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HISTORY NEWS TECHNICAL LEAFLET

A PUBLICATION OF THE
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Using Oral History in Museums

BY BARBARA ALLEN BOGART

History museums in the 1990s have a variety of important objectives and constituencies. They must make their programs responsive, relevant, and responsible to their communities in the present while fulfilling their traditional mission of collecting, preserving, and interpreting the past. Oral history can help museums achieve all these goals.

At first glance, incorporating oral history into their programs may seem daunting for history museums, especially for those with limited staff and scarce resources. But museums of all sizes and kinds have been using oral history in their programs for years. This *Technical Leaflet* offers some suggestions on how oral history can be successfully and effectively used in history museum settings and provides a few examples that illustrate how oral history can be a powerful tool in achieving the history museum's mission.

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history is the systematic collection and recording of personal memories as historical documentation. In a sense, an oral historian collects memories in the same way a museum collects artifacts.

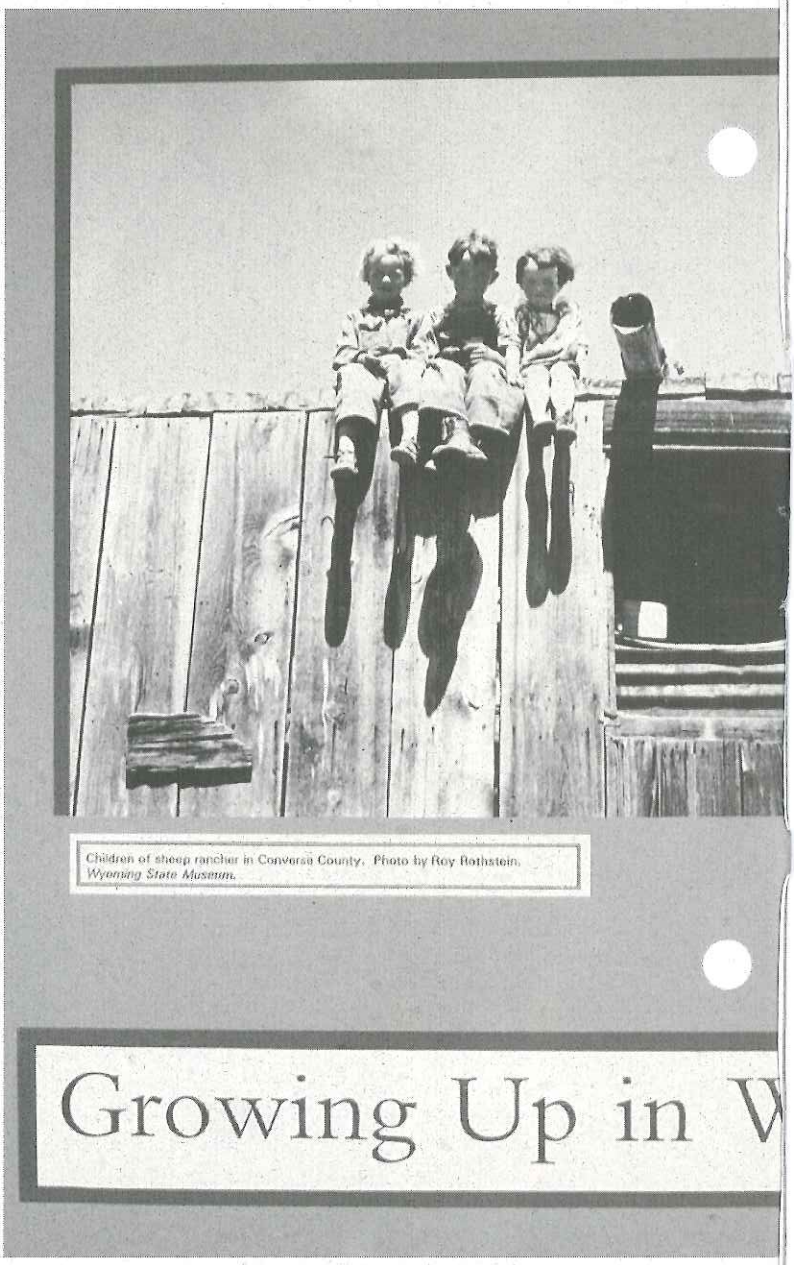
The practice of oral history is very old, but in the United States it has been widely used among both academic historians and the general public since the 1970s. The major impetus for its popularity over the past twenty five years has been the renewed interest in local and community history that emerged around the time of the American Bicentennial.

In academic circles, historians have begun to pay more attention to the lives of people who traditionally have been absent from standard historical works, including ethnic and racial minorities, workers, women, and children. For these subjects, oral history provides valuable information that is not often available in more traditional sources.

Likewise, in history museums, the trend toward a more democratic social history has been emerging. For many museum professionals, oral history has become a natural tool for broadening their programs to include a wider spectrum of their communities. It bridges the gap between the past and the present by using personal memories to interpret artifacts or experiences.

Today, oral history is used in a wide range of institutions all over the country, from state historical societies to house museums and museums with very specialized missions. Each uses oral history in different ways to suit their missions, communities, and resources. Some use oral history only for special projects, while others have built it into virtually all their programs. Regardless of how oral history is used, the fact that so many institutions take advantage of it suggests that oral history is adaptable to and extremely useful in a broad range of museums. Perhaps the greatest advantage of oral history in a museum setting is that it can easily be built into what you already do.

What follows are descriptions of how oral history can be used in a history museum, including examples from a variety of institutions around the United States. Also presented is a brief overview of the process of undertaking an oral history project, and a section on common questions and concerns you may have about implementing oral history in your own institution.



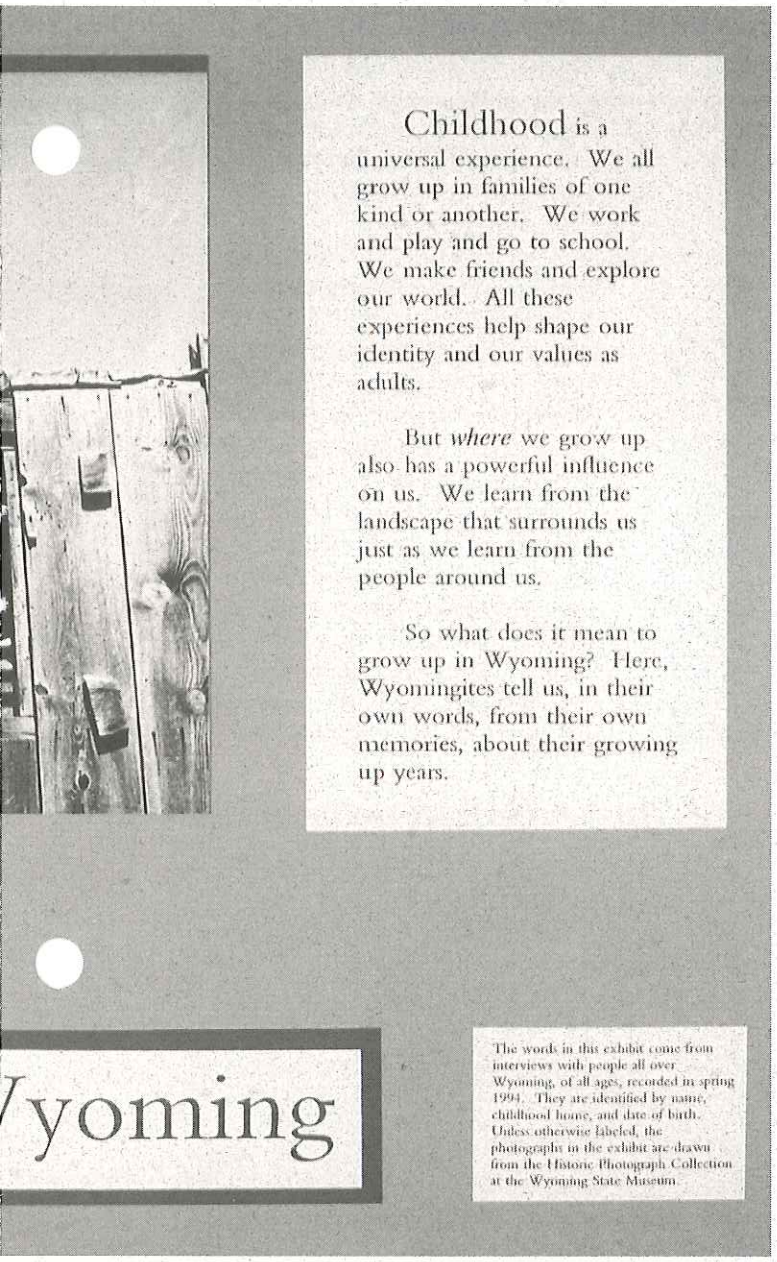
Oral histories enhance the interpretive value of photographs. Photo courtesy of the author.

USING ORAL HISTORY TO DOCUMENT COLLECTIONS

In a cupboard next to my kitchen is my grandmother's four-piece silver coffee service, which has a story associated with it. If I donated the coffee service to a museum, I would want the story to be made part of the accessions record because the story is what's important about the service for me and my family.

Oral history can become part of the acquisitions process by interviewing donors about the items they are turning over to the museum. In fact, much informal interviewing does go on when curators and donors are working together, but it can be beneficial to make it a more formal process. During the interview, a donor can provide valuable information about the donated items, not just about their provenance, but about their meaning as well. Sometimes such information is essential to understand the items. Photographs, for instance, need to have as much identification as possible to be properly cataloged and effectively used in interpretation.

For instance, in 1993, the Wyoming State Museum was given five reels of 16mm color film, which the donor had shot during several rafting trips down the Green and Colorado rivers in the late 1950s, before several dams were built. We asked the donor to nar-



rate a travelogue on audio cassette tape while we showed the films. He explained how and why the trips were taken; identified the locations, many of which are now underwater; described the people involved; and told stories about adventures along the way. Without the audio component, a silent film is simply a cryptic visual record of unidentified terrain and unknown people.

Using recording equipment to capture these memories has several advantages. Not only is it easier for donors to tape record what they know than to write it all out by hand, but you will probably ask for, and receive, more information than the donor would ordinarily write about on the acquisition form. When the tape-recorded information becomes part of accessions record, it can save valuable research time down the line if the artifacts or materials are used in interpretive exhibits or other museum programs.

Another benefit of involving donors with oral history is that it helps promote positive donor relations. Most people are flattered to be interviewed and are happy to provide you with information about the artifacts they are giving you. The process of capturing their memories on tape also enhances donor's perceptions that you appreciate their donation.

REACHING OUT TO VISITORS

Museum visitors often have strong personal associations with the events, experiences, and artifacts on exhibit. Frequently they, like donors, can provide information about how particular items were made or used, can identify people and places in historical photographs, and can tell anecdotes or relate personal memories about episodes, individuals, or locales related to the subjects depicted in exhibits.

There are several ways to take advantage of this natural response. For instance, some museums place response sheets at strategic locations in an exhibit, asking people if they have information or memories about the exhibit's topic and if they would be willing to be interviewed. Museum staff members then contact individuals who complete the response sheets and arrange for the interviews.

The curator for an exhibit at the University of Nevada who dealt with changes in the urban landscape of Reno over the past twenty five years built such response mechanisms into the exhibit design itself. At the end of the exhibit, visitors were invited into a curtained-off space where there was a tape recorder and directions on how to record their own memories of particular buildings or locales before development changed them. The curator, who was gathering such memories as part of a larger research project, was overwhelmed at the response. "Everyone had a story tell," he said. "Even if it wasn't about Reno, people seemed eager to talk about the places in their lives that had changed."

Using oral history to allow visitors to make a personal contribution to an exhibit is an effective means of getting the community involved and invested in the work of the institution. This is the premise underlying an oral history project at the Texas Maritime Museum in Rockport, Texas. In a self-guided oral history program, visitors to the museum are given an opportunity to record their own maritime experiences or family traditions about the subject. In the museum's library, visitors are encouraged to record as much information as they wish, and they are able to take home a copy of the tape when they have finished. Museum volunteers prepare subject guides to the original tapes which become part of the museum's library. This visitor participation approach allows the museum to gather information fairly effortlessly, and according to its director, helps create a sense of community for the museum.

USING ORAL HISTORY IN INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITS

Probably the most extensive use of oral history in most history museums is to support interpretive programs, especially exhibits. During exhibit development, for example, oral history can be used as a research resource. Many state historical societies, universities, and public libraries, have extensive oral history collections that can be mined for information about a potential exhibit topic.

Because oral history allows people to express what's important to them, it also can be used effectively in developing exhibit themes. Exhibit themes that are drawn from oral history can be an especially powerful way to reach visitors because they may have a deeper connection that enables them to identify with the experiences presented in the exhibit. For instance, when the Belmar Village Historical Museum in Lakewood, Colorado received an important donation of Vietnam War artifacts and photographs, it planned an exhibit around them. As exhibit plans developed, the staff decided to conduct oral history interviews with local Vietnam veterans. Ultimately, the labels for all the photographs in the exhibit were drawn from oral histories.

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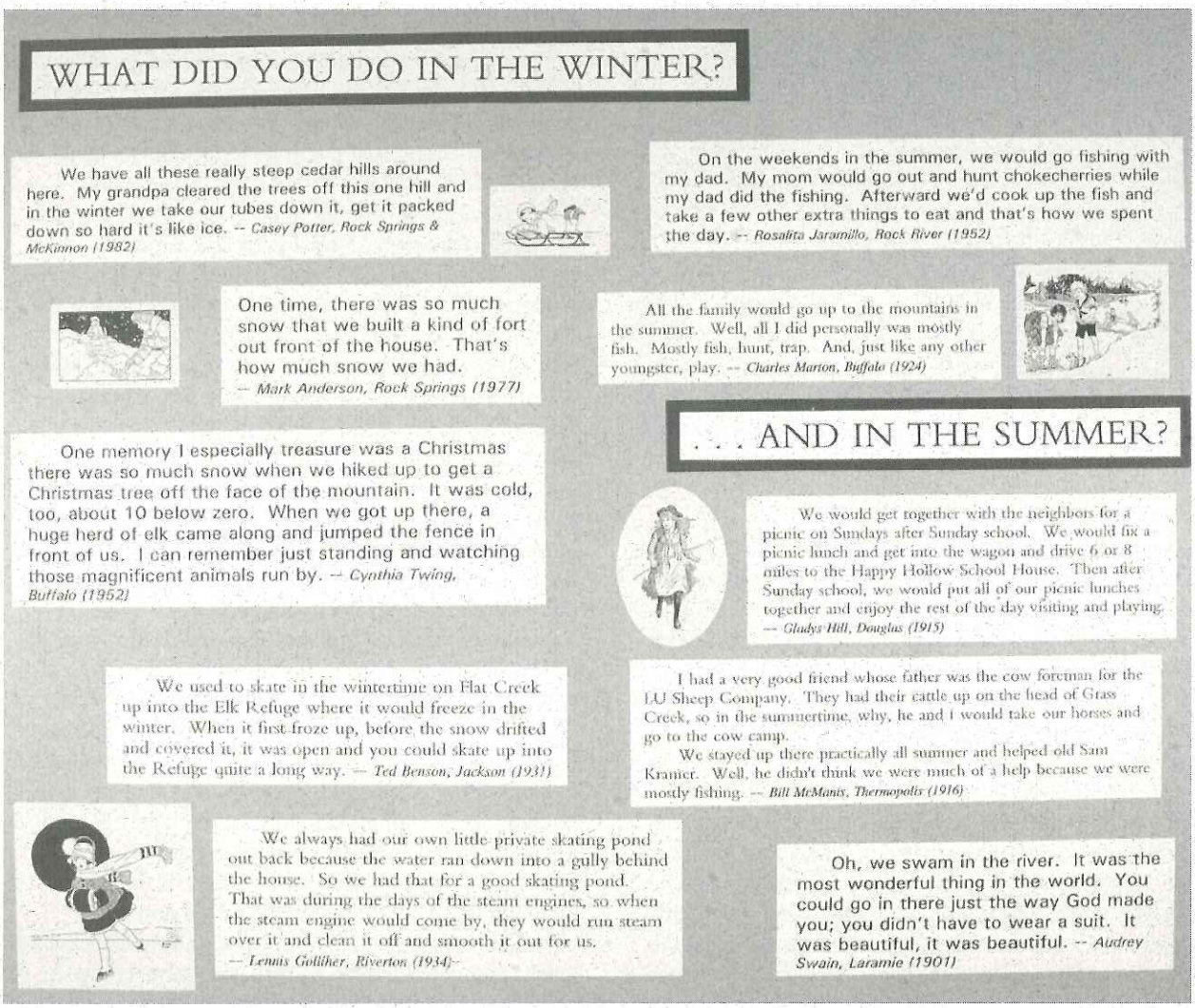
A museum can also conduct an oral history project to gather information around which an exhibit can be designed. For instance, the Fossil Country Museum in Kemmerer, Wyoming, conducted a series of interviews on coal mining from which it developed an exhibit incorporating its extensive collection of artifacts and photographs. At the University of Wyoming's American Studies program, the themes that emerged in a series of oral history interviews with European immigrants and their children in southwestern Wyoming were used as the basis for a traveling



Transcribed excerpts of oral history interviews can serve as visual elements for museum exhibitions.
Photo from "Growing Up In Wyoming," courtesy of the author.

exhibit called "Ellis Island in Wyoming."

