

Making Interpretation Memorable

I have some questions. Why did you become an interpreter? Was it because you attended a memorable program? What makes interpretation memorable?

“Tell me about a memorable interpretive program and tell me why it was memorable?” More than one hundred experienced interpreters responded to this question. The responses and the names of the respondents are included below. Their responses included: providing meaningful thematic experiences, personal contact with the interpreter (as in roving interpretation), and passion and enthusiasm on the part of the presenter. Getting the audience involved, presenting moving historical reenactments, following an organized, logical flow and role playing are also important. The interpreters who responded reinforced the idea that children, and often adults, need to do something (walk on the trail, pet the farm animals, participate in the skit, etc.) to help them remember the experience. Interpreters must know the subject, know how and when to deliver the message, and know when to remain silent to allow the message to sink in.

The responses are divided into categories of good memories, not-so-good memories and memories about interpreting water.

Here are all the responses I received plus some memories of my own:

You asked about memorable programs - we were in Dawson City, Yukon and took a walking tour of the historic town. The gal was dressed in period clothes, which always adds some ambiance to the experience for me. She knew her stuff, and had a way of talking that didn't sound rehearsed. In chatting with her after the program, we learned that she'd lived in Alaska and the Yukon for many years and had had some unique experiences. Her personal life doesn't directly affect her program, except that we came away knowing she was a native of the area and I think that increased our respect for her knowledge and the passion she had for the town.

Twila, A Friend of Multnomah Falls

Check out the book "The Experience Economy". It is the kind and quality of the "experiences" that the visitor is involved in that directly goes into both short and long term memory. A memorable interpretive event usually has memorable "experiences" that relate to the intrinsic needs of the visitor.

John Veverka, Interpretive Planner. Consultant and Trainer

Positive: In the early 1980's we had a Park Guide who was presenting an evening program off site in the local community. He was presenting a program that involved using a film projector with a 16mm film reel. Approximately one third of the way through his presentation, the sound bulb blew, so he had picture but no sound. He could have stopped and simply informed the audience that the program would have to be cancelled. Instead, he was very enthusiastic about his subject and knew it so well that he was able to narrate the program himself. The program was a good one in and of itself, however it was memorable because the interpreter was enthusiastically familiar with his subject and able to continue in spite of technical difficulties. What makes Interpretation Memorable? Enthusiasm combined with knowledge.

Jim Runkles, former Park Manager, Bonneville Lock and Dam

Some examples of memorable programs I have attended: At an NAI conference (I think) one presenter, with minimal props was able to draw people into the story (Lewis and Clark) by having the audience stand up and pretend to climb into the boat. After seating, the audience "rowed" the boat while the presenter talked about daily life for the crew. He would interject occasional sing-song type chants to keep the "rowers" involved and coordinated. It was a great way of involving the audience, giving them a hint at how hard it was to row for many hours each day (compared to how hard it was to keep it up without really rowing for just a few minutes). There are many other components of this story that could be told in this active manner. It also helps keep audiences engaged if they physically participate and everyone can, not just a few volunteers!

Another successful program was one I borrowed from somewhere long ago - I had a volunteer make costumes (hats or capes or belts etc) representing wetland plants and animals. In the program I would dress audience members up as parts of a wetland. I had fish hats, moss capes, plant capes, bird hats, turtles shells, cattail hats etc. The participants loved "being" the wetland. Each time I added a component they had to swim around, become a school of fish, hide next to the plant that was floating in the water, chase food, sun themselves on a log, etc. It made a "living" wetland in the classroom.

Another really fun program I had a chance to see was a "Frog and Toad Olympics". The presenter invited people to bring a frog or toad to enter the races. The presenter switched between Ranger and Commentator simply by turning around switching hats and voice style then back again. The Ranger compared frogs and toads and their features and traits. HE would interject water safety or upcoming event "commercials". After the presentation all contestants competed in the Olympic race, winners declared and all frogs and toads were released. (Some "defected" before reaching the finish line). It was fun, active and memorable. It definitely took the right personality to do this type of program.

It is hard to describe in short these experiences - but they have been some of my favorite and based on what I saw from the audiences - very enjoyable.

Mary Anne Heitmeyer, Park Ranger, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mark Twain Lake

I think that the mom in me remembers programs what gave my kids a great experience, something that gets them involved and interested in the resource. Photo Ops that I can look back at years from now and remember how much fun we had and how great that program was.

The interpreter in me loves to see creativity. Something original. Not to be confused with something "Fancy". I want to see neat pocket exhibits, inexpensive props or visual aids. Something that is going to make me remember this experience for years to come. For me high tech isn't near as memorable as low tech and highly relatable.

The manager in me is looking for something that is site specific. The more interpretive training I get and give the more I am looking for interpretive programs to be an experience that the visitor

can't get just anywhere. Whether I go to Yosemite or Lake Dardanelle State Park, I want my interpretive experiences to be about that place.

One of the best interpretive programs I have been to with my family was at Petit Jean State Park (a nearby Arkansas State Park). We were camping for the weekend and went to the evening amphitheater program on "10 sites to see in Petit Jean State Park". It was a power point program but had a lot of audience involvement and was very casual and conversational. And although I had been to Petit Jean many times before, I learned about things in the park I didn't know about. For the next several days during our camping trip we went in search of the 10 things talked about in the program. (Gorilla Rock, Bear Cave, Rock House Cave, Turtle Rocks, Cedar Falls, The Grotto, Davies Bridge, etc...) We had a great time searching for the places and getting pictures of the kids at each of them. This simple program had all the makings of a memorable program. My kids participated in the program through questions and answers and although there weren't any photo ops during the program we had many later as a result. Although the program was a power point, it was very simple, presented outdoors in the amphitheater and very relatable as it got us excited to go out and see the park during our visit. And as a manager I loved how park specific it was and how it led many of our experiences throughout the rest of our stay.

