

Varying Versions of the Real

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THE ACCURATE INTERPRETATION of historical experience is a complex issue tied to the complex nature of history itself. The objectivity of history has long been under debate among scholars. In the past, history was often written as if it emerged from the vision of an ideal observer who simply recorded incontestable facts, "truth" that was experienced the same way by all people. This approach was somewhat comparable to the form of fiction in which the omniscient narrator knew precisely what happened and how everyone felt about it. Today most historians accept the idea that people experience history differently and that historians themselves interpret it from the vantage point of their own particular social niche and intellectual prejudices. History emerges from much historical writing now as a story with multiple plots, which vary depending on who the narrator and the characters are.

In his book *American Historical Explanations*, Gene Wise discussed the "perspectivistic model" of historical analysis. Wise acknowledged that no single historian could ever know everything about particular events and that historical experience was always filtered through frames of reference constructed from the historian's life experiences and interests. This is not the relativism of Carl Becker's "everyman his own historian," which implies that all versions of history are equally true. Perspectivism acknowledges that experience is multiple. But perspectivistic history does not accept any and all versions of history as equally true, because it is grounded in specifics and subject to documentation and persuasive argumentation.¹

History, then, is a selective rather than an objective pursuit. While selection is necessary to provide focus

and organizational continuity, it also invokes the interests of individual historians. Researching and writing history, therefore, is in many ways a highly personal endeavor, since its materials must engage the interests of the historian.

Despite the individual nature of historical investigation, dominant ways of looking at the past arise as cultural attitudes combine to convince historians to ask different questions and seek different materials. According to David Lowenthal, "The place of the past in any landscape is as much the product of present attitudes as of past history." New social history has motivated many historians to ask questions about the everyday life of nonelites in society, and this salubrious approach has filtered into most contemporary historical inquiry, even into high school textbooks. In *America Revised*, Frances Fitzgerald demonstrated how high school history textbooks have changed over time, reflecting social changes and trends in academic interests. In recent memory, historians have "discovered" blacks, American Indians, and women as figures of importance in American history, and they are increasingly present in most works.²

The fact that history is a malleable discipline that accommodates social dynamism can have both positive and negative effects. History can be used to empower people, but it can also be used to legitimize social oppression. In their eagerness to use history as an empowering discipline, people can sometimes impatiently force inappropriate interpretations onto unyielding evi-

¹ Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Revised ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980); Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37 (Jan., 1932): 221–236.

An earlier version of this article was delivered at the annual conference of the American Association for State and Local History, Rochester, N.Y., in September, 1988.

² David Lowenthal, "The American Way of History," *Columbia University Forum* 9 (Summer, 1966): 27; Frances Fitzgerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

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EDITOR'S PAGE

Toward a Socially Responsible Public History

dence. When this happens, historical experience is refracted through the lens of the present by "presentism"—an insistent solipsism that forces the past into the Procrustean bed of the present, thus deforming it to make it fit present consciousness. This is the beginning of propaganda; it is not perspectivistic history.

Historian Michael Wallace, a persistent and insightful gadfly, has recently applied this critical awareness of the perspectivistic nature of history to the presentations at museums and historic sites. He has written that "museums cannot be faulted for having read the past selectively. . . . All history is a production—a deliberate selection, ordering, and evaluation of past events, experiences and processes. The objection is rather that . . . museums incorporated selections and silences on such an order that they falsified reality and became instruments of class hegemony." Such selectivity, Wallace says, inhibits the ability of visitors to "imagine alternative social orders—past or future."³

Many members of the diverse public history audience, not unlike historians, seek history that touches their lives and resonates from their experience. They want history that reflects their current attitudes, that provides role models for themselves and their children. In short, they want history that empowers them and legitimizes their aspirations and beliefs. This desire motivates historic site visitors on both the conservative and radical ends of the sociopolitical spectrum and all those in between. It affects visitors who seek a nostalgic reinforcement of the moral exceptionalness of the American experience and those who seek a critical approach to the degrading effect of the power structures of American capitalism and imperialism. In a sense, both

groups seek an ideal—the reinforcement of perceptual models containing culturally bound notions of the American experience.

