

INTERPRETATION AND INCLUSION

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The purpose of this column is to address the need for improving our interpretation diversity and developing a broader approach to WHAT we interpret and to WHOM we interpret. This includes changing both our techniques and our subject matter to reflect a more diverse and encompassing education and interpretation program.

Ø Column Notes

This is the eleventh issue in an occasional column on the In Touch bulletin board. Replies can be sent to me as can any articles for later dissemination. Comments, essays, notes, and news, are welcome. You can address to me by cc:mail "reply to this message" or find my name on the directory. (Remember - do not retain all original addressees!) Please indicate if your item is intended for future printing in this column.

Ø Demographic Realities

One aspect of managing for diverse visitors is knowledge of visitor interests. These are some recent findings related to historic sites. These figures refer to 1995.

- 45% of all travelers in the United States planned to include a trip to a historic site during the year, the fourth most desired activity (first: beach or lake; second: visit a friend or family; third: visit a city).

- African Americans spend 1½ times as much as non-African Americans at multi-cultural events and places.

- One-third of all international travelers to the U.S. visit cultural/historic sites.

Source: Tourist Industry Association and National Trust for Historic Preservation

Recommended reading: Heritage Tourism, Partnerships and Possibilities, published by the American Association for State and Local History, (615) 255-2971.

Ø Feature Article

Submitted by Bill Gwaltney, Fort Laramie NHS.

After 30 years in the interpretive field Tom Vaughan recently retired from the Anasazi Heritage Center operated by the B.L.M. near Dolores, Colorado. Tom came through my neck of the woods on the way to visit family in Wisconsin. Our ruminations are the basis for this article.

Do the Right Thing: Inclusion in Interpretation

Interpretive programs often fail at inclusion because we are so far into the forest, it really is hard to tell the forest from the trees. As interpreters with the knowledge, the enthusiasm, and as custodians of fabulous resources, it is easy to become impressed with ourselves, our organization or agency, with the TRUTH. Yet if anyone should know how elusive the truth really is it should be interpreters.

Interpreters often gravitate toward topics that don't talk back or change. Visit a Civil War battlefield. You will very likely learn about loading and shooting a musket, about hardtack and coffee, about long marches and short naps in the mud or snow. Will you learn about the causes of the war, about States Rights, Slavery, or the economic relationships between the southern Lords of the Lash and the Northern Lords of the Cotton Loom? Probably not. The musket, the hardtack, the story of troop movements never change. But the meaning of the Civil War has had many, many meanings in the past 130 years, and will undoubtedly have more before the end of the next century.

Where in interpretation are there discussions about fairness, about the meaning of freedom, about the costs of liberty? Where is a helpful discussion about the earth? The earth is used as a weapon to punish the innocent and reward the guilty. Where is a discussion of Environmental Racism?

We interpreters assume far too much. We assume that we are wonderful people simply because we have taken a low paying job with high standards, because we care. We assume that if we build a better nature center or a better nature walk, "They Will Come." We assume since we are either non-racist or unaware of racism in our lives, our communities, our profession, that racism does not exist and that "other" people stay away because they have made a rational choice to do so. We assume far too much.

We assume that color of skin is the only issue we face. We often overlook age, gender, physical ability, and life experience as walls that keep people from being a part of what we do. We assume provocation, Tilden's First Principle was really designed for somebody else.

We have to decide that the resources that we protect and interpret, the parks and reserves, the forests and the artifacts don't really belong to us, we really are only keeping them for other people. People born and unborn, people who look like us and people who don't. People who watch PBS and people who watch Married with Children.

We have to understand that we must value diversity of interpreters and diversity of experience before we can value diversity of life. How can we be concerned with endangered species if we cannot be concerned with the extinction of dignity, liberty, and progress?

Perhaps interpretation is having a mid-life crisis. Perhaps we just can't stay focused as long as we thought. Maybe we haven't kept the faith of our youth when we were sure we couldn't trust anyone over thirty.

Perhaps we have tired of Generation "X" and MTV just at the time when we should be discovering that they should be a big part of our audience. Perhaps we have sung "We Shall Overcome" one time too many and have forgotten the meaning of the words. Maybe we are tired.

I am tired too. I look for diverse faces on the cover of LEGACY, and in books about interpretation. I look for a diversity of approach as I visit other parks and visitor centers. I look for the many voices that together tell the story of our past and predict our collective future. I don't see the faces and I don't hear the voices at those places.

Interpretation is in danger of becoming very much like McDonalds. The menu is well designed, the service is courteous, there are house specials, and people seem to like it, but are the products good for the people who consume them?

It all seems like a bargain. Doesn't it? As a profession and as individual interpreters we are not too tired to see the handwriting on the wall. After all its done with spray paint these days.

We have to do things right, but we also must do the right thing.

You'll know what to do.