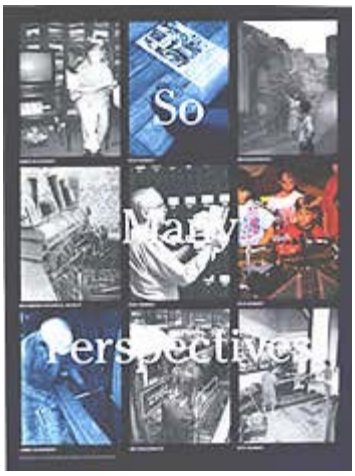
Interpretive Challenges in Museum Management

by James Alexander Jr.

This article shows how Jim draws upon his general management and writing skills to analyze and explain situations that are new to him, placing them in a broader context in which strategies for success may be developed. An earlier version of this was published in *Locomotive and Railway Preservation* Magazine in November 1994.



Visitors Bring So Many Perspectives

Pausing to explain an artifact to his tour group, a docent strains to make himself heard over the whine of a generator and the blast of a safety valve popping on a nearby locomotive.

The locomotive, a Pennsy G5, has not had steam up in over 40 years. What's going on here? Some kind of mistake?

To the contrary -- it is but a minor illustration of purposeful interpretive planning. Such planning at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania takes both tactical and strategic forms.

The great railroad stations, like Grand Central Terminal, once fabled in radio as "the crossroads of a million lives" and "the gigantic stage on which are played a thousand dramas daily" are no longer the repositories of the human story associated with movement of people by train. In part, railroad museums now carry on this responsibility.

Railroads did more than carry freight and passengers. They affected and were affected by society. Their fate was inter-twined with the ebb and flow of progress. It Is the effort to tell this panorama of stories—of railroad building, technology, jobs performed, lives affected, a nation served—that we now refer to as *interpretation*.

Interpretation deals with the physical, the economic, the political, and the social, and it speaks to an array of museum visitors ranging from the avid railfan to the casual tourist.

Interpretation's Many Forms

One aspect of railroading involves the physical surroundings. Railroad yards were often cold In

Special Audiences and Special Experiences It's not what you think you are instructing, it's how the recipient receives the message, so varying levels of comprehension must be be anticipated. Museums are increasingly putting themselves In the eyes and bodies of the beholder, reinforced by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania builds ramps, surveys passages for width, makes large-print handouts, and takes other steps to welcome disabled visitors. These include developing special guided tours for the visually impaired, with help from their advocate groups; adding closed captions to videos (and making these available to others); and making videos of rolling stock interiors when historical considerations prevent wheelchair access.

Tactile opportunities for the visually impaired are also very helpful. Such basic interpretation efforts are now commonly used in museums. The RMP also promotes special experiences. Several times each year the museum is abuzz with visitors wearing the Pennsylvania Railroad insignia on Pennsy Day -- or the Reading Company insignia on Reading Weekend. Slide shows, lectures, and exhibits of a particular line's working paraphernalia all add spice to the basic exhibits, reinforcing the museum's role as a focal point for recording and sharing experiences.

Museums are good places both to preserve history and to capture it as well. Retired railroad engineers visiting the museum are often inveigled by museum staff into participating in its oral history program. With their

winter, hot in summer, noisy, dirty; certainly not very safe places for casual visitors. In seeking to recreate this texture of railroad working environments, a museum cannot in conscience expose its visitors to all these elements.

But some well-placed sound does help set the stage, thus we have the recorded noises of a locomotive building up steam in preparation for its next run. Sound can come into play in other ways, too. This is a button-pushing society.

A family stops next to an early Consolidation locomotive. Several crates are at trackside awaiting pickup, with a sign saying “Imagine you are standing in a railroad depot in the year 1907. You meet a friend, the wife of one of the engineers on this division. What might this woman have said to you? Push the button to find out.”

Pushing the button starts a recording of a woman’s voice, telling what it was like to have a husband who worked all hours in all kinds of weather. Often over-looked, women were involved in many aspects of railroading, and museums need to tell their story. At the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania (RMP) there will be more buttons to push, activating sound tracks and videos, as well as computer displays.

Similarly the role of African Americans in railroading was part of the reality that needs telling. RMP addresses such issues in various ways.

At the most elemental level, interpretation involves placing informative signs by major artifacts, meeting the needs of the mildly curious. They must be worded succinctly and they should balance the technical with the broader context.

At the next level of advancement, docents can staff a locomotive or a caboose and explain what it did. The most skilled docents can do this in the first person, while others are effective In the recollections on tape, the museum gathers information for research or use in audio presentation. The museum trains several staff and volunteer members in question-asking techniques, obtaining permission, and making recordings. Often these opportunities are unexpected and, as such visits of railroad veterans decline, the museum must be ready to seize every opportunity.

A museum visit can be enlivened by actors playing, for example, a track worker resetting spikes, a black porter talking about his perception of the railroad, or a railroad manager berating an engineer for letting his fireman loaf. Few museums can afford to pay real actors, though occasionally professionals perform skits during busy periods at RMP. One summer a local amateur acting company donated its services in return for later using museum facilities for a function. Real people bring added understanding to the visual impact of the museum's impressive old relics.