*Sarah A. Keating, Certified Interpretive Trainer, Assistant Superintendent
Lake Dardanelle State Park*

I took my daughter (almost 11) and my son (8) to the Barrington Living Farm at Washington on the Brazos, which is a Texas Parks and Wildlife historical site (the Texas Declaration of Independence was signed there). At the Barrington Farm, they have interpreters dressed up in period costume who are performing farm chores that a 19th century Texas farmer and his family would be doing on a daily basis. My daughter was enlisted to help with the farm chores, which included shelling peas, feeding the hogs, doing laundry, and making shakes for the barn roof. She was able to relate what she was doing to some of the things she had learned in her history classes in school, and got some hands on experience with what life was like for a kid her age in that time period and place. At one point one of the interpreters made the comment that if she found a grasshopper, she could feed it to the chickens in the barn. She spent about 20 minutes scouring the fields looking for a grasshopper. I think the hands on work really made the experience real for her; she was telling everyone we saw for the next 4 days that she had gotten to do chores at the farm (too bad she still doesn't want to do 21st century chores like clean her room). I think hands on experiences, where people get to do something themselves, are what make interpretive experiences really memorable

Jennifer Linde, Outdoor Recreation Planner, USACE, Fort Worth, Texas

What makes interpretation memorable to me is when it makes a connection to a feeling within me whether it is value related or makes a connection to my childhood and some of the memories that I have about family.

Jason Whiting, Hartwell Project, USACE Hartwell, Georgia

My husband took me on an Orca watching tour for my 25th birthday. I have wanted to see wild Orcas for as long as I can remember, so this was a huge deal for me. The vessel was small and had one onboard interpreter. She was very knowledgeable and obviously loved what she did. What I remember most about her was that she was so responsive to the situation and the visitors

needs and interests. She spent more time with those who wanted more information but didn't overstay her welcome with those who just wanted the peace and quiet of the water. When we did encounter the Orca pods, it was overwhelming for me and everyone else on the boat. And she did the best possible thing for us...she didn't talk! She let us all experience the moment in our own way, not intruding on our experience. She answered questions if they were asked, but never tried to push information on anyone. After the pods had moved away from the boat (and they literally swam up to and under our boat!) she started conversations again. It was such an emotional moment for me and it could have been disrupted by a pushy interpreter, but she really allowed each of us to experience it in our own way and to me, that made it a more powerful and memorable experience.

Jessica Moore, Conservation Program Coordinator, NW Trek, Washington

I think what has made for some memorable interpretive programs that I have conducted, has to be serendipity—those unplanned events that fall in the interpreter's favor. It can't be overlooked. For example, when I was a young buck NPS ranger, I was conducting a reptile program at the outdoor amphitheater at Mammoth Cave National Park, on a particularly cool autumn evening. I'm guessing there were 300 people in attendance. I built a large campfire, collecting wood that was stacked against the fire ring. As if on cue, just as while on stage gearing up to conduct the program, and with the fire going strong, a large and now thoroughly warmed copperhead slithered out from under the of the wood pile...much to my surprise and that of the campers in attendance! I grabbed the snake stick in the amphitheater and collected the snake (everyone was standing on the benches now), and placed him gently behind a wall. I'm sure that the folks attending the program that night thought that it was part of the performance, which it certainly wasn't. But it made for a memorable moment! I had everyone's attention from that point on, that is for sure. So there you go...serendipity.

Dave Dutton, Operations Manager, Abiquiu Lake

When I was attending Chico State for my BS I had a ton of great interpretive moments. One moment I remember is going to Alcatraz Island and listening to the audio recording while touring the prison. There were screams from real prisoners and chains clanking. I will never forget the hardships of those early day prisoners.

Angela M. Bradley, Park Ranger, Volunteer Coordinator, USACE, Eastman Lake

Here are a few memorable programs that I experienced working with other interpreters:
Yosemite National Park:

During an evening program about Peregrine Falcons, the park ranger explained how DDT builds up in a food pyramid using a pile of coats (borrowed from the lost and found.) 8 audience members were brought up to the front to represent plants. The ranger pretended to spray them with pesticides, then each one put on a "coat of DDT." Then 4 more audience members were brought up to represent the insects. They "ate" the plants (who went back to their seats) and each insect put on two coats each. 2 swallows "ate" the insects, so they had to put on 4 coats each. Finally, the one Peregrine Falcon "ate" the swallows, so he had to put on 8 coats. The poor falcon was completely covered with coats at the end of the activity. The activity was memorable because it was unique, entertaining, involved the audience, and visually represented something that would be difficult to explain with only words.

Redwood National Park Outdoor School programs (while working with Jay Moeller):

-Hand out paint chips from your local hardware store with a wide variety of colors. Challenge members of the audience to find that color in nature (within a defined area like a small meadow). After everyone has found his/her color, walk around together as a group and each person shares what they found. The activity was memorable because it involved the audience and challenged them to make their own discoveries.