The Southern Oregon Historical Society made particularly innovative use of oral history in its project "The Land in Common," which involved a series of traveling exhibits dealing with and circulated to three communities in Jackson County. Each exhibit was based on interviews with a cross-section of residents, focusing on their perceptions of community identity and character and their assessments of historical change.

When used in developing interpretive exhibits, oral history not only provides first-hand information about the subject that may not be available in standard historical sources, it also infuses an exhibit with an immediate human presence, particularly when excerpts from oral histories are used as label text. This can be particularly beneficial when the topic of the exhibit is a broad one. In the Wyoming State Museum's series of exhibits on World War II, for instance, the interpretive labels included quotes from oral history interviews with Wyomingites to personalize and humanize such subjects as military service and commodity rationing.

Finally, when a museum undertakes a large, complex project, oral history can be used to serve a variety of purposes. For instance, in 1991, the Western Heritage Center in Billings, Montana launched an ambitious, three-year, multicomponent project called "Our Place in the West." At the heart of the project was a permanent exhibit on the Yellowstone River Valley with a focus on social history during the period from 1880 to 1940. Oral history was built into exhibit plans from the beginning. Audiotaped oral history interviews were conducted first, then videotapes were made of selected narrators. A thirty-minute video production focusing on ranching became part of the permanent exhibit. Excerpts from the oral history interviews were also used in the exhibit catalog, and other publications developed as part of the overall project.

Rather than begin with a specific idea for an exhibit or a program to which oral history might contribute, these institutions assume that oral history can and should be an essential element in any museum program.

ORAL HISTORY AS PART OF A MUSEUM'S OVERALL PROGRAM

Some museums have made oral history an integral part of their overall program and use it to support many of their activities. Rather than begin with a specific idea for an exhibit or a program to which oral history might contribute, these institutions assume that oral history can and should be an essential element in any museum program.

The Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka also believes oral history is essential to its programs. For instance, during a project to document quilt-making in Kansas, museum staff members interviewed contemporary quilt makers, then used extensive excerpts from the interviews in the project publication as well as for interpretive labels for a traveling exhibit.

According to the Kansas History Museum's education director, "Our commitment to oral history is a natural progression from the fact that our mission is to show people how history relates to their lives. If we are to do this effectively we must take our research up to the present and, of course, oral history is an excellent tool for that."

USING ORAL HISTORY FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES

Some museums have effectively used oral history to achieve particular ends. For instance, the oral history program at the First Division Museum in Wheaton, Illinois, was initiated to record reminiscences for research purposes. But, according to the museum's director of operations, "As the design of the galleries came to emphasize interactivity and the experiences of individual soldiers, it was decided to have a series of interviews professionally filmed." These interviews were later edited and incorporated into the audio-visual components of the galleries. Now there are touch screens that allow visitors to choose a question that is in turn "answered" by veterans in clips from interviews. The success of the videos in the galleries prompted a decision to videotape all future oral history interviews. To accomplish this, the museum has purchased a high quality video camera and is gradually acquiring other video production equipment to produce videotapes in-house.

As the First Division's experience suggests, museums can also use oral history for internal restructuring as well as public programs. For instance, as part of a general reorganization, the Kemerer Decorative Arts Museum in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, undertook a series of oral history interviews about Annie Grim Kemerer, who had endowed the museum and whose personal collection formed its core. The information gathered in those interviews enabled the museum to established one gallery as a "Founder's Room." Furthermore, the museum revised its interpretive and docent program to present a more accurate picture of Annie Grim Kemerer as a collector.

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY RELATIONS THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

Museums can use oral history to build strong relationships with both individual constituents and other agencies and organizations in their communities. One way to do so is through cooperative projects with other institutions or entities, pooling resources and staff/volunteer time to accomplish the work. For instance, the Wyoming State Historical Society (a private membership organization) teamed up with the Wyoming State Museum for an oral history project called "Growing Up In Wyoming." Volunteers from local historical society chapters attended a teleconferenced oral history workshop conducted by a museum staff member and completed more than 100 interviews with people of all ages from around the state. Museum staff transcribed the tapes and produced a traveling exhibit based on interviews and historical photographs from the museum's collection. The exhibit circulates statewide to libraries, museums, and schools; these institutions are encouraged to mount corollary exhibits of their own.

Oral history can help involve the community in the initial stages of a museum's development. For instance, in conjunction with the county library, the organizing committee for the Pikes Peak Museum in Colorado has plans to conduct a series of oral history interviews with local residents of to develop collecting themes for the museum as well as to foster community support for the museum's establishment.

Oral history can extend museum programs and services to groups of people that traditionally have been excluded from them. For example, the Carbon County Historical Society in Wyoming is gathering materials relating to the county's sheep raising heritage. Their plans include an oral history project with Hispanic families whose association with the sheep industry—primarily as sheepherders—has been overlooked in the past. Staff members at the Kansas History Museum agree that oral history is a way to show a commitment to the non-white communities in the state. For some communities which maintain history as part of the oral tradition, a large part of their history would be missing without oral history projects.

For groups whose material culture has not been represented by museums' collections, using oral history to record their cultural traditions helps broaden an overall understanding of a community's past. In the city museum in Eureka, Nevada, for instance, oral history excerpts from interviews with southern and eastern European immigrants who worked in the area's coal mines help enrich an exhibit on the mining industry.

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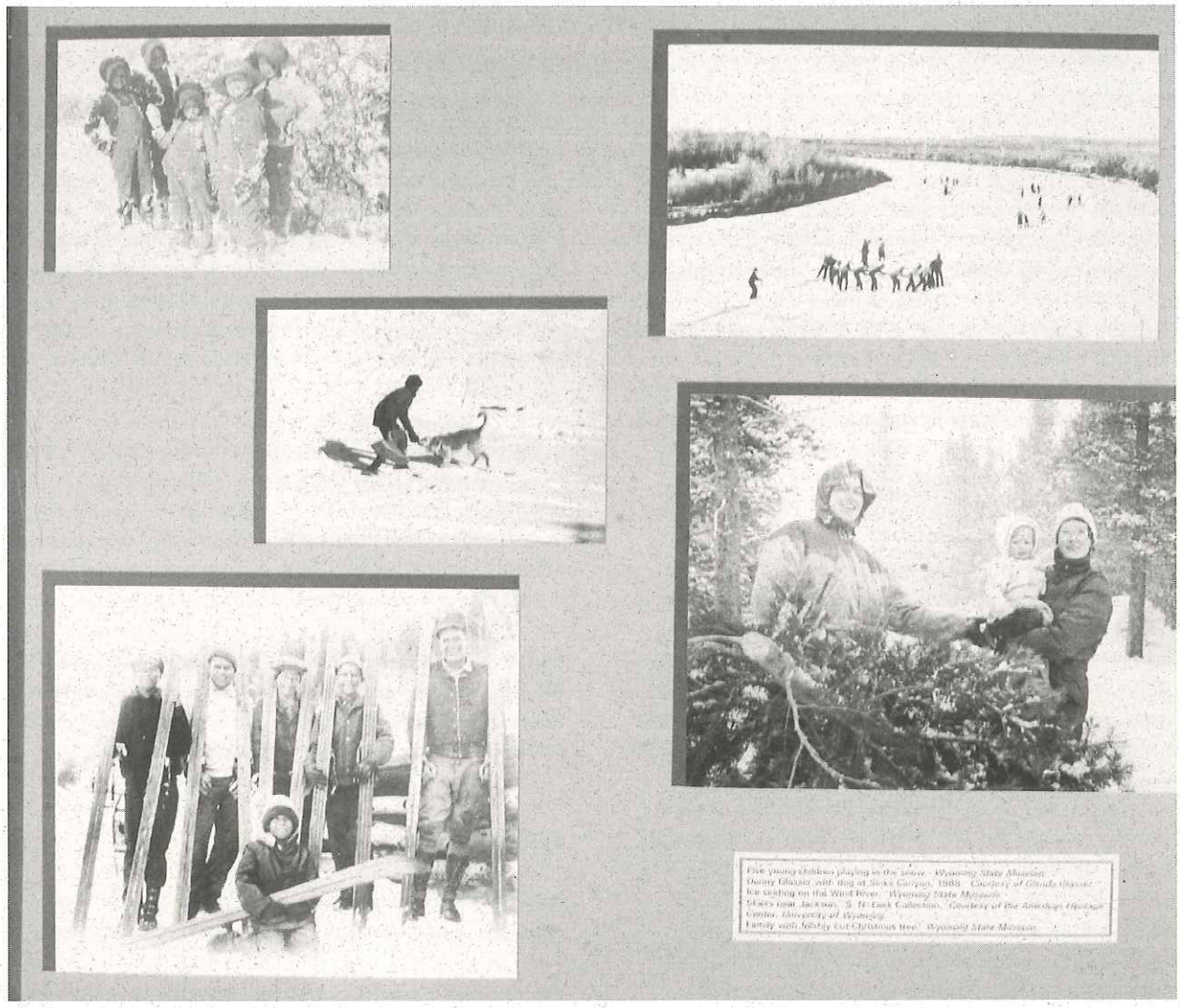
Perhaps oral history's greatest benefit is that individuals and families whose memories become part of the museum's collection may become first-time visitors to and boosters for the institution. Just as museum artifact donors feel that they have a vested interest in the institution, so do individuals who have given a part of themselves through an oral history project.

ON DOING ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is most effectively and efficiently used in a museum setting when it is part of a specific project or regular museum program. For the best results, you should first decide how an oral history project can be coordinated with the programs already in place, how it can contribute to programs you are planning, and how it fits in with the institution's overall mission and philosophy. Also keep in mind that a good deal of oral history material may already exist in your community. Before undertaking your own project, make sure you aren't reinventing the wheel; survey the collections in public libraries, state historical agencies, and university libraries and research centers.

The single greatest drawback to oral history is that it is labor intensive. It involves not only the time needed to contact narrators and conduct interviews, but also time to process the interviews properly. Ideally, tapes should be fully transcribed; at the minimum, they should be indexed. This takes a considerable amount of time—estimates for processing time range from six to twelve hours for each hour of recording. Professional oral history standards call for tapes to be duplicated and the master tapes to be housed archivally. On the other hand, oral history does not need to be terribly expensive to be done well. And while it does require investment in a good quality recorder, microphones, and recording tape, much of the actual work can be done by trained volunteers.

A committee should oversee the design of the project to ensure that it not only meets the museum's specific purpose but is also broad enough to use as a future research resource. The committee should create an interview guide or questionnaire for all interviewers to follow. Interviewers should attend a training workshop; information about such workshops is available from the Oral History Association (address given below). If the museum does not have storage facilities for the tapes, transcripts, and other materials



The Wyoming State Historical Society and the Wyoming State Museum teamed up for the oral history project "Growing Up in Wyoming." Volunteers attended training sessions in oral history and then conducted over 100 interviews with people of all ages and from across the state. Photo courtesy of the author.

resulting from the project, it should arrange for them to be deposited in an appropriate archive or library that has an oral history collection. The Oral History Association can help identity appropriate locations.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Here are some common concerns and helpful advice for local historical organizations that are interested in getting involved with an oral history project.

The Oral History Association offers training workshops on oral history. For information contact:

Oral History Association
Box 97234
Waco, TX 76798-7234
Phone: (817) 755-2764
Fax: (817) 755-1571

If we haven't done oral history before, where can we learn how to do it?

Contact the Oral History Association, your state historical agency, or a college or university about workshops and consultants. The Oral History Association offers training workshops at its annual meetings every fall. Many state historical agencies have ongoing oral history programs with knowledgeable staff. Some university history departments offer courses in oral history.

How good does our oral history project need to be?

Oral history is a means of creating historical documents by preserving memories. Just as you strive to give the best possible care to the artifacts in your collection, the oral history you collect should be as well researched and documented as it possibly can be—not only for the sake of your immediate program needs, but to serve future researchers and future

museum audiences as well. Even if your plans for immediate use of the oral history are just for background research or to provide material for labels, other individuals may have other uses for it.

At a minimum, effective oral history projects requires a certain amount of training for staff or volunteers. The process requires using a good quality tape recorder and archival quality tape. With an eye to the future, you might want to invest in a DAT or laser disc recorder if your institution can support that technology. If you plan to use audio excerpts as part of an installation or for a media production, then you should strive for the best possible sound quality. Again, staff members of a college or university media center may be able to offer sound technical advice on the best kinds of recording machines, microphones, and recording tape.

Should we audiotape or videotape?

The answer depends on what your plans are for the material. If your institution has good quality video equipment, then it could certainly be used in conjunction with high quality audio recording. Some museums conduct audiotaped interviews first, then select individuals they want to feature in a videotaped exhibit, program, or production. Other institutions use videotape exclusively, whether or not they intend to use the footage for exhibit or broadcast. Remember, an interviewer cannot effectively conduct an interview and run a video camera at the same time. Hence, videotaping automatically doubles the amount of staff/volunteer time. And high quality videotaping requires a certain amount of training and skill.

How do we handle oral history tapes and transcripts?

Just as you require a donation form to be signed by donors, standard oral history practice calls for narrators and interviewers to sign a copyright release form. Sample forms can be obtained from the Oral History Association. The American Library Association and the Society of American Archivists have published standards for cataloging, arranging, describing, and preserving oral history collections.

To be most useful, oral history tapes should be fully transcribed. The most effective method involves using a transcriber machine and a word processor. You may want to enlist volunteers for this time-consuming and occasionally tedious job. At a minimum, oral history interviews must be indexed, that is, a list prepared of the topics on the tape, in the order in which they were discussed. Both audiotapes and videotapes should be stored in climate-controlled environments, and transcripts and indexes should be printed on archival quality paper.

What if we have no money for equipment and no staff time to spare?

Publicize the project as widely as possible and ask for assistance. Enlist help from your volunteer corps or from organizations such as senior citizens centers, women's clubs, local historical or genealogical societies, or civic clubs. Ask for donations or loans of equipment and supplies from local businesses that use recording or transcribing equipment (such as law firms).

Oral history may be daunting, but projects can be scaled to match your institution's mission and resources. And the rewards can be far beyond your expectations. Ask your colleagues in other museums about their oral history efforts and be prepared for an enthusiastic recital of success stories.

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HISTORY NEWS TECHNICAL LEAFLET

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Telling the Story: Better Interpretation at Small Historical Organizations

**by Timothy Glines and David Grabitske,
Minnesota Historical Society**

INTRODUCTION:

Interpretation is a five-syllable word with special meaning for those who work or volunteer for historical organizations. It's a word often coupled with two others in our mission statements: collect and preserve.

Unfortunately, it is often the part of our mission that is given insufficient attention. Too many organizations still take the easy route: just arranging artifacts in categories, creating historic tableaux with a few labels, or letting visitors wander through our historic houses. We can do better! Because interpretive programs are the most public and visible aspect of our operations, their quality determines how our organizations are regarded. One does not need to be part of a large organization to do excellent interpretation. Organizations with a few paid employees, or even those with all volunteers, can do it effectively.

The essence of interpretation is story telling. And what can be more natural for human beings than to tell stories? Communications expert Peter Orton tells us: "Stories enhance attention, create anticipation, and increase retention. They provide a familiar set of 'hooks' that allow us to process the information that we hang on them."[1]

How do we tell compelling stories in historical organizations? Before we can answer that question, let us consider what interpretation is; what things to keep in mind when interpreting; and, in what ways museums carry out story telling. Planning an interpretive program is necessary, but cannot be effectively accomplished until the planners understand something about the institution, the goals of the institution and its interpretive program, and interpretation in general.

Recognizing that our organizations need to serve broad audiences makes telling our stories a lot harder. We cannot simply say that one size fits all and expect people to take it or leave it. However, an individual program might be developed by focusing on a segment of the overall audience, particularly on underserved segments.

Historical interpretation translates human stories from the past into meaningful thoughts for people in the present. It makes past experiences instantly understandable by a modern audience. At one historic site with a one-room school filled with benches, interpreters are often questioned by school children making instant associations with their own school. They ask, "How did they do their homework?" What they mean is where, since there are no desks. A clever interpreter replied, "Pupils complete their assignments on laptop chalkboards, called slates." What this interpreter did was create an instantly recognizable concept in the child's mind of a chalkboard the size of a laptop computer.