A very successful program by historian Rich Pawling, entitled "History Alive," features Pawling in the role of Captain John Hummel, a barge operator when railroad competition appeared, and of Mike Malloy, a trackman. Visitors are drawn into a presentation featuring slides, songs, sounds and backdrop. Powerful in researched history, the program is engrossingly entertaining as well.

Allied fields can aid in railroad interpretation. Since several of RMP's volunteers are talented artists, their renderings enliven old stories. We have a "meet the artist" series where a volunteer explains how to sketch, and provides youngsters with sample fill-in sketches showing locomotive parts.

Interpretation can also be more formalized, as it is during RMP's annual railroad history lecture. This year Dr. Theodore Kornweibel of the University of San Diego presented a lecture on the African American railroad experience. In cooperation with the California State Railroad Museum, the museum sponsors one of the two annual National Railway Preservation symposiums discussing issues of museum management and planning, operating practices and philosophies of interpretation. It is all part of a wonderful, unending mix of events characterizing an effective museum.

continued on next page

For a touch of philosophy and humor, see the sidebars to this article:

- Perspectives on Preservation
- Humor in Interpretation

third person. Museum guided tours allow an interpreter to introduce comparisons, themes and tell stories.

Even mannequins can be helpful in visually rounding out a story. A fireman with a large shovel in hand can convey the labor Involved.

Located at the end of this article.

Interpretive Challenges in Museum Management

continued...

by James Alexander Jr.

Interpreting Through The Written Word

The Friends of RMP publishes the journal MILEPOST five times yearly, incorporating stories of museum events, extensive narratives about RMP's artifacts, and broader stories of Pennsylvania railroad history and experiences. Several have led to production of slide shows and expanded articles for national publications.

A rich resource is the museum's extensive library and archives, a storehouse of information which can be mined almost without limit. Whether it be old Reading Railroad construction prints, thousands of negatives and photographs, an incomparable book collection, or worldly reflections in old issues of the AMERICAN RAILROAD JOURNAL or RAILWAY AGE, much of the museum's success in railroad interpretation rests on meticulous research performed out of visitors' sight.

Partners in Presentation

Visitors frequently ask, "Does any of this equipment really work?" Though the museum would like to see its noble locomotives fired up and moving, the real answer is, "Sorry, but these relics are the last of their kind. We want to preserve them, not wear them out."

The last E7 diesel in the world, on display.

Yet this answer is not only a matter of financial and practical necessity, it is also a very real concern. People do like to see machinery operate. When RMP's 100-foot former Reading turntable rumbles around, people are mesmerized. Fortunately, aside from the occasional vehicle that operates at RMP, the museum is located across the street from one of Visitors can enjoy the thrill of riding behind live steam there, then see the Museum's preserved relics. Happily the Strasburg is committed to historical preservation as well as operation, and maintains first-rate steam railroad maintenance and restoration shops. The museum also performs restoration, albeit primarily cosmetic. The museum's new restoration shop, although off-limits for safety reasons, does allow visitors to observe the equipment and labors of a rail shop via closed circuit TV. The volunteer restoration crew's activities are not only of professional quality but are also greatly helpful in the understanding of artifacts. Taking an old parlor car down to its underflooring can reveal secrets of construction, maintenance, and change that eventually become part of the interpretive presentation.

Enhanced Interpretation

Without doubt, locomotives take up a lot of space. When the RMP doubled the size of its indoor exhibit hall, not only was added protection available to protect vintage locomotives that had previously been stored outside, but room became available for more interpretive exhibits.

Rather than focusing on the historical attributes of equipment, broader themes of history and function are now possible. The museum can now better tell the many stories of railroading in Pennsylvania, so that visitors may experience a greater interplay of exhibits, sounds and activities. Together, these will help to form a wonderful panorama of life, life that once was-and still is -- railroading.

When all is said and done, it is often the trained yard guide or docent who leaves the most lasting impression on the visitor.

America's premier steam tourist lines -- the Strasburg Rail Road. The Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania intentionally located in Strasburg. A productive and happy synergy exists between the Strasburg-a for-profit corporation, and the museum -- an agency of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Historical and Museum Commission.

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Starting on the next page..

Perspectives on Preservation

by James Alexander Jr.

Why do visitors come to a railroad museum? What do they take home with them after their visit? Despite carefully planned interpretive efforts, answers can, and do, vary.

STAND IN THE MUSEUM AND WATCH. Obviously the museum has preserved much more than mere locomotives.

• See the child playing engineer in the cab of the K4, pulling every lever in sight, pretending to make it go. Something is being learned.

• Listen to the old man who remembers when it did go, telling all about it and what it meant to him. Memories and validation of the past are occurring.

• Hear the young man intrigued by the engine, asking in endless technical detail what made it go. Interests are being stimulated.

• Listen to the rail historian recounting its colorful past and telling why these mechanical marvels were constructed, and what they did to lives, communities, and commerce. Meaning is being explored, and future lessons sought.