WHAT IS A RESPONSIBLE APPROACH for those who develop and supervise programming at museums and historic sites to such relativistic demands on public history? In public history, the true marketplace of history, is "everyman his own historian"? Should public historians succumb to relativistic history? Should public history be guided by economist Jeremy Bentham's principle of utility, which validated the right choice as that which provided the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people? Only cynics would agree with these rhetorical questions. The answer lies in a perspectivistic approach to historical interpretation, an approach that ties interpretation to the attitudes and activities of distinct historical individuals or groups of individuals, an approach that also accommodates varying contemporary attitudes about the past, but an approach that ultimately avoids the relativistic trap by forcing historical argumentation to be particularistic and persuasively documented.

Two examples of the pressures placed upon the Oliver H. Kelley Farm interpretive program to conform to visitor expectations illustrate this problem. The Kelley Farm was originally owned by the man who in 1867 organized the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry (the Grange). It is an 189-acre historic site, operated by the Minnesota Historical Society. Interpreters in period clothing farm 40 acres, performing the tasks of mid-19th-century farm families such as the Kelleys. Since 1987 the farm's Fourth of July presentation has featured a dramatic reading of the Farmers' Declaration of Independence of 1873, a radical revision of the original declaration. This new version was read throughout the country at Fourth of July celebrations, at the height of radical power within the Grange. The Farmers' Declaration inveighed against the inequities of monopoly capitalism, particularly against railroads and dishonest politicians. A discussion of the historical confrontation

³ Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. Susan P. Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 158.



TEMPERANCE and Oliver Kelley relaxing outside their farmhouse, a building that no longer stands, about 1865

between monopoly capitalism and 19th-century farmers followed the re-enactments. In 1987 two men in the audience happened to be retired railroad workers, and they were incensed that interpreters could accuse the railroads of cheating farmers and bribing politicians. They were proud of their years of work, and they believed that railroad companies had always been kind and nurturing and that they had been the major actors in developing the country. Although assured that the program simply re-enacted a historical event, the men left in anger, with no interest in further discussion.

The second example involves another visitor, a faculty member at the University of Minnesota, who accompanied her daughter on a class field trip to the Kelley Farm. The group consisted of children from the first through sixth grades. The day after the trip, the visitor wrote: "The farm is beautiful and I was very impressed with the kind of educational experience that was given to the children on our tour. I am sure that they learned much about farming and what farm life was like one hundred years ago by participating in the farm activities and games and by watching the farm workers." But, she also wrote, "I am concerned that they had an effective learning experience, but an inaccurate one."⁴ From subsequent correspondence and discussions with the visitor, it was clear that she was dis-

turbed that her daughter's vision of her potential could be limited by the depiction of farm women at the Kelley Farm. She wanted validation of the idea that if historians looked hard enough, they would find that women have always done the same kinds of things on farms that men have.

THESE ARE TWO EXAMPLES of historical perspectives in opposition to the interpretive story presented at the Kelley Farm—one a conservative belief in the inherent goodness of capitalism and one a feminist belief in the oppressive, patriarchal nature of historiography. Each person wants his/her particular historical perspective to be reified. But is it the role of historic sites to seek to fulfill the many and varied perspectives of visitors? Should we seek the examples that support such ideologies, then build our programs around them? Or should we base our programs on careful research, which includes materials presented by historians of differing perspectives, then choose the most compelling and convincing arguments?

Before answering these questions, we need to look at the examples in more depth. The most problematic one—and the most interesting one for me—is the femi-

⁴ Amy Sheldon to Tom Woods, Oct. 1, 1986, copy in Gender Role File, Oliver Kelley Farm, Elk River.

nist issue; an examination of the program the school group received, the documentation for that program, the current scholarship concerning the issue, and our interpretive methodology will be instructive.

The group experienced the first-grade program in which interpreters consciously use gender as an organizing concept for presenting work roles, which they then use to analyze the family economy. They emphasize that the roles of rural men and women, although different, were equally important in ensuring the success of the family enterprise. The Kelley Farm site interprets a 19th-century Yankee gender division of labor, which put women in charge of the house, garden, and poultry, while men were responsible for large animals and field work. The program develops this theme showing the division of labor within the Kelley family and among middle-class Yankee farm families in general, while acknowledging differences among individual families and ethnic groups.

The visitor's objections were basically of two kinds. She objected that this interpretation was inaccurate, claiming that rural women actually did the same sorts of work that men did, and she argued that such an interpretation was insensitive to women's historical role and future potential. In her view, the interpretation relegated women to less important jobs than men and created a historical justification for contemporary limits on the potential of women.