It can be hard for small local history museums to tell a story well. Resources are limited and small organizations often face the challenge of telling stories in difficult places such as historic houses converted to museum use. But perhaps the most serious challenge is simply a lack of familiarity with interpretative theory and technique. Too often, long-serving volunteers have become attached to certain stories and tours and are unwilling to consider changes that would serve new audiences. Even staff trained in museum studies or public history may have had more courses in administration and collection care than in interpretation. Without effective interpretive programs, our organizations risk becoming irrelevant.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND: THE OPERATIONAL PLATFORM OF 'TELLING THE STORY'

Why tell a story? The answer is usually found in most of our mission statements: to educate. Local historical societies should be educational institutions. What good is it if we are mere repositories of historical facts and objects? Local history organizations should be able to tell people what all that stuff means.

Telling a story complements our primary educational goal by responding to two major reasons people visit museums and historic sites, namely recreation and entertainment. Although local historical societies should be careful not to let these two helpers eclipse the primary goal, visiting a history museum can be a healthy diversion. At many museums, visitors get to try their hands at certain parts of historical processes by using either reproductions or expendable artifacts from the "educational collection." Such interpretation can be seen as recreational. Other visitors are treated to dramatic vignettes, rides in old wagons and trains, and video documentaries; they are entertained. But such experiences must still tell people something about the past. Educational enrichment must always be first, or local history museums will reduce themselves to historically oriented campgrounds or theme parks.

To keep education at the forefront, keep four things in mind when planning an interpretive activity: what a story is, how people learn, the potency of interpretation, and basic customer service principles. These guiding principles will keep an interpretive program on target.

What is a story? There are many definitions. One narrative theory called structural-affect,[2] maintains that the goal must be meaningful to the audience, that the audience develops empathy for the protagonist, and that the outcome holds a surprise for the audience. When using the structural-affect model for historical interpretation, the difference is that, rather than a surprise, we impart a human truth at the end. For example, an interpreter

It Starts with Audiences

We should always identify or define the audience for our interpretive programs. For many small organizations, particularly in their formative stages, audience identification may be an afterthought. So, how do we define our audiences? For most historical organizations with geographically defined or place based missions, the audience includes all the people who reside in our geographic service area, not to mention those who are only visiting. It is no longer feasible, especially for those of us funded by government sources, to serve a small slice of the community—for example, those whose ancestors have lived here for four or five generations. Even organizations with missions defined by subject (for example, the history of aviation, fishing, railroads, farming) recognize the need to serve more than "buffs" already knowledgeable about the subject matter.

[1] Quoted in Elizabeth Weil, "Every Leader Tells a Story," *FastCompany* 15 (June/July, 1998): 38.

[2] Peter Orton, at IBM's T. J Watson Research Center, http://www.research.ibm.com/knowsoc/ideas_featurestructure.html.

pretending to be a spectator at a vintage baseball game approached modern spectators, saying, "I'm sure this game looks a little different from what you're used to, but I assure you that this is an improvement to what you all played as children." He went on to relate briefly how the rules used in 1860 either codified or altered earlier practice. In doing so he imparted the truth that human beings are constantly tinkering with things, hoping for a better result.

People learn in a variety of ways. However, scientists who study how people learn say we generally learn using our culture and prior knowledge as a platform. We take in new facts, such as antique baseball rules, through a variety of media to assist in problem solving and reasoning to draw conclusions and comparisons with things we already know, such as modern baseball rules. These new facts should spark our natural curiosity. We respond well to structure. If our visitors know the goals of the program, they will be ready to learn.[3]

Using the structural-affect model and understanding that people use what they are already familiar with, the interpreter can make translations with what might be termed "The Three C's of Interpretation." That is, compare and contrast in context. Once we establish the context of the past, we can make comparisons and contrasts with our own situations, as in the example of the "laptop chalkboards" or our familiarity with the rules of the ball game. Context enables us to understand that those who lived before were products of their own time and place just as we today are products of ours. When visitors understand context, contrast and comparison can convey a meaningful history.

Humor can be as useful as it can be troublesome. Used well, it can help further a lesson, drive home a point, and reassure an audience. One reenactor, costumed as a Civil War soldier, used humor to his benefit. He was talking to a class of school children, comparing and contrasting his historical situation with theirs. Just like the children, he had to obey two things that he wished he didn't: time and teachers. His "teachers" were officers who had gone to a special school and received a special piece of paper called a commission. He had to obey time too, because his "teachers" wanted things in good order. In essence, this grown man was being treated like a child. He then wryly commented for the adults present, "Guess that's why they call us Infant – tree." The pun helped at least the adults to remember that being in the army is like being a kid in school.

Historical interpretation and comic strips have a lot in common: both are potent combinations of ideas and illustrations. Cartoonist Berke Breathed, in his introduction to *Classics of Western Literature: Bloom County 1986-1989,* explained what makes stories work for comics. Rather than surprise the audience, a good story relates a basic human truth—the truth of anxiety seen in *Peanuts* character Charlie Brown, for instance.[4] When interpreting history to the public, it is important to connect them to the past on a basic level; doing so builds empathy with human truth, enriching the mind and spirit.

Just as some local history programs allow recreation and entertainment to eclipse the primary goal of education, others allow artifacts either to become the story themselves or to be more important than a human story. According to cartoonist Bill Watterson, in his anthology *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book,* great ideas save boring illustrations better than great illustrations saving boring ideas. This is true for local history organizations as well. An artifact without a story or an interesting idea is not particularly educational. Many historical society collections contain the same items as the historical collection down the road. To someone who has heard about the general use of a sadiron, even the best surviving example of a sadiron will no longer be interesting. Who used this sadiron, and what was that person's significance to your mission? Every artifact was used or made by a human being: it's the human story that is interesting, not some obscure tool a modern person doesn't use or recognize. The fact that some other person used the object makes translation of the story possible and meaningful. Objects must support the story you are telling.[5]

At a former state capitol building, the only two people on one tour admitted to the guide they both worked at another historic site. The guide had no stories to tell on his hour-long tour, just explanations of how curious artifacts were used. Instead of orchestrating a conversation about significant proceedings, grand architecture, interesting politicians, and important legislation, this guide knew only about the artifacts. When his visitors already knew about the artifacts, his tour was compromised and less meaningful. Perhaps because of limited training he did not know that objects could help him tell stories about the special community he was living in; and, therefore he was not able to provide a very good customer service experience. Few visitors know the meaningful local stories that we know, even if they live in our area—so it is best to take advantage of what makes our places special to live in.

The final key to effective interpretation is good customer service. We must pay attention to the interests of our visitors by telling meaningful stories, making sure not to fatigue them mentally with breathless depth or fatigue them physically with no chance to take it all in. Be kind and helpful. Take time to get to know them so you can kindle curiosity with the supremely interesting human stories you have to tell. As Watterson suggests, as long as you have the opportunity to speak to someone, you might as well say something useful.

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[3] John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking, editors. *How People Learn: Brain Mind, Experience, and School.* Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. National Research Council. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999). http://www.nap.edu/html/howpeople1/ch1.html.

[4] Berke Breathed, *Classics of Western Literature: Bloom County 1986-1989* (Boston, MA: Little Brown & Company, 1990): two. Bill Watterson, *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews & McNeel, 1995): 6.

[5] Watterson, 32. See also, Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), particularly chapter 4, "Transcending the Object."

Being kind and helpful will lead you to what one interpreter summed up as "Know all, tell some." One guide with a theatrical background saw the story she was paid to tell as being like lines in a play. She would not let visitors leave until she had concluded her "performance." You can fatigue audiences with an exhaustive narrative. Withholding less crucial parts of the story can be a kindness. Visitors often sense when something is missing, and if their curiosity is aroused and they are so inclined, they will ask. Another interpreter described this activity as "digging holes." Dig enough holes, and curiosity will trap the visitor in one of them. They will have to ask a question to get out.

Good customer service at our history museums means getting to know our guests even minimally so we do not bore them with things they already know. We must learn where our guests are coming from, if we expect to build on their knowledge. It means not putting up barriers to their experience. We must describe the experience ahead so the visitor is prepared to overcome challenges like stairs, long walks, no working restrooms, no water, unusual temperatures or light levels, and so on. In short, customer service is the consideration of human needs. By considering our guests' needs, we show that we are fully engaged in their experience.

These four ideas—what a story is, how people learn, the potency of interpretation, and basic customer service skills—kept firmly in mind can produce enjoyable, high-quality interpretive educational opportunities. They can be applied to all kinds of interpretation. They drive curiosity by using the powerful combination of ideas plus good illustrations.

INTERPRETATION'S MANY FACES: VEHICLES OF INTERPRETATION AT LOCAL HISTORY MUSEUMS

Local historical organizations tell their stories in a wide array of interpretive media. We tell stories in museum exhibitions, in public programs conducted at historic sites and house museums, in programs conducted offsite in the community, and through other media, such as publications, where our interaction with an audience is indirect.

Choosing themes or subjects for interpretation should start with mission. It is certainly acceptable to do interpretive programs that go beyond an organization's mission, but the mission should be the primary screen for program selection. Geographically based historical organizations should have no problem knowing where to start, but it is important to take the time and effort to identify the historical themes that tell the story of your area. List the broad themes that help people understand the forces that have made your area what it is today. Your themes may have much in common with those of other areas in your region, but there will surely be some variations unique to your area.

Themes for Interpretive Programs

Given the wide range of human activity, historical organizations have no shortage of topics from which to choose. Of course, some stories lend themselves better to one interpretive medium than others. Some stories can be told well by an exhibition, for instance, but not in a walking tour.

Expand the list of historical themes by writing brief narratives about each one. Connect them with a timeline that includes specific people, places, and events. Then add lists of resources that you could use to develop interpretive programs. These will range from manuscripts and government records to oral histories, artifacts, and books. The information you collect about your historical themes should be dynamic. That is, you should always be adding new material and you should review the themes in light of new historical research.

While developing a list of historical themes is an essential part of planning interpretive programs, another way is to identify more universal themes that can become a framework to connect the history of your area. Think of the big themes that apply to everyone: families, making a living, health, bereavement, and so on. Historian Joseph Amato calls on local historians to look into other themes, some so common that we don't think about them, for instance the senses.[6] How have the sounds and smells of a community changed over time? Amato would also have local historians study and interpret the emotional history of their communities through topics like anger and madness.

According to the National Park Service, themes connect tangible objects with intangible concepts and universals. For further information please see the NPS Web site for the online booklet *History in the National Park Service: Themes & Concepts.* www.cr.nps.gov/history/hisnps/NPSThinking/themes_concepts.htm

Museum Exhibitions.

It is not easy to create an effective exhibition. Unlike other forms of interpretation, which can be tailored to different audiences, museum exhibitions need to work with multiple audiences. They can only do so if they are well planned and executed.

The first step is to recognize that exhibitions are more than displays. A display of neatly arranged and categorized farm or fishing implements with a few labels does not tell a story. Even an arrangement of items in a recreated domestic setting, such as a 19th-century kitchen, does not tell much of a story. Neither technique does anything to engage museum visitors. National Park Service historian Freeman Tilden told us

[6] Joseph Amato, *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History,* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002): 60. For another approach to developing historical themes, see Tom McKay, "Choosing a Local History Topic: Beginning With Concepts," in *Exchange,* newsletter of the Wisconsin Historical Society's Office of Local History Volume 24, Number 7 (January/February 1982). Available online: http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/localhistory/articles/concepts.htm.

nearly 50 years ago: information is not interpretation.[7] Tilden defined interpretation as revelation based on information. Barbara Franco, the director of The Historical Society of Washington D.C., explains that museum exhibitions ought to create memorable experiences.[8] When we plan an exhibition, we need to be conscious not just of what a visitor will see, but of what the visitor will do. Dan Spock, head of the Exhibits department at the Minnesota Historical Society, elaborates: "Exhibits are a mode of communication, but this process is primarily non-verbal, minimally textual, works more in the 'gut' than in the 'mind' and is inherently a two-way street, a kind of dialogue of meaning-making between visitor and museum." [9]

Spock also recognizes that visitors bring a variety of knowledge, experience, and associations with them to the exhibition. Visitors use these things during a museum visit to create new experiences in a "personalized synthesis." He feels that the story is the most common and natural way to move "the personal meaning into the social sphere, into the world of other people where it can be shared and understood." Good exhibitions enable these kinds of experiences.

Isn't all of this impossible for the small historical organization with limited resources? Not necessarily. Even the smallest organization can do excellent exhibitions that address multiple audiences. Of course, it all starts with a clear goal. What is the exhibit about? What story does it tell? What are the primary messages you want visitors to take away after they have seen the exhibit?

Two key words to keep in mind while doing this are layering and interactivity. Layering recognizes that visitors will experience a museum exhibition in a variety of ways. We are all familiar with people who hurry through an exhibition and take very little time to read interpretive panels. Others, however, will spend a great deal of time and read everything. Most people are somewhere in the middle. The process of designing and fabricating exhibitions needs to consider all these visitor styles.

Visitors in a hurry need something to grab their attention. It might be large artifacts that are visually compelling. Or, spatial design can capture attention by drawing the eye to a particular area. These speedy visitors need to see exhibit headings in very large type size if we expect them to understand the message we are trying to convey.

Other visitors, those who might take more time for the exhibition, can be stimulated with other techniques. They are more likely to look at more museum objects, photographs and documents. They may also read text blocks and labels. To be effective, labels or text panels need relation to actual things in the exhibition. Too often, smaller museums retain labels for items after changing their exhibit. Also, be succinct because most visitors will not read lengthy descriptions.

Some visitors, of course, will take much more time. We can engage them at even higher levels. They are more likely to want to share what they learn with others if they are in a group. They are the visitors who would sit down at tables with reading materials that allow them to explore more content. And they are more likely to interact with employees or volunteers who do demonstrations or portray historic characters.

Interactivity refers to techniques in which visitors are no longer passive but can take an active role in an exhibition. Interactivity is not just a passing fad. We know from numerous studies of learning development that people of all ages remember much more about an experience if they participate actively, as opposed to simply reading, seeing, or hearing something. In museum exhibitions, interactives can be simple or complicated. Most smaller organizations lack the resources to design, fabricate, and maintain complicated interactives, so it is best to use tried and true techniques. Things that work well include allowing people to handle reproductions or artifacts from the educational collections, role playing, games and puzzles, simulations of work situations, and mastering crafts and tools through "make it, take it" programs.

Spock says learning works best when it is informal. Exhibition visitors learn more when they are active participants and not preached to by an authority. Planners of good history exhibitions need to understand visitors' prior knowledge with a particular subject and use it to engage them. Spock suggests using stories of human experience common enough to be familiar to today's visitors, emphasizing the voices of real people from the past. He also advocates exhibitions representing the diversity of peoples, communities and roles to engage visitors' empathy and emotion. Spock does not avoid controversial issues in exhibitions, but presents clear, balanced accounts that do not impose one viewpoint over another. He believes visitors are perfectly able to decide for themselves, even allowing issues with contemporary parallels or implications to come to the foreground. Lastly, exhibits are to be welcoming, aesthetically pleasing, comfortable, and accessible to all.

Public Programs in Our Museums.

Public programs generally are history programs with some kind of human interaction. Every local history organization does public programming in some way. Perhaps the most common public programs are guided tours with a docent.

Researchers who study how people learn tell us that most people's tolerance for listening is limited to eight minutes. Many docents are aware of this and make sure they do not spend any longer than eight minutes at any one station. They also notice obvious body language from visitors who begin shifting their weight to relieve tired legs. When visitors are physically uncomfortable, they cannot listen as well.

[7] Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage,* revised edition (Nashville, TN: AASLH, 1967): 9.

[8] Barbara Franco. "What's New in Exhibits?" *Cultural Resource Management,* No. 5, (2000). National Park Service http://crm.cr.nps.gov/archive/23-05/23-05-14.pdf.

[9] Dan Spock, presentation titled "Exhibits: More than Displays" at workshops for Minnesota's Historical Organizations, spring 2002.

Costumed interpreters lead a growing number of guided programs. There are many variants, from strict first person, where the interpreter never strays from a certain time period, to third person that does not necessarily even need costumes. Small organizations might need to rely on community members who have developed a program well suited for its audience. Often reeanctors, living historians, thespians, and interpreters are passionate about their subject and willing to provide programs at little or no cost. However, the organization should not allow just any program to happen. These sorts of programs require planning and evaluation too.

As with every other program, when you bring in someone from outside your staff or regular volunteers, it is wise to write out what you expect from, and what you will provide to the costumed interpreter. Be aware that costumed interpretation has its own language, so acquaint yourself with basic terminology. There are different kinds of costumed interpreters:

- reenactors are the basic hobbyists for whom enthusiasm knows no bounds;
- living historians study and document things often to extreme minutiae;
- thespians can give powerful and memorable performances; and,
- professional history interpreters generally value education above all.

