

ENTERTAINING THE PUBLIC  
TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC AT CONNER PRAIRIE:  
PRAIRIETOWN, 1975 TO 2006

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## INTRODUCTION

During the height of the Depression, Eli Lilly, Indianapolis's pharmaceutical leader and philanthropist, employed Tillman Bubenzer,<sup>1</sup> a down-on-his-luck German immigrant to run an experimental farm. It lay across the White River from a newly restored brick house of minimal historic import.<sup>2</sup> At that time, Lilly hoped that new, improved breeds of hogs and cattle would advance Indiana's stature as a leading hub of agricultural innovation. In the following years, Lilly's venture failed to recognize profits and, by 1967, it was losing money. The historic William Conner house, however, was quietly drawing visitors from around the state. They walked through its pioneer-themed rooms (the house was built in 1823) and looked out from its windows over the same floodplain that settler William Conner had once looked across.<sup>3</sup> Lilly and the administrators of the recently christened "Conner Prairie" saw that the almost 1,500 acre money-losing expanse of land could become something more than a small historic house museum surrounded by fancy hogs and barren silos. So, in 1974 they created a town.

Prairietown never functioned as an actual town. The year is always 1836 there and people from the present pay to walk through it. The town is a jumble of eleven houses,

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<sup>1</sup> Tillman Bubenzer, Farm Manager of the Conner Prairie Farms, 1942-1977.

<sup>2</sup> William Conner, who built the house, was one of the first white men to settle in Hamilton County. He was an Ohio-born merchant who made his living from trade with the local Native American tribes (in particular the Lenape, also known as Delaware) who had settled along the White River. Conner served several non-consecutive and undistinguished terms as a state legislator. He later took up residence in Noblesville, Indiana, Hamilton County's seat. Conner certainly had an interesting life and was an important figure in the development of Hamilton County and central Indiana, but his significance to the rest of the state and to the nation was minimal at best. The early interpretations of the Conner story at the museum will be explored in Chapter Four, "Do You Really Live Here?" And Other Visitor Responses: 1935 to 1998."

<sup>3</sup> Landrum Bolling to Eli Lilly, 15 July 1967, Conner Prairie Archive, Fishers, Indiana [Hereafter "Conner Prairie Archive" will be referred to as CP Archive].

two barns and three craftsman shops. None of these buildings were constructed on the property--they were trucked in from around the state at various times during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This expensive project involved hours of labor devoted to moving, restoring and furnishing the buildings. Eli Lilly and the planners of the fictional town went to great lengths to create this place. They developed and organized the town to sell it to the public as an historical experience. The creators of Prairietown intentionally set out to recapture an idyllic time, but one of their motivations to frame the experience as they did was to bring out some of the difficult stories of the pioneer era. Many of these decisions were market-driven, but in most cases they were actually focused toward providing experiences that were “authentic” (a problematic term used by the founders of Prairietown that will be defined below) and would help the public to learn about the past. Theseeming contradiction between authenticity and drawing visitors to the museum and its exploration herein have important ramifications for the rapidly-declining field of living history. Using Conner Prairie’s history as a case study will illuminate some “best practices” for the field to show that Conner Prairie during the 1970s set out a model for how to effectively combine entertainment with education in a recreated museum setting.

In the early 1970s, the creators of Prairietown saw a unique use for the land that would draw visitors, and, because they focused on providing an entertaining experience, this fictional town was initially successful in drawing large numbers.<sup>4</sup> In the years leading up to the bicentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1976, living history, at Conner Prairie and elsewhere, was considered the perfect way for (as Jay Anderson, an early living history theorist, described) the general public to experience

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Glassie, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 27 May 2005, transcription, CP Archive.

“history as it really was” by enabling visitors to immerse themselves in an “authentic” space.<sup>5</sup> Living history is, in general terms, a museum-based recreation of past villages, cityscapes or farms populated by costumed staff members who portray characters from the time period represented. As will be seen, at its advent, living history was an extremely popular way to present history to the public in a uniquely contextual way. Initially, this formula was successful. Both Colonial Williamsburg and Plimoth Plantation, the leading East Coast examples of this type of museum, experienced their zeniths during the 1970s.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there was also a burgeoning interest among academic historians in taking history to the public. The underlying argument from many of the early academic writers on the topic stressed the importance of providing the historical context for guests at museums, so that the exhibits and reenactments would be more accurate.<sup>6</sup> In addition, museum theorists emphasized the value of integrating best practices in research and historiography into the presentations to the public at museums.