The first objection seems a factual one, easily settled. When seen through the lens of perspectivistic history, however, it is not easily resolved because there exist competing historical versions. Yet a great preponderance of evidence suggests the interpretation is appropriate for Yankee families. Almost without exception, research concerning women's rural history, published by both men and women historians, has concluded that there were distinct rural gender work roles. Those roles varied somewhat among ethnic groups and regions, and they were elastic enough to allow divergence as the need arose. Many scholars of gender work roles have argued that a rigidification occurred when a family entered into market agriculture, producing specialized goods for cash sale rather than a variety of goods for subsistence. It is also important to note that

most of the recent work in gender roles uses material such as women's diaries and letters, census and probate records—descriptive sources that show how people acted—rather than the prescriptive period books and journals that told people how they *should* act.

In *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land*, Joan M. Jensen adopted a form of the perspectivistic model of analysis described by Wise and recently recommended to women's studies scholars by historian Gerda Lerner. Jensen analyzed the gender work roles of different ethnic groups and concluded that in Euro-American families men and women worked together in the fields until the plow changed agriculture, after which men began to dominate agricultural work. "Women," she argued, "increasingly confined themselves to household tasks which included tending poultry, making butter and cheese, working in vegetable gardens, manufacturing clothing, and caring for children." Jensen reiterated this position after reviewing the papers of a Scottish farm woman in Oregon and a Norwegian farm wife from Minnesota: "Most of these frontier farms," she noted, "had certain similarities: families were nuclear; men normally plowed the fields; and women tended poultry, made butter and cheese, worked in vegetable gardens, and cared for small children." Jensen repeatedly emphasized that women's work was just as important as men's, though different, and both sexes co-operated to achieve success.⁵

In *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850*, Jensen focused on a particular region, rather than on ethnic groups, and arrived at similar conclusions about the solidification of gender roles with the introduction of market agriculture. Similarly, in *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier*, Joanna Stratton found that "In general, however, it was the daily housework which consumed most of a woman's time and energy. The prairie housewife put in long hours cooking, cleaning, sewing, laundering and gardening." But during hard times "When the strength of the frontiersman and his sons proved inadequate, the mother and daughters assisted with the traditionally male tasks of planting and harvesting, tending livestock . . . and even hunting."⁶

Nancy Grey Osterud found a similar division of labor among farmers in the Nanticoke Valley of New York, although gender roles varied somewhat among families. "In the Nanticoke Valley, as in other rural areas, men were responsible for plowing and planting the fields, cultivating and harvesting the field crops, and preparing the hay, grain, and root crops for use as animal and human food. Women were responsible for tending the vegetable garden, processing and preserving the year's supply of vegetables and fruits, and preparing meals. Men were responsible for the construc-

⁵ Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1981), 32, 34. Jensen calls the model *multicultural*. Gerda Lerner, "Priorities and Challenges in Women's History Research," *Perspectives* 26 (April, 1988): 19, newsletter of the American Historical Association; see p. 17-19 for statistical data.

⁶ Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Joanna L. Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 62, 61.

tion and maintenance of the house, barn, and outbuildings, for the provision of fuel for heat and cooking, and for the repair of farm and household equipment; women were responsible for cleaning the house, tending the fires, and sewing, mending, and laundering."⁷

Osterud denies that these gender work roles constituted a separation of spheres, though, because there was an inherent mutuality in the roles, and women helped men whenever an emergency or a lack of male labor required more work in the fields. She argues that in the Nanticoke Valley, where dairying was the major agricultural pursuit, gender work roles were more fluid, because in dairying they were more ambiguous than in other agricultural pursuits. Osterud also found evidence to disagree with Jensen's depiction of a dual economy in which men produced for the market while women produced for family subsistence.⁸

In *From Peasants to Farmers*, an interesting analysis of 19th-century Norwegian immigrants who settled primarily in Minnesota, Jon Gjerde took an in-depth look at changing behavior by examining a cohort's customs both before and after migration. Gjerde found that in Norway these people had had specific and fairly rigid rural gender work roles. After a short transitional period in America, which corresponded with their transition to commercial agriculture, Norwegian farm families generally adopted the work roles of the culturally dominant Yankees. One Norwegian wrote home in amazement, "The Americans never use female help out of doors, not even to milk and care for the cows. So they get no help from their wives and daughters in the operation of the farms."⁹

A number of studies by historians and sociologists have reached similar conclusions about 19th-century rural gender work roles in the North. Other scholars, faced with this surprising consensus, are currently seeking to show that gender work roles were less consistently followed than these studies have suggested. Until this new work is completed and critically reviewed, though, it is not a usable body of information.¹⁰

