

PUBLIC HISTORY

By

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*I*n his popular public television “Civilization” series on the grand sweep of European history, Kenneth Clark makes an interesting observation about the construction of medieval cathedrals. He points out that for the carpenters, stone carvers, and common laborers working on the project, the act of construction itself was considered a form of worship. Worship did not occur only when the cathedral was finished. Hauling stones and hoisting beams was also praise to the glory of God.

If that is a hard concept for modern minds to comprehend, Clark argues, it is a tribute to the impact of Protestant Reformation with its emphasis on the Word. The sermon, correct religious propositions, precise interpretation of Scripture—this was the core of religion to men like Calvin, Knox, and Oliver

Cromwell. Eliminate the sumptuous decoration of the sanctuary. Get rid of the candles, statues, incense, and other appeals to the senses. Focus on "the words."

The classroom approach to the teaching of history also reflects the pervasive impact of the Reformation. History has been the study of written records. We even define "prehistoric" as the time before written records. Prehistoric peoples may have had elaborate oral history traditions, but only when they developed an alphabet and began writing down their stories did they enter into the "historic" era. What most of us remember from our school and college history classes are textbooks and tests. A lot of analysis; not much experience or involvement of the senses.

Clark's distinction between the medieval and Reformation emphases offers an interesting perspective on the role of public history in the educational universe. For this discussion, let us consider public history to include the realm of museums, historic sites, experiential programs, and other out-of-classroom activities that rely primarily on something other than written materials to convey their message. Public history is the realm of field trips, and those of us raised as history "Protestants" may wonder deep down if they have any real educational value or if they exist only as a pleasant diversion from daily routine, a reward for diligent effort in the classroom.

I confess that I am a convert to public history. Having gone through the traditional sequence of undergraduate and graduate lecture courses, I thought I had a pretty good idea of what "real" history was all about, and it didn't include bus trips to tourist spots. My own appreciation for the value of "experiential" history grows out of a long involvement in public history programs. For fourteen years I was director of history at Living History Farms in Des Moines and for the past five years as administrator of the State Historical Society with its museums, eight historic sites, History Day and other educational programs.

At Living History Farms, I was blessed with a staff that had no hesitation to tell me when I gave voice to an outstandingly stupid thought. One of the first (but by no means the only) such utterance occurred when I suggested that we develop a quiz for departing visitors composed of historical facts they should have learned on the tour. What a great weapon

for an administrator! We could determine which site interpreters were doing the best job by looking at the percentage of right answers by visitors to questions pertaining to their sites. In other words, set up assessment standards and teach to them. Dumb idea!, roared the staff, and they were absolutely correct. The best interpreters respond to their visitors' interests and vary their interpretations with different groups.

It was at Living History Farms that I discovered Freeman Tilden's marvelous book on interpreting history at historic sites, *Interpreting Our Heritage*. (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1977) Interpreting, he writes, is "an educational activity that aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects and firsthand experience...rather than simply to communicate factual information." Meanings and relationships. Understandings built on facts the way ever-widening ripples radiate from a single stone dropped in a pool.

Museum education usually starts with one simple question: "What's that?" It may come from a seven-year-old girl pointing to a washboard in a bucket of suds. It may come from a teen-age boy spying a powder horn hanging from the wall. It may come from an elderly man noticing a breed of ducks different than any he has ever seen. The strength of artifact as an educational tool is that it confronts the visitor with a tangible reality from the past. The best exhibits are those that position artifacts where they will catch the attention of the visitors to make them ask that simple question, "What's that?"

That artifact—unmediated through anyone else's experience—is a powerful teaching tool. We know it has a story and we want to hear what it has to say. This is borne out in by historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen who conducted a fascinating survey of Americans' attitudes toward history and interpreted the results in their new book, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) The authors asked their interview subjects to rate the following several sources of information on a 1-10 scale on their "trustworthiness" as a reliable source of information. Museums came out on top of the heap, with 80% giving them an 8, 9, or 10 on a 10-point scale as a trustworthy source.

Museums	80%
Personal accounts from grandparents or other relatives	69%
Conversation with someone who was there	64%
College history professors	54%
High school teachers	35%
Nonfiction books	32%
Movies and television programs	11%

One of the respondents recalled his visit to the Dinosaur Museum where he got to see exhibits of dinosaur bones: "The bones are right there. The bones don't lie."

But the good interpreter or museum exhibit does not let the experience end with a presentation of facts only. Visitors should be encouraged to develop a context for those facts that helps them understand why they are significant. "Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based on information, but they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information."

In interpretation, says Tilden, we take facts and put them together in meaningful patterns. For example, a study by Quaker Oats in 1895 revealed that a typical Midwestern farm wife was spending five hours a day in meal preparation and clean up. The 1900 farmhouse at Living History Farms gives students a chance to experience how a farm wife might have spent those five hours. What does fresh bread dough feel like between your fingers, and how long do you have to knead it? How long does it take to churn cream into butter, and what does fresh butter taste like? How heavy is a bucket of water hauled in from the pump? And then, while a group of students are sitting around the table peeling apples to cook into applesauce, innocently ask them this one: If you had to spend five hours a day getting meals and washing dishes, how would your life change? What activities would you have to give up?

For better or worse, teaching through artifacts is different than teaching through lecture or written materials. Visitors bring to the site their own interests and view the artifacts through their own values. At the 1850 pioneer cabin at Living History Farms, the interpreter may present

the same information to two different groups, but their reactions vary considerably. One group will sigh for the good old days when families worked together close to the land in simply wholesome lifestyles. Another will gasp, "How can you stand the flies? Aren't you about to die in this heat in that long dress? Our family would kill each other if we had to stay cooped up in this dinky cabin together all winter!"

And both responses are valid. One of the great strengths in teaching through artifacts is that the artifacts do not interpret themselves. The meanings that visitors give them reflect the values and perspectives the visitors bring to them.

Biography

Dr. Tom Morain was appointed administrator of the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1995. Prior to that, he was Director of History at Living History Farms in Des Moines for fourteen years. Morain taught Iowa history at Iowa State University and is the author of three books and several articles on the subject. In 2000, he chaired the Des Moines Register's panel to select the 50 most influential Iowans of the 20th century.