

THE INTERPRETER'S GUIDEBOOK

**Techniques for Programs
and Presentations**



**By Kathleen Regnier
Michael Gross and Ron Zimmerman**

Interpreter's Handbook Series

The Interpreter's Guidebook

Techniques for Programs and Presentations

**by Kathleen Regnier
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The Interpreter's Guidebook: Techniques for Programs and Presentations

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About the Interpreter's Handbook Series

The Interpreter's Guidebook: Techniques for Programs and Presentations

The second in a series of practical guides for interpretive professionals and students. Other topics in the series are:

Making the Right Connections: A Guide for Nature Writers

Creating Environmental Publications: A Guide to Writing and Designing for Interpreters and Environmental Educators

Signs, Trails, and Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People and Places

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Inside cover: Point Reyes National Seashore, California, by Donna Zimmerman

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1

Roots and Reasons

Poetry should begin in entertainment and end in wisdom.

- Robert Frost

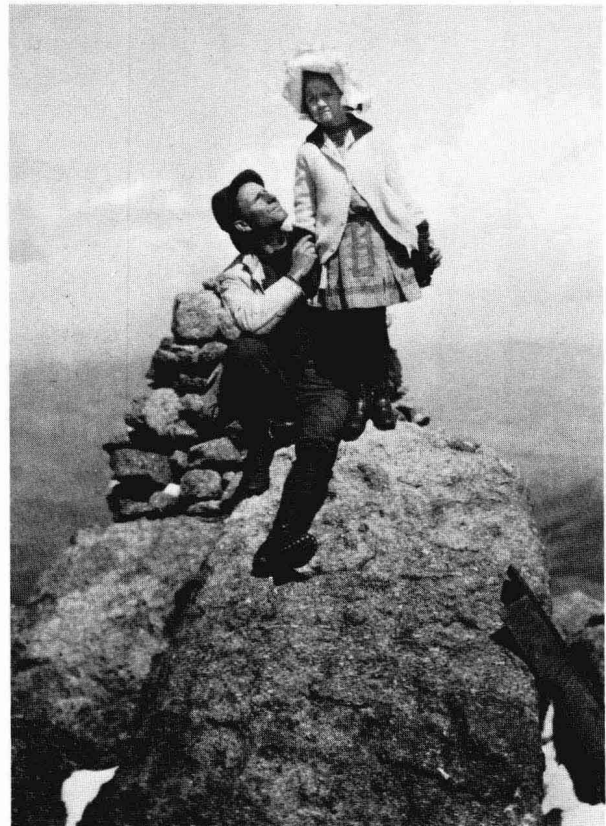
Foundations of Interpretation

Enos A. Mills (1870-1922)

Nature guides blazed the trail to modern interpretation as they shared the beauty of the American wilderness with turn of the century adventurers. One of the best known of these early guides was Enos Mills who led excursions into the Rocky Mountains from 1889 until his death in 1922. He is regarded as the founder of the profession we call interpretation.

By his mid-teens, Enos Mills was guiding visitors to the 14,256 foot summit of Longs Peak and to other destinations in the Colorado Rockies. Over the next 35 years, Mills would be known as a naturalist, interpreter, author of 15 books about nature, a lecturer, Father of Rocky Mountain National Park, crusader for parks and preserves, founder of the Trail School (an early version of environmental education programs), and trainer of interpreters.

Mills' insatiable curiosity about nature and his contagious enthusiasm helped make him the ideal nature interpreter, but Mills did not stop there. He carefully analyzed his interpretation with visitors. He noted what techniques worked best and tried to understand why others failed.



Courtesy of Enos Mills Cabin, Longs Peak, Colorado



Courtesy of Enos Mills Cabin, Longs Peak, Colorado
Mills' Trail School introduced visitors to the Rocky Mountains and became a training ground for novice interpreters.



