

A PRACTICAL GUIDE



Minnesota Historical Society

to Personal Connectivity

BY DANIEL SPOCK

I make it a practice to visit my own museum often, to chat with staff, with the public, but also just to observe what's going on. In 2005 we opened an exhibit called *Open House* at the Minnesota History Center (Benjamin Filene recounted the story of the creation of that exhibit in the Spring 2008 *History News*.) The exhibit chronicles the lives of a diverse group of families who all happened to live in one actual ordinary house over 118 years. Part of the experience of the exhibit involves making comparisons between the various families and their experiences over time. As it turned out, one common thread our research turned up was

the practice of keeping chickens. The German, Italian, and, most recently, Hmong immigrants who lived in the house all raised and butchered chickens in the basement, a fact recreated in meticulous detail in the exhibit. One day, I saw an older man, whose feed cap, beard, and suspenders telegraphed his agricultural roots, leaving the exhibit with a boy I took to be his grandson. The old man looked at his grandson and said, "How's about every time you wanted a McNugget, you had to kill a chicken?" The boy stopped and got a faraway look in his eyes as he struggled to imagine this. In that instant, boy and granddad were making a connection with history in highly personal ways.

Above: A broad palette of experiential engagement points makes Mill City Museum's main message abundantly clear—what happened in Minneapolis continues to shape your world. Here, visitors explore industrial water power through direct kinesthetic connections.

In fact, stimulating personal connections to the past isn't all that hard to do. People enjoy doing it to such a great degree that meaningful personal connection is the critical criterion for how people perceive the value of what we offer. The human desire for connection is a lever that history program developers can use to increase the likelihood of public engagement.

At least as far back as 1957, Freeman Tilden, the grand master of heritage interpretation at the National Park Service, made connection the first of his six principles when he observed "Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile." Tilden also called interpretation an art, but the art of connectivity is certainly more elusive in practice than it is in theory. If connection is what people desire, then creating *connectivity* is the art of what we do as exhibit and program developers. Just because we aim to create connectivity with history, however, doesn't necessarily mean that the public perceives us this way. Our notion of what the past is and how it should be accessed can be in conflict with the public's desires. As a field, we still have some counterproductive habits.¹

As Dale Jones and his interview subjects have already pointed out in the Spring issue of *History News*, this business of connection happens in a number of distinct

and powerful ways, so defining connection in a limited way has limited utility. It is better then to describe something more like a *spectrum* of connection and connectivity. This spectrum may run narrow to wide and run shallow to deep. The connection process is cognitive, affective, and physical all at the same time. The conclusions Jones and so many of informants articulated echo the directions we have been exploring at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) since the History Center opened in 1992: idea, emotional, social, and story connections. These connective avenues to visitor engagement, most of them embarked upon incrementally and in a spirit of experimentation, have also been prompted and supported by extensive visitor research. In one of the first visitor studies at MHS a museum-goer told us enthusiastically, "This isn't history, this is my life!" and in some fashion or other, this has been our gold standard ever since.

Investment

At the broadest connection level, *investment* means a decision to invest time, and usually money, in the activity at the outset. At a granular level, investment might mean the decision to be captivated by some detail in the environment, an investment of attention in a particular thing.

Visits to history places rely on a decision maker,

Viewers of Home Place Minnesota not only reported high levels of personal connection to the show, but they also reported that their entire museum experience was enhanced and they spent more time at the Minnesota History Center when compared to nonviewers.



Michael Mouw

somebody who perceives value in investing in the experience—hence a prior personal connection. This investment of time, energy, and resources relies on intrinsic (or personal) motivation by that decision maker, but not necessarily by every person in the decision maker's group. These motivations have been described pretty well in two ways that are relevant to history destinations, but are by no means limited to them.