Black Diamond Mines Preserve school program (East Bay Regional Park District):

-Naturalist Mike would stand behind a child and use him as a human puppet. He would describe the life of a miner and move the arms and head of the child to act out what he was talking about. This interpretive method was memorable because it was funny, but also because he was bringing history to life and making it personal for the audience.

Crab Cove (East Bay Regional Park District):

-The naturalist would dress up a child in a crab costume to explain the natural history of crabs. The costume had many parts and as the naturalist added each part, they would describe the function of that body part. The program was memorable because it was entertaining, clever, and personal for the audience members who knew the child. (You know the child will never forget that time he was dressed up as a crab!)

Corps of Engineers:

Don't forget to mention the "Sink Fast" activity which is probably one of the best interpretive activities I have ever experienced. This activity is memorable because it is entertaining, involves the audience, and incorporates the universal concept of "survival."

<http://corpslakes.usace.army.mil/employees/watersafety/toolbox/interp/Sink%20Fast.pdf>

*Christie Johnson, Park Ranger/ Outreach Specialist, Willamette Valley Project
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*

The ones I have attended that stuck in my memory were those that involved living history or storytelling. If appropriate humor was included, that makes it even better (think of Dave Weiss' programs). Music and cultural demos in the living history programs greatly enhanced the memory quotient. The programs that included stories were most memorable to me if they were people stories rather than stories about events or things. For example, a story about Lance Graham, a newspaper reporter who was standing on the top of Lassen Peak during an eruption is far more memorable and compelling than a story about an eruption of Lassen Peak. And of course, we all do remember doing something. While it's memorable for visitors to do something, for some people, it hard to get out of their comfort zone...just a thought.

Miriam Macdermot, Park Ranger, Bonneville Lock and Dam

We were on our way to New Zealand and had a 12-hour layover in Sydney Australia after an all-night flight across the Pacific Ocean. We decided to spend the day in Sydney on the Harbor to be able to get the most out of the day and not have to spend time in traffic. When we arrived at the Harbor, we, of course, immediately recognized the Sydney Opera House and the bridge across the Harbor. Every New Year's Eve news report shows fireworks over this area as the start of a new year still one night away in North America.

We discovered that the Opera House had a tour leaving about every 1-2 hours.... It was an amazing tour that engaged our minds and our hearts to reveal the history, struggles and community involvement in planning and building this iconic structure. The guide did a marvelous job of involving us in the story and pulling along an international audience with varying degrees of English proficiency. She had me hooked and I was very impressed. I spoke with her after the tour and told her I wished I had taped or filmed her giving the tour. She seemed embarrassed when I told her this and even more when I told her that I trained people to do tours and programs. Then I asked her how long she had been doing the building tours. When she answered six months, I was floored. She had a gift of being an incredible interpreter and I hope she is still practicing her craft five years later now. I use this story a lot when teaching CIG courses as an example of how someone can be good right from the start.

Chuck Lennox, Principal, Cascade Interpretive Consulting. LLC

Besides the usual: laughter, enthusiasm, audience participation, clarity/relevance, flow...etc. I would say the element of surprise and the unexpected, plays a huge role.

Amber Tilton, Park Ranger, The Dalles Lock and Dam

My most memorable interpretive program was one presented at Mt. St. Helens a couple years after the mountain blew its top. Ranger Ralph Naess gave the daytime program and it was so captivating that I took some photos of him in action and mailed them, thanking him for his spectacular program as a way of encouraging a fellow interpreter, totally unbeknown to me who he REALLY was!

Ralph was a very personable presenter who welcomed his audience and asked where they were from along with other niceties to warm up the group. His talk was about the mountain. Of course it was outside with the mountain behind him, literally in our faces. Being in the place of what the talk was about certainly drew in the people to listen. Mountain information was greatly desired. Ralph used of his entire body and voice. Gestures with his hands gave the audience the sense of size. He moved slowly back and forth across his "stage" to encompass the entire group, bending down here and there instead of just standing straight all the time. Action words described. His voice varied in loudness for punctuation. He might have used props or tools to emphasize parts of his talk. He knew what he was talking about and never a stumble. He was the best interpreter I have ever listened to.

Bonnie Ecker, Corps of Engineers, Seattle

1. The Louisville Slugger Museum in Louisville, KY. It wasn't a presentation as much a movie at the start of the tour of their museum. It was where I made the connection and truly understood thematic interpretation (my ah-ha moment). Their theme, btw, is "the heart of the game starts with the crack of the bat". Still gives me goose bumps (over a bat museum... and I am not a huge baseball fan either).

2. Listening to Hasan Davis as "York" during the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial. Hasan brought the character to life and tears to my eyes as he talked about life as a slave, the freedoms of being a part of the expedition and life in slavery after returning back to civilization. It was memorable

because the presentation tugged on your heartstrings (emotional connection to basic human rights).

3. I was a foreign exchange student in the UK in 1992/93. I went back for a visit with Dean in 2007 and the changes to their programs were amazing. IN 1993 it was a walkthrough of castles. In 2007, there were places for kids to dress in the time period, games of the times, actually GREAT interpretive programs on the history of the location, etc... Very few were the same "stuffy" stiff upper lip castle tours of the past. The UK is putting a HUGE effort in to interpreting their past. Edinburgh Castle in Scotland and Alnwick Castle in Northumberland (Hogwarts) were top notch interpretive sites with a variety of options for interpretive experiences.