• See the volunteers who clean it, repair it, repaint it, and thereby preserve it for future visitors. They are securing fulfillment.

• Think of the people behind the scenes, the museum staff who administer its custody and provide for the interpretation planning which explains its role in history. They are performing more than a daily job.

• And, of course, from all visitors, young and old, male and female, hear the same question, "Will this locomotive ever operate again?" And the question that provides a most happy opening for discussion, "Will railroads ever come back?"

SO MANY PERSPECTIVES on what the museum has worked so hard to preserve. The locomotives stand, silent witnesses to a wondrous array of diverse talents, skills, and effort, all focused in a common cause to save precious remnants of a colorful and historically important past. The museum's task is to communicate the stories of these splendid artifacts.

SO MANY INTERPRETATIONS, flowing in both planned and unplanned ways, in visible and in less recognized directions.

Role playing by young visitors is an important part of early visits. In school tours, two youthful crew members assume their positions on the museum's John Bull (Camden & Amboy Railroad, 1831) replica. Donning the work gloves, hefting wood for the fire, pulling the throttle and ringing the bell all add to the dimension of the visit. These activities have a side benefit of explaining how locomotives work for other visitors who happen to be watching. Here the "engineer" is required to walk along the John Bull's side to oil an overheating axle; the group is thus introduced to one of the functions of the brakeman they will later see in a caboose.

One of the most engrossing activities for children during school tours is "Laying Track," where a group actually learns what goes where on railroad track. It's a far cry from having the kids stand behind a glass case while someone points at pictures and tries to explain the process! Not surprisingly, more mature visitors are usually interested onlookers as well. This activity culminates the standard tour for younger visitors.

Based on an article in *Locomotive and Railway Preservation* magazine, November 1994.

Humor in Interpretation

by James Alexander Jr.

Work around a railroad museum can be pretty tedious, but it has its rewarding moments. The restoration crew at Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania often works in full sight of visitors, performing an interpretive role that is not always planned, but is still rewarding to volunteers.

One day, two members of the restoration crew were hard at work rebuilding Reading switcher No. 1251. The two have pretty serious jobs in real life, one being a member of the Pennsylvania Legislature, the other a computer expert, but at the museum they sometimes wonder if they are in a circus. One task was to get some electrical wiring snaked through a conduit on the locomotive. Each was at the opposite end, leaning out precariously, trying respectively to push and pull the wire through. It was tricky, with each intently at work, hardly moving lest the wire kink.

Along came a man and a woman. She pondered the scene for a moment then proclaimed, "Look, honey, they have dummies here!"

Hearing that, the legislator muttered, "You may be right, lady," and she almost fell over backwards, grabbing her husband by the arm and exclaiming, "Oh my, they're alive." The duo hastily retreated, leaving the volunteers still struggling with the wiring hardly moving but now with big grins.

Another episode happened in the pit under a Pennsy H3 consolidation locomotive, referred to as a "Johnstown Flood" locomotive because it was the class of locomotive in service during that disaster, several being swept off the track by torrential waters. The pit is open to allow visitors to see the locomotive's underside.

Two volunteers were in the pit, one on a ladder adjusting something on the locomotive's undercarriage, the other steadying the ladder. A lady came down the steps, having just read the sign describing the H3's role in the flood. She looked around the pit, then quizzically addressed the guy holding the ladder, "So this is where the Johnstown Flood was!" The volunteer below was paralyzed by

And then there are the visitors (mostly men in this case) who stand by our GG1 electric locomotive, telling others about their memories of it running by their house -- on a line that was never electrified.

Or the visitor who not only called our working Reading Railroad turntable a roundhouse, but also told his little boy that real ones had more than one track so the trains could go in different directions.

Another variation was this observation from one visitor: "This is just an exhibit. Real turntables had two sets of parallel tracks to allow for passing."

Perhaps best was the parent patiently explaining to a child how the brake wheel on the back of the caboose allowed the train to be steered!

By golly, sometimes it all seems worth the effort just for the free entertainment. And the volunteers thought they were the interpreters!

"What are they doing, and why are they doing it that way? Did they really paint the wheels in the old days?" Such are the questions of curious visitors as they notice that work is going on around them. "We're preparing the surface of the metal for repainting, and we have to do it this way so the paint sticks. And, yes, they did paint the wheels," answers a volunteer restoration worker.

Its a simple encounter, yet it's also an important one. Work always seems to be going on somewhere around most railway museums, and the restoration volunteers doing the

the question, but from above the other's disembodied voice came down, "No ma'am, I believe it was at Johnstown."

Thoroughly befuddled, the woman backed up the steps, never to be seen again. It was some job to keep the ladder from collapsing from the paroxysms at both ends.

work can serve as a museum's best emissaries. Visitors like to watch work; as the saving goes, they could watch it for hours.

And since they don't always understand what's going on, they need to ask -- or go away without knowing. Wouldn't we rather that they learned something?

Of course, railroad folks never ask silly questions when they are visiting airplane museums, do they! Based on an article in *Locomotive and Railway Preservation* magazine, November 1994.

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