First, John Falk's study of visiting identities posits four categories of motivational identity: Explorers, Facilitators, Enthusiasts, Experience Seekers, and Spiritual Pilgrims (Numen Seekers). What's compelling about his study is that it shows a very broad range of distinct visit motivations, which, in turn, have a pretty determinative effect on the quality of connection likely to happen on a visit. For example, a Facilitator's primary motivation is to provide a pleasurable meaningful experience for others, usually the family. A Facilitator, then, is more likely to remember the quality of social interactions the group had, than the content of any exhibit or program.

Joe Pine and Jim Gilmore's *Experience Economy* matrix offers four different qualities in a destination that visitors find engaging: Escapism, Education, Esthetic (numinous), and Entertainment. For example, someone who finds escapism appealing might prefer the time travel aspect of a living history experience, while an esthetic-minded experience-seeker might enjoy the bucolic natural or architectural beauty of the same place. In the Pine and Gilmore view, the richer the combination of these qualities, the higher the appeal (and, hence, connectivity) to visitors. These two frameworks help us understand both people's internal motivations and the elements of what we offer in our destinations that act as "Velcro" for those motivations.

While we have tended to presuppose that learning is the chief motivating factor for our visitors, in truth this may only be one aspect of what they desire in their experiences with us. This is especially the case if we define learning narrowly as limited to the acquisition of information. If we see learning more broadly defined as: making meaningful connections (however visitors choose to do it), then we are in a better position to evaluate the effort. At MHS, when we look at outcomes, we don't place the highest priority on the retention of factual information. Rather we look for evidence that this personal connection occurred. A high incidence of strong personal connections in the preponderance of visitors, however they choose to make them, equals a great program.

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The Human Thread

Crudely defined, empathy means understanding what it would be like to be another person. But at a higher level, empathy is both the cognitive and emotional tool we humans use to understand our own humanity. In other words, to understand others is to understand oneself. As far back as 1954, psychologist Leon Festinger proposed a theory of social comparison that identified a human drive to evaluate one's own sense of identity through comparison to others. This self-reflection—a natural process of associative comparison between oneself and another, [e.g., this is like me (or my grandfather), this is not like me], is one classic way people access the past, but a deeper element of that has a moral character: What is the right thing to do? What would I have done? As Roy Rosenzweig observed in *The Presence of the Past*, people informally use the past as a way to answer important personal questions about identity, mortality, and responsibility.

Our research suggests that for the public who are relatively uninitiated in the arcane ways of historical scholarship, the imaginative, empathic process is one of the most engaging ways to connect with the past. Moreover, this continual comparison process is so natural, such a fundamental part of being human, that our visitors are doing this all of the time, both consciously and unconsciously. Take for an example this visitor conversation recorded in the *Open House* exhibit:

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- M1: So, the first residents were the Schumachers.
M2: Um... hum....
- M1: They had sailed from their German home and went on to settle in Henderson. Which is...
M2: How far is that from Le Sueur?
- M1: Nine miles.
M2: They were in your neighborhood then.
- M1: Yeah, I mean my German great-grandparents came to the same neighborhood.
M2: What year was that?
- M1: They came in the 1880s. And there is a huge wave of German immigration here in the 1880s. I guess because of German recession.
M2: They also came in the 40s with all the wars. That is when all my German ancestors came.
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One practical way of working the interpretive art is to anticipate the various places this connection might occur. They don't all involve direct family connections. In one section of the exhibit visitors can gaze up at a recreation of an attic stairway while a multimedia presentation dramatizes a fire that destroyed the attic. A woman who escaped the fire tells the story and she recalls her distress when she discovered that her baby brother was left inside. She also describes how the repairs after the fire changed the roofline of the house, illustrated with before and after pictures at the attic door. We recorded the following excerpted conversation between a mother, age thirty-nine and her eight-year-old son at the attic.