None is necessarily better than another, but consider what each type can do for you. Each type has its pitfalls, as well. The reenactor may be enthusiastic, but can he relate well to the public? Is he well versed in his subject? The living historian, sometimes referred to as 'hardcore,' can lose sight of the broader educational message because she is far too interested in the type of stitches and the number of stitches per inch in her garments. The thespian, while powerful and memorable, may not easily interact with your audience while running the course of the 'script.' A professional history interpreter, while primarily an educator, may be willing to sacrifice some small parts of accuracy for the greater educational good.

Also be aware that the method a costumed interpreter uses may or may not be appropriate. Tom Sanders' excellent article on interpretation points out, "First person in its purest form does have some drawbacks." Cultural differences, willingness to 'play the game,' limitations of the time period or of social class being enacted, and so on sometimes get in the way of the educational goals we set for programs.[10] Of course, thinking about method applies to all our programs.

Costumed interpreters often function at historic sites, historic house museums, and "pioneer/historical villages." Historical environments are often the best places for costumed interpreters to work. Visitors can easily walk with their predecessors, feel like them, and even begin to imagine themselves living as their forebearers did. Here visitors can readily learn about the lives and motivations of people in the past. Of course, such environments also present other challenges such as adequate staffing, proper maintenance, a consistent message, staff morale, training and discipline, and the cost of clothing, reproductions, and other consumables.

Other public programs use onsite interpretation just like docents and costumed guides. Many local history organizations have regularly scheduled meetings at which there is usually some kind of program, often a guest speaker. Slide shows, documentaries, lectures, sing-a-longs, facilitated sharing sessions, book readings, and other such programs are vehicles for telling some important story of your community.

Public Programs in the Community.

Local historical organizations offer many public programs off site. These programs include tours guided by brochures or a recreational activity guided by a historian.

Many small history museums partner with local heritage preservation organizations to produce walking tours of historic downtowns. Likewise, countywide historical museums develop driving tours of historic places in their region or create historical marker systems which, when coupled with a brochure, tell a story about a much larger area. Even more broadly, multiple historical museums may create a theme tour, such as a tour of historic sites related to children's authors.

Recreational opportunities led by a historian are increasingly popular, and history museums are responding. Tour groups might ride bicycles down a path converted from an old railroad line, or through multiple historic areas in larger towns that would be impossible to cover on foot. Some specialized walking tours require a guide, especially those focusing on faint traces of historic sites long razed. In areas with snow, a historian might accompany groups on snowmobiles, snowshoes, or cross-country skis past familiar historic sites that evoke a different feeling and association than they would in the summer. Enos Mills was a tireless advocate in the 1910s for National Parks and the learning opportunities afforded in them. His many books and magazine articles are still good advice for modern guides, whether they are leading groups through pastoral or urban wildernesses. The popularity of site-specific tours today is much the same as it was in Mills' day: people are too busy to stop and consider what they are speeding past.

Cemetery walks are a popular combination of walking tours and costumed guides. Here, after extensive biographical research, volunteers and staff sometimes portray former residents who return to life near their headstones and present a brief story to tour groups. Sometimes a historian leads a cemetery walk. The tour might encounter any number of "ghosts" or markers, but they all relate to some overall theme. To that end many cemetery walks will feature themes like women activists in the community, victims of major natural disasters, railroad workers and their families, and the community's military veterans.

A combination of recreation and history occurs at

[10] Tom Sanders. "Thoughts on Effective Living History: Interpretive Suggestions," *Midwest Open Air Museums Magazine,* v. 11, n. 1 (Spring 1990): 10.

recreated "bat and ball" games. Interpreters, volunteers and the general public play "base ball," rounders, cricket, and other versions of ball games—often in appropriate reproduced apparel, but always by the historically documented rules. While the public or demonstrators who participate may have fun and learn about the game, not many sponsoring institutions take the time to make the story of the game relevant to the public watching the event. These types of games make translating history easier because baseball is such a common experience for so many Americans.

Requiring visitors to participate is one way to ensure both a memorable and actual learning experience. A unique combination of outdoor recreation and historical experience is found at Connor Prairie, a historic site near Fishers, Indiana. They decided to address a highly sensitive subject, namely African American slavery. The program is "Follow the North Star," and requires all the visitors to participate in the program as a group of runaway slaves. It is a somewhat physical program covering a lot of ground at night, where they meet various historical interpreters, from slave hunters to abolitionists and Quakers. Through first hand experience, visitors learn what it was like to be a runaway slave in the mid-nineteenth century.

At one Canadian museum that presented a lesson on the War of 1812, guests were randomly handed note cards on which were written quotations from original participants. The lesson focuses on an academic mystery: who held the cannons at Lundy's Lane on July 25, 1814, and when? With the aid of a narrator, each participant stepped forward to "testify" to what was seen that night. At the end of the program, the narrator asked visitors to solve the mystery and concluded by briefly describing the academic debate. The point of the program is not only to show a past human activity, but also to show how those events still affect people today. The visitors developed empathy for multiple protagonists through individual points of view.

All public programs should carefully consider educational goals. History organizations must make sure all their programs meet the mission in some way and are evaluated to see whether the program furthers its mission. Evaluation does not have to be complex, just conducted methodically to produce meaningful feedback in guiding the future of the program.

Publications and Other Indirect Programs

One of the most common ways that local historical organizations tell stories is through research, writing and publication. Unlike the other interpretive programs discussed, publications do not require someone to visit the museum or historic site or register for a program. Much of what has been said about other interpretive vehicles applies. Just be careful to note that publications have a different impact than a temporary museum exhibition or a costumed portrayal at a historic site. Publications are more widely accessible both geographically and temporally.

Whether books or essays, publications differ in another way from other interpretive programs. The historical writer has a fundamental responsibility to tell the reader how she knows what she writes. This means telling the reader about primary and secondary historical sources and making it clear how they are used.

Local history publications also allow for the retelling of history when new information is available. Although reprinting an old history might be a fine project, a better one—although much more difficult and time consuming—would be to undertake new histories, which, in the words of Carol Kammen, "change what needs to be altered and challenge what needs to be questioned." [11]

In recent years, historical organizations have begun to undertake other forms of interpretive programs such as the production of curricular material for schools and now interpretive programs on Web sites. At this time, larger organizations are mostly producing such programs, but in the future they will likely become common in smaller local organizations as well. These programs require solid planning, maintenance, and evaluation just like any other interpretive program. Additionally curricula require collaboration with the teachers whom you intend to use it.

CONCLUSION: WE CAN ALWAYS DO BETTER

Local historians know their work is never done. Just planning, researching and implementing an interpretive program is not the end. All programs need to be evaluated, and then adjusted to improve or discontinue them if need be. Large historical organizations regularly evaluate projects, but smaller organizations without the same resources can do the same. In fact, increasingly, government, foundation and corporate funders demand that evaluation be a component of every program.

Done well, interpretation helps audiences connect with the past in personal ways by drawing on first-person accounts of human activity. The best interpretive programs are well organized, based on sound historical research, and have clear objectives. They are tailored to diverse audiences and ways of learning. While keeping education at the forefront, they let audiences draw their own conclusions about the past. With interpretative programs, we play the ancient and honorable role of storyteller. When we tell stories well, no matter whether our organization is large or small, we know we are carrying out our mission.

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[11] Carol Kammen. *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What it Means.* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1986): 38.

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Theater 101 for Historical Interpretation

By Dale Jones

BEING "HIPP"
USING HEART, IMAGINATION, PLANNING, AND PHYSICALITY IN HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

All understanding interpreters know as well as I what the ideal interpretation implies: re-creation of the past, and kinship with it. The problem is how to achieve this desirable end. It is not easy…So, in interpretive effort we are constantly considering ways and means of bringing the past to the present, for the stimulation of our visitors…

Freeman Tilden—*Interpreting Our Heritage*

Interpreters at historic sites and history museums and the visitors to those sites have quite similar goals. Both want an engaging experience that brings the past alive and makes it understandable. Interpreters want to create those experiences, and visitors want to enjoy them.

Creating those experiences, as Tilden says above, "is not easy," but he does suggest a way out of this difficulty—through art:

Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.

One of those arts, that far too often goes unrecognized in the history field, is theater. If the goal of historical interpretation is to engage and inform visitors, then some of the best tools for achieving those goals come from the world of theater. Whether you are playing a costumed character in first or third person interpretation,[1] performing in a scripted museum theatre production, talking to visitors on the floor of the museum, or designing interpretation, four key factors from the world of theater are essential for developing quality interpretation. While you can have some success by not incorporating all four, or by incorporating them half-heartedly, those who excel in their interpretation display strong elements of each: heart, imagination, planning, and physicality.

Heart is the passion, the love you bring to your work. That heart or passion may be found in your love of history. It may be your commitment to a museum or site. Or it may be fueled by your love of performing for an audience. No matter what the reason, to succeed with style in museum interpretation, you have to have passion and a desire for doing a great job—you gotta have heart.

Imagination provides the spark of creativity that lifts your ideas and presentations out of the ordinary and into the realm of greatness. Imagination gives you the capacity to see new, exciting ways to do something or to show connections that will help the audience understand your ideas.

Planning ties everything together. It is the careful design and organizational structure that allows you to utilize all the other components in a logical, systematic way to achieve your interpretive goals. Planning forces you to think ahead, to assess your interpretive goals, your audience, and the best way to reach them. Planning then helps you design a process for a successful, engaging interpretation and allocate time for practice or rehearsal until you get it right.

Physicality, or control of your body and voice, leads to a presentation that visitors can understand. What good will it do you to have created the most engaging and thoughtful presentation, only to discover that people did not hear or understand what you said or that you bored them with a monotonous voice? Knowing how to use your tools, in this case your physicality, lets you construct a presentation that audiences can see, hear, understand, and enjoy.

If you have all four—Heart, Imagination, Planning, and Physicality—then you are "HIPP" and ready to present your best image, and the museum's best image, to the public. Let's examine these four elements below.

The Heart in "HIPP"

The heart in "HIPP" is the passion you bring to your work. It is the inspiration you have and that you pass along to others. It is the caring you have for the quality of your work and the concern you have that you succeed.

Interpreters have many reasons for their "heart." A living history interpreter might be passionate about open-hearth cooking or costumed interpretation. An actor may care deeply about the craft of acting. Some interpreters are passionate about working with children. Many interpreters care deeply about a museum or exhibit.

What if you are lacking heart or passion for your interpretative work, either because you have lost it or never had it? The time has come for you to begin some exploration to discover, or rediscover, passion. You might begin by reading books that you find inspiring—try Freeman Tilden. His thoughts about passion and interpretation are still relevant today. As he writes in 1957 in *Interpreting Our Heritage*, "If you love the thing [that you interpret], you not only have taken the pains to understand it …, but you also feel its special beauty in the general richness of life's beauty." He likewise advocates that you "love the people who come to enjoy it…in the sense that you never cease trying to understand them…."

You might also talk to some people you respect. What is the source of their passion? What books or articles do they recommend? Inspiration is often waiting for you just by wandering around a site or exhibit after everyone has left or before they arrive. Let your imagination roam. The quiet times you spend alone on site can help you connect with your historical passion.

But "heart" is not enough, unless you combine it with the essence of theater—imagination.

Using Imagination: Storytelling and Motivation

Perhaps the most powerful tool in your interpretive kit is an active and vivid imagination. That does not imply that you create fictitious information or events to engage your audience. What it does mean is that you develop "historically plausible"[2] interpretations and stories and use vibrant, descriptive language. A story, scene, or interpretation is "historically plausible" if it is based on primary and secondary sources and is a reasonable extrapolation of what might have happened.

Storytelling

A practical imagination exercise and interpretive technique is incorporating storytelling and evocative language into your work. Storytelling and associated

[1] In first person interpretation, the interpreter pretends to be a character from the past, speaks in first person, and attempts for the most part to stay in character. In third person interpretation, the interpreter dresses in period costume but does not attempt to be a character.

[2] "Historical Plausibility" is a term coined by Dr. Ira Berlin, University of Maryland, College Park, while serving as a consultant at the Baltimore City Life Museums for a museum theater project.

skills do not have to be limited to the stage or to fictional stories. The techniques below are appropriate to use in your interpretation to tell a story as part of your interpretive message. The story might be about a well-known figure such as George Washington as he braves the winter at Valley Forge or it might be about an unknown soldier who was in Washington's army. Alternatively, your story could focus on an object and how that object was created or used.

Courtesy of the author

Brian Bagley plays the role of an African-American sailor in the War of 1812 in a play called "A Taste of Freedom." The author wrote and directed the play for the Star-Spangled Flag House in Baltimore.

Your first step in telling such a story is to know the story and its details well. Here are some factors to consider in developing a story that will be a delight for you to tell and for listeners to hear:

Visualization. You want to paint a picture in your audience's mind about the story, and to help you do this, visualize scenes from the event or story so your telling becomes more vivid and engaging. Close your eyes and recreate the sequence of the story in your mind's eye. Stop in each mental sequence and look around. What colors and sounds do you notice? What descriptive words help convey what you are imagining? Describe some of the scenes to a friend, and then let that person ask you questions about the scene. Think about the most important objects in the story and describe them to a friend, using descriptive language. Doing this exercise can also help you understand some of the missing information you might be able to fill in with a little research.

Characters. The people in your story were once alive, and you want to pass that sense of "aliveness" to visitors. Begin by identifying the most important person in the story and describe him or her to a friend. Detail their physical appearance and personality in a few evocative words. To help you dig deeper into the character, you might let a friend ask you questions about your character's physical appearance and personality. Find a place in the story where the character talks and try to speak as the character would. How would you describe the voice? Do the same with other main characters in your story. If you have found any relevant primary material, this is also a wonderful point to integrate some actual quotes from the character or about the character.

What is the major obstacle or success the character faces in the story or event that you are relating? How does the character react to this? Do they have any second thoughts about their actions? Describe the main challenges and the character's reactions to them to a friend and as before, let your friend ask questions.

Plot and meaning. The framework of the story on which everything else hangs is the plot. Just as a good historian creates interesting stories for the reader based on historical facts, so must you. To do so you need to understand the flow of events, or the plot. To help you get a firm understanding of the story and pare it down to its essence, try to relate it in three sentences in which you tell the beginning, middle, and end of the story. What is the context of the story? What is the most important moment?

Rhythm. Varying the rhythm and pacing is another way to heighten an audience's interest in your story. Identify the parts in the story where the pacing is fast and slow. Retell it, exaggerating the slow and fast parts. Tell the story again and notice where the pacing changes for the first time. Retell that part, exaggerating the change and paying more attention to the transition.

Language. Go back over the most important points of the story. Check to see if you are using powerful descriptive words that evoke the meaning of the story. Get out a thesaurus if necessary and substitute more interesting words for some of the less descriptive words you have used. This does not mean, of course, that you are choosing language that visitors do not understand, just more varied language.

Movement and Motivation

Another imagination activity from theatrical training that can be especially helpful to living history interpreters, but also to those who incorporate the storytelling outlined above, relies on imagination, motivation, and movement. Audiences learn more from you than just from the words you say. How you move your body also sends them information. As a very basic example, think about the difference in posture that you would have if given a hug by a favorite friend or relative versus your reaction if someone that you did not like gave you a big hug.

To get an idea of how your movements can send a message, try this classic acting 101 exercise, modified for historical interpreters. This is a good activity to do with a group, but you could also do it alone.

Pretend you are a living history interpreter standing just outside the parlor in a house from the 1840s. You hear visitors enter the parlor from the hall and turn back to enter the parlor. Should you walk into the room in the same way you would if you were in your present-day house, or should you enter as an 1840 person would enter their parlor? How would a person from 1840 enter the room? Each of these ways to enter a room conveys a different message to visitors. Try these examples below, perhaps with a friend to assist. Notice that each of these has an interpretive theme associated with it.

- Quickly—you have misplaced a letter from a dear friend who is traveling to Indiana and you want to find it immediately to show to your husband (or wife). (Your interpretive theme may be to let visitors know about travel conditions in the 1840s).
- In anger—your daughter has just said to you that she wants to write books like Lydia Maria Child when she gets older, so she does not need to learn how to cook. (Theme: role of women in antebellum America).
- With pride—a phrenologist has just read your head and told you that your faculty of courage is well developed. (Theme: interpretation of phrenology and other "philosophical" ideas of the period).

Depending upon the circumstance, you will find yourself entering at a different pace, with a different degree of tension, and with a different force behind your movements. Also, be aware of your posture—how you hold your head and shoulders—and what you do with your hands. You might want to hold a relevant prop (perhaps a letter, a book, or some other object) to give you something to do with your hands and to help convey some meaning to the audience.

