctive Interpreters and professional Interpreters. Instinctive Interpreters are naturally fascinated by the wonders of nature or history and usually love sharing their personal insights, reflections, and knowledge with others. Their academic training may be very limited as their interpretive energies seem to flow naturally from their heart. They represent an unusual combination of eloquence along with the commitment of a crusader, and the righteous determination of a prophet. We might say they were born Interpreters.

Thoreau, Emerson, Muir, and Theodore Roosevelt might fit this description. Their styles were different, but a mysterious flame ignited their spirits and those they touched. They were not trained for their roles as Interpreters, it just happened.

Professional Interpreters made their living by being Interpreters. They did not just "do" interpretation, but recognized two levels of the art. On one level, there was personal interpretation and what they felt and experienced with nature or history. On another level was the profession of interpretation, requiring analysis of those experiences, studying human behavior and establishing principles or guidelines of communication by which an Interpreter acted as a catalyst with others. Every person feels something on the first level, but only a few advance to the more disciplined second level. Some of the best Interpreters have been individuals who combined all the above traits.

A century ago, there were no park Interpreters; there were practically no parks. The few instinctive Interpreters around might be referred to as naturalists, trail guides, teachers, or transcendentalists, but not as Interpreters. There were no professional Interpreters in the modern Tilden mold. This is one story about the transition one person made from being an

instinctive Interpreter to establishing a profession of interpretation.

In 1889, a destructive fire at the copper mines in Butte, Montana changed one young man's life forever. He was uninjured, but also suddenly unemployed. At age 19, he had already spent several winters in Butte, devouring the city's impressive library to compensate for only a few years of formal elementary schooling, and working the mines to earn enough money so he could travel in the summer, explore the wonders of the Rockies and guide climbers up Long's Peak and into the magnificent splendors of the Colorado Mountains. This teenager was enthralled by nature. He was an instinctive Interpreter, overwhelmed by curiosity and wonder. Then there was the fire, so he took off for a new land, to explore California.

The chilly wind pierced the lad's dark coat as he darted along the deserted sandy beach near San Francisco. He had never seen the ocean and was totally absorbed by the myriad assortment of unusual creatures, vegetation, and minerals along the water's edge. He picked up one, then another, and another. His quick examination yielded few answers, but a whirlwind of questions. He wanted information about his discoveries, but he was nearly alone on that wintry beach. The only other person visible at some distance was a tall, lean stranger, in his fifties. The lad approached the bearded gentleman and began pouring out his enthusiastic questions, insights, and thirst for understanding.

The older man became excited with the lad's insatiable curiosity, keen observations, and youthful effervescence; it reminded him of his own early days afoot in the land. He invited the lad to his home, and a lifelong friendship grew from this chance meeting.

The older gentleman was John Muir, an instinctive Interpreter whose strongest weapons were his pen and his Sierra Club. The lad was Enos Mills, a budding, instinctive Interpreter who, with Muir as his mentor, would become a key force in establishing parks, the National Park Service, and the modern profession of interpretation.

At 19, Mills was eager and excitable, but lacked direction. Muir helped Mills discover ways to channel his abundant energy and talent. Muir recognized Mills as a potential crusader for wilderness, but three talents must first be polished. In order to be a great Interpreter, Muir encouraged Mills to observe, write, and speak out.

As an observer, the Interpreter must be keenly aware of nature or history. Interpreters must interpret for themselves before they can hope to lead others to interpretive experiences. Therefore, they must be careful observers, patient watchers, eager inquisitors, and strong thinkers who reflect on their observations. They must try to tie different observations together, discover common threads in nature, and organize their observations. They should take note of patterns, interrelationships, and interdependencies. They must observe and wonder.

As a writer, the Interpreter first writes notes about everyday observations and keeps a journal or diary. Carrying a pad and pencil everywhere becomes a

must, so they are ready to jot down any thoughts or observations for future use. Second, an Interpreter will begin writing for the public. They may begin with a few articles for newspapers or magazines and eventually work up to a book, then another. An author writes it once, but the message continues being heard over and over everytime anyone reads it, even long after the writer is gone. The pen is a powerful persuader.

When it came to being a public speaker, Muir believed that his personal life had exemplified his advice to observe and to write, but he was reluctant to take to the lecture circuit. He shunned crowds. Although he felt at ease on a one-to-one basis with Theodore Roosevelt or John Burroughs, and could speak eloquently in private, he avoided public speaking engagements. In this respect, he felt he had failed his cherished cause. He urged Mills to polish his public speaking talents and seek every opportunity to speak out on behalf of the trees and wilderness, which have no voice.

With his respected mentor helping point the way, Mills committed all his energies to a career, better yet, a crusade which would outshine that of his teacher.

Enos Mills became a totally committed Renaissance man and a visionary. His 15 books and hundreds of articles drew people closer to nature, shared his incredible experiences and insights, and pleaded for preserving wild places such as national parks. He is hailed as the father of the Rocky Mountain National Park and lobbied, spoke, and wrote, urging the creation of many other parks. He voiced his fears about the long-range effects of industrial pollution, stressed ecological principles in understanding the relation of people and nature, and warned of future bear problems in Yellowstone due to the garbage dump policies. Mills saw the signs of an increasing population, the soaring pressures on wilderness to commercialize resources for profit, and a continuing isolation of people into city environments far away from forests, mountains, fresh streams and wildlife. To understand their place on this planet, people will need Interpreters, so Mills began formulating a profession of interpretation.