SPECIFIC DOCUMENTATION for the interpretation of gender work roles in the Kelley family shows that Oliver H. Kelley was a Bostonian Yankee who was thoroughly inculcated with Yankee cultural characteristics. Temperance Lane Kelley, his wife, was also a transplanted Bostonian whom Kelley met when she was teaching school in Anoka. In the 19th century, the "cult of domesticity" was a powerful cultural belief that created an ideal of woman as mother and wife—a saintly teacher, moral guide, nurse, and guardian of the home, a place intended to be a refuge for her family from the cares and snares of the corrupt world. Kelley was a devotee of this prescriptive philosophy, which led him

to criticize others not similarly inclined. While touring Minnesota in 1866, he passed through a German neighborhood near St. Cloud. He later remarked, "In the German neighborhoods, males and females, old and young, are busy digging potatoes and doing other out door work, and in a few instances I see girls holding the plow. To me they appear out of place. Political economists may see it in a different light and my education may be at fault, but I have been taught to believe the field was no place for a colored female to labor and that all females were alike in this respect. It hardly seems to me a judicious way of encouraging those finer feelings necessary to make kind and affectionate mothers—but money being the object and happiness, secondary, my philosophizing will hardly be heeded."¹¹

Kelley was away from the farm frequently in the 1860s, and that has led to speculation that Temperance and their daughters were forced to fill in for him in the fields. It is possible, but unlikely, that their work roles changed significantly at this time. The family consistently expended comparatively large amounts of money

⁷ Nancy Grey Osterud, "She Helped Me Hay It as Good as a Man: Relations among Women and Men in an Agricultural Community," in *"To Toil the Livelong Day": America's Women at Work, 1780-1980*, ed. Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 93.

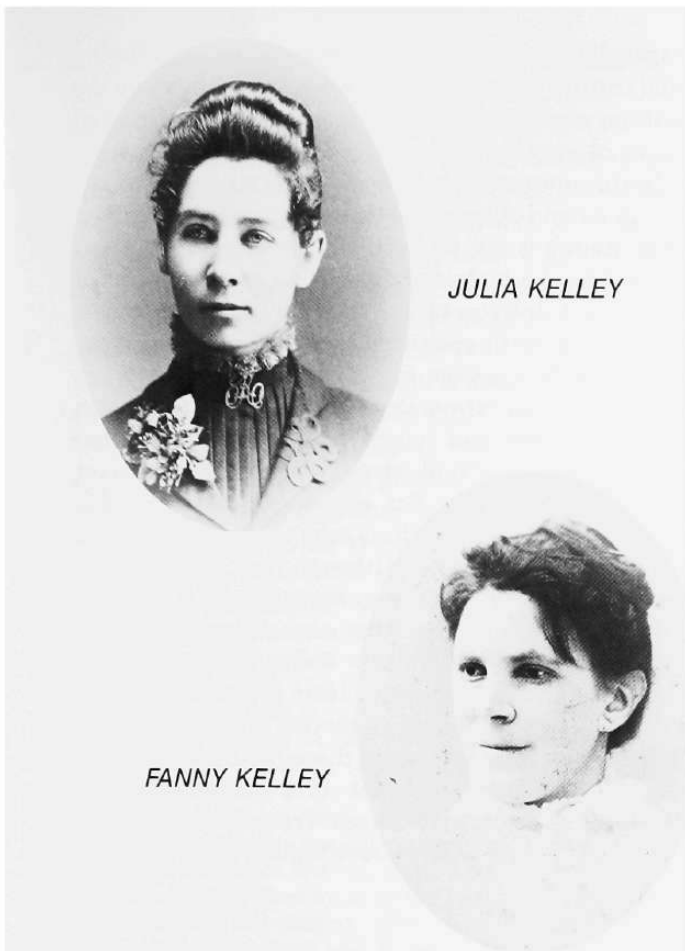
⁸ Osterud, "She Helped Me Hay It," 93-95.

⁹ Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 34-36, 66-69, 168-169, 192-201, 235; quote, p. 194.

¹⁰ Studies forming the consensus on gender roles include: Bengt Ankarloo, "Agriculture and Women's Work: Directions of Change in the West, 1700-1900," *Journal of Family History* 4 (Summer, 1979): 111-120; Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987); Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Cornbelt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Mary W. M. Hargreaves, "Women in the Agricultural Settlement of the Northern Plains," *Agricultural History* 50 (Jan., 1976): 179-189; Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen, The Iowa Experience* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981); Carolyn E. Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totawa, N.J.: Rowman and Allenheld, 1983); David Schob, *Hired Hands and Plowboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

For the other side of the debate see Anne B. Webb, "Forgotten Persephones: Women Farmers on the Frontier," *Minnesota History* 50 (Winter, 1986): 134-148. Webb is working on a longer manuscript based on homestead records.