Although I make intellectual connections to presentations all the time, the emotional connections are what really make me remember a presentation for years. I can't think of a single presentation on natural resource management issues that hit a really strong emotional connection (hence, I can't recall any presentation I have been to about those subjects).

Alana Mesenbrink, Park Ranger, USACE, Libby Dam, Montana

What Makes Interpretation Memorable? I have always thought of interpretation as a management tool - a way of getting a point, idea, management goal, etc across to our visiting public. To this end, I have done my share of nature programs, facility tours, and "explanation" programs (i.e. explaining to the public why we regulate their use of our land). I enjoy doing the programs and also enjoy listening to programs of other talented interpreters. I would like to relate two memorable moments in interpretation that occurred to me.

My true love in interpretation lies in historical interpretation. Whether (I'm) doing a living history program or a program as a contextual ranger explaining a point in history, I really enjoy doing the research and relaying that data to my visitors. By doing a good living history program and doing it correctly, you can make a significant impact on the visitor. Several times in my career, I have done a first person living history portrayal about a specific person during a specific event. When you become that person, at the site the event took place, on the day it took place, you are able to make history spring off the pages of a book and make it real for the public. One incident happened to me during the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial in 2003. We were portraying the men on the expedition at Fort Wood in Illinois at a re-creation of the stockade that the men built. We were honoring them at the first night they stayed in the enclosure. We were on the site 200 years to the day. According to the journals it snowed 4 inches that night. Guess what – 200 years later it snowed 4 inches on us. Now, we were using their names, dressed in period clothes, trying to stay warm by smoky cabin fires, doing things that soldiers do to stay busy on the campaign. Everything was the same. IT WAS EERIE! Those kinds of moments make the hair stand out on your neck and you can feel your kindred spirits all around you. But the best part of the experience comes when the public walks up to you (or you hear it through your contextual ranger) that your authenticity was top notch and they felt as if they were actually there to see the original and know what the historical figures had to endure. That's what makes it all

worthwhile. I will remember that positive moment in interpretation for the rest of my life.

Ken Wilk, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Park Ranger, Melvern Lake, Kansas

I am a consumer of interpretation. And I am a critic. So my experience as the interpreter and the interpretee will be the filters to my response.

Early experience that may have set a life's course:

a. My family traveled to Shenandoah National Park when I was about 13 or 14. The parents' plan had been to drive the Skyline Drive and then the Blue Ridge Parkway all the way to Great Smokey Mountain National Park. However, when we got to Shenandoah we stayed to go on a couple ranger walks. We met at the Visitor Center and car caravanned to a trailhead for a rock scramble along a stream bed. I recall it because it was fun. It was out of the ordinary. I remember a story that the Ranger told, and can tell it to you later. (It is in regards to signs.) I also recall a woman on the hike was from NYC, apparently her first time out of the City. Early in the walk the Ranger passed around a twig of black birch or sassafras for all to smell. She ended up with it and let us know that she sniffed it whenever she wanted a bit of a pick-me-up to keep going. (OK, it was the late 1960s. I've since learned that Bruce McHenry was Chief of Interpretation at Shenandoah at this time.)

b. Another family camping trip. This time it was to Acadia National Park, maybe the following year. We went to a campfire program that was memorable. It had a campfire, unlike many amphitheatre programs I've been to since. There was singing, something that I don't think most people can do any more. And it may have been my first exposure to Maine humor. I've been telling some of those stories ever since. And I've been trying to return to Maine whenever I can.

An interpretive program that I did:

I have to include one recent one. I volunteer at Historic Fort Snelling. Last fall we ended the season by offering candlelit tours of the Fort. I was assigned with Mr. Eckert to the Hospital, my favorite post at the post, and given the story of an amputation to interpret. Now, Fort Snelling once did 1st person interpretation, but now uses 3rd person except for "History Players" in the Commander's House. This night we sort of bent the rules. Mr. Eckert, the Surgeon, taught me, the Steward, how to do an emergency amputation. At the end of the evening was the scheduled time for the Hospital demonstration. The small room was packed with visitors. By the light of the fire in the fireplace and two candle lanterns I showed the surgical implements and talked through how to amputate an arm. (I don't recall having any volunteers to be the patient, so had to use my own arm.) This was memorable because of the atmosphere, the "ooo, ick!" factor, and the resulting interest in the audience. The site supervisors had to come and chase people away 15 minutes after closing because of the questions and reluctance of people to go home.

Summary. What makes interpretation memorable? Something that takes the visitor out of the ordinary - an adventure, a different slant, a new smell, a good story or familiar old song, a chance to touch the past. We don't teach it, but good interpretation involves good humor.

Rick Magee, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Paul, Minnesota

Memorable Moments in Interpretation

The most memorable interpretive moments of my career were experienced during the Lewis and Clark Expedition Bicentennial Commemoration. As a member of the Corps of Engineers interpretive team, I was fortunate to work signature events in Kansas City, Long Beach, Billings and two in St. Louis.

The opportunity afforded me by Corps team leaders, Jean Nauss and Ken Wilk ranks as one of my most influential life and career-changing experiences.

Hassan Davis' first person interpretive depictions of York, William Clark's manservant, were tremendous. It is universally accepted that York made a more than meaningful contribution to the Corps of Discovery's 28-month journey into history. Mr. Davis' performances were essential to the success of the Bicentennial Commemoration.