Too often, living history interpreters are not aware that when playing a character they can greatly expand their interpretive repertoire and engage visitors better by developing motivations for their character, even for such a simple thing as entering a room. When that happens, the character becomes more interesting to the audience, and when coupled with a carefully designed interpretive theme, the whole interpretation is much stronger.

Using Imagination: Creating a Scene

One of the most important aspects of being "HIPP" is "imagination," and there is no better way to exercise and grow your imagination than in creating interpretive scenes. Using primary and secondary sources to develop a scene is a logical extension of the storytelling activities above. The key to creating these scenes is using your imagination and letting it run wild. Of course, as you move toward creating a scene for presentation, you should keep in mind the concept of "historical plausibility."

To begin this exercise, start with a primary source. Below is one such primary source, taken from an article in the February 1840 *Baltimore Clipper*, which describes an accident on the streets of downtown Baltimore in which a boy is run over by a suction engine. A key to doing this exercise effectively is to keep in mind that for any incident that happens, there are multiple perspectives from which to describe and interpret that event. Read over the article below from the *Clipper*:

> **Accident**. A lad about sixteen years of age named Michael Laurence, was yesterday afternoon run over by the suction engine of the Patapsco,[3] while coming down Fayette. His head was considerably lacerated. He was taken into Dr. Alexander's office, and such aid rendered him as his wounds required. We are only surprised that more accidents of the kind do not happen.

Now, reread the article and try to identify all the various points of view or perspectives that could be used in telling this story. Pretend that you might be interpreting this event for an audience and you want to make it interesting and still accurately tell the events as described. An obvious perspective to choose would be that of Dr. Alexander, who treated the boy. Take a minute or two and make a list—some perspectives are obvious and others are more subtle. Below is a partial list, but don't peek until you have created your own perspectives.

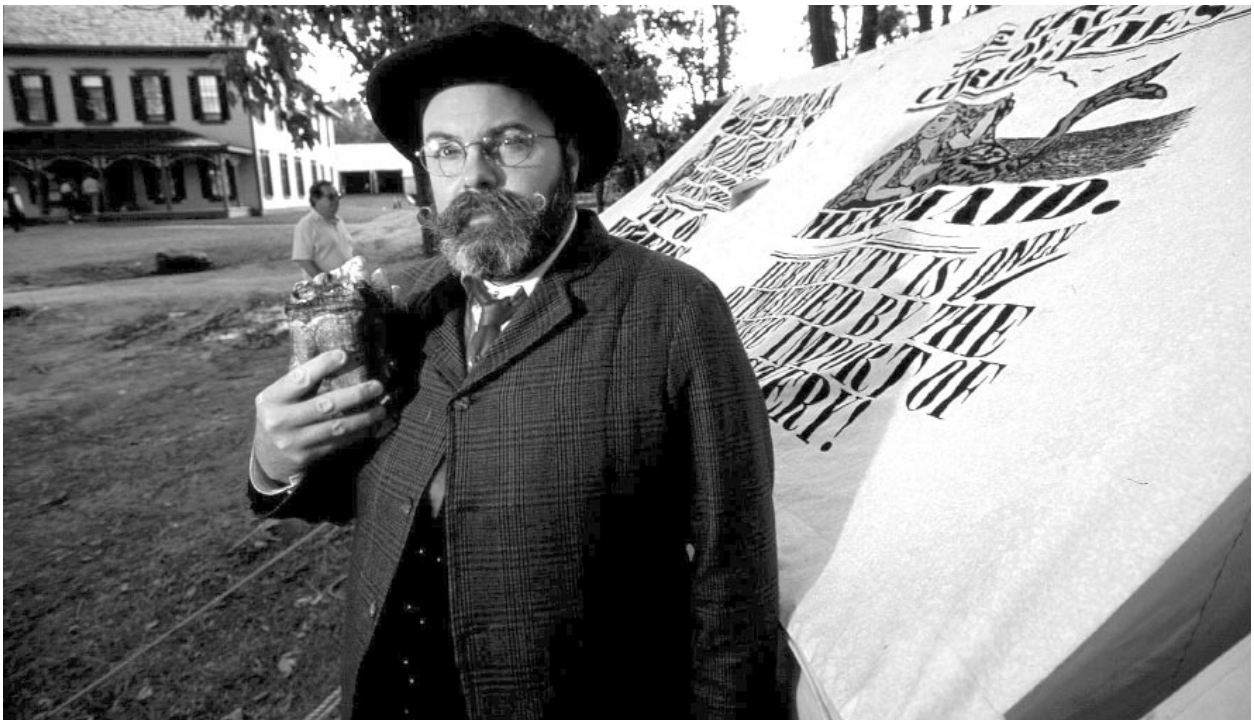
People:
- Michael Laurence
- Driver of the suction engine
- Reporter who wrote the story
- Editor of the paper
- Michael's mother (and other family members)
- Bystanders

Animals:
- Horses that pulled the engine
- Pigs (American streets were covered with pigs roaming freely at this time)
- Dogs

Inanimate objects:
- Suction engine
- Road
- Sky

An important concept to remember is that if you are creating a museum theater scene or a story to tell, you

[3] A suction engine is a nineteenth-century fire engine pulled by horses that pumped water. The "Patapsco" was the name of one of many volunteer fire departments in the city.



Courtesy of Conner Prairie

Dan Shockley working as Col. Harrison Hamlin Whitley outside the Tent of Wonders for Country Fair.

have some flexibility in applying your creative juices. For example, you do not have to be limited in time and space. You could move your interpretation through time to a few months (or even years) later and have a friend of Dr. Alexander relate the story of Michael to a group of people. And since you have moved the telling of the story through time, you could also move it to another location. Perhaps the friend is on a wagon train heading west and tells the story around a campfire.

Once you have established a point of view, take five minutes or so, ideally with a few others, and create a scene that tells the story from the perspective you have chosen. Be sure to include elements that we have mentioned earlier, including thinking about variation in movement, pacing, and vocal expression. As an alternative activity, you could create a story that is told by one person. Remember in both cases to use evocative language to help paint a verbal image of what you are saying.

Your imagination in many ways is like any other part of your body or mind. The more you use it, the stronger and more agile it becomes. Look for opportunities to use it by finding elements of your interpretation or presentation that lend themselves to storytelling and then practice by telling the stories you create to family members or friends. As you begin to finalize your presentation, keep the concept of "historical plausibility" in mind, so you do not stray from your interpretive message.

Planning for Imaginative Interpretation

Up to this point, the discussion has focused on specific, personal elements of your interpretation. It is now time to step back to view the whole process. Inevitably, some of you will at some point be asked to create a character, a scene, an interpretation, a demonstration, a story, or a welcome greeting. When those occasions arise, it is valuable to be able to take a much broader look at what you are trying to do and how best to do it so your efforts support the museum's mission and the program or exhibit's interpretive goal. Below are some elements to consider as you create that presentation, whether it is a museum theater presentation, a living history interpretation, a tour, or a special program.[4]

What is your goal? Asking this question should be obvious; on the other hand, museum interpreters often fail to do so, and the answer affects all the other aspects of the project. You need to identify clearly your mission, your goal, and your "spire of meaning"—the essential point you want to get across to visitors.

Who is your audience? Are you designing this for elementary school children, for families with young children, adults interested in a specific topic, or a general audience including adults and children? Once you know who the audience is, you can begin making decisions about whether the piece should be interactive, dramatic, a more traditional interpretation, or something else entirely.

[4]These planning elements are based on a workshop conducted by Dale Jones and Margaret Piatt, "Planning Effective Living History Performances" at A Union of Spirits: A Conference for Interpreters. The Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., 1991.

What is your interpretive format? Will you be creating a tour; a living history interpretation for an interpreter that has a station, or specific spot; a short or long museum theater piece; a demonstration; or some other format?

Where will you perform or present? Is the space in an exhibit, outside, in the room of a historic house? Will visitors have benches, chairs, low walls, or steps to sit on? Will audiences be positioned so the sun or light is in their eyes or at their backs? Are there distracting sounds coming from another gallery? If so, your audience should be positioned to face away from that area.

How long will your presentation be? Long enough to accomplish your goals, but no longer, is the standard but unclear reply. The time range can vary greatly. It could be as short as three to five minutes, or as long as fifty minutes. There is no set answer, although many museums choose a range of seven to fifteen minutes for museum theater presentations. If you are creating a tour, there is also no magic length. Some short but poorly designed and presented tours seem to last an eternity and other long tours keep visitors totally engaged. It really depends upon your audience, your goal, your space, and other factors listed here.

How will your audiences be oriented? If you are creating a museum theater performance or a short living history interaction, it is important to let visitors know what is about to happen. Will visitors accidentally stumble upon the program? Will there be an announced time and place? Will an orientation, or description of what is to follow, be built into the presentation or will someone else need to do that?

How much interaction with visitors and families do you want? Do you want the audiences only to watch or listen? Do you want families to have some interaction during the presentation or tour? How much? Will it support the main goal? Do you have supplies and props for interaction?

Have you developed a written script or outline? While some presentations may successfully arise without conscious planning or scripting, you have a better chance of creating an effective presentation that can be passed on to future presenters or performers if you have planned it carefully and written it down.

If you are creating a museum theater performance and looking for a good playwright, you might contact local university drama departments, community theaters, and local professional companies for possibilities. To assist you in selection, you might ask for previous work or even invest a small amount of money and, after presenting your goals and some information to the playwrights, ask them to create a portion of a scene for you to look over.

Have you allocated time, money, and locations for rehearsal and practice? Whether this is a museum theater play, a short first person interpretation, or a demonstration, the staff who will be in front of the audience needs to have time and space to rehearse or practice. Be sure to set some rehearsal practice time for the actual space in which they will be performing or presenting.

Do you have a director for your production? Many museums fall into the trap of not using a director for their performances or a staff member with director-type abilities for their presentations and interpretations. A director can provide an objective perspective on your performance or interpretation that you can't possibly do yourself and can help you create a more interesting presentation by calling to your attention strengths and weaknesses of your interpretation:

- Effective and engaging parts of your presentation;
- Distracting or ineffective parts of your presentation;
- Points in your presentation where you need to add some variation to your movement—perhaps sitting, standing, leaning against a wall, or moving to a different space;
- Your pacing in case some parts are moving glacially and need to speed up or another part is presented at such a rapid pace that you lose intelligibility;
- Solid tips on how to create a better, more effective presentation.

If you are creating a museum theater piece, you may need to interview several directors to find one who understands the nature of museum education and how to combine that with a theatrical presentation. You might look in university or school drama departments, community theaters, or local professional theaters for a director. If you don't have the time or inclination to search outside your museum for a director, you might look to your own staff to find someone with those abilities. Someone with a good eye can improve staff's presentations tremendously by just watching a few times and giving some inspired coaching.

Have you considered the use of "prepared impromptus?" Interpreters or presenters have many opportunities to respond to questions from their audience—the same questions that are asked routinely. Rather than taking each one and answering anew or falling into a pattern of responses that haven't been well-thought out—why not prepare an engaging response that you practice and are ready to give when the occasion arises? A "spontaneous" reply prepared and rehearsed beforehand, a "prepared impromptu" is perhaps the most effective way of consistently making a strong interpretive statement. All good speakers do this, so why not museum interpreters? All it takes is a little bit of time and planning.

How much planning? As Mark Twain once said, "It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech." So it is with these "prepared impromptus." To the audience it appears to be a fresh response to the question they have just asked (from their standpoint, the question is new, of course). You, on the other hand, have prepared and practiced your best response.

In any interpretive situation, you can have a number of prepared impromptus, and when someone asks you a question or a topic comes up, you provide a transition/entry line, pull out your prepared impromptu, and off you go! Be sure to incorporate movement, engaging and descriptive language, and interactivity when appropriate.

Have you made sure your scene or presentation is interesting? It is worthwhile to stop periodically, look at your presentation or scene and ask yourself, "Is this interesting?" Jon Lipski, playwright for the Museum of Science, Boston, felt that it was so important to make museum theater interesting that he created a "Ten Commandments of Museum Theater" that apply to museum interpretation as well. These Ten Commandments are:

1. *Thou shalt not be boring*
2. *Thou shalt not be boring*
3. *Thou shalt not be boring*
4. *Thou shalt not be boring*
5. *Thou shalt not be boring*
6. *Thou shalt not be boring*
7. *Thou shalt not be boring*
8. *Thou shalt not be boring*
9. *Thou shalt not be boring*

   And

10. *Thou shalt always deliver the information.*[5]

Unfortunately, too many museum presentations place all their emphasis on number ten and load up the presentation with facts and dates. They fail to keep in mind the simple adage to engage and not bore the audience. Note that "engaged" does not mean just "entertained" but implies relevant interpretive content as well.

Physicality

All thought and imagination will be for naught if the audience or visitors cannot hear or understand you. This is where the "Physicality" aspect of theater comes into play—making yourself understood through your voice and body. We touched on some movement elements above and below we will briefly review some thoughts and exercises related to voice.

Many of you have probably had the unfortunate experience of straining or losing your voice at the end of a long day of interpretation. Others may have difficulty finding enough volume to reach the back of a room in which you are speaking, while others lose their audiences attention because they mumble and do not enunciate their words. In addition, everyone has had the mind-numbing experience of listening to someone who speaks in a monotone with little or no inflection or expression and who lulls us into inattention and boredom.

The above problems are common throughout the world of museum interpretation and can all be addressed through voice training techniques commonly used in theater. Five important elements can bring success to your speech efforts: warm-up, breathing, relaxation, articulation, and expression.

Courtesy of Conner Prairie

The Fall Creek Massacre Trial. One of many performances at Conner Prairie.

Warm-up. Just as a dancer or anyone about to do strenuous activity stretches and prepares his or her body for dancing or exercise, so should an interpreter prepare their voice. One of the most effective ways to loosen up and relax your voice is humming, an exercise you can do in the privacy of your car as you drive to work. First hum just a single note, then a favorite song. Next, try humming up and down the scale and dropping down one tone each time.

Breathing is the core of your voice. Proper breathing enables you to have sufficient volume to project to those standing in the rear of your group and enough endurance to speak for a long period of time—all of this without straining your voice. When you breathe in properly, you take in enough air for exhalation, and control of that exhalation gives you control of your voice. To give you an idea of how breath affects your volume, try doing this experiment. Take a deep breath, exhale until your lungs are empty, and then try to say as loudly as you can, pushing the sound from your lower abdomen, "History is fun." If you have emptied your air, you can barely do it. Now take a deep breath, filling your lower lungs (not your chest) and try saying the same thing. Not so hard, is it, when your lungs are full? You can even add volume if you have enough air. The trick is to breathe in so your stomach expands and not your upper lungs.

Relaxation affects the pitch of your voice, your vol-

[5] Jon Lipski, "Playwriting for Museum or: How to Make a Drama out of Slime Molds" in *Case Studies in Museum, Zoo, and Aquarium Theater*, Laura Maloney and Catherine Hughes, eds. (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1999).

ume, and the strain you put on your vocal chords. Try the humming exercise above, with the idea of relaxing your vocal chords and your neck. Notice that your voice should relax and your pitch should be a bit lower. As you learn to control your breathing and relax your voice, you should also lessen the strain on it.

Articulation is indispensable for allowing audiences to understand what you are saying and enabling you to be heard without having to speak as loudly. You can increase your verbal dexterity by trying any of the old stand-by practice phrases such as "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers," or make up your own to practice your enunciation. Try saying the phrases clearly and cleanly, paying attention to the consonants.

Expression in your voice gives you nuance, emotion, and emphasis and helps audiences understand your meaning. It makes the sound of your voice more pleasant to the ear—more interesting and less boring. This is clearly one area where many interpreters are remiss. One of the best ways to learn to become more expressive is to read aloud. Try reading to children or to a friend. You might choose some poetry you like, for example Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." Read it as if you are very sad and then try reading it as if you are quite happy. Try a variety of different emotions. The purpose is to learn a variety of expressive ranges in your voice to help engage your visitors.

Also try to vary your pace—sometimes it makes sense to talk slowly, other times more rapidly. What does not make for an interesting interpretation or talk is to speak at the same pace all the time. Keeping some variation—in pacing, expression, and volume—makes you more interesting to listen to.

Coming Back to "Heart"

Our brief tour through theater and interpretation has taken you through the elements of being "HIPP"—heart, imagination, planning, and physicality. As you begin to look at all four of these and integrate them into your interpretive work, it is useful to keep a couple thoughts in mind. Without proper planning, your efforts will probably not reach the interpretive success you desire. If you do not have the imagination to create engaging interpretation, whether in museum theater, living history characters, guided tours, or other interpretations with visitors, then you run the risk of being boring. If visitors cannot hear or understand you, you will have lost them even with the best-designed interpretation.