Courtesy of Enos Mills Cabin, Longs Peak, Colorado
Mills was a patient observer of nature. He took seven years to gain the trust of a big horn ram. He studied beaver for twenty-seven years before writing *In Beaver World* in 1913.

the conversation of members of his party lest the beauty of the outdoors be marred... He is master of the art of suggestion. He is a leader rather than a teacher."

Mills wrote about interpretation as a profession and began teaching its art and science to others. His Trail School introduced visitors to the Rocky Mountains, and became a training ground for many novice interpreters. Under his guiding hand, men and women became patient observers of nature and enthusiastic trail leaders. In 1917, two of Mills' best pupils, Esther and Elizabeth Burnell, were licensed by the National Park Service to conduct interpretive tours in Rocky Mountain National Park.

Before his untimely death in 1922, Enos Mills organized the profession of interpretation. He developed principles, guidelines, and techniques which laid the foundation for modern interpretation.

Without Mills, the new profession meandered. Sometimes parks sought out university professors who lectured visitors without spontaneity or enthusiasm. Inspiration was often sacrificed for scientific accuracy.

By the mid-1950's, Mills' books about the profession had long been out of print. A new book filled the void: *Interpreting Our Heritage* by Freeman Tilden.

He believed his mission as a guide was more than directing people safely through the wilderness. "A nature guide is not a guide in the ordinary sense of the word, and is not a teacher. At all times, however, he is rightfully associated with information and with some form of education. But nature guiding, as we see it, is more inspirational than informational."

"A nature guide (interpreter) is a naturalist who can guide others to the secrets of nature. It is not necessary for a guide to be a walking encyclopedia. He arouses interest by dealing in big principles, -- not with detached and colorless information."

And what about techniques for leading a group in the woods? Mills offered many insights. "The nature guide who understands human nature and possesses tact and ingenuity is able to hold divergent interests and scattering members of his party together. He appreciates, too, the eloquence of silence and is skillful in controlling, directing, and diverting

Freeman Tilden (1883-1980)

