

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

"PERSONALIZED HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION"

One of the basic objectives of the National Park Service, as defined in the organic Act of 1916, was providing for the enjoyment of areas administered by the Service. In its broadest sense, this involves giving the visitor the background information, and interpreting that information so as to give him the fullest understanding, enjoyment, and appreciation of a given area. This objective has long been policy with the National Park Service, and I quote the following from Volume I of the National Park Service Administrative Manual:

Visitor understanding of scenic, scientific, and historic features is recognized as essential to full enjoyment and appreciation of areas of the System. Interpretive programs shall be developed and maintained to aid visitors to understand the significance of the area and to encourage them to view and enjoy its features. Appreciation of their preservation and the will to preserve the historic, scientific, and aesthetic resources of National Park Service areas are enhanced by popular use and understanding.

One of our former directors, Newton B. Drury, has outlined the challenge in this objective:

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 mile-high canyon gashed by a rushing river; the sight of strange new plants and animals living in the 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 (and Mr. Drury might have added a parallel reference to "the quiet dignity of the room where the Declaration of Independence was adopted") are at the heart of the experience that national park visitors travel many miles to seek. All else that they do or that we do in the national parks is incidental. If we can remember this, we can remain true to our high calling as trustees for the great things of America.

The challenge, of course, lies in the fact that "experience" is not always "supreme experience" until some aid to understanding is supplied. The "supreme experience" is not always immediately obvious. The statement of a former Secretary of Interior, Franklin K. Lane, is pertinent:

Like other quests for knowledge, an intelligent study of nature is greatly assisted by direction. Many persons who visit the parks are thoroughly responsive to their influences, but they lack the incentive born of knowledge to delve into a real understanding of things.

And here, of course, is the role of interpretation. And, certainly, if Mr. Lane's statement is true for the so-called "natural" areas, it is even more true for the historical areas. I suppose most everybody will get something out of a waterfall or a grand canyon - if not a really "supreme" something - but it is hard to get an empty field to come alive with the battle that took place thereon, and it's hard to get bricks and stone and mortar, such as those in Independence Hall, to give the average visitor - unless, of course, he is an architect, a real thrill. And not just the average person. I recall a comment in this connection from the great Irish writer, Sean O'Faolain:

I confess that I never respond to places like the Colosseum, or Pompeii, or the Roman Forum, or the ruins of Ostia or Agrigento, unless my imagination, or some learned and sensitive friend, can first people them for me as they were when they were alive.

It is significant, I think, that even such an imaginative person as Sean O'Faolain finds the need for a sensitive interpreter at times. But, for the many people who don't have the imagination that O'Faolain certainly has, you, of course, are the "learned and sensitive friend" who peoples the scene - makes it come alive - makes it the "supreme experience" that it should be.

Now how do we do this - how do we go about giving Everyman the great "supreme experience" when he visits Everyman's historical area? How do we make him respond to more than the surface scene? And, of course, in this hour, I'm trying to think in personal terms - and forgetting all the non-personal interpretive facilities that are possible. It's certainly more than giving the facts, and Sean O'Faolain's comment on seeing the world through the eyes of a social scientist is pertinent. Speaking of some conscientious young American students visiting Europe in these post-war years and seeing the scene through the fashionable guise of Social Conscience, seeing "nothing at all but statistics, underemployment, bad finance, political chaos, moral turpitude, underproduction and the devil knows what other social abstraction," Mr. O'Faolain remarks that "The only possible thing to say to these sad young people is that the best way to see any city at all is 'after midnight, with an attractive young woman' - and then, by Heaven, I swear they would sit in the Colosseum reading a Senate report by the light of the moon." I am sure that in many of our Civil War battlefields (and at Independence, too, in a parallel sense) a more or less interested visitor has not only lost the thrill of it all, let alone the broader meaning, but has actually been scared away by a multiplicity of facts and military terms, complicated maneuvers, strange names, strange designation of units, and a great number of numbers, casualty figures, etc.

A story at this point will perhaps illustrate my thinking - if only in reverse. This is the story of the man who was discovered by his neighbor to be sprinkling the flowers in his garden with perfume and when his neighbor asked why, replied: "Oh, this is to scare the elephants away." His neighbor said, "For goodness sake! Why? The nearest elephants are ten thousand miles away." To this, his gardening friend replied: "Yes, I know. Effective, isn't it?" Now, while we must admit the danger of scaring the elephants away (no politics intended) by over-perfuming the facts, over interpreting the facts - at the same time, I feel that historians in the National Park Service perhaps more often have scared the elephants away by "over-facting" the perfume. It's certainly much more than fact that we must offer. We've got to relate happenings, one to another; the events in one building to the events in another building; the events in one time-period to the events in another time-period. We've got to make these events come alive in terms of the personalities that shaped the events and, somehow, we must relate the events of 200 years ago to the world today, and to ideas and historical personalities well known to people today.

