



# UMC GUIDE RECREATION PARKS & LEISURE

University of Missouri-Columbia Extension Division

## *Methods of Interpretation*

# Interpretive Demonstrations

BY GLENN WEAVER

*Department of Recreation and Park Administration*

Words are sometimes inadequate to describe how a particular object is or was used or the intricacies of a skill. A *demonstration* may be the best way to interpret that activity to an audience. A demonstration creates an experience that is shared by interpreter and audience. It's "common ground" on which the interpreter can build, and it duplicates the "real thing" much more effectively than any other medium.

Of course, an interpreter must give the demonstration. On a large scale, this interpretive technique would be expensive to maintain. It demands an interpreter with both technical and interpretive skills—and one who is also a bit of an actor.

Two basic types of demonstrations used in interpretation are living history demonstrations and activity or skill demonstrations. Living history demonstrations are also called "whole park demonstrations" because they incorporate a total living environment. The intent is to present a moment in history. Living history demonstrations used by the National Park Service include The Living Farm, The Living Town, The Living Military Post. These activities require tremendous amounts of planning, research, training and organization to produce. Single demonstrations of one or more topics are more realistic additions to most interpretive programs.

Demonstrations complement campfire presentations, museum exhibits and many other interpretive settings. They are especially effective in interpretation for children.

An activity demonstration illustrates a part of a larger subject. For example, a theme of pioneer life might include demonstrations of candle making, rail splitting, bread baking, corn husking, plowing and many other skills. Demonstrations are more interesting and easier to comprehend than a written or oral description. People are more likely to remember what they see.

## PLANNING STEPS

*Select a subject worth demonstrating.* Organizing a demonstration involves research, assembling materials, and considerable practice time. Don't waste time demonstrating something that doesn't contribute to the theme of the interpretive site.

*State the purpose of the demonstration* and how it contributes to the theme of the site and management objectives.

*List each step of the demonstration in sequence.*

*Outline the explanation necessary for each step or process.* Interpret what is being done, how it is being done, and why this method is used in preference to other methods. Also relate to the larger topic being discussed. For example, the demonstration of bread baking will incorporate a more complete picture of pioneer life in the discussion. Each step and each ingredient suggests areas of expanding the discussion: Who bakes the bread? Why? How often? How important was bread to the diet of the pioneers? Is the wheat home grown and ground? If flour is purchased, how is the money earned? How is the bread baked? What fuel is consumed?

*List the equipment and supplies needed.*

*Plan illustrations and photographs* to clarify parts of the demonstration.

## PRACTICE THE DEMONSTRATION

*Practice the introduction.* Introduce yourself—or the historical figure represented. This should be done "in character."

*Practice the demonstration.* Try to anticipate some of the questions likely to be asked and prepare yourself for them. Be prepared for problems. Remember Murphy's Law: If something can go wrong, it probably will.

## GIVE THE DEMONSTRATION

*Demonstrate the activity as practiced* but be prepared to answer questions, handle interruptions gracefully.

fully, and relate to the particular audience.

*Summarize the important points.* If you haven't already done so, emphasize how this topic applies to audience members.

*Display the finished product* and invite questions from the audience.

#### **A FINAL THOUGHT. . .**

Demonstrations can be expensive and time consuming to do well—but they can also expand the interpretive program at any park or museum. Although the demonstration as such is not permanent, the interpreter might consider filming or videotaping the event or producing a slide-tape production to be used as a self-directed interpretive presentation.

■ Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914 in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Leonard C. Douglas, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Missouri and Lincoln University, Columbia, Missouri 65211. ■ An equal opportunity institution.

**June 1981/2M**