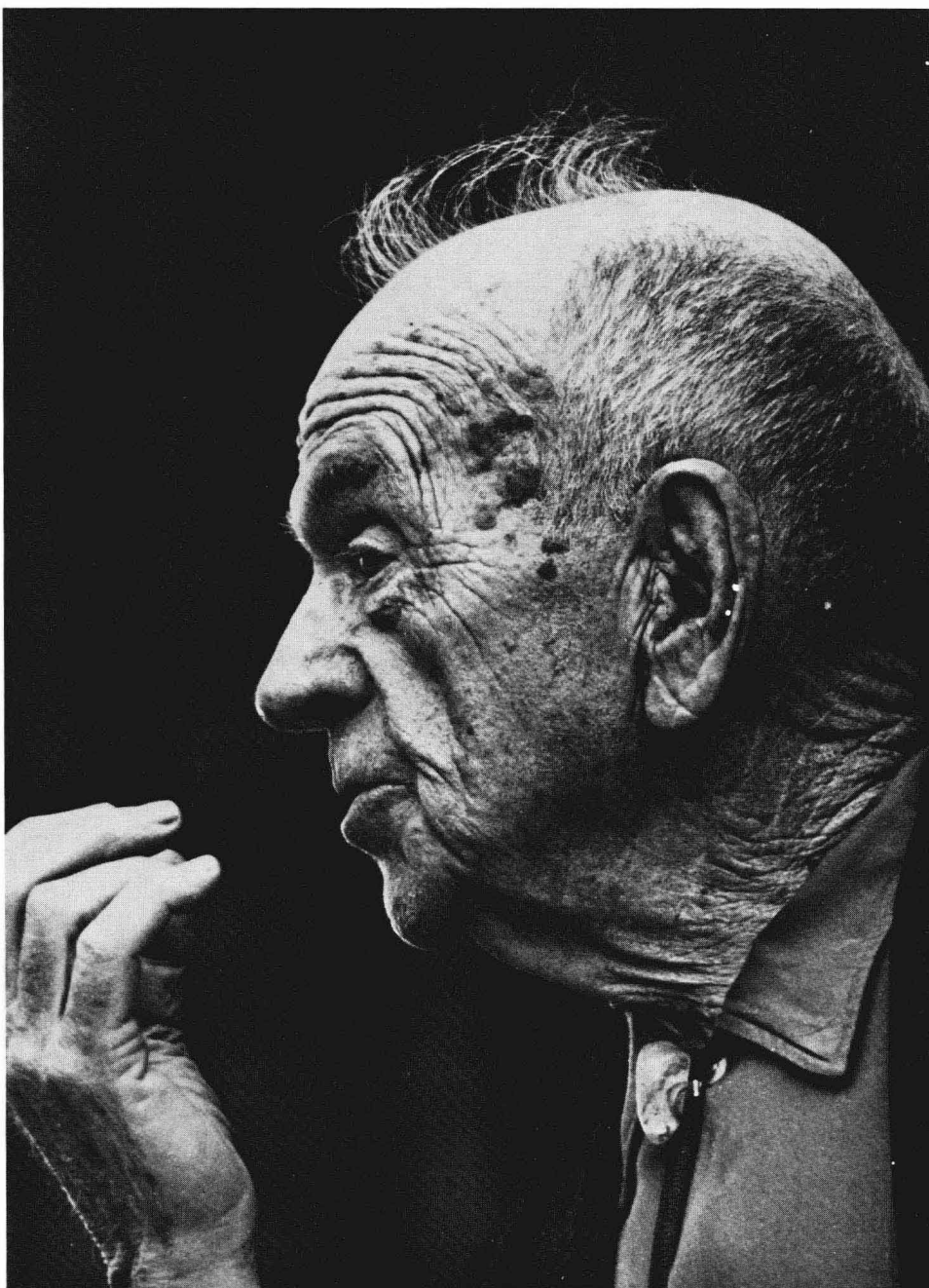
Freeman Tilden was not a renowned naturalist or interpreter, but he possessed impressive experience as a newspaper reporter, playwright, non-fiction author, and keen observer/commentator. In mid-life, Tilden was eager to do something different. The National Park Service invited him to tour the national parks, write about them, and analyze what was happening with interpretation. Tilden accepted the challenge.

Tilden traveled for years, observing ranger walks, talks, and other ways park professionals communicate with visitors. He noted the public's reactions to different styles and media of presentation. Tilden analyzed the practices of a profession much as Mills had done 40 years earlier.

In 1957, *Interpreting Our Heritage* was the first book written solely to define the profession of interpretation. It does not describe how to lead a tour, nor does it list the steps in preparing a talk. *Interpreting Our Heritage* answers the question: why do we interpret? It establishes goals and identifies principles for quality interpretation. The reader discovers a philosophy, an attitude, of interpretation.

In 105 pages, Tilden captured the essence of a profession. The book was officially endorsed by the National Park Service, other federal agencies, numerous state and county parks, museums, and the academic world. The profession returned to the path begun by Mills.

Tilden would spend the next 20 years teaching the art and science of interpretation. His principles are still the most recognized standards for interpretation.



In *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Freeman Tilden defined interpretation as "an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information."

Two concepts were stated as central to the philosophy of interpretation. "Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact." "Interpretation should capitalize on mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit."

Tilden's Principles of Interpretation

- I. 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.
- II. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
- III. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
- IV. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
- V. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
- VI. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best, it will require a separate program.

Tilden saw six principles at the foundation of any interpretive event, whether personal or non-personal. Most of his book is devoted to explaining and illustrating these principles.

Compared to Mills' straight-forward, practical approach to interpretation, Tilden is often deeply philosophical, requiring several readings and personal reflection to understand. The two greatest leaders of interpretation had very contrasting styles to express and explain the same profession. Yet, both Enos Mills and Freeman Tilden are worthy of study by interpreters today.