Even with all three of the above in place, however, unless you have "heart," you will find your enthusiasm and energy flagging in the end. Your heart might be tied up with the mission of the museum, or it might be based on the fact that you like talking to people. It might even be based on your enthusiasm for interpreting or performing. In many ways, it doesn't matter what makes you passionate about your work. It is only important that you have that passion or heart that you can transfer to others. For without heart, you will not have the motivation or the energy to care enough about your work to plan, practice, rehearse, and make it better. And that would be a loss for you and the public.

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Telling a Story in 100 Words: Effective Label Copy

By Larry Borowsky

Consider two blocks of interpretive text for a panel in an exhibit about the Great Depression. Here's the first one:

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s was one of the worst ecological disasters in U.S. history. It was caused by severe drought and erosion, and resulted in the loss of millions of acres of topsoil throughout the Great Plains. Baca County lay at the heart of the disaster. For several years, the region got less than half the annual average of 15 inches, the longest and deepest drought ever recorded here. The land was already in poor shape due to decades of overuse, and the drought left it unable to sustain crops. Baca County farmland lost more than 80 percent of its value during the 1930s. By the end of the decade more than half of its farms were in foreclosure.

And here's the second:

First the rains stopped; then the land dried up and billowed. In those two cruel strokes, the Dust Bowl swept much of Baca County away. Swirling earth blackened the skies, jammed machinery, choked livestock, and stripped farmhouses free of paint. Since the first fields were plowed here in the 1880s, farmers had always lived with drought—but not on this scale. Half the county's residents drifted off between 1931 and 1936, often reaping no return on acreage their families had worked for 50 years. Those who remained were certain recovery lay just one thundershower away. But no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County soil finally brought forth a wheat crop—the first since 1932.

The first is not a bad label. It's informative and factual, and it introduces a number of important themes in a very short space. But it's also as dry as Dust Bowl dirt—a loose assemblage of facts that

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A Dust Bowl farmer and young son on a tractor near Cland, NM.

are liable to drift out of the reader's mind at the first gust of wind. The material is not binding. It's not the kind of soil in which the roots of knowledge can take firm hold.

The second one has fewer facts but, I would argue, more truth. There's a unity to it. The images are coherent, and the sentences build upon one another. This label is much stickier, much more apt to get caked under a reader's fingernails—and more likely to nourish the seeds of lasting knowledge in his or her mind.

"History, a fable agreed on, is not a science but a branch of literature," wrote Wallace Stegner in the Fall 1965 issue of the journal *The American West*. It is "an artifact made by artificers and sometimes by artists. Like fiction, it has only persons, places, and events to work with, and like fiction it may present them either in summary or in dramatic scene…. The dramatizing of legitimately dramatic true events does not necessarily falsify them, nor need it leave their meaning ambiguous. Dramatic narrative is simply one means by which a historian can make a point vividly."[1]

Dramatic narrative is dangerous territory for a nonfiction discipline such as history, and especially so when you've only got 100 words or so in which to write. What kind of story can you expect to tell in so short a space? Let's turn that question around and ask how many facts can you really convey in a 100-word label? And how many of those facts do readers carry with them when they leave the exhibit? I bet it's not a high percentage.

A reader is more likely to remember a dynamic narrative than a compendium of static facts. A narrative-driven label, if executed properly, can provoke a more powerful response from the audience than a traditional expository label, and generate a stronger sense of identification with the exhibit. To give the story room to develop, you might have to withhold a fact or two from your label, but, again, what's the value of one additional fact? Weigh that value against the value of inspiration—of having your readers get so excited about your subject matter that they seek further information about it after they've left the museum. *That* is the primary dividend of narrative-driven labels. They can stir the imagination and get visitors excited about your subject matter. They can create a springboard effect, giving visitors a reason and a desire to learn more about the exhibit's topic after they've left your museum, to seek out books and articles and films that are much longer and more information-packed than an exhibit label (even an entire exhibit) could possibly be.

Having said that, narrative labels still must contain information. They need to contain enough information so that readers who aren't inspired to pursue further reading on your subject still come away from the exhibit with a solid, basic knowledge of the subject matter. By packaging that information in a narrative form, you can both inform and inspire. Doing so requires tradeoffs and conscious choices about which facts to present, which ones to withhold, and what order they're presented in.

Here's how to go about it.

Is it a Story or Not?

Before outlining the key ingredients of a 100-word story, it seems appropriate to firm up the definition of "story" beyond the single example I cited in the introduction. As a general rule, consider a label to be a story if it produces some of the same responses in a reader that a much longer work of fiction can. Specifically, focus on the following:

1. Does it create an air of suspense and/or tension (hook the reader)?

This is a reader's most primal response to any story, the desire to know what happens next. Creating this mood can be tricky with respect to historical material, because the sequence of events and eventual outcome is often common knowledge to some or all of your readers. This is likely the case with the Dust Bowl. But even so, a well-crafted 100-word story can simulate the feeling of suspense by leaving readers vaguely unsure of where the label is headed.

Compare the two Dust Bowl labels. The first one gets directly to the resolution, using the basic form of an expository paragraph, a topic sentence up front, followed by details and evidence that support the topic sentence. It is clear and informative, but not a story. Since the outcome is stated as a *fait accompli*, the reader has no sense of working toward an unknown destination. On the contrary, you start at a known destination (the worst ecological disaster in U.S. history) and work backwards. Once you've read the first sentence, no surprises await the reader.

In contrast, the second label begins with a vague, open-ended image. No specific time or place is cited,

nor even any particular historical fact. The ecological disaster is not stated so much as described, and the description unfolds incrementally and seems to deepen with each sentence, much as the Dust Bowl unfolded and deepened year by year. Most readers probably have a general sense of where the narrative is headed. They are viewing an exhibition about the Great Depression, after all, and most American adults probably have a general awareness of the Dust Bowl. Just the same, readers naturally look for resolution, and this label does not resolve itself until the final sentence. Until they reach the end, readers are going to be hungry for that resolution. They're going to want to know what happens next, even if they already know.

2. Does it trace a journey through time and/or distance (frame the story)?

This is also integral to any story, and closely related to the element of suspense. More important, however, the passage of time is also integral to the telling of history. Events of great significance usually don't happen in an instant, but they often come across that way in a 100-word label. That is unfortunate, and it is misleading.

Again, compare the two Dust Bowl labels. The first one cannot be described as a "journey" because (as described above) it begins and ends at the same known, fixed destination. The ecological disaster is presented as something that occurred in a single stroke, rather than as a dynamic process that occurred over a long period of years. Likewise, the decade of the 1930s is presented as a single, indivisible unit of time. There is little sense of a cause-and-effect relationship between events.

In the second label, effect follows cause. First the land suffers, then farm property suffers, and ultimately people suffer. It's all presented in sequence, creating the illusion of movement through time. Reinforcing that sensation, the years 1931, 1936, and 1940 are called out by name explicitly depicting the passage of years, and framing the era with start and endpoints. As a result, the Dust Bowl comes across not as a static event, but as a progression of events, a discrete period of time with a beginning, middle, and end.

3. Does it encourage readers to suspend disbelief?

This is certainly essential for readers of fiction, but how does it apply to readers of history? Insofar as the events of a historical narrative are all true, the suspension of disbelief would seem to be unnecessary. What is really referred to here is the reader's willingness to place him or herself in an alternate world—to become drawn into a reality that exists only in the text and accept that reality on its own terms. In historical writing, this is often helpful, because it encourages readers to identify with the bygone world they're reading about—to feel, if only fleetingly, as if they're living in the past.

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A Dust Bowl farm in the Coldwater District near Dalhart, TX.

Such an effect clearly is not produced by the first Dust Bowl label, with its authoritative textbook-ish prose. But the second label achieves the effect. It encourages readers to feel, hear, and sense the events of the past as if they are really happening. *And they really did happen.* That is the whole point. Labels that nudge readers to suspend disbelief can thus produce a depth of identification that's impossible to achieve with a more expository, objective approach.

Elements of a 100-Word Story

Keep in mind that writing story labels is a matter of tradeoffs and choices. This form of storytelling is as elastic as every other form, which means that a writer often gets the best results by breaking the rules.

Don't consider the following to be rules. Think of them as guidelines—instruments that can be useful, but are not essential, when constructing a 100-word narrative. It's a short list with only three elements. They are:

- A narrative arc,
- Thematic unity, and
- A provocative first sentence.

But remember it's all about tradeoffs. It may be that one particular label works more effectively if you sacrifice a measure of thematic unity in order to sharpen the narrative arc. For a different label, you might have such a great first sentence that you just can't alter it, even though it dilutes the narrative arc somewhat. So this recipe for 100-word stories is exceedingly mutable. You can alter the ratio of the ingredients and/or substitute liberally as need, taste, and/or circumstances dictate.

Narrative Arc

That's fancy talk for saying the label needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning introduces a problem and a crisis, or an unresolved question. The middle describes the grappling with that unsolved problem, the attempts to rectify the imbalance.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Gottscho-Schleisner Collection [LC-G622-T01-81482 DLC]

A stagecoach at Riverside, NY.

The finale reaches a point of equilibrium—not necessarily resolution, but at least a point of stability or of change. Something has changed; the universe of the story has been altered.

Sticking with the Dust Bowl label of the introduction, what's the narrative arc? Here's the text again:

> *First the rains stopped; then the land dried up and billowed. In those two cruel strokes, the Dust Bowl swept much of Baca County away. Swirling earth blackened the skies, jammed machinery, choked livestock, and stripped farmhouses free of paint. Since the first fields were plowed here in the 1880s, farmers had always lived with drought—but not on this scale. Half the county's residents drifted off between 1931 and 1936, often reaping no return on acreage their families had worked for 50 years. Those who remained were certain recovery lay just one thundershower away. But no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County soil finally brought forth a wheat crop—the first since 1932.*

In the simplest terms, this narrative says:
Beginning: There was a famine.
Middle: The famine tested people's faith in the land and Providence.
End: The famine finally ended—having left a deep scar.

There is nothing too fancy about it. You can't (and shouldn't try to) get too fancy in 100 words. But thinking in terms of beginning/middle/end helps you make choices about what information to include in a label, and what information to leave off. It provides a through-line, a backbone, which every piece of information has to support. If it doesn't, the label sags.

Take a quick look at the first and last sentences of the Dust Bowl label, and note how the last sentence reflects back directly upon the first. Indeed, one could almost fuse the two sentences together to form a mini-narrative, viz.:

> *First the rains stopped; then the land dried up and billowed….no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County finally brought forth a wheat crop.*

Use this fusion as a shorthand way of evaluating a draft of a label. Ask yourself if the last sentence reflects back to the first one. If you only read those two sentences and nothing else, can you discern the outlines of a story? Consider these pairings:

> *Stricken with tuberculosis at 21, Doc Holliday came west in 1873 with the standard "lunger" prescription: get rest and fresh air…. By 1887 his ravaged lungs were beyond saving, and he expired within two months.*

> *In the late 19th century, towns came and went in the San Juan Mountains as abruptly as gusts of wind…. But their remnants, still visible throughout the San Juans, bear powerful witness to the enterprising spirit of the frontier.*

> *Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres—or would have, if it didn't leak so badly…. the flood devastated farms in this area and tore out six bridges in Denver, thirty miles downstream.*

In every case, the last sentence is a natural extension of the first. So no matter what information you pack in between, the whole thing is going to hang together.

Thematic Unity

More fancy language, which means, in this case, that a 100-word label can only be, ultimately, about one thing. In the Dust Bowl example above, the one thing is *the land blew away.* Look at how the word choices reinforce that unifying theme:

> *First the rains stopped; then the* ***land*** *dried up and* billowed. *In those two cruel strokes, the Dust Bowl* swept *much of Baca County away.* Swirling ***earth*** *blackened the skies, jammed machinery, choked livestock, and stripped farmhouses free of paint. Since the first* ***fields*** *were* ***plowed*** *here in the 1880s, farmers had always lived with drought—but not on this scale. Half the county's residents* drifted off *between 1931 and 1936, often reaping no return on* ***acreage*** *their families had worked for 50 years. Those who remained were certain recovery lay just one thundershower away. But no one* breathed *easy until 1940, when Baca County* ***soil*** *finally brought forth a wheat crop—the first since 1932.*

The words in **bold** all refer to the land; the words in roman text, to wind. So the language itself is structured to reinforce the storyline of the Dust Bowl. Look at another example:

> *Admirers said William "Billy" Adams* ***shot down*** *more bad laws than any legislator in Colorado history. During forty years as a state representative and senator (1886-1926), the Alamosa rancher won* ***countless battles*** *for his working-class constituents. He* ***muscled*** *wage supports, agricultural*

loans, child-labor laws, and mine-safety statutes through the legislature, as well as the bill authorizing Alamosa State College (now Adams State). Most important, he ***led a heroic stand*** *against the Ku Klux Klan, whose allies controlled the legislature during the 1920s. Adams used parliamentary tactics to* ***beat back*** *the KKK faction and then, in 1927, defeated its candidate in the gubernatorial race. He served three terms in that office and retired in 1933, having never lost an election.*

What do these words in **bold** tell you about Billy Adams? He was a strong man, a fighter. We could come right out and say that in a single expository sentence—"Billy Adams was a fighter"—but the statement has no resonance. Embedded within a narrative, in a suite of coordinated images, the assertion carries far more power and makes a much greater inpact on the reader.

A Provocative First Sentence

A good first sentence has three main purposes. It should:

A. Convey information,
B. Raise an unanswered question (hook the reader), and
C. Frame the theme of the story.

You can't always achieve all three of these objectives in a first sentence—indeed, sometimes you don't even want to achieve all three. But when I'm writing my first sentence, I always evaluate it in terms of these three criteria. Let's take them in order.

A. Convey information

In a 100-word label, there's no room to waste; every sentence has to convey information. But that doesn't mean every sentence has to be an expository statement of fact. On the contrary, you can pack plenty of information in a sentence that seems less a statement of fact than a flippant opinion, like this one:

Stagecoach passengers on the Butterfield Overland Despatch stood a better-than-even chance of surviving the journey to Denver.

There doesn't seem to be as much information in that sentence as there would be in a sentence such as "The Butterfield Overland Despatch operated from 1865 through 1870, carrying passengers from Joplin, Missouri to Denver." Or this one: "From 1865 through 1869, the Butterfield Overland Despatch was the only regularly scheduled transportation service to the Rocky Mountain region." But the sentence does convey a lot of facts; it just doesn't state any of them directly. It tells readers that:

- The Butterfield Overland Despatch was a stagecoach line.
- It carried passengers to Denver.
- It crossed terrain that must have been dangerous.
- It operated in the nineteenth century.

The last bullet point, the time frame, is not stated directly, yet many readers will be able to infer it—they've watched enough Westerns to have formed a rough association between stagecoach travel and the nineteenth century, and/or they know enough about early Denver settlement to make the connection. (The panel appears at a roadside history exhibit near Denver.) Just to make sure no reader misses the point, the implied time frame will be made explicit in a later sentence:

Stagecoach passengers on the Butterfield Overland Despatch stood a better-than-even chance of surviving the journey to Denver. That was the good news. The bad news? They had to endure hour after punishing hour on the coach's wooden bench, bouncing over prairie trails in hot, dusty, stifling misery. Although Butterfield used that era's most comfortable coaches (Concords), travelers suffered from the very first mile. Even the price ($75 one way from Kansas City) hurt. But travelers had no better option during the Butterfield's years of operation (1865-1870)—the railroads wouldn't be complete until 1870. And if they happened to pass the corpse-littered scene of an Indian attack, those road-weary passengers swallowed their complaints. Things could always get worse.

So while this first sentence does convey information, it defers certain pieces of "introductory" information (i.e., the time frame) in order to meet the other two objectives (i.e., raise an unanswered question and set up the rest of the story). This is a tradeoff that should be made consciously. You need to balance the three objectives.

Let's quickly look at another example:

Juan de Oñate may have built a fort beneath the Spanish Peaks in 1598—but maybe not.

Without having been told directly, the reader knows the following facts:

- Juan de Oñate lived in the late 1500s.
- Judging by his name, he was Spanish or Mexican.
- He must have been a soldier or explorer, because he built forts.
- He might have traveled in the vicinity of the Spanish Peaks.

We could state all those things directly: "In 1598, the Spanish conquistador Juan de Oñate led a group of 25 men from Santa Fe into this region." But that wouldn't achieve Objective 1 (hook the reader) or Objective 2 (frame the story). To show you what I

mean, let's stick with this example.

B. Raise an unanswered question (hook the reader)

While the first sentence has to provide information—to fill gaps in the reader's knowledge—it's just as important for the sentence to create gaps in the reader's knowledge by asking an unanswered question. In this example, the unanswered question is explicit, "Did Juan de Oñate build the fort or not?" The reader's curiosity is naturally aroused, and he or she has a strong incentive to keep on reading—to get the answer to the unanswered question. That is the air of suspense mentioned in the previous subsection.