¹¹ *St. Paul Pioneer*, Oct. 19, 1866.



JULIA KELLEY

FANNY KELLEY

for hired labor, and Kelley worried constantly about money to pay more hired laborers while he was away.¹² There is no descriptive evidence—such as diaries—to relate what sorts of work the Kelley women were doing. Thus the convincing descriptions compiled by scholars about similar families and the Kelley family's background and typically Yankee ideas about proper gender work roles remain the only persuasive evidence with which to develop an interpretive perspective at the Kelley Farm.

After 1876, the farm was in the names of Julia and

¹² Oliver H. Kelley to Ignatius Donnelly, Feb. 5, April 26, 1867, Ignatius Donnelly Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).

¹³ See, for instance, Hepzibah Hall to Carrie Hall, July 4, 1879, Edwin H. Brown and Family Papers, MHS; United States, Manuscript Agricultural Census, 1880, Sherburne County, Elk River Township; U.S., Manuscript Population Census, 1880, Sherburne County, Elk River Township.

¹⁴ For a thorough discussion of the history of the Kelley family's residency at the farm and strategies for interpretation of the house, see Tom Woods, "A Reevaluation of Interpretation at the Kelley Farm," unpublished report, April 19, 1982, and "Six Year Plan for the Kelley Farm," unpublished report, May 16, 1986, both on file at the Historic Sites Department, MHS, and the Oliver H. Kelley Farm.

Fanny Kelley. Julia was listed in the 1880 census as owner/operator of the farm, and both women were consistently taxed for property there from 1876 until 1885. During this period Julia was the major farm manager; Oliver Kelley probably never returned to live in the house which he had local carpenters build in 1876. But does this prove that Julia and Fanny were performing the manual labor in those years? Probably not. In fact, letters suggest that although Julia was at the farm more than any other Kelley family member during that period, she was probably only there during the summers, returning to her family's new home in Florida for the remainder of the year. Furthermore, in 1880 the total value of all Julia's farm produce was \$400, and she expended that \$400 to pay for hired labor for a total of 58 work weeks. Obviously more than one laborer was working at times; Douglas and Mabel Phillips, a farmer and a housekeeper, were listed as living with her on the farm when the 1880 census was taken in May.¹³

The Kelley Farm program focuses on change in agriculture in the mid-19th century, change that brought farmers into conflict with monopoly capitalists, thus motivating Oliver Kelley to organize the Grange. Interpretive assignments at the farm generally adhere to Yankee gender roles of the period, having women working with field crops only when a shortage of male labor or crop emergencies make it necessary. Within this overall theme, interpretation of the Kelley house focuses on the role of Julia and Fanny as summer managers of the farmstead in 1876. The house has been only partially furnished to suggest their temporary residency and the dwelling's unfinished nature. The house also serves as a space in which to interpret the domestic activities and general work and social roles of Yankee farm women in the 19th century. Plans call for an exhibit in one of the unfurnished rooms to discuss the lives of the Kelley women and the changing social roles of rural women, in general, in that era.¹⁴

During the first interpretive seasons in 1981 and 1982, a woman was the primary teamster at the Kelley Farm, working horses and oxen in the fields. As our research base improved, we found that such an activity was rare and unlikely in a Yankee household. During these two years we also found that using a woman as a teamster did not encourage people to think about changes in gender work roles. Given the greater flexibility of these roles in contemporary society, visitors simply accepted the woman teamster as normal for the 19th century, too. Generally, they were not moved to compare historical and contemporary attitudes about gender, and they left with an inaccurate view of 19th-century Yankee farm life.