Quotes for the preceeding biographies were from the following books. We recommend them for every interpreter's library:

Enos A. Mills, *The Adventures of a Nature Guide*, 1920, reprinted in 1990 with additional chapters from other Mills' books, available from New Past Press, Inc., 2098 18th Ave., Friendship, WI 53934

Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 1957, available from the University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.



Point Reyes National Seashore

Donna Zimmerman

A gray whale's size is put into perspective. This interpretation applies the first two principles: relating to visitors' experiences and revealing information in a way they can understand.

Goals of Interpretation

Environmental interpretation becomes even more important as natural landscapes and cultural treasures disappear. Today, the public has an expanding role in land management decisions. Agencies value an informed public capable of supporting and participating in management decisions.

Interpretation serves agency objectives by educating the public. Interpretive programs can shed light on controversial practices like prescribed burning or deer herd reduction. These often misunderstood practices have a sound ecological basis.

Environmental interpretation leads to responsible visitor use of a site. An informed and caring public will not harm a site through vandalism, littering, or thoughtless destruction. Visitors can learn their role in fire prevention, dune conservation, or grizzly bear safety. In a larger sense a concerned public becomes an advocate for the site, supporting elected officials and agency administrators when development threatens.

Most important, **interpretation serves the visitor**. Interpretation opens visitors' eyes to a world they may have never seen before.

Interpretation has two characteristics: it is based on-site and offers first-hand experiences with that site. It serves leisure visitors who come voluntarily and are anticipating an enjoyable experience. The goal of the interpreter should be to **interpret the site** and **involve the visitor**.

Goals of Interpretation

As they relate to the Site:

- Foster proper use.
- Develop advocates for the site.

As they relate to the Agency:

- Enhance image of the agency.
- Encourage public participation in management.

As they relate to the Visitor:

- Provide recreation.
- Heighten awareness and understanding of their natural and cultural environment.
- Inspire and add perspective to their lives.

Interpret the Site

Interpreters serve as links between the visitor and the site. Therefore, they must have a thorough knowledge of their area.

They must know the natural and cultural history and understand their universal implications. This requires solid grounding in the sciences and humanities. But even more important is the first-hand knowledge that can be gained only in the field. If you are going to be a spokesperson for the environment, you must know what the environment has to say.

Some sites have subtle messages. A group that has never seen a salt marsh may need a little guidance to appreciate it. Without help from a trained naturalist would they really see the tall cord grass? Would they understand its role in stabilizing rich organic mud, thus assuring survival of other grasses in the upper salt meadows?

Can an uninformed visitor fully understand the story of geologic time etched in the rock layers of the Grand Canyon? A knowledgeable interpreter opens the door to new dimensions of perception.

Involve the Visitor

Interpretive audiences are special. They come of their own free will ready to see their old world in fresh ways. They're on vacation; they're on their own time. They're not seeking lectures or schooling as much as inspiration and recreation. They want to be involved.

People at an interpretive program are not empty vessels passively waiting to be filled with environmental wisdom. They must associate new information with their past experiences. You must be aware, even in a general sense, of their backgrounds, interests, and experiences. You must appreciate how they see the environment in order to help them expand their perceptions of it.



Courtesy of Monterey Bay Aquarium, California
Visitor curiosity is engaged through involvement in the touch tank at Monterey Bay Aquarium. Interpreters answer questions and help visitors learn about marine life.



Beggich-Boggs Visitor Center at Portage Glacier, Chugach Nat. Forest, AK, Courtesy of U.S.D.A. Forest Service
An interpreter helps visitors understand how Portage Glacier is formed and how it moves. Props and role playing make these difficult concepts understandable.

