

SELECTING EXHIBIT THEMES FOR PARK AND FOREST MUSEUMS
A Background Paper

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At the Seattle meeting of the American Association of Museums in May 1963 the National and State Parks Section will discuss the selection of exhibit themes for park and forest museums. Every time we establish or update one of our museums, we have to choose exhibit subjects for it. The choice usually constitutes a problem because our guidelines lead in several directions and include diverting side roads. The problem 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 purposes. This 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 same guidelines will hardly serve all our agencies equally well. 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, refuges and recreation areas they administer. The purpose of the section meeting this year is therefore to explore ways of selecting our exhibit themes with increasing skill and wisdom. This preliminary paper attempts to lay a groundwork for the discussion.

We probably should narrow our immediate search to 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?

The present Administrative Manual states:

Park museums have two unique objectives in exhibition. First there is a necessary interrelationship between the exhibits and the park features. The exhibits not only interpret significant features of the park, they also encourage visitors to go out and see them. Park museum exhibits are designed to help people understand what they see in the park. Their second characteristic objective is to work as integrated parts of a larger interpretive program. The exhibits in the museum are coordinated with outdoor displays, markers, publications, audio-visual orientation programs, lectures, guided tours and other devices. Park museum exhibits can be considered successful only if they accomplish these two aims.

The previous edition of the Administrative Manual (1956) points in the same direction, but less precisely at the significant park features:

Museums in areas administered by the National Park Service have two functions. The first is to present in comprehensible and interesting form facts and ideas about the * * * natural history of an area * * *. Park museums are not independent or self-sufficient, but are units in a larger interpretive system into which they should be integrated. Their exhibits are primarily concerned with park features and with the natural * * * history of the area; they are expected to deal with natural phenomena * * * outside the park only if needed for perspective or reasonable completeness in telling the park story.

The National Park Service Field Manual for Museums (1940) provides similar guidance with additional elements:

The museums * * * make available in comprehensible and attractive form the facts that will give the public a greater understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of the natural * * * features of the park * * *. In each park the naturalist * * * has a number of methods through which he interprets his area to the public * * * and the museum is one of them. Its exhibits tell the parts of the park story that are best explained by viewing original objects and the graphic devices which accompany them * * *. The men who developed the park museum idea conceived of the subject matter for these museums as a story. In a park geology, biology, anthropology, and history are not widely separated fields of knowledge. They are so related and bound up in the features of the park that it is possible to integrate them in a coherent story which explains and illuminates the meaning of the park.

These official documents give National Park Service museums three main guidelines for choosing exhibit themes:

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 selectors 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. The 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 that " * * * 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 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 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 feature--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 go on with Bumpus? The discussion at Seattle can help at this point of decision. It can also explore the applicability of the first guideline to the museums of other agencies. (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.)

The second guideline established for National Park Service museums, that they should choose the themes exhibit methods can present most effectively, applies to all our agencies. We seldom use museums alone but combine them with personal services, audio-visual, 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 difficulty in using this 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 do not know enough to assign (with confidence) particular themes to the most appropriate media. 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 discussion at Seattle can pool helpful experience in this area of choice among several interpretive methods and can uncover leads to studies that would guide our judgment. It also can stimulate interest in obtaining more scientific data on the peculiar attributes of our various interpretive methods.

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 Seattle discussion can help by reappraising the importance of the narrative approach. 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, should the museum relinquish the main story-telling chore to the AV program and supplement it with more exhibitable themes?

The naturalist who chooses exhibit themes for a National Park Service museum can find several secondary guidelines in addition to the three discussed. In 1952 the impact of rapidly increasing public use led the Service to emphasize the part interpretation should play in promoting protection and conservation. Park museums now include occasional exhibits on forest fires, predator policies and similar subjects not strictly in keeping with the main guides. At a park naturalists' conference in 1940 other themes for museum exhibits were proposed--" * * * as keys to the park, their purpose should be to aid the visitor in a better understanding of what the area has to offer and how best to see it * * * should not our museum and exhibits stimulate the visitors' interest to such an extent that they would greatly prefer to accompany the naturalist guide afield?" At least one park museum was planned as an index to the park features and what-to-see-and-do exhibits have become a common device in visitor center lobbies. Exhibits actively promoting other interpretive activities are not rare. The vital importance of the national parks as the only remaining places to study natural environments relatively untouched by man is receiving increased attention. The need for intensive ecological research is being emphasized. These trends will surely bring demands for more ecological exhibits in park museums. Park naturalists have been reminded that exhibits should be related to something the visitor knows about so he can associate them with his everyday life. The naturalists also appreciate how many visitors want to know the names of the things they see in the park. These secondary pressures rise from valid park needs or visitor interests, yet they often call for choosing exhibit themes inconsistent with the emphasis on significant park features and the attempt to interpret the features in a well rounded story. Can the Seattle discussion consider the merits

of at least three possible ways of treating these divergent guidelines-- to resist the inclusion of additional secondary exhibit themes, to include them but separated from the main story, or to work them into the story sequence as logically as possible?

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 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. As a National Park Service museum worker we can only infer the guidelines used in this other kind of park museum from secondhand acquaintance. 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 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. The Seattle discussion here should consider how far the exhibit themes of the two general kinds of outdoor museums have been kept and should be kept distinctive, and obversely to what extent the museums might benefit by sharing their characteristic approaches. The panel has the opportunity to propose new guidelines for either or both groups of museums.