Enos Mills conducted over 250 guided hikes to the summit of Long's Peak. He noticed that besides meeting his responsibility to get his visitors safely to their destination and back, he was also able to get them excited about nature along the way by providing information and stimulating insights about the geology, life zones, wildlife, and other features along the strenuous climb.

He began to reflect on this interpretive talent and the qualities that made it effective. The demands for his guide services were too great for one person to fill. As Muir had inspired him, so he, in turn, would inspire and instruct many others. With ideas borrowed from Muir, Liberty Hyde Bailey, and others, Mills began filling the need for a profession of interpretation. Hippocrates had standardized medicine and Freud laid the groundwork for psychoanalysis. Mills began teaching Interpreters, outlining goals and principles of conduct for the profession of interpretation, and setting its standards high above those of mere informationalists, educators, or trail guides.

Unlike Freeman Tilden nearly 50 years later, Enos Mills did not write one definitive book on the principles of the profession. He mixed them into many of his narrative tales in several books. Then in "Adventures of a Nature Guide" (1920), he devoted several chapters to the profession itself:

"A nature guide (Interpreter) is not a guide in the ordinary sense of the word, and is not a teacher. At all times, however, he has been rightfully associated with information and some form of education. But nature guiding, as we see it, is more inspirational than informational."

"The aim is to illuminate and reveal the alluring world outdoors."

The Interpreter "arouses interest by dealing in big principles - not with detached and colorless information. He creates more permanent interest in the biography of a single tree than in the naming of many trees."

The Interpreter "appreciates the eloquence of silence and is skilled in controlling, directing and diverting the conversations of members of his party. He is a master of the art of suggestion. He is a leader, rather than a teacher."

The Interpreter "is at his best when he discusses facts so that they appeal to the imagination and to reason, gives flesh and blood to cold facts, makes life stories of inanimate objects....gives biographies, rather than classifications."

Early in the 1900's, Mills instituted his "Trail School" at his lodge near the base of Long's Peak. Here he practiced interpretation and trained new Interpreters in the profession. In 1917, two of his best students, Esther and Elizabeth Burnell, became the first Government-licensed Interpreters in a national park. They worked for hotels, but were tested and authorized by the NPS to perform interpretive activities in Rocky Mountain National Park.

Enos Mills was nursing a new profession when he wrote: "A few people, for years, have practiced interpretation occasionally. It has made good, and it has a place in national life....it need not be confined to national parks. There might well be Interpreters in every locality of the land. City parks and the wild places near cities are available to thousands of people and are excellent places for the cultural and inspiring excursions with Interpreters. 'Ere long, interpreting will be an occupation of honor and distinction. May the tribe increase!"

With his strong ties to national parks, and his repeated lobbying to create a cabinet level Office of Parks and Recreation, Mills was a natural participant in the committee formed to draft the Organic Act of 1916, thus creating the National Park Service. One might think that Mills would have been the logical choice to lead the interpretation movement in the new National Park Service. The parks' idea had no stronger crusaders than Enos Mills and Director Stephen Mather. Nor did Stephen Mather have a more formidable enemy than Enos Mills. The issue: Concessions. Mills disapproved of Mather's concession policies, and was attacking the Director in the press and in the courts, alleging violations of anti-trust laws. Just when interpretation was being launched in

the parks, Mills found himself as a persona non grata in NPS circles. Mills' sudden death in 1922, at the height of the controversy, left a negative image of Mills in the minds of many park supporters who quickly forgot Mills' incredible contributions to the park movement and the profession of interpretation.

Mather had turned to fellow Californians Professor Loye Miller and Dr. Harold Bryant to begin educational activities in Yosemite in 1920. That same year, Horace Albright hired Milton Skinner as the first Naturalist at Yellowstone. Miller and Bryant were former academic educators and the trend toward hiring scholars and professors shifted much of the focus of interpretation for the next two generations. Muir and Mills seemed to generally take a backseat as many "interpretive" efforts stressed information, not inspiration, and listed classifications, rather than biographies. There were many individual interpreters, many styles, many exceptions, but much of the fire of Muir and Mills had been dimmed - until 1957.

With Freeman Tilden's monumental little book, Muir and Mills were slowly reincarnated as newly discovered heroes of the profession. It is unknown whether Tilden ever read, or even met, Enos Mills, but their personal visions of interpretation were almost identical.

According to both Tilden and Mills, the best interpretation comes from the heart and is laced with imagination, creativity, inspiration, revelation, and personal commitment.

Today, travelers along Colorado Highway 7, just south of the village of Estes Park, Colorado, will see a tiny log cabin dwarfed by massive ponderosa pines and quaking aspens. Enos Mills built this cabin in 1884 when he was 14 years old. This was his home, his retreat. Here, his books were written and some of the first professional interpreters were trained. The cabin is full of Mills' belongings, part of his library, his journals, furniture he crafted, his camera and clothing, letters from famous individuals, and so much more. Enos Mills' only daughter, Enda Mills Kiley, welcomes visitors to her father's cabin and shares his special perspectives, contributions, and dreams with willing listeners. Perhaps this is where the modern profession of interpretation emerged.