In this example, it so happens that we're unable to provide the answer to the unanswered question of the first sentence:

> *Juan de Oñate may have built a fort beneath the Spanish Peaks in 1598—but maybe not. Another Spanish explorer who ventured into this region, Antonio de Valverde, supposedly erected a post nearby in 1719. Who can say for sure? So many legends surround these mountains that it's impossible to tell fact from fiction. The Utes called them Huajatolla—"breasts of the earth"—and believed vengeful spirits haunted the slopes. Spanish prospecters coveted the peaks' treasures but dreaded their power; one explorer swore he saw fire shoot forth from the crest. Visible from 100 miles off, these landmarks guided 19th-century travelers, but most kept a respectful distance away just in case.*

This is a question we can't answer. But that's kind of the point. In this case, the Spanish Peaks possessed a mystique, and even today there are legends and rumors about them that historians can neither confirm nor refute. (Note that most of the implied information in the first sentence is made explicit in the next sentence—Oñate was, indeed, a Spanish explorer.)

Take a look at this one:

> *Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres—or would have, if it didn't leak so badly.*

There is some good information here. Castlewood Dam was built to irrigate local farms, and it apparently had some structural problems. But what's going to keep people reading? Are the unanswered questions implied by the reference to the leak? Did the dam eventually burst? And, assuming that it did, what happened afterwards?

> *Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres—or would have, if it didn't leak so badly. The seepage began the year the dam was completed (1890); within seven years, a 100-foot section of the earthen barrier had crumbled. Engineers made repairs and vouched for the structure's soundness, and local farmers—who needed the water—trusted them, even though the leaking continued on and off for decades. On August 3, 1933, the inevitable happened. Castlewood collapsed, releasing a two-billion-gallon tidal wave down Cherry Creek. Only two people drowned, thanks to a switchboard operator's life-saving calls, but the flood devastated farms in this area and tore out six bridges in Denver, thirty miles downstream.*

So the rest of the label provides the answers to the questions raised in the first sentence.

Note how many expository elements are slipped in throughout the narrative.

- Year of completion? **1890**
- Composition of the dam? **Earth**
- Stream dammed? **Cherry Creek**
- Location? **Thirty miles from Denver**

We might have dispensed with all this information in a single expository sentence: "Built in 1890 on Cherry Creek, 30 miles upstream of Denver, Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres." Sure it's informative, but it's boring. It doesn't pique our interest or make us want to learn more about the subject.

C. Frame the story

Continue with the first sentence about Castlewood Dam. The choice of detail, and the presentation thereof, sets up this label as a story about misplaced faith in technology, about humankind's inability to ever truly tame nature, and about hubris and humility. If one wanted to frame the story differently—say, as a story about heroism in the face of calamity—one would make different choices in the composition of the first sentence.

So before you write that sentence, you have to know what kind of story you want to tell. The rest of the story should hang off that first sentence the way a coat hangs off a hook on the coat rack.

Beyond the 100th Word—the Untold Story

Consider the following 100-word story:

> *Stricken with tuberculosis at 21, Doc Holliday came west in 1873 with the standard "lunger" prescription: get rest and fresh air. Instead he drifted like a contagion, drinking and gambling his way from Dallas to Dodge City to Tombstone. Hot-tempered and reckless, he killed a poker rival in 1880, his first—and maybe last—murder; most of Holliday's attempts failed because his wheezing and boozing made him an unsteady shot. Still, he was dangerous—striking suddenly and at random,*

making brave men uneasy, just like his disease. By 1887, when Holliday moved into the Hotel Glenwood, his ravaged lungs were beyond saving. He expired within two months.

A reader is going to form a certain impression of Doc Holliday from this label, but he or she also might come away with it with a few questions about the subject. For example:

- Where did Doc Holliday come from?
- Why did he ignore his doctor's orders?
- Why did he kill that rival poker player?
- Why didn't he go to jail for it?
- What's a lunger?

These are all good questions, and it is not bad that they're left unanswered. On the contrary, it's consistent with the storyline to leave them unanswered, insofar as the narrative equates Doc Holliday with an impersonal force of nature—a contagion, an epidemic. Who knows where a virus comes from? Who knows why it acts as it does? Doc Holliday always has been a mythic figure, and this label acknowledges and respects that status. He remains a sketchy, somewhat outsized figure in this telling. But the label still dispels the myth of the Wild West gunslinger as somebody endowed with superhuman powers. On the contrary, in this story the gunman is only too human—he is what he is because of his own mortality and his frailties. We don't encourage the reader to reflect on these things unless we leave a few blanks for him or her to fill in. So I would argue that the existence of these unanswered questions actually strengthens the label.

Unanswered questions also provoke curiosity and can motivate the reader to seek answers on his or her own, after leaving our exhibit—and that is surely one of our goals. However, if a given curator was uncomfortable with this level of ambiguity, unanswered questions can always be addressed without damaging the overall narrative:

Stricken with tuberculosis at 21, Doc Holliday came west ***from Philadelphia*** *in 1873 with the standard prescription: rest and fresh air. Instead,* ***seemingly gripped by a death wish, he drank and gambled*** *his way from Dallas to Dodge City to Tombstone. Hot-tempered and reckless, he shot a man in 1880* ***during a cardroom dispute****—Holliday's first, and maybe last, murder (****he was acquitted on a self-defense plea****). Most of his shootings failed because his wheezing and boozing unsteadied his aim. Still, he was dangerous—striking suddenly and at random, making brave men uneasy, just like his disease. By 1887, when Holliday moved into the Hotel Glenwood, his ravaged lungs were beyond saving. He expired within two months.*

This version is only ten words longer than the original, but it addresses all of the questions on the bullet-pointed list above (answers in **bold**):

- Where did Doc Holliday come from? **Philadelphia**
- Why did he ignore his doctor's orders? **Seemed to have a death wish**
- Why did he kill that rival poker player? **Cardroom dispute**
- Why didn't he go to jail for it? **Pled self-defense**
- What's a lunger? **N/A**

The tradeoff here is that, in order to include the "death wish" text, we lose the "drifted like a contagion" metaphor. I think it's a losing exchange. To answer that question adequately, it would take a whole chapter (or more) of a book. It's a complex question without a pat answer. We only have enough space here to provide a hasty answer to the question, one that will still leave many readers unsatisfied. The contagion metaphor gets closer to the truth. He ignored the prescription for health because he was flat-out unhealthy. One might as well ask why a germ kills its own host, and thereby destroys itself. It's simply in the germ's nature to do so. Live for the moment and damn the consequences—that's as good an answer to the question as any.

Let's take another example:

In its own way, Brown's Hole circa 1890 was the very picture of frontier law and order. People generally got along with their neighbors and minded their own business, and no wonder—their business sometimes included cattle rustling, bank robbery, tax evasion, or worse. Safe from the authorities' prying eyes, wanted men such as Butch Cassidy, Black Jack Ketchum, and Isom Dart lived peacefully in this inaccessible valley. Almost everyone was welcome—except men with badges. One lawman who'd chased a fugitive across most of Wyoming stopped his pursuit when it reached Brown's Hole and handed the case off to a man named Philbrick—who was himself wanted in three states.

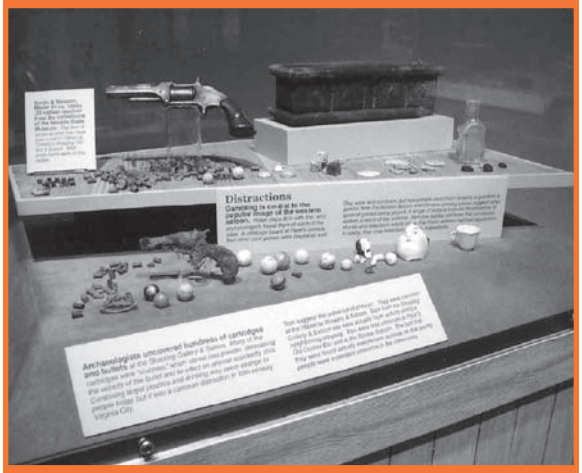
But hold on a second—

- Where was Brown's Hole?
- Who were Black Jack Ketchum and Isom Dart?
- Why didn't authorities just raid the place?
- Why did the law-abiding residents tolerate these criminals?

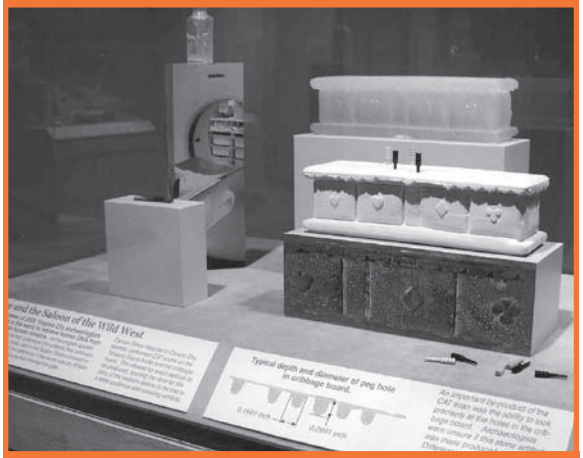
I cite this example to suggest other, non-textual ways of answering the questions. The first one is simple enough, include a map on or near the label that shows the location of Brown's Hole (it's in extreme northwestern Colorado). The second question can be answered in captions accompanying photographs of Ketchum and Dart (the former was a train robber, the latter, a cattle rustler). The third

All photos from Nevada State Museum, Carson City, NV

A narrative-driven label, if executed properly, can provoke a more powerful response in the audience than a traditional expository label and generate a stronger sense of identification with the exhibit.



In a 100-word label, there's no room to waste; every sentence has to convey information.



Labels that nudge readers to suspend disbelief can produce a depth of identification that's impossible to achieve with a more expository, objective approach.

question also takes a graphic answer. Topography made a raid out of the question, so a topographical map or illustration is in order. A caption might cite a description of the citadel's impregnability contained in a U.S. marshal's report.

As to the last question—I think this one is best left to the reader's imagination and curiosity. Much like the question of why Doc Holliday didn't obey his doctor's orders, this one admits no easy answers. There's a complex dynamic at work, one that would require many pages to illustrate adequately. It is best merely to drop a hint and try to prod readers to investigate on their own.

Conclusion

The point I would like to conclude with—one I've returned to throughout this essay—is tradeoffs. There's no right or wrong way to write an exhibit label, nor is there a hard delineation between an "expository" label and a "narrative" one. Most labels contain both elements out of necessity. The question the writer must answer is this: what is the proper balance to strike among these elements? What effect do I want to achieve? What do I want my audience to walk away with?

When we write, we compose a mosaic. We pick and choose the "tiles" (the words, facts, and images) we want to include, and which ones we want to withhold. We pick and choose the shape and arrangement of the tiles. In a 100-word label, the number of available tiles is far greater than the available space, so the use of one tile necessarily excludes the use of many others. That makes each choice an extremely important one. The key to writing good text is to make those choices deliberately—to weigh what is gained and what is lost if I swap out tile B for tile A; if I tilt a given tile at an angle instead of lodging it square; if I pack my tiles densely or disperse them unevenly.

If I follow this process, I end up with labels that make the most of that 100-word space—labels that not only convey facts but also hint at truths; labels that not only inform but also entertain, maybe even enchant.

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[1] Wallace Stegner, "On the Writing of History," *The American West* (Fall 1965): 7-8.

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Families First! Rethinking Exhibits to Engage All Ages

By Anne Grimes Rand, Executive Vice President; Robert Kiihne, Director of Exhibits; and Sarah Watkins, Curator USS Constitution Museum

The Problem: A nationwide survey of 5,500 museum-going families in 2007 indicated that history museums are the least popular with today's families. When families chose among eight different types of museums, only twenty-three percent chose to visit history museums.[1]

The Opportunity: The likelihood of visiting a history museum or historic site increases in families with grade-school-age children who are beginning to learn about history. There is a window of opportunity for museum professionals to entice families to visit, especially by developing special programs and exhibits that target this audience. If museum professionals share effective techniques for engaging an intergenerational audience, history museums can appeal to more families. This demonstrates their value to the local community as fun and exciting places for hands-on learning.

Proposed Solutions: At the USS Constitution Museum, we wondered if there were simple, low-cost techniques to encourage family learning and conversation in the galleries that might work in different history museums.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services provided the necessary resources to explore this question through a 2004 National Leadership Grant. With the assistance of a steering committee, a study of best practices, and a prototype gallery where staff interviewed over 2,000 families, we learned a great deal about how to encourage families to laugh and learn together in a history museum. This technical leaflet is a summary of findings from three years of studying intergenerational interaction within the USS Constitution Museum's prototype exhibit in Boston. A more detailed explanation of the project findings is available at www.familylearningforum.org. While the content we tested explored seafaring in the age of sail, the techniques identified in this article and on the website are adaptable to a wide range of history museums. The goal of this publication is to share replicable techniques and approaches that have proven to be successful at engaging family audiences in history.

Family Learning in Museums

Families are the first learning community that a person experiences. When families visit a museum, there is an opportunity to engage the family in compelling experiences. John Falk and Lynn Dierking in *Learning from Museums* observe that "museum exhibitions and programs, when done well, support opportunities for families to participate in and become more effective communities of learners, allowing group members to share, watch one another, have a new and novel experience, reinforce something they already knew, or see something in a new way.… All of this contributes to a highly personal experience, which is all important if meaningful learning is to occur." The experience of visiting an exhibition together, exploring the past, comparing it to the present, and solving problems together builds a shared memory that lasts long after the visit to the museum.[2]

Family learning in a museum may take many different forms. When visitors engage with one another, as well as the content of the museum exhibit, family learning is likely to occur. The Children's Museum of Indianapolis describes the characteristics of family learning in this way:

- Family learning is a playful, fun, and social experience.
- Family learning is influenced by the ages of the children and adults in the group.
- Families all learn in different ways.
- Families find value in their own personal observations and experiences; they learn by working, talking, and solving problems together.[3]

Increasing family visitation has benefits in both the short and long term. Falk and Dierking report that the adults who are most likely to bring their families to a museum are those who visited museums with their parents as a child. Engaging a family audience today will increase present visitation *and* build a pattern of family museum visitation into the future. Exhibits and programs that engage visitors of different ages and learning styles create greater opportunities for learning within a museum. Engaged visitors spend longer discussing the activity or exhibit, and their satisfaction increases. When visitors are engaged in a compelling experience, they are more likely to stay longer, make a donation, plan a return visit, or become a member.

I. Putting Families First

When the USS Constitution Museum put families at the center of exhibit development, it led to a radical shift in our thinking and creative process. Families first meant social interaction was as important as conveying content. If visitors are bored, very little content will be delivered, much less remembered a week later. If visitors have a great experience they will remember content long after leaving.

Families first also meant that we could not assume we knew what was best. Instead we let families tell us what they are interested in, how they want to learn about the topic, and what makes the topic compelling, memorable, personally relevant, and enjoyable. We discovered that designing a thematically organized exhibit facilitates family learning more than a chronologically organized exhibit. Thematic organization allows families to bounce around naturally

Photos Greg Cooper courtesy USS Constitution Museum

The prototype gallery at the USS Constitution Museum offers hands-on opportunities for visitors of all ages to sample life at sea.

and bypass areas altogether. By encouraging positive group interactions and using humor within the exhibit, families were more receptive to learning.

Allowing families a voice in the exhibit development process had an unexpected benefit for the exhibit's in-house steering committee. The USS Constitution Museum's planning team included members of the curatorial, exhibits, and education departments. We learned that letting the visitors decide eliminated a lot of interdepartmental debates. Testing ideas with the visitors was also very freeing. Instead of getting too invested in any one idea or arguing over whose idea is better, we let it go and directly asked the visitors what they thought.

II. Crafting a Compelling Experience

Use Interactive Elements to Convey Key Messages

Certain exhibit concepts or stories that are important to the museum may be difficult for visitors to grasp. There may be few if any artifacts or images to support these concepts. These concepts many be perfect candidates for interactives. Visitor tracking studies at the USS Constitution Museum demonstrated that families stop at interactives more than any other kind of exhibit.

In 2005, the museum tested an interactive that illustrated just such a topic with family visitors, recruiting a crew for the USS *Constitution* in 1812. There are almost no objects or images related to recruiting, but understanding why someone would join the crew was vitally important to the exhibit team. The recruiting station is a simple two-sided tabletop interactive with questions on one side and a related image on the other. Questions are slightly humorous and relate to a person's skills, health, and sailing experience, foreshadowing the exhibition to come. Questions include: Have you ever swung in a hammock? Are you willing to do it next to 200 of your closest friends who haven't taken a bath in a while? The exhibit team hoped to encourage conversation about what it meant to be a sailor in 1812.