Now, I dug down in my files the other day, and came up with some very perceptive comments on the problem as it has been seen to exist at

another area. Interestingly enough, these comments are by a seasonal Ranger-Historian, and this points up the larger aspects of your job. You bring to your job the freshness of approach, you who are in other activities during the winter season, that we "permanent personnel" inevitably lack, and we certainly are in need of your perceptive comments - based on your experience with the visitors here from day to day, re the shortcomings of our interpretive program, and what we need to do to give the people the "supreme experience" they're coming here for.

Here are the comments of seasonal Ranger-Historian Frederick Manzara after his tour of duty at the Castillo de San Marcos, that great fortress, symbol of forgotten Spanish power, preserved and interpreted by the Park Service in Saint Augustine today:

The visitor should be made to identify himself with the early soldiers and settlers who built and occupied this fort. This would lead to a greater appreciation for the fort, and the work of the Spanish. Try to get the visitor to see things through the eyes of the early settlers. Such comments as, the English said, 'hitting these walls with a cannonball is like putting a knife into a piece of cheese.' Or, the Spanish governor said, 'The very name Florida strikes terror into the souls of the men.' (This is especially meaningful to a New Englander, brought up on a solid dose of English-based history; England was an "upstart" on these shores when Spain ruled Florida.)

Make the visitor identify those early experiences with his own. 'People regarded Florida in those days much the same as we might regard Siberia today!' The soldier's pay was always late; it came from Havana, Cuba, and one time it was eight years late! Every one has had the experience of waiting for a pay check.

In the courtyard, scatter a few Indians around, and a few Spanish soldiers (here "scatter a few Representatives" around!) Talk about the decoration. Imagine these walls if they were a brilliant white, but flat and featureless. It would be pretty dreary in here, wouldn't it? Then build in the window and door frames, the cornices, pilasters, pendants, etc. Good design. (They will see this as you make it meaningful!) Relieve the flat surfaces. It must have been hard to look at those white walls in the sunshine. They didn't have sunglasses in those days, the more shadow the better.

The people hearing mass from around the chapel door. Too crowded for them to get inside. Talk about the pottery, the pipes, the wine jugs and iron, oil, cloth, etc., from Spain. In short, the early part of the tour should get the visitor to build up to a unity between yesterday and today. Statistics are out of place in the early part of the tour.

Relate Florida to the rest of the world at that time . . . Here is the history lesson, the meat of the tour. After the people have been directed into feeling that they might have lived here in early days, we proceed to tell them why they would be in Florida in the first place and to what uses they would be put.

Relate the fort itself to its immediate environs. Point out the island, the swamps, the town, the outer defenses, etc. The specifications of the fort itself and the artillery. Here also we can do a bit of public relations work by pointing out the town and inviting people to go into St. Augustine and to get the rest of the story.

Inspire the people with an appreciation of how the country was built. Every stone placed in these walls by the Spanish slaves, the Indians, and the Spanish people was a building block in the structure of our nation. One of the few places where American settlers came into actual contact with the people from Spain. Now we can understand better the rich Spanish heritage manifest in our language, architecture, cookery, and many of our customs. Over half the people in the western hemisphere speak Spanish, not English.

Call attention to the work of the Park Service. We want to leave people with an appreciation of the work we are doing in preserving the scenic, scientific, and historic features of our country. One of the show windows of conservation.

Now how might we apply some of this interpretive philosophy to Independence, or some other area represented here. How do we see Independence through the eyes of the representatives here in 1776 and in 1787 and the years in between? How present the scene as they saw it? Of course, the restored Declaration Chamber helps considerably, and the buildings themselves, especially when fully restored. But let's think in terms of words. Sinclair did it pretty well, I think, with its ad featuring the restored Assembly Room. First the

catchy title "Visit the room where our liberty was born . . ." then the personalized text below the picture:

You stand in this room at Independence Hall and see it as it was on that hot July morning 180 years ago when the Declaration of Independence was adopted. In your mind's eye you can see Ben Franklin ... John Adams down from Massachusetts ... and Tom Jefferson up from Virginia. This is where the States of America were born, and eleven years later became United. Here you can see the silver inkstand used in the Signing and the chair Washington sat in at the Constitutional Convention. In the nearby hallway you can put your hand on the Liberty Bell, the cracked symbol of a nation that didn't crack.