From a troubled youth, often expelled from high school and college, Hassan made the commitment for a better life. He rose to student body president at Berea College and went on to graduate from law school. With more than twenty years of public speaking experience, Hassan shares living history stories of noted but not well known African Americans like Joe Lewis, boxing legend and York of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. "I want to do more than repeat statistics, I want to reenergize, and encourage, I want to inspire. Most of all, I want audiences to walk away realizing the power they have to contribute to the success of a child in this world, or ultimately, insure their failure", proclaimed Hassan Davis.

In bringing the past alive, Hassan exuded power and raw emotion in relating events that formed history two-hundred years ago. As an expedition member, York was afforded the opportunity to vote and enjoyed many perks that were unprecedented for a slave in the early 1800's. After the expedition, he returned to being Clark's slave and was kept in slavery for several years before Clark finally allowed his freedom. Hassan related York's frustrations with tangibles that left his audience with an emotional glimpse into York's life. Hassan's inspirational, first person interpretation style brought the past to present by revealing meanings, feelings and relationships. His heritage interpretative technique provokes inspiration and the desire to know, persuades the audience to relate and reveals a deeper meaning that produces behavioral changes.

As a visitor from the past, the heritage interpreter has the opportunity to heighten visitor involvement. When done properly, the interpreter entices the audience to see, hear and touch the past as they view the present. This is memorable interpretation, generating a visceral response opposed to presenting a few facts that are forgotten upon the conclusion of the presentation.

Programs and presentations were plentiful along the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commemoration trail, but interpreters-like Hassan stood out and made the entire journey into history more memorable for me.

Brian C. Westfall U. S. Army Corps of Engineers

To me the most memorable "program" was actually a few courses I took in college taught by a professor named Dr. David Russell. Dr. Russell teaches introductory biology, ornithology, methods in field ornithology and entomology at Miami University. I took all of these courses, volunteered twice a week at his banding station and worked as the teaching assistant for his ornithology lab. His passion for avifauna and wildlife in general is obvious in every lecture. Often his passion manifests itself in how he physically moves around during a lecture. Dave is not one for standing behind a podium; he is constantly moving, gesturing or demonstrating something. One lecture he created an animal cell out of balloons and duct tape; I recall with a

chuckle that it looked nothing like a cell by the end of the lecture, but the process was memorable and engaging.

Dave's lectures were more than just facts and theories; he always added a few personal anecdotes. He broke the ice with his students by being real and personable, so that we felt comfortable visiting him in office hours and asking questions. Dave never made you feel stupid for asking a question.

Dave always has a metaphor for everything. Biology can be related to basketball and birds to horses. He has a knack for explaining concepts that can be inherently complex. His explanations were concise and did not bore the listeners with any attempts at showing us everything he knew about the subject matter. If a piece of information was shared with us it was important for understanding the big picture.

Dave took his lessons out to the field whenever possible. In his smaller ornithology courses he took the class out every week. The hands-on approach to learning made the classes memorable and honed my knowledge and skills. For part of the ornithology exam Dave would take us out in the field and point out a bird or bird song and each student would write down his or her answer on paper. This would continue until we ran out of time. His methods of testing our knowledge were aimed at applying information in a real setting. For the methods in field ornithology class we met at Dave's banding station where we learned about the life history and biology of birds while actually being able to handle, measure, weigh and take a variety of other data on the birds. Dave's homework assignments even got us out into the field. Each student was assigned a species of bird to observe once a week for the entire semester. We were to take notes every minute for a hour about the behavior of an individual that we would have to find ourselves.

Dave's passion is contagious. His style of instruction impassions his students; at least it did for me. I can recall exact locations of where I encountered specific species of birds for the first time. I can remember struggling to come up with an identification or answer, rather than being told this is this and that is that. I felt challenged, but not to the point of complete frustration and failure. Dave would not give up on his students. In his classes everyone is capable of learning about and gaining an interest in the subject matter. Dave has been a big influence in my life and I certainly would not be working with the Corps if it weren't for him.

*Rebecca Elefante, Natural Resources Specialist Ranger, Caesar Creek Lake
Louisville District, US Army Corps of Engineers*

More Memories

In his book, "Applied Interpretation: Putting Research into Practice" Prof. Doug Knapp stated: "Although you may make memories, long term impacts may be the exception, not the rule." He also wrote, "If I knew then what I know now, I would give my audience the experience of seeing a sunset from a ridge top rather than filling 40 minutes with ecological topics, human impacts on that ecology, and ways to overcome global warming – which I did 20 years ago."

Personal Memories

I took a day cruise out of Seward with an on-board interpreter. It was more of a "let's go out and see what we can see and experience" trip than an interpretive program. We visited a glacier and

watched it calve; we saw a solitary orca swim under our vessel heading for an island filled with noisy sea lions. As the whale approached the sea lions they suddenly grew very quiet. I remember seeing puffins on cliff-like apartment houses and Dall's porpoises playing in the bow wave. I do not remember the messages but I do remember the sights and the wildlife.

On another trip to Alaska, after the Anchorage NAI workshop, I travelled the inside passage on the Alaska Ferry back to the lower 48 from Juneau to Bellingham with my friend and co-worker David Weiss. On the ferry we latched onto an elder hostel group and I lead some sing-alongs for them on my guitar. I remember some of the interpretation from Rob from the Forest Service but much of it is gone. I remember stopping in a church in Sitka and hearing about a fire and people rescuing religious icons. I remember an on-board interpreter spending much of the cruise carving a mask from cedar.