Interpreters walk a tightrope, balanced between two extremes. On one side are cold scientific facts. On the other is empty rhetoric filled with "ooh, ah" sentimentality. Good interpreters combine both ideas and emotions. They blend the extremes of taxonomy and tree hugging. Interpretive programs should involve the senses, challenge the intellect, and touch the emotions. They should entertain as well as inform.

Courtesy of Monterey Bay Aquarium

Developing Your Interpretive Style

It is natural to stand in awe of talented master interpreters who captivate audiences with their charisma and vast knowledge. There are no easy ways to become an outstanding interpreter. It requires dedication and desire. The raw materials include a love of people and a passion for your subject.

You can study the styles of successful interpreters and learn from their common attributes, but each one is unique. Their styles developed from their own personalities and life experiences.

Four interpreters that have served as models for many people are Josh Barkin, Dennis Olson, and Warren and Elizabeth Wells. They all learned to relate to their audiences in their own way.

Josh Barkin

The late Josh Barkin, San Francisco Bay Area naturalist, had a boundless enthusiasm that he shared with his audiences. A former businessman, Josh embraced his newfound profession with childlike wonder and he approached every new subject in a fresh way. Josh had a gift for using the simple, commonplace things to show people new worlds. *"A plant, a tree, a brook, a fern, a bird, a rock, and a lot of excitement and enthusiasm - you got a trip! What's all the baloney about the tremendous stuff you have to know? It adds on afterwards."*

The following is a typical Barkin field trip:

"A spider - there are so many different kinds of spiders it would drive you nuts! It's got eight legs - great. But a spider catches its prey and bites it...the venom is so slight it doesn't bother us, but it slows down the fly and then the spider drools and melts the tissue into a soup and then goes sl-u-r-p and the kids go y-u-k. They love gore, see, they love it! And you say, well, we use a straw don't we, to drink stuff. And, that's why you find flies in the web in the corner of the window all sort of desiccated or dried out because of the ability of the spider to do that, and if you were a spider you could demonstrate it. And you still don't



Courtesy of East Bay Regional Park District, Oakland, California

know what kind of spider it is. I'm talking about story telling and adventure along the trail, and excitement. Alright, I'm a spider, OK? I have seven coils of rope, because he has seven spinnerets, this spider (he might have six, he might have five). I am carrying two buckets of glue and brushes. I take one coil of rope and throw it onto the tree and it sticks. Then I pull it tight and I run up as fast as I can so that the wind is whistling in my bronchi. Meanwhile I'm putting on the old stuff out of the glue bucket. I get there, and throw another line across horizontally, pull it in

tight, and run like anything, at full speed. And that is the way a spider works. You've demonstrated something about a spider, you tell 'em. And then this very nice little lady who is along on the trip says, 'Oh, oh, look at the beautiful little hummingbird, isn't she sweet - the spider Y-U-K!' You say, 'Madame, if you love hummingbirds you have to be interested in spiders because no spiders, no hummingbird nests! The hummingbird ties his nest together with not only lichens and other materials, but with the spider thread - it is the tie that binds.' "

Using ropes and glue was commonplace for Josh. He was a great believer in props and gimmicks and loved to provoke his audience with them. A machete thrust in the ground (right) became an exciting tool for introducing people to vibrations, sounds, and the Old West.

Josh loved to keep his audiences a little off balance. What good is a tree? ... "Well, you can blow your nose in it!" His gutter walks changed trash in the streets into discarded artifacts of civilization. Josh helped people see their gray world through fresh eyes.



Ron Zimmerman

Dennis Olson

Dennis Olson, a Lake States naturalist, has developed an entire series of interpretive characters. His repertoire includes Critterman, Dr. Death, The Mad Herbalist, Gavin Immer - Professor of Loonacy, and Professor Avian Guano. Denny's characters are the vehicles for serious environmental messages. Each personality interacts with the audience, surprising and entertaining as they educate.

Professor Avian Guano enters the room. Long dark feathers protrude from his fingers. A yellow beak covers his nose. Bobbing his neck like an oversized chicken, he struts across the stage.