The last perhaps is a little "corny" - at least they left out Davey Crocket! (Though even this might be appreciated if you are addressing an audience of small children!)

Along this line: a couple more thoughts on interpreting the building itself. When we say "begun in 1732" - the date by itself is meaningless - why not identify this as the year George Washington was born 'way down in Virginia, and it was "way down in Virginia" in those days - or, identify this as just 50 years after William Penn sat foot on these shores.

Now, as the Castillo guide interpreted Florida and its meaning in the historical period, so let's not neglect the City of Philadelphia. Now that Philadelphia has become a train stop en route from New York to Washington and easily by-passed by turnpikes, I think it is good to remind people that to the representatives - or should we say the rebels and revolutionaries (that in itself is meaningful interpretation) - coming here in 1776, it was the largest city in the colonies and the principal city in the British Empire.

Again, what about identifying historical experiences with the visitors' own, or with events and historical figures well known to him? The First and Second United States Banks, for instance. I suggested last year that we might interpret these as the forerunners of our Federal Reserve System, presuming that the Federal Reserve System is sufficiently well known to most people. Present these as a first attempt at a central Government bank - the place where the Government deposited its funds, the place where it got money in a hurry. And, I think it's interesting in this day and age when banks are almost as numerous as filling stations, that there were only four other banks in the thirteen states in the year when the First Bank was chartered. I

wish we could glibly say "this is the place where your tax dollars would have come" but we can't - in terms of the majority of the people. There was no income tax. But even this might be a meaningful reminder. The whole money situation in the 1790's was something vastly different from today. There was a lot of English money around, for example - and much bartering of goods.

Library Hall - because of its special lending privileges to the members of Congress, I think this might be presented "popularly" as a forerunner to the Library of Congress, an institution fairly well-known to people today.

The Merchants' Exchange: present this as one of the early stock exchanges, and bring up a parallel again.

Congress Hall: compare the relative size of Congress then and now. Paint a picture, naming names of some of the more prominent members sitting on the rows and rows of seats. - Muhlenberg presiding as Speaker of the House - Tom Jefferson presiding as President of the Senate, one of his roles perhaps unknown to most people today.

And getting away from Independence - Hopewell Village: present the Blacksmith Shop as the Village Hardware Store - and, at Harpers Ferry, make the "Point" section of the town come alive by describing the hotels and other important structures centered here. Even throw in the John Brown man who was kept captive in the Wager House during the raid.

I am sure you, all of you, can add to the examples, and I certainly hope that you will think about this all of the time. We must constantly think of new ways to make facts come alive in terms of personalities that made the events, relating facts to people's lives today and to things that they know well, and we must always watch for the telling phrase, the quick summation, something to impress it on their minds - like a fire engine impresses itself on a busy city street - and, if possible, something to make them use their imagination - something even to make them think, and even read further on the subject.

Let's dwell a little on this matter of the telling phrase, a most important matter to the oral interpreter. I recall immediately some stimulating labels I saw at Gimbels a couple of years back when they opened a new suburban store, featuring a display of objects commemorating the local history roundabout. Over the usual collection of antiquarian household objects and implements, the eye-stopping - "Grandma's Handy Hardware Horrors." Instead of merely "Meatgrinder,