I remember visiting an excellent Forest Service visitor center in Ketchikan where I was fascinated by totems and by lights and shadows projected onto the walls. I'm sure that is not what the exhibit designer thought would be most memorable, but as an interpreter, I'm not the average visitor. Knowledge of interpretation has ruined me. I'll never simply appreciate another visitor center without somehow dissecting it.

The first interpretive program I ever saw was an evening program in 1974 in what was then Roosevelt National Memorial Park in North Dakota. It was memorable although I only remember one thing about it. I remember washing my hands.

Let me explain. At the time, many shampoos and similar products touted the benefits of Yucca as an ingredient. The interpreter at the evening program passed around a bucket with some yucca roots (dug up outside the park, of course) and allowed us to wash our hands. His message was that local tribes used this plant for cleaning - just as popular shampoos and soaps were doing were at the time. Nearly 40 years later, I remember this message, though nothing else about the program. He used the technique of getting his audience to do something.

The second program I remember was in Glacier National Park. I went on a long hike with a ranger named Gary to Grinnell Lake, one of a string of lakes out of the Many Glacier area. I remember some of the information about the formation of the glacial lakes. I remember feeling vulnerable being in grizzly bear habitat. He told the group that he would hike further if anyone else wanted to go. I was one of 2 people who went with him. I remember that one-on one experience, being able to have a conversation with a ranger. I also remember the joke he told, "We are going into Grizzly bear territory. In case we see one everyone make a tight circle around me and I'll protect you. He used techniques of meaningful one on one contact (like we all do when we rove) and humor.

For me, the impact of both of these programs was that I felt like I found my profession. I thought something like, "This is what I want to do when I grow up!" Those good memories changed the course of my life.

What makes programs memorable? I asked one of my coworkers and he told me that good programs include an enthusiastic interpreter. I believe this is true. One memory I have from over 30 years ago involved a very enthusiastic woman who walked us through Oregon Caves, She acted like the cave was the most exciting place on the planet and she could not wait to show us why! By the end of the tour we all felt the same way!

Another interpreter said holding live animals was memorable. I'm sure my daughter still remembers holding a python when she was about 10 years old. Ranger Jane Jackson recalled standing over a place where water used to pass underneath to power a textile mill in Lowell, Massachusetts. The interpreter pointed out that the flowing water below them powered the entire mill. Ranger Dan Porter said, "It was great to get a thorough industrial tour of a water treatment plant because we saw everything in a sequence and really understood how it worked." Ranger Ryan Braaten said, "The best interpreters made it memorable by- using props, getting people involved and by making it fun and humorous!"

Jason Sharp, another one of my coworkers, remembers visiting a pioneer village in Ohio as a child and remembers making and eating corn cakes with a first person interpreter. He remembered forming the cakes and eating them. He also remembered asking her about why she wore running shoes! Her feet hurt!

Brian McCavitt another coworker, remembered a demonstration about the budget in which the interpreter kept taking away half of the water he had just given audience members as an analogy about a shrinking budget.

Melissa Rinehart remembered a program she saw at Mount St. Helens. The interpreter told about the sequence of events as seen from Johnston Ridge by David Johnston, the volcanologist who died there on 18 May 1980. As the interpreter described the chronology of the eruption she related how many minutes had elapsed as David Johnston reported on the events while watching the eruption heading his way, knowing he could not outrun it. She used the intangibles and universal concepts of the power of the eruption and facing certain death. The most moving intangible focused on the passage of time. As the program progressed the interpreter kept telling the audience how much time had passed. Those universal concepts gave this program drama and power and made it memorable.

One program I remember from 15 years ago came from Todd Cullings at Mount St. Helens. I'm sorry to say I do not remember the exact sequence of the May 18, 1980 eruption. But Todd assigned different segments of the audience to play different stages of the eruption: the landslide, the explosion, the pyroclastic flows and so on. It was memorable because it was fun and we all acted out the eruption- we all did something. We all laughed. We all made noise. We all moved and we all left with a better understanding of the eruption. Todd served as the choreographer of the eruption as acted out by the entire audience. The program was memorable because I enjoyed

it, because I moved and made “eruption sounds” and because I left with a better understanding of the events of May 18 1980.

Not-So-Good Memories:

A not-so-good program: We were hiking alongside a creek/falls and there was a group there with a tour guide. But the group got so strung out along the creek that only a small portion of the people got to hear his stories. It was a pretty narrow space, so it would have been tough to stop and get folks corralled. And maybe the people that really wanted to hear him stuck close, and the others wanted to do their own thing - I don't know. I kind of stayed within ear shot because he had some interesting info he was sharing.

Twila, A Friend of Multnomah Falls

Negative: In the mid 1970's I toured a number of early American historical sites as part of my research on the subject. I walked onto the model of one of the first ships to reach this continent. An interpreter was stationed inside one of the cabins onboard. As I walked into the room, he started to give a canned speech. It was apparent that this "interpreter" was bored to death. Approximately half way through his "talk" I asked him a question. Not only did he not know the answer but he forgot where he was in his talk and had to start the canned speech over again.