- BOY: Mom, did they forget a baby upstairs?
MOM: Somebody went after it I think she said.
- BOY: Did it say that?
MOM: They said that the roofline...yeah.
- BOY: Wow. Did they say that?
MOM: There must have been tons of research.
- BOY: Mom, can you see if they say that?
MOM: Well, yeah. Come here, they show the picture of... see how it used to look?
- BOY: Yeah....
MOM: The roof is kind of tall, you can tell there's a little room on the third floor and then here later in 1974 it said that three years after the fire the rooflines were much lower.
- BOY: Mom?
MOM: Yeah.
- BOY: Do they know how the house caught on fire?
MOM: It doesn't say.
- BOY: Oh....So this could be...did they say that the baby survived Mom?
MOM: Yeah.

Rolled up in this particular exchange we see the child's preoccupation with the fate of the baby interlaced with the mother's preoccupation with the more abstract exhibit content of changed rooflines. But in the interplay of these two individuals talking, learning takes place, the details emerge in the dialogue. Museum educators call this intergenerational learning. But what has been less clearly understood is the degree to which empathy generates the conversational spark. The child must know what became of the baby.

A Working Definition of Storytelling and the Importance of Voice

I have a coping mechanism I use when I'm enduring something terrible. I convert my suffering into a story. Doing this not only takes my mind off of the worst of what I'm feeling, it also spins gold from the straw that's

been tossed into the dungeon of my life. In the process, I'm not only making an indelible memory out of the experience, but I'm also attaching something meaningful to it, perhaps a little moral lesson or an observation about the meaning of life. This story fits into the narrative that explains me to myself, helps me to define who I believe myself to be.

Significantly, this process occurs also so that I can share it with others. Telling the story inevitably begins a process of story refinement. The story gets better with the telling if we pay attention to how it is being received by others. If empathy expresses our feeling for the past, storytelling is how we work that feeling out. And all great stories are the product of a reciprocal relationship between the storyteller and the listener. A great story is engrossing for all concerned. A terrible story is pointless, boring, and sterile, to use Tilden's words.

Today it's trendy to pay lip service to storytelling, but in practice it too often looks like the same old deal: we talk about historical events and dates, you listen. But stories really are fundamentally different both as constructions of content and as content delivery vehicles. To take popular culture as an example, when we say, "That guy is history," we mean he's passé, irrelevant, no longer worth paying attention to. And yet, looking around, the American Girl Doll is one of the most successful toys of all time, *Saving Private Ryan* was a box office smash, and a biography of John Adams can top the bestseller lists. If history is so boring, why do certain kinds of history content sell so well? The answer is that each of these products has led with a story that affords personal connection.

The problem, then, comes in the training we bring to the process. In history class, we got good grades for presenting well-reasoned arguments supported by facts and generalized to larger social trends over time. Our visitors, on the other hand, just want to know what happened to the baby. Histories tend to generalize events to large groups of people, in classical examples, contending nations, waves of immigrants, units of infantry, or generations of women. Scholarship looks for organizing patterns over large groups, but this has the consequence too often of vaporizing the individuation that actually exists. Stories, on the other hand, begin at an intimate,



Deutsche Waterland

Visitors drew comparisons or connections between exhibit content and personal stories an average of over three times per visit in conversations recorded in the Open House exhibit.

personal level. Stories tend to heighten the unique traits and foibles of each character and, more often than histories, they get expressed in the first and second person voice. This intimate view proves very accessible to those who otherwise claim to have little interest in history. Empathy is naturally felt by one person for another, but this relationship falls apart in a crowd.

The distinction can be described as a shift in voice. The authoritative history museum voice might say, "In the early twentieth century, when Italian immigrants first came to the United States, the jobs available to them were menial, low wage, and often dangerous." The storytelling voice, on the other hand, says, as it does in *Open House*, "On Thanksgiving night there was a real bad storm... [Uncle Filomeno] was called to go work.... I begged him 'Don't go tonight'.... Well he insisted. He thought he had to go when he was called to go.

And he went.... Before you knew it...[my aunt] came up and said 'something happened to Filomeno' and that night he was sideswiped by a train. That's the kind of work that they did, they had to go do this work."

