

Case Statement: PARK RANGERS: CHALLENGES TO WORKING THE HISTORIANS' GROUND

Carol Kelly, National Park Service Volunteer, National Mall, Washington, DC Working Group Session, "Finding Common Ground Between Interpreters and Historians," National Council on Public History 2008 Annual Meeting

In 2003, in preparation for the dedication of the World War II Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, DC, as a National Park Service park ranger, I contacted a number of leading and successfully published scholars in the field of the war's history to enlist their participation in a series of seminars with park rangers who would be interpreting the new memorial to the public. Many of these historians, including Paul Fussell, and especially Gerhard Weinberg, were interested in the program and would have contributed their time to it without honoraria in a desire to be part of the historical event anticipated with the enormous gathering of WWII veterans for the memorial opening. In a conversation at the time, Geoffrey Ward, who was not yet a major figure in the storytelling of the Second World War but from whom I was seeking advice, gave me an insightful observation. He indicated that he has tremendous respect for the knowledge and expertise of park rangers in the National Park Service, but sees room for growth in the measure of historical contextual understanding that accompanies these attributes. The outcome of the proposed seminar series unfortunately proved that no established, or even experimental, format existed in the organization of the National Mall & Memorial Parks for a substantive exchange between scholars and academics and field interpreters on historical subject matter of mutual interest. The series did not take place, but Geoff Ward's comment left a lasting impression on me.

By 2005, another possible venue for expanded contact between professional historians and park rangers had presented itself to me, and I and three colleagues

developed a proposal to present a teaching session at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians. The format for the session was the presentation by park rangers of interpretive and educational programs similar in content and delivery to programs given to visitors and students at the Lincoln Memorial. The intent of the presentation was to demonstrate the historical knowledge, understanding, and methodology that park rangers employ in interacting with the public. Primarily, the purpose of the rangers in submitting the session to the OAH was to foster a relationship with professional historians that would increase our ability to better inform and teach the public. The OAH did not accept our proposal, but the National Council on Public History later welcomed our initiative.

The ranger group presented "Interpretive Teaching for the Lincoln Memorial" at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the NCPH. The positive response to the session, as well as to our presence at the annual meeting, encouraged us about the prospects for our goals of increasing recognition of the importance of the role of park rangers in the field of public history, augmenting the personal sense of professionalism among rangers, and, importantly, enhancing rangers' skill in analyzing and contextualizing history. In addition, on return to our park, we received the same enthusiastic support for our efforts that had carried us to New Mexico. But it is the matter of organizational support that is central to this case statement. The group comprised only four members who were assisted by two managers in a large and busy park. Summer visitation was upon us before we could usefully share our "public history" experience with fellow rangers. The departure of one manager and the work load of the other hampered efforts to expand our

experience into new venues, such as this Working Group. Only I, the retired ranger, will attend the 2008 NCPH Annual Meeting.

The example of the National Mall public history ranger initiative can be an instructive one. Members of the group already have ideas about means for promoting the development of park rangers as public historians and ways in which the NPS can structure the development. There are many specialist and coordinator positions in the agency in areas such as education, volunteerism, and interpretation. An interpretive specialist with a focus on public history is certainly a possibility. That person would work to broaden the public history exposure of as many fellow staff members as feasible. Already existing partnerships with universities and foundations designed to enhance the content of messages delivered to the public by all modes of historical interpretation utilized by NPS personnel can be designed to bring greater contextual background to the messages. Open discussion about publication by park rangers of the results of their research while on the government clock would do much to clarify a murky issue that undoubtedly discourages rangers from pursuing that course. But the focus of any work in establishing links to public history considered essential by the park ranger group at the Mall is on the field rangers, the men and women in gray and green who interact with the millions of members of the visiting, real and cyber, public who come to National Park Service sites. They are the ones on the scene of the fifth grader's or the cynic's first encounter with the physical reminders of the triumphs and tragedies of American history. The more the rangers know about the sources - social, political, economic, cultural, and personal - of those triumphs and tragedies, the better the public will be able to make its own meaningful interpretations of them.

An obvious limitation on the ability of park rangers to pursue the enlargement and refinement of their historical knowledge and skill is their role as public servants. Today, the rangers' duties stretch from putting on band-aids and mopping up water leaks to coordinating the Fourth of July concert on the steps of the Capitol. Of course, the concept of research time has long been part of the park ranger job description, but this is not a process deeply rooted in a scholarly or educational base. And as the band-aid example suggests, the ranger can engage in such research only as it fits into a schedule of public responsibilities. Even if it is not possible in this time of shrinking dollars and budgets and already maxed-out efficiencies to find more free time, gains can still be made by learning new and different ways to do things. Increased contact with professional historians would not only enhance park rangers' subject matter expertise, but also their familiarity with the means to acquire it with as complete an understanding as possible.

Lastly, the rangers who participated in the 2007 NCPH Annual Meeting also attended it, and another of their observations is worth noting as we reflect on the common ground between interpreters and historians. One of the ranger group had never attended a conference of an academic professional organization before. Although genuinely interested in the content of a particular session, the ranger could not understand why none of the panelists was making an effort to promote even greater interest in the topic for the ranger or the rest of the audience. All of the presenters read their papers, talked without the use of visuals, and neither encouraged, nor probably would have appreciated, ongoing interaction with the audience during the presentation. Of course, the ranger realized after the session, the panelists were not delivering their program to the public.