c. 1770" the following: "Meatgrinder, 1770. You put the meat in here - the knives go round and round - and the hamburger comes out here." Personalized, and - related to something the visitor knows - in this case, a popular song of some years back. Again, I think of those notable Sinclair Oil ads. Here's one on Mesa Verde - showing the cliff dwellings - "America's first apartment houses - today they belong to you." And I am sure the notable interpretive phrase "cheesebox on a raft" has fixed on all your minds from your schoolboy days a picture of John Ericson's Monitor. And getting back to "natural" examples: last week's New Yorker, in a stimulating article on an animal sightseeing safari in Africa, a reference to timid giraffes looking "over the tops of trees, keeping just their heads in sight, like schoolgirls peeping out of a dormitory window." And a reference to "Mongoosees, running wildly into their holes into which they vanished abruptly, posting themselves like letters in a mailbox." And a reference to foxes: "Just their heads, with pinched faces and bright eyes, appeared out of their holes when we approached, and their enormous rounded ears turned slowly as they followed our progress, like a revolving radar antenna at an airport." Not necessarily, here, more meaningful - but at least they make the experience more memorable. Another one, on the train coming in this morning, an ad for CARE - a very tangible idea driven home with a personalized example: "You help harvest Freedom when you send tools through CARE." It's the sort of thing that Time and Life magazines do well all the time (despite the fact that the solid base of fact is sometimes lacking!) You'll recall, I'm sure, Life's fine series last year and year before on various phases of American life, in various time-periods. This afternoon, in the Gettysburg film, you'll see some more of the same thing. The juicy point of view - Northern troops in the battle came up from the South; Southern, from the North. Not necessarily important - but something to impress on the mind, perhaps arouse curiosity. The meaningful statistic: not just the figures, but what they mean in terms of the whole. Names of outfits - not numbers - the First Brooklyn - the only unit named for a city.

If you think interpretation all the time - and you should, in this business - it can get quite exciting. There are examples all around you. Last Friday's New York Times, for example, featured some excellent interpretation in an ad for TWA. While the intent, of course, was to sell TWA and its new Jet Stream plane, the comparison in picture and text to the Mayflower was the sort of thing that a good interpreter of the Mayflower itself might use; not just the dimension "92 feet" for the Mayflower, but the comparative statement "a little more than half the wing-span of the Jet Stream;" not just the statement "66 days (for the Mayflower) to cross the Atlantic" but the comparison "the TWA Jet Stream does it in less than half a day."

And yesterday morning, on the CBS radio program Invitation to Learning, a discussion of an early 19th Century wit, Sydney Smith, recalling Smith's allusion to the arrival at a fashionable dinner party of a social bore - again interpretation - "The cool of the evening is arriving!"

Let's remember-- we are more than historians (and we're certainly more than just guides). We're poets part of the time (and I think of the interpretation and inspiration in Stephen Vincent Benet's John Brown's Body or Western Star). We are advertisers, selling history. We are dramatists. Above all, we are teachers. This is a teaching job you're in - one of the most important - one of the toughest. Tough, in terms of the varied audience that you have - all ages, all degrees of interest; you certainly have no captive audience as you do in a schoolroom. Tough, in terms of trying to be professional and soundly based on fact (we certainly must never forget that interpretation must not be mere guess or propaganda); yet, non-professional in delivery - like Walt Disney at his best. Toughest, of course, in terms of the dry-rot of routine that inevitably sets in as the days get hotter and the crowds get bigger, and the visitor "ideal" becomes a visitor "actuality" who's sure he's seen it all when he's seen the Liberty Bell, and everything else back home in Kalamazoo is much more interesting and, besides, he's hot and thirsty and he'd really rather look at the girls in shorts.

Now how do we master this last problem: the deadly routine - this is the real challenge in personalized historical interpretation. The largest part of the problem is, of course, you. And, aside from the periodic checkups that you will get from the permanent staff here - and from the Region - the best tool is constant and conscientious self-appraisal. And the first step is to remind yourself constantly that you're here, to begin with, because you believe in this work - you believe in history and its importance to Everyman - you have accepted the challenge of making it come alive to him. Along with this, keep the Appraisal Chart in the Administrative Manual constantly in mind - let's look at some of the questions therein ---

Self-appraisal is part of the solution. The other major tool is thinking in terms of the audience. Think of them, first of all, as stimuli - let's not look down our noses because they're not all historians - maybe historians don't have all the insights and answers, anyway. I used to find it stimulating to engage a visitor in conversation - point out something that he may have missed - find out what he's interested in, and find something along that line in the area. But, more than that, let's remember the "supreme experience" that they're coming here for. And remember that many of them are

coming here for the first time in their lives after years of thinking about and hearing about the Liberty Bell in Independence Hall. Many of them have traveled hundreds and thousands of miles to come here. Many of them will never come here again. We must not let them down ---

Gentlemen, we are a dedicated service, dedicated to the task of cherishing our historical heritage and making it come alive to the people who are its heirs. The National Park Service has a proud tradition of serving the people and the Man in the Uniform represents the Service ideal of meeting the people in person and personally helping that people to realize its heritage. We are in the business of enriching people's lives. Some of us feel that in the process, we enrich our own.

Talk given several years ago by
Mr. Frank Barnes, then Regional
Historian, Northeast Region