

THE MANAGER, INTERPRETATION'S BEST FRIEND
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Interpretation has been with us for a long time. You might say that our troubles started because we didn't have effective interpretation in the first park - Eden International Wildlife Sanctuary.

Top Management had told Adam and Eve not to eat any fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, but they did not understand why.

The Serpent induced Eve to harvest some of the Park attractions without due regard for protection of Park resources.

Eve realized that she had broken all the regs in Title I, and did not want to take the rap alone.

With the sudden education of Adam, the basic principles of the Great Park Dilemma were evolved.

Adam and Eve had started the battle between preservation versus non-conforming entertainment.

Communications with Top Management were swift those days, and decisions even swifter.

HE threw them out and closed the park.

In the years following that original experiment, management and interpretation have tried to work out better communications. We are still working on it, with very substantial recognition at the top levels of how important interpretation really is.

I have seen a considerable change during my career so far. When I started with the National Park Service in 1941, attitudes toward interpretation varied widely.

In some parks interpreters were regarded as impractical butterfly chasers and flower lovers. They were useful to have around to talk with nice old ladies, but not much good on a going fire.

I must admit there was justification for this attitude in some cases. We had, and may still have a few of the kind that Assistant Director Bill Everhart calls "heavy breathers."

However, scattered throughout the nation, in State, Federal and other parks were able, dedicated men and women who believed in that distillation of service, teaching, and enlightenment which we call interpretation, and carried it out.

Through their work, through the favorable responses of the visitors, and with growing support by Service management, we came to the current awareness that interpretation is a principal part of our business.

I don't want to give you the impression that we think interpretation is limited to the National Park Service, or that any of us believes we have arrived at perfection.

In the first place, no organization man would dare say that, or the company would throw him out. We realize that we have a long way to go and will never really get there, because everything continues to change.

Perhaps Fort Laramie can serve as an illustration. In the thirty years of its Park Service history, the idea of giving service and interpretation to visitors has been consistently present and active.

However, there were many other compelling jobs which had to be done for development and survival.

There were and are conflicting demands on our resources of time, money, and manpower. There is not enough to go around, and probably there never will be. The manager and the entire team have to work continuously at reconciling their resources with the demands. They must do this within a framework of varying and sometimes downright conflicting needs and ground rules.

That is an old story to all of you. What might be different about it here? If there is any difference, it might be that the succession of managers here remained aware that interpretation was the focal point of our concern with the old Fort.

No one deserves any great credit for this. The Fort's place in history makes it obvious.

However, it would be easy at any time to believe that we are in the business of running a park, when we are really in the tourist business.

And it is not easy to carry out the park business without at least occasional inconvenience or imperfect service to visitors.

Let's get out of generalities into some examples. Part of the park business is to restore or stabilize historic buildings. Here is something happening, and the visitors are intensely interested.

The first thing we have to do is put a fence around the work site, or men, women, kids and dogs will swarm all through it, risking injury and getting in the way.

Then we want to keep tools, equipment, piles of sand, and yellow dump trucks back of the building, so we won't louse up the scene for photographers.

We need to train the construction crew to take smoke breaks out of sight, don't be seen leaning on a shovel, and don't swarm to the fence en masse to whistle at pretty girls in shorts. We have to be sure that the Foreman and every man on the crew knows that he as well as the man in uniform represents the government.

Where does the interpreter come in? He is the salesman for the operation. He has to explain what is going on, field any complaints, listen to remarks about government workers, and understand what restoration is all about.

The real business of historic restoration may well be plans, drawings, hiring crews, working with architects and historians, getting special supplies and materials, but we had not better forget the tourist business.

After the historic building is restored to look as it did a certain few years a long time ago, something more is needed to bring it to life. That something more is refurnishing it with the proper historic articles, to help re-create the scene.

I will refrain from the two-hour discourse it would require to cover the high spots of a refurnishing project, and merely mention that the actual installation process goes on in full view of the visitors.

This can get one into all sorts of things. Such as:

Why do we use real whiskey in the bottles? - - It is the only thing that keeps on looking like whiskey for more than a few days.

Why did we cut up the flag like that? - - It is a guidon, swallow-tailed to fly freely when carried on horseback.

Why the furnishings specialist and her young man assistant were lying on a bed in the bachelor officer quarters? - - The bed was supposed to look rumpled, and they were tired.

The first interpreter whom the visitor sees after all this, will have some questions to answer.

The Maintenance operation is very much in the tourist business. Many visitors would rather talk to a maintenanceman than a ranger. They figure that maintenance will give them the straight goods, but the rangers will hand out the party line.

So Maintenance needs to know how to respond courteously but not get diverted from the job too long. They have to avoid zapping visitors with rocks thrown by rotary mowers, drive all vehicles with extreme caution, get a lot of work done, and look reasonably neat and presentable while they are doing it.

One of their problems here comes with the irrigation season, when we have to irrigate the parade ground without soaking too many visitors. We don't always succeed.

One visitor last summer was keeping his eye on the mighty water gun which sweeps a 300 foot circle, and a little revolving sprinkler sneaked up and got him from behind. It did not take him long to make the connection from maintenance to interpretation to the superintendent.

How does that concern Interpretation? In this case the real complaint was perceptive and well founded. We do not yet have a good enough way to orient incoming visitors, and we should have one. The sprinkler was merely the last straw.

Before we bring on the tigers, let's take a business view of what they do here, via some definitions.

Our Product is a specialized, informed service, which requires skilled presentation and delivery. The objective - to give the visitor a better understanding of western expansion history while making his visit worthwhile and enjoyable.

Interpretation: Knowing and delivering the product.

Interpreters: Interpreters are the sales force, customer representatives, the men on the spot, whatever you call them, they sell and deliver the product.

Supervisory Historian: The coach, faculty, first vice president, division sales manager, is responsible for training, supervision, inspiration and operation of the sales force, plus product research and quality control, and a lot of related management work.

Museum Curator: The Curator here keeps track of and takes care of the thousands of historic items in the houses and in the collections, helps restrain eager novitiates from rearranging the furnishings, is a qualified historian, and plays a basic part in keeping the show on the road.

Administration: The women in the office, the business managers who know where all the bodies are hidden. The whole show would fold up in a week, without them.

Manager: The superintendent, the guy in the middle.

Now, how can the manager be Interpretation's best friend? The way we try here is first to realize the importance of that activity, then to enlist the application of all the park resources toward a mutual goal.

I believe that goal is to maintain, protect, and administer a smoothly running scene, with the welfare of all activities in mind; but with the benefit of the visitor as the objective.

This is a lot easier to say than it is to carry out. We have not had a perfect year yet. But we have had a number of good years. May I present the interpreters who help make them good--Supervisory Historian Thomas E. White.