Jim Runkles, former Park Manager, Bonneville Lock and Dam

My husband and I were on our honeymoon, driving from MI to Florida. We stopped and camped at (name deleted) in KY. We took a ranger guided cave tour, and got the world's worst interpreter! The man was in his 50's or 60's, and had no passion for his work. He told us interesting information about the caves, but had a nearly monotone voice and was just plain rude to the visitors! If someone asked a question that he thought was "dumb", he would say, "That's a dumb question and I am not going to answer it!". We were told not to ask about "the pretties"...those were found in Carlsbad Caverns. He was referring to the difference in rock formations in the two caves and apparently had been asked one too many times if there were pretty formations in these caves! He was impatient with the hikers, apparently not concerned with keeping the group together, and generally a not very nice man. By the end of the hike, I wasn't listening to the information anymore; I was just waiting to see what appalling thing he would do next! And I wasn't the only one, other visitors were commenting on how awful this guy was. That hike will always stick out in my mind as the WORST interpretive moment I have ever encountered!

Jessica Moore, Conservation Program Coordinator, NW Trek, Washington

A memorable interpretive moment happened to me while on a family vacation. We were visiting a site that boasted of underground caves with guided tours. Our tour guide was absolutely terrible. He never smiled, recited the entire tour by rote, never paused or interacted with the group, never waited for the group to assemble, and never answered any questions. It was like being led by a robot where you just inserted the nickel, the recording started, and there is no off button. It was very obvious the tour guide wasn't having a good time, so no one else was either. This is definitely an example of a negative interpretive experience for me and rest of my group, who could be heard commenting all the way back to their cars.

Memorable interpretation can be looked at two ways – positive and negative. Memorable interpretation is not always positive. Sometimes the most memorable ones are the ones that don't leave a good impression. But always learn from what you experience – some memories show you what to do, others what NOT to do.

Ken Wilk, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Park Ranger, Melvern Lake, Kansas

An interpretive experience that was bad, but memorable:

Following the National Interpreters Workshop in San Diego, back in the day, my wife of the time and I visited (name of park deleted). Like usual, we stopped at the V.C. and checked on when and where the programs would be. At 10 a.m. there was a ranger walk scheduled at a particular trail head, only be a bit more than a mile walk. We arrived the next morning at 10 'til 10. Ours was the only car in the parking lot. At 10 o'clock we were still the only ones there. No ranger. At 10 past the ranger drove up. He saw that we were waiting and the look of disappointment was clear upon his face. By this time I had experienced many interpretive programs, experienced Paul Risk and Bill Lewis teaching, and had participated in several National and Regional Workshops. This was a memorable experience because the ranger was late; he was wearing a ball cap; and his shirt was half un-tucked from his green jeans. But he went on with the program for the two of us. Now one advantage of getting a private tour is the ranger is easily taken off script. (And by this time (the agency) often had a script.) The actual information imparted was interesting (I think he talked about the native palms and other plants of the Mohave.) But it was memorable as an example of what not to do to start an interpretive program. I wish I had the photo.

One of my earliest interpretive experiences was a family trip to (name of park deleted). The year would have been about 1962. I just realized it was my parents' 10th anniversary, and we were retracing part of their honeymoon trip. Anyway, we took the long tour one day and the historic cave tour the second. The latter was lead by a gruff, somewhat bored or jaded ranger who told some jokes as we went along without mirth. It would not have been so memorable, except long about 1979 or so I again visited (name of park deleted) and took the historic cave tour. It was lead by the same even more bored and jaded ranger who told the same old jokes.

Rick Magee, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Paul, Minnesota

Other Not-So-Good Memories

I asked interpreters about some of the worst programs they remember attending. I got answers that included, “it was nothing but boring facts. There was no enthusiasm coming from the interpreter. Someone else said the evening program was a slideshow of “galloping postcards” with no message! I heard about one ranger that faced the screen and read her slides in a monotone lecture about water quality.... A friend told me that one program was so depressing and full of doom and gloom that after the program he seriously considered not having children.

I know of another case where the interpreter misidentified a bird then argued about it with a visitor who knew better. Once I saw an interpreter walk into an amphitheater and ask a couple of hundred people to sing along with some unfamiliar songs that were very uncomfortable for the

audience to sing because they were very inappropriate for the setting and because she did not take time to build any rapport with the audience. It felt awkward.

No enthusiasm, rudeness, inaccurate information, inappropriate techniques, too much information, poor presentation skills, distracting appearance, poor hygiene (aka smelly ranger), and so on.... We've all seen bad programs and we've all received poor service. We want people to remember good programs and connect to the sites we interpret. We want people to understand, appreciate and support what we do!

As interpreters we can influence what people remember. We want visitors to remember our messages, connect with, relate to, and help protect the resources.

Memorable Programs about Water

There are so many techniques we can use to make interpretive programs memorable...so many techniques to make programs about water or whatever else we interpret memorable. One of the keys is to involve the audience; another is to use appropriate techniques and powerful universal concepts to provide the audience with opportunities to make their own "emotional and intellectual connections to resource meanings."

Like people, water has moods. I remember taking a boat trip from the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe to the California side and back. The day was gorgeous and the lake blue and calm. On the return, a storm blew in, waves bounced the boat, the sky opened and rained so much that it probably raised the level of the lake. Safe inside, I appreciated seeing two moods of Lake Tahoe that day. I do not remember the information from the interpreter on board but I vividly remember the moods of the lake. Water is moody! It sounds like a universal concept.