The interpretive methodology of the Kelley Farm program is designed to encourage visitors to understand

that historical experience is multiple, to persuade them to analyze accepted notions of progress, to help them understand that history is a process of conflict and power struggles, and, by connecting historical farm protest to contemporary farm protest, to show visitors the vital connections of the past with the present. The farm's method is based on a third-person living history technique that we call inductive, perspectivistic interpretation. In third-person living history, interpreters in a simulated historical environment talk about historical people, rather than pretending that they are those people, as in first-person living history. The method is inductive in that interpretation always begins with a physical object and expands to abstract ideas and cultural connections. It is perspectivistic because interpreters use an inquiry strategy to provoke visitors to think about how people of varying social characteristics thought and felt about different objects and changes in their lives. For instance, interpreters may ask visitors how they think farm women reacted to the purchase of a new reaper, how it may have affected their lives, or how hired hands who were formerly employed as grain cradlers responded to such an innovation. Using this method, interpreters are able to interest visitors on a concrete level, lead them to abstract considerations—even an evaluation—of social change, and invite them

to speculate on the varying ways people of differing social status experienced change, thus introducing questions about social structures of power and accepted notions of progress.

In this interactive model, Kelley staff members key in on issues and objects of interest to individual visitors. Programming is not scripted. Interpreters are trained to understand a body of information and a method of presenting it. Interpretation, therefore, necessarily varies somewhat with each visit, visitor, and interpreter, because the two engage in a dialogue about historical issues. This is an extremely effective model that keeps interpreters fresh and interested in visitors and often provokes visitors to think about things they have never thought about before. But sometimes this technique does not work well for visitors who are passive learners and refuse to participate. Although they, too, will discover much information from interpreters, it may not be the sort of information they are seeking.

The school program at the Kelley Farm is distinct from the general interpretive one. It consists of four graduated programs based on models of conceptual development used by educators throughout the country. Since these models suggest that elementary-age children—particularly those from kindergarten through the fourth grade—have limited abilities to ab-

INTERPRETER in period dress and tour group at the Kelley Farm, 1982



stract, interpretation emphasizes active experience. In the first- and second-grade program on family living, children actually perform the chores of 19th-century children. Although staff interpreters do not try to introduce perspectivist history in this program, they do help children to see differences between the past and present by asking them what sorts of work roles their mothers and fathers have today, thus helping them realize that historical rural gender work roles no longer limit what men and women can do.¹⁵

This is an innovative program that seems to satisfy even the demanding criteria of gadfly Michael Wallace. It maintains a coherent, documented experiential perspective from the vantage point of a particular family and cultural group and a unified interpretive perspective in its focus on the revolutions in agriculture that

¹⁵ For a summary of current modes of application of learning theory in schools, see Bernice McCarthy, *The 4Mat System: Teaching to Learning Styles with Right/Left Mode Techniques* (2nd ed., Oak Brook, Ill.: Excel, Inc., 1981). For museum applications of conceptual development theory, see Peggy Cole, "Piaget in the Galleries," *Museum News* 63 (Oct., 1984): 9-15; Nina Jensen, "Children, Teenagers and Adults in Museums: A Developmental Perspective," *Museum News* 61 (May/June, 1982): 25-30; Sue Sturtevant Rayner and Judith Douglas Speidel, "Learning Theories and History Museums: How Museum Educators Can Improve Their Programs for Children by Applying Learning Theories," *History News* 42 (July/August, 1987): 23-26; Peter O'Connell, "Adult Education and the Museum Experience," *History News* 43 (September/October, 1988): 10-17. See especially Allison L. Grinder and E. Sue McCoy, *The Good Guide: A Sourcebook for Interpreters, Docents and Tour Guides* (Scottsdale, Ariz.: Ironwood Press, 1985), 22-50, 90-116.

were changing how family members interacted among themselves and with the rest of society. Yet it also encourages visitor participation in analyzing the nature of history and the variety of historical experience. But visitors also must understand that historic sites are generally more like a monograph than a textbook. No historic site can—nor should it seek to—encompass all regional or national history within its program. That would lead to a program lacking focus, adequate documentation, and an animating interpretive perspective.

INTERPRETATION at museums and historical sites should recognize the perspectivist nature of historical experience. Programs should also encourage visitors to understand that history is a fabrication that may vary, depending on the researcher's interest and social position. Informed by the latest scholarship, interpretation must be based on solid research into the particular story being told at the site and the context within which that story exists. Interpretation should also be suffused with a sensitivity to the varying perspectives of visitors, but that does not mean replacing an informed perspective with historical relativism, in which programs are changed to accommodate the varying views of individual visitors. Yet program managers must also be flexible enough to change in the face of new evidence or compelling perspectives that challenge current interpretation.

THE PICTURE on p. 183, top, is by E. S. Hill, St. Cloud; p. 183, bottom, by Walter E. Chickering, Boston; p. 184 is by Stan Waldhauser, St. Paul. All are in the MHS audio-visual library.



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