The story is no less true than the history, but it acts as a microcosm of something larger and this reveals a human experience in ways that make us care. In this way, the story exemplifies the broader history without crossing the line into tedious didacticism.

Some of our first clues into this phenomenon at MHS happened in a series of visitor research studies done on the multimedia object theater *Home Place Minnesota*, which aims to paint an evocative portrait of the life of the state. The show is not only story driven, but it also offers a kaleidoscope of varying individual perspectives, over a wide, but nonchronological, span of time. Significantly, the show commingles historical primary source accounts and words drawn from the fiction of such writers as Sinclair Lewis and Laura Ingalls Wilder. In a 1993 study surveying *Home Place* viewers, almost ninety percent reported that "thoughts and feelings in this show sounded familiar to me"; over eighty percent reported that "this show is about feelings and emotions about places"; and three-quarters reported that "this show helped me remember things, events, or people in my own past." Even more significant were the results of later studies done on the entire exhibit program at the History Center. A 1994 report noted that *Home Place* viewers were more likely to find their overall experience at the History Center interesting, welcoming, and enjoyable than nonviewing visitors. Participants in this study who found the visit more interesting also reported finding emotional or personal connections at a higher rate than others, suggesting a strong correlation between viewing the show, emotional engagement, and interest level. Another survey in 1996 discovered that *Home Place* viewers also spent a longer amount of time at the History Center than nonviewers.

The Wonderment Connection

Occasionally we experience an aspect of the past that mystifies us, leaves us grasping for a way to make sense of it. These things are by their nature unfamiliar to us up to that point and, so, may engender anxiety, disgust, or fear while at the same time being intensely attractive. For history places, wonderment is strongly associated with the strangeness of the past. A powerful connection point for people is to try to imagine what it was like, another dimension of empathy. If you think about those strange things about the past that are particularly interesting to people, they tend to be associated with bygone practices or rituals around eating, going to the bathroom, disease, warfare, death, sex, exotic animals, occupational hazards, etc., things that have always provoked strong feelings and anxieties in human beings. People want to imagine these things in ways that are vicarious, not abstract, and feel real. There's a fine line between the appeal of this

brand of giddy anxiety and repulsion and that line is liable to sit at different places for different people.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia literally means “homesickness,” but has been broadened to mean the entire complex of personal feelings we may have about the past. These can range from a yearning for an absurdly idealized past, to a sense of profound grief for the things and people lost to the passage of time. Like it or not, nostalgia is one of the most powerful ways people access and use the past.

Nostalgia is triggered by deeply familiar things, a phenomenon Steven Greenblatt calls resonance. Anything that is likely to stimulate the memory of visitors is also likely to produce a sense of emotional connection in ways that run the gamut from intense to faint, positive to negative. For Greenblatt, resonance is at the opposite end of the spectrum from wonder. Because of nostalgia, we find that stories within the realm of living memory are easier for the public to access emotionally. This explains why popular culture subjects are such a proven way to create broad public engagement with history. A great many people experience popular culture at the same time, so it stands to reason that there is more shared memory around it than events outside of the cultural mainstream. Rock and Roll has more resonance than the Louisiana Purchase.

Immersion

Many things that trigger nostalgia tend to be rooted in the way we sense our environmental surroundings and speak to the power of place. Like wonder, this experience is highly charged with emotion and these emotions are complex and shift, tinged with poignancy, and often bittersweet.

An oft-overlooked quality of connection is the kinesthetic, physical, multisensory quality of experience that so many historic places provide. While a static image like a photograph can trigger nostalgia, the effect of being plunged into a familiar place redolent with odors, tactile sensations, sights, and sounds, intensifies the emotional impact dramatically.