Families at the USS Constitution Museum consider the life of a sailor in 1812 and discuss questions such as, "Are you willing to work a four-hour shift before breakfast?"

The USS Constitution Museum designed interactive exhibit elements that met the PISEC criteria, [see sidebar] then subjected them to rigorous formative evaluation. This resulted in a series of interactive experiences that encourage family participation and conversation. Tracking studies show that families spend three times longer in this hands-on exhibition than in our larger, more traditional history display. Satisfaction is higher and visitors are absorbing exhibit themes while laughing and learning together.

Multi-sided Exhibits Take Up More Space, But That's OK!

One PISEC characteristic that can be extremely effective comes at a cost. Multi-sided exhibits take up a larger footprint, easy for a cavernous science museum, but a challenge for history museums with limited gallery space. Creating an exhibit element that is multi-sided also reduces available wall space, but it's worth it!

The benefit is changing how visitors use your museum. Families gather around multi-sided exhibits, interacting as a group rather than as individual museum-goers. The resulting conversations can be the highest form of visitor engagement.

Integrating Learning Styles

Museums are free choice learning institutions. Understanding the different ways people prefer to learn can help us broaden our exhibit's appeal, increase visitor engagement, and spur new methods of exhibit interaction. People do not learn by reading alone. Museums are an ideal environment to teach using a variety of learning styles. Addressing a

PISEC

The Philadelphia/Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC) identified seven characteristics to promote family learning.[4]

- Multi-sided—the family can cluster around the exhibit.
- Multi-user—interaction allows for several sets of hands and bodies.
- Accessible—the exhibit can be comfortably used by children and adults.
- Multi-outcome—observation and interaction are sufficiently complex to foster group discussion.
- Multi-modal—appeals to different learning styles and levels of knowledge.
- Readable—text is arranged in easily understood segments.
- Relevant—the exhibit provides cognitive links to visitors' existing knowledge and experience.

Try this test: *Take the PISEC criteria into your galleries and see how many criteria your exhibit elements meet. Are there simple modifications you could make to meet more of the PISEC guidelines?*

different learning style need not equal dollar signs. For example, charts or visual representations can sometimes present information in a way that appeals to visitors with strength in math or logic.

Try This Test: *Print a list of learning styles, such as Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, and see how many of these techniques you employ in your exhibitions. This is a great exhibit-planning tool to see if you are creating experiences for different types of learners.*[5]

III. The Power of Prototypes

Prototypes can take many forms. The form depends on what the final exhibit will be and upon where you are in the process. Show a few versions of a label on a clipboard and you can quickly find out if families interpret the label as your exhibit development team intended. A paper and cardboard mock-up can test an idea with staff and a few family, friends, or visitors. Observing visitor flow near a neatly posted paper directional sign can show if your signage will do what you need it to, before investing in expensive, ineffective signage. Even a cheap plywood and laminate version of an interactive that can be tested on the floor is much less expensive than a finished version—especially if the final version is not successful. Exhibit prototypes can test:

- Functionality—Will it work?
- Clarity—Do visitors understand how to interact with the exhibit?
- Comprehension—Do visitors understand the exhibit's key idea or story?
- Interest—Do visitors want to engage with the exhibit? Do they unexpectedly show interest in certain elements?

Be Prepared to Revise Exhibits

Information gained from prototyping and visitor observations will most likely lead to exhibit design changes—changes that will improve the visitor experience and opportunities for learning. A favorite idea among the exhibition development team may not work and may need to be abandoned. You must know what you are prototyping for, and be open to unforeseen outcomes.

Prototyping (a form of formative evaluation) is an iterative process. *Draft. Test. Modify. Repeat.* Many times during prototyping, the audience may suggest changes and additions exhibit developers had not considered that improve the product significantly. To get an overall feel for visitor satisfaction, it can be helpful to ask visitors to rate each interactive (like a movie with a five-star scale). The USS Constitution Museum kept modifying each exhibit element until the average visitor ranking reached four-and-a-half stars. The museum has come to see formative evaluation as making their family audience a partner in exhibit development.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION

Formative evaluation is conducted when you have something to show your audience.

You might try testing:

- A draft of text panels, instructions, or even object labels
- Graphics (charts or illustrations)
- Interactive prototypes (ideas in a 3-D form—cardboard & masking tape are okay)
- Rough cuts of media pieces

Visitors scrub the deck with a holystone and discuss the life of a sailor in 1812. At the suggestion of visitors we added sand and made a more satisfying and authentic experience.

IV. Engaging Text: Short & Sweet

Developing content for a family audience at the USS Constitution Museum challenged us to convey history in a way that appeals to both adults and children. Some people felt this would mean "dumbing down" the story. Instead it led us to think thematically, choose information that best supports the themes, and layer content in creative ways.

We knew that our visitors did not want a book on the wall. So we gave ourselves the goal to limit our text panels to fifty words. Fifty words is brutally short, but it forced us to focus. For each panel, we asked ourselves, what is the main point we want to convey?

The short segments of text carry the themes in an engaging, conversational manner that reflects the perspective of the speaker (a crew member). These labels were unlike any we had ever written. Once we gained confidence in this new method, we discovered that label writing could actually be fun. Instead of dry, academic report writing, these labels turned into a creative writing exercise. We learned to have fun with word choice (i.e. "buddy" instead of "friend"). By simply changing the voice from third- to first-

person, the same content suddenly came alive. Some of our NEH-sponsored scholars were our toughest critics going into the process and our greatest supporters upon its completion.

The Proof is in The Numbers

The museum tracked and timed family visitors through two exhibitions: our traditional *Old Ironsides in War and Peace* exhibition and our family-focused prototype exhibit *A Sailor's Life for Me?* We found that family visitors spent an average of seven minutes in *War and Peace*, a 3,000-square-foot exhibit with many long text panels totaling nearly 4,500 words, sensational objects, and a few interactives. *A Sailor's Life for Me?* is only 2,000 square feet and contains about 1,500 words of text, but families spent nearly twenty-two minutes in the smaller exhibition. Just as important, families also talked to each other significantly more than in the *War and Peace* exhibition.

Using Questions and Quotes—A Research Study

Which technique is more effective to promote conversation?

The museum wanted to identify questioning techniques that encourage family conversation, so we tested three types of labels. We asked if visitors preferred:

- An actual historic quotation from a sailor
- A historic question that put them back in time, "What would you do in this situation?"
- A contemporary question bridging past to present such as "Have you ever been in a similar situation?"

Three hundred families commented on label text accompanying the cut-out figures in a pilot study before the prototype exhibit opened. A first-person context label accompanied each of three cut-out figures throughout the study.

Historic Quotation: "The most disagreeable duty in the ship was that of holystoning the decks on cold, frosty mornings." —Samuel Leech, 1810

Almost half of of the family members interviewed preferred the historic quote labels and sixty-three percent of males prefer historical quotations. Visitors stated they preferred historic quote labels because the content was accurate and authentic, provided a personal connection, and provided historical perspective.

Historical Question: *"Can you imagine being a sailor starting off your day with a cold saltwater scrub rather than a hot shower?"*

One-third of visitors and forty-seven percent of females prefer historical questions. Visitors expressed that these labels fulfilled their need for thought-provoking content and that the questions' open-endedness was more engaging.

Contemporary Question: *"What is the chore you dread the most? How often do you have to do it?"*

Fewer than two in ten visitors preferred the contemporary question. Due to this low response, we eliminated the contemporary question from the rest of the study after the pilot phase.

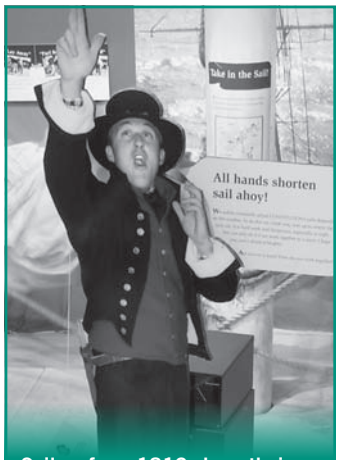
Summary: *When shown three types of labels, visitors showed a strong preference for both historic quotations and historical questions.*

What happened when visitors encountered these labels within the exhibit? Which were more effective at encouraging conversation? Staff observed over 550 visitors and recorded their behavior in tracking and timing behavioral studies. Visitors engaged in conversation with the historical question labels three times more often than with the historic quote labels. This highlights the importance of using different research tools to understand visitor preferences and behavior. The findings are not contradictory, as a visitor may prefer to read an authentic quotation to learn about the past directly; however, if an exhibit developer's aim is to encourage family conversations about the topic, the historical question is a more powerful technique.

Summary: *Posing a question is three times more likely to encourage visitor conversation than simply presenting information or a historic quotation.*

Peopling History

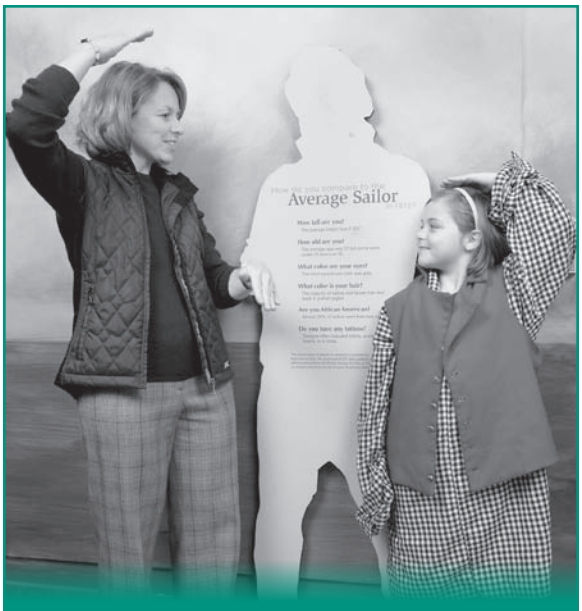
Our exhibition set out to reinterpret the USS *Constitution* by offering the human perspective. This interpretive strategy resonated with our family audience. By personalizing the story and telling it through people, our visitors connect on a personal level and can feel empathy for what the sailors went through and as a result are better able to imagine themselves in the sailors' shoes. To help bring the crew to life, full-scale photo cutouts visually "people" the exhibit and the text is written as if visitors are hearing sailors' stories first-hand. Because we illustrate a diverse range of crewmembers and the families they left behind, minorities, women, and children who may not expect to see themselves in our exhibition can make emotional and intellectual connections.



Sailors from 1812 share their experience through first person text and invite museum visitors to consider how their life today compares to 200 years ago.

The audience research we conducted focused on how to present personal narratives in engaging ways to foster personal connection between visitors and stories.

We tested different types of interpretive labels



How do you compare to an average sailor in 1812? Simple, direct questions compare today's visitors to sailors in 1812 and make statistical information relevant and fun.

accompanying a photo cutout and learned that sixty-four percent of visitors preferred labels written in the first-person as opposed to a third-person curatorial voice. Visitors reported that they preferred the conversational voice because it felt like the historical cutout was speaking directly to them.

When asked about the first-person approach, one visitor to our prototype exhibit commented:

> *"When I come to a history museum I want my family to hear it from the people who lived it, not a secondhand dry account. History should be alive and this type of label gives you a chance to be a part of that."*

V. Steal this Idea!

Here is a collection of simple, cheap, effective, and tested techniques that have worked in other exhibitions and may be applicable in your museum.

Making Work Fun

Children visiting Conner Prairie living history museum will sweep the floor, make the bed, or wash dishes when asked to by costumed interpreters. At other museums, children churn (imaginary) butter in Indianapolis, build a (foam) stone wall at Sturbridge Village, carry buckets of (imaginary) water at the Wenham Museum, and scrub the deck at the USS Constitution Museum. These full-body kinesthetic experiences are both an outlet for energy and a moment to pause and reflect on the similarities or differences between the past and the present. These activities set the seed for a conversation at home, when water rushes effortlessly from the tap, or butter comes neatly wrapped in paper.

Try a Board Game

Board games are a familiar form that can take advantage of successful pre-visit family interactions. They can also offer seating, a welcome rest within a museum visit. Through the roll of a dice, games can also highlight the role of chance in determining the final outcome. Games can be used as a summary element, to review content presented in the exhibition. Games have proven to be effective, engaging, and inexpensive. Families sit, smile, and converse, laughing and learning together.

Involve the Senses

An exhibit is more likely to be effective if a variety of exhibit techniques address a range of senses. Smelling the pine tar in the ship's rigging or the salted cod carried in barrels creates a more vivid experience than simply reading about life at sea. When visitors climb in a hammock or get on their knees and scrub the deck, it is a full body experience. These are the activities eliciting the most comments in exit interviews at the USS Constitution Museum, and the elements most frequently recalled, even years after a visit. The Chicago History Museum created an exhibit for children called *Sensing Chicago.* Based on front-end and formative evaluation with children, the exhibit uses the senses as a window to history—smell the fire of 1871, hear the roar of the crowd at a baseball game, or climb into a giant foam roll and see what it feels like to be a famed Chicago hot dog with all the trimmings.

Try This Test: *Walk through your exhibitions and see how many senses you engage.*

Discovery

A surprise element hidden within an exhibit becomes a family's discovery. Discoveries can trigger conversation and encourage visitors to slow down and take a closer look. Simply hiding a light-sensitive document or small item like a coin can enhance its importance; the discovery becomes a moment to share with another family member. In food barrels at the USS Constitution Museum, visitors discover a rat eating the sailors' food. In exit interviews, it is one of the elements most frequently mentioned by visitors. Offering a surprise is a reward that can encourage closer exploration of an exhibition.

Flipbook / Questioning Interactive

The flipbook is a simple tabletop activity that consists of pages with questions or information viewable from one side of the table and a related image viewable from the other side of the table. At the USS Constitution Museum, we used this format to let visitors play the roles of recruit and recruiter, asking one another fun questions related to their suitability as a possible sailor in 1812: "Are you willing to eat bread as hard as a brick?" This questioning interactive engages

both young and old visitors. It invites the audience to rest for a moment and consider the content. It links your visitors' experience to the past, providing an opportunity to compare and contrast life today with life in a past time. The flipbook works because it requires conversation. You cannot really do the activity alone. Almost any content could be adapted to this form. Many families spent significantly longer with the interactive than needed to finish because parents discussed the questions with their children.

Comment Boards

Rather than limiting the flow of information from museum to visitor, comment boards or books offer visitors an opportunity to share their thoughts and state their opinions. It moves an exhibition closer to a discussion rather than simply a presentation from an all-knowing authority. Visitors like to see what other visitors have written. Comment boards can be very helpful tools for exhibit developers to see if key messages are reaching visitors. Positive comments are also a powerful tool to demonstrate the impact of the museum experience; to motivate staff, volunteers, and board members; and to leverage future funding.

VI. Conclusion

At the USS Constitution Museum, the focus on family learning has revolutionized the organization. The audience is seen as a partner in exhibition development rather than a passive user of the end product. This mindset has spread through the institution, as we test sample signage and even fundraising appeals with members of the target audience. This approach can be liberating, as decisions fall to the audience, rather than to the team member with the strongest argument. The exhibit galleries have come to life with the active participation of museum visitors young and old. Instead of the quiet, reverential tone of a staid art museum, our galleries include conversation and active participation. We have even found visitors swinging in hammocks and singing sea songs.

Who will be promoted first? The Constitution Challenge game quizzes visitors on the content presented in the exhibit and introduces the element of chance (bad weather, bad luck, etc.).

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

Are exhibits and programs ever really finished? Summative Evaluation addresses questions such as:

- Do visitors understand which way you intend them to go?
- Can they find instructions or key text panels?
- Do graphics make sense in place?
- Are there elements of the exhibit everyone seems to miss?
- Does your audience understand the major themes of your exhibit or program?
- How much time does the average visitor spend in the exhibit or program?

Try this test: *Visitor tracking, timing, and behavioral coding are simple, effective, and honest. Grab a copy of the floor plan and observe your visitors in the exhibition. Where do they stop? What do they interact with or read? Do they talk to each other about your content? How much time do they spend in each part of your exhibit?*

Trustees and staff have taken notice of two key facts:

1. Visitors to the hands-on prototype *A Sailor's Life for Me?* spend three times longer in the gallery than visitors to the traditional *War and Peace* gallery.
2. Voluntary contributions per museum visitor have increased from an average of thirty cents between 2000 and 2005 to fifty-one cents per visitor since the installation of the hands-on prototype in 2006.

Since the USS Constitution Museum does not charge admission and relies heavily on voluntary donations, an increase in visitor satisfaction that results in a sixty percent increase in per-person donations is significant. With more than 250,000 visitors to the galleries in 2007, donation box revenue topped $150,000. The Board of Trustees voted to adopt a new strategy: The USS Constitution Museum will provide a hands-on, minds-on environment where intergenerational groups seeking an enjoyable, educational experience can have fun and learn as they explore history together.

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