Melissa Rinehart (Corps of Engineers) told me about watching and appreciating Jean Harrison (City of Gresham Water Division) very effectively presenting a program that Cindy Samples developed about the different meanings of water. In Cindy's own words, "It's amazing how people get it when I keep changing the "backstory" of the water. I start with, "Can you give me the meaning of this little vial of water?" Then I go on to tell them the "backstory" of the water: "This little vial of water is from the place I worked last summer in the Gulf of Mexico on the Deepwater Horizon Oil spill. Now can you give me some words to describe the meaning of this water?" Then I say, "Wait I think I may have mixed up the vials, I think this is actually a little bit of water from the place where I saw my first bald eagle on the Mississippi River when I was 8 years old. My father took me to the Mississippi River so that I could see the "endangered bald eagle". Can you give me the meanings of this little vial of water?" Then I say, "Actually this may be the vial of water from the place on the Mississippi River where my husband and I took our honeymoon - Hannibal, MO." Then I say, "Actually I think this might be the vial of water that was from my son's baptism." I then dissect the lists we made. So many meanings and intangible meanings are revealed once the resource - the little vial of water is connected to a story. I change the "backstories" to fit the audience but the intent is always the same - to show

how the meanings of the vial of water change once you can connect the audience to the resource. I use this when I am teaching tangibles/intangibles and universal concepts.”

Cindy Samples, US Fish and Wildlife Service

During a boat tour of Crater Lake I remember giving my program about the formation of the lake. It was neither the best program I ever delivered, nor the worst. It was a classic lake tour with a theme, subthemes, transitions, conservation message at the end, etc. During the program, a bald eagle splashed into the water about 100 feet from the boat and came up with a fish. I'm absolutely certain that no one remembers a word I said during that program but I imagine that nearly everyone remembers the boat ride and seeing that eagle catch the fish.

One of my interpretation students wanted to make an “interpretive display about a Fresnel lens from a lighthouse” at a maritime museum where she worked. She was eager to tell all of the technical information about this technically complex and expensive collection of prisms. She had pages of facts and wondered what to include. We decided that people may remember the stories about the lives that light saved, the shipwrecks it prevented, the sailors reunited with their families. They are less likely to remember the 726 separate pieces of glass that weighed 1026 pounds and cost 28,000 dollars. People remember stories and experiences, they forget facts.

We communicate messages about water that meet the goals and objectives of the agencies and organizations that employ us as interpreters. Many of the missions of our organizations and interpretive sites are neck-deep in water. We want people to feel a connection to the watery places we interpret.

We all have many meaningful memories of water. One of the techniques to get people to remember your interpretive message in your programs is to get them to *do something*. Think back to programs you've attended. Many of you may not remember the message or theme of the program but you remember doing something. I believe we should ask our audiences to do something that directly relates to our themes. This way, they may remember our message.

Questions to ask ourselves include: How do we convey messages to our visitors to encourage them to conserve water, to protect watersheds, to reduce waste streams leading to bodies of water? How do we encourage them to recreate safely on the water? How do we promote conservation of ecosystems and raise their awareness of their role in preventing the spread of pollution and exotic species? How can we encourage them to immerse themselves in caring for water? How can we help them internalize the idea to recreate safely on the water?

If interpretation is not memorable it is not meaningful. If it is not meaningful, why bother? If people cannot relate, what is the point?

Appropriate Techniques

Appropriate techniques particularly well-suited to memorable interpretation include: providing meaningful visitor experiences, involving the audience and their children in something “hands-on” related to the message, and getting the audience to play roles. Living history presentations, including those where audiences perform, are to be remembered. Other effective techniques include: quotes, poems, alliterations, questions, and analogies. Other techniques that make memories also include: using props, music, humor, and encouraging visitors to use senses to watch, hear, etc. Original ideas, site-specific knowledge or experiences and good program organization are important along with one-on-one contact with the roving interpreter. Interpreters also need to be sensitive to visitor’s needs. Knowing when not to speak provides those crucial moments for visitor reflection. The wise use of surprise (revelation) and taking advantage of serendipitous teachable moments provides spontaneous learning. Personal stories can connect with the audience in a memorable way. See “Handles Update” a National Park Service publication by Peggy Scherbaum in the references for a very thorough list of appropriate techniques. One caveat, do not get bogged down in overused techniques.

In Conclusion

From the above we can see that memories about interpretation can be divided into good and not-so-good memories. Clearly, we want our visitors to experience good memories. This can be done by using appropriate techniques to create memorable experiences based on strong themes that, in turn, are based on powerful universal concepts, that perhaps recall childhood memories. Passion and enthusiasm were other ingredients in the recipe for a memorable experience. Involving the audience in something “hands-on” related to the message seems to influence what people recall and so does involving their children. Getting the audience to play roles and well-done living history presentations received many votes. Knowledge and good program organization are also part of the mix. Humor and one-on-one contact with the ranger were also vital. It was also important for interpreters to read their audiences and know when *not* to speak. Original and site-specific ideas and knowledge were also mentioned. The use of surprise (revelation) and taking advantage of serendipitous teachable moments also helps. Personal stories are a great way to connect with the audience in a memorable way.

Most of this sounds familiar. Most of what people have shared helps validate what the researchers and scholars in the field of interpretation have been saying for many years. While this is by no means a scientific study, these anecdotes point to directions we all need to go to continue to create meaningful and memorable interpretive experiences.

I offer my most sincere appreciation to those listed above who took the time to answer my question, “Please tell me about a memorable interpretive program and tell me, Why it was memorable?” I sincerely hope that others in the profession can benefit from their memories.

J. Patrick Barry, Supervisory Park Ranger, Bonneville Lock and Dam, August, 2011

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