Planning for Connectivity

A good example of how visitor preferences can inform museum planning is the Mill City Museum, which the Minnesota Historical Society opened in Minneapolis in 2003. The challenge as we began planning this entirely new museum housed in the burned out shell of a historic flour mill would be to turn this industrial history story into a place broadly appealing to a general audience. The initial assessments were not encouraging. Front-end surveys showed that flour mill-

ing history and processes are esoteric and consultants told us bluntly that industrial history does not sell. Where's the connectivity?

The answer could be summed up in a statement that graces the entrance of the museum today, *More than 100 years ago, converging forces made Minneapolis the flour-milling capital of the world. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, what happened here continues to shape your world.* People, the participants of the story, have the primary voice serving as the human connection point for visitors—empathy. Production is significant, not just because flour industries built Minneapolis and pioneered a revolution in food production, innovative convenience food products, and global marketing (which they did), but also because we've all eaten the recognizable brands of Wheaties, Betty Crocker, and the Pillsbury Doughboy—the nostalgia of promotion.

Power speaks to the brawny water-powered industries, made possible by the Mississippi River, but also the global reach of the companies that drew on the natural bounty of a vast region and converted it into the durable financial empires who have struggled to control these resources ever since—immersion in the place.

We envisioned the museum as a buffet of distinctly different experi-

ences. Some were planned as memorable anchor moments in the overall museum experience. A water lab would give visitors a kinesthetic sense of how the river was harnessed for industry through the direct experience of science museum-style water interactives. A baking lab would afford direct contact with flour making, kneading, baking, and tasting activities, permeating the museum with the aroma of baking. A flour tower would convey visitors through an eight-story working flourmill narrated with the stories of retired millworkers. At the top of this ride an observation deck would afford a view of the entire milling district and the waterfall that powered it all. Another show, *Minneapolis in 19 Minutes Flat*, would connect the industrial story to the city through two goals: to capture the spirit of the city in ways a native would recognize as truthful and to engage any visitor with no starting knowledge.

In the development of both the *Flour Tower* and *Minneapolis in 19 Minutes Flat*, staff paid attention to the mood and pacing. In the *Flour Tower*, the stories shift from amusing anecdotes of shop floor flirting, to the dangers of the machinery, to the poignancy of the mill closings and the end of the milling era. Similarly, while *19 Minutes* indulges in local pride, it also doesn't skirt the violent labor struggles, the decline of the city's industrial base, the destruction of historic buildings through misguided urban renewal, or the denizens of the criminal underworld.

A summative evaluation of Mill City Museum report-

The story gets better with the telling if we pay attention to how it is being received by others.

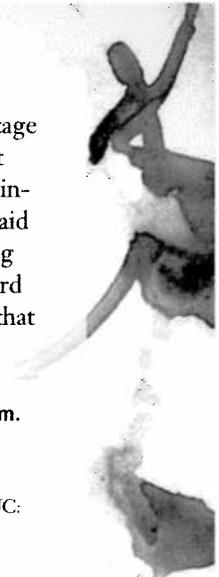


ed that the museum's world-changing credo was "almost universally apparent to visitors." The museum proved popular with a broad spectrum of visitors across demographic categories and, most importantly, was "very effective in raising awareness of the connections between visitors and the history of Minneapolis and the flour-mills." Attendance has also consistently exceeded initial expectations. But it works, not because we took a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather because we orchestrated a cluster of varying connection points to the past for a diverse audience. My mother-in-law grew up on a Michigan dairy farm. During a pleasant visit to Mill City Museum, her points of personal connection ranged from recognizing the familiar task of preparing huge meals for

field gangs of migrant workers at harvest time, to vintage television clips of Pillsbury bake-off competitions. But the most evocative moment occurred at a vitrine containing flour sacks printed with floral patterns. "Oh," she said to me, "I remember making clothes from these. Making things from these sacks was the only way we could afford to get new clothes!" It's connection moments like this that make history destinations so personal and satisfying. ©

Daniel Spock is Director of Minnesota History Center Museum. He can be reached at daniel.spock@mnh.org.

¹ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 4th ed., (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 34.



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