"Sooooo," he squeaks in a thick German accent, "you vant to learn about birds? I haf studied them so long I feel like dem." The professor goes on to interpret birds with slides, humorous anecdotes, outrageous props,

and some unwitting "volunteers." Members of the audience become contestants in a bird quiz show. The reward for a "wrong" answer is a huge shaving cream "bird dropping" on the head.

Denny's interpretation is filled with humor, drama, audience involvement, and physical props, but it is all based on solid natural history fact.

Olson says, "In my experience, kids and adults have remembered (word for word!) the major portions of Critterman, Mad Herbalist, and Dr. Guano shows. As interpreters, we have two obligations; we must give useful information and we must make it 'rememberable.' Theatrics internalizes concepts and information because the audience feels as well as learns.

Emotional or sensory experiences are remembered for a long time.

Good interpretive theatrics should make people apprehensive, happy, sad, and include the use of all five senses by the audience.

There is one hitch. It's a lot of work."



Photo courtesy of Dennis Olson

Warren and Elizabeth Wells



Warren Wells



Elizabeth Wells

Photos courtesy of Dave Imbrogno

There are many ways to prepare to become an interpretive naturalist. Warren Wells had been a professional trapper, hunter, fox farmer, prospector, daredevil motorcycle rider, tattoo artist, soldier, jeweler, lapidarist, and an employee of zoos and museums. A World War II veteran, he speaks Russian and Mandarin Chinese and served in the O.S.S. where he specialized in jungle and wilderness survival. He has unique experiences that he can relate to hundreds of natural scenarios.

Warren and Elizabeth Wells worked as an interpretive team for the Hamilton County Park District in Ohio for many years. Having "run together" at an early age, they developed a smooth working relationship.

Dave Imbrogno trained as an interpretive naturalist under the Wells. He later became Director of Programs for the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History. His thoughts on the Wells' style... "The Wells' style"

does more than teach, it inspires. Few people have casual contact with them. Most return again and again to learn more. Many go on to have natural history become a significant part of their lives. The Wells contact tens of thousands of people in their work as naturalists. Perhaps even more significantly they also inspire many to seek careers in the environmental field. I know, I am one. Offhand I can think of at least a dozen working professionals that I know of who got their start with the Wells. I am sure that there are many more. Warren and Elizabeth's contributions to the environment will increase geometrically with time as those who learned from them carry on the tradition. Their work will echo through generations."

Warren describes his style as that of a woodsman. Others have observed that he was a woodsman who loved people; someone who could make people feel good about themselves. He approaches every trail hike as if he were... "taking a bunch of

friends on a walk." A simple down home approach would draw in a high "fulutin" group as readily as a group of children. In a quiet relaxed voice that hinted of his South Carolinian roots, Warren might remark "Well that plant looks like it could be a mustard..." His understatement would often expand into a wealth of shared knowledge about this mystery plant that he actually knew well. "If it is a mustard, it'll have four petals that form a Maltese cross. That's why scientists call it the *Cruciferae* (the cross). The seeds develop all summer long. "Here, taste these." He'd talk about man's use of the mustard in England and maybe on American hotdogs. Meanwhile, Elizabeth would be "bird doggin'" for a new surprise down the trail. Two professionals, complementing each other's talents and learning something new each day. In Warren's words, "I never met a stranger and I never met anyone that I couldn't learn something from."

Finding Your Own Style

Experienced interpreters can be an inspiration to beginners. Much can be learned by watching them, but each of us must develop a style that we are comfortable with. Trying to duplicate the personality and background of a Josh Barkin would be insincere. The poise and ease of veterans like the Wells are pleasing to audiences, but it can't be imitated by a beginning naturalist. You can never be a Josh, Warren, Elizabeth, or Denny, but that should be a relief because then you are free to find your own style - to be yourself.



Chugach National Forest, Alaska

Donna Zimmerman