Beginning in the mid 1980s, however, attendance at the leading living history museums like Colonial Williamsburg, Plimoth Plantation and Greenfield Village at the Henry Ford Museum, began to drop precipitously.<sup>7</sup> Many solutions to this problem were tested by the leading museums, from devising new programs to streamlining operations, but no one solution staunched the flow of visitors away from living history museums. The dilemma for Conner Prairie, and by extension, other living history museums, is that

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<sup>5</sup> Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville: AASLH Press, 1984), 61. Anderson uses the term “authentic” to describe the social history and craft activities at outdoor living history museums.

<sup>6</sup> Sten Rentzhog, *Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea* (Kristianstad, Sweden: Carlssons and Jamtli Press, 2007), 236.

<sup>7</sup> *26<sup>th</sup> Annual Proceedings of the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums* (Williamsburg, VA: ALHFAM Press, September 2002), 28.



accuracy and historical content are paramount to presenting honest portrayals of the past. At the same time, these museums need to be an attractive place for people to spend their leisure time. The tension and interplay between educational goals and entertainment are central to Conner Prairie's story, and are uniquely manifested in Prairietown, its living history village.

Prairietown was established for the public as an entertaining re-created village. Representations of the past for public audiences can, at its best, inspire people to reflect on their own cultural situation and learn more about the world around them (and before them). Learning theory has shown that the education is most effective when presented in an engaging, constructivist format.<sup>8</sup> In the years following the creation of Prairietown, program planners and historical interpreters moved away from using the created past of living history as inspirational entertainment and focused instead on specific historically-based content goals. By the late 1990s, this narrow focus estranged museums from their potential audience. More recently, however, the social milieu of the early 2000s, as personalized web-based interactions and demographic fragmentation become more prominent, may cause historical museums to take a more entertainment-focused approach to getting visitors interested in their offerings. In the case of Conner Prairie, evidence from extensive visitor learning studies required thoughtful museum educators to return to the original emphasis upon entertainment. The ups and downs of the general public's appreciation for historical offerings (as measured by attendance figures, but also by analysis of their reactions to the experiences they have) beg not only Conner Prairie but also other museums to forsake a tunnel-vision focus on historical content. Instead,

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<sup>8</sup> John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2000), 28.

museums seeking to educate the public about history should consider basing programs on the model set out some forty years ago by Prairietown's creators.

By showing a keen attention to audience, museums will be able to provide entertaining experiences to visitors as an effective way to promote learning about history. Finding out what guests bring with them to their visit to a museum with regards to past experiences and memories can provide critical information that will help museums to make meaningful connections to their audience.<sup>9</sup> If no one wants to hear a museum's information, it becomes useless. History risks losing its relevance if it is presented in boring, dull or overly didactic ways. Prairietown's creators understood this premise, and the museum field would be wise to follow their lead in charting a visitor-focused course that will retain museums' relevance in the uncertain future. In Conner Prairie's case, returning to that vision in the early twenty-first century helped the museum cast itself as a leader not only in the living history field, but also in the museum field writ large.

### Themes and Organization

Chapter One, "Living History Museums in Context," will give an overview of the literature that has informed this thesis. Historians of memory and popular consumption of the past, in particular writers like Roy Rosenzweig, David Thelen and David Lowenthal, are foundational to this historiography. Other areas of history contributed to this project, from literature about the societal upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s to studies that explore the goals and assumptions of other outdoor living history museums. Some of the latter, such as Richard Handler's and Eric Gable's work on the utilization of social history at

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 10.

Colonial Williamsburg and Seth Bruggeman's efforts to trace different interpretations of history at George Washington's birthplace, are direct influences on this work. Jessica Swigger's recently completed doctoral thesis examines historical memories at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, and shows that Ford's preoccupation with creating a sanitized recreation of a nostalgic past was influenced by his belief in the power of capitalism as an agent of democracy. In all of these examples, institutional histories are transformed into something beyond the typical celebratory anniversary tomes that populate gift shops at museums around the country. Handler and Gable, Bruggeman and Swigger used their histories to provide insight into larger cultural themes as well as to highlight some of the interpretive techniques that these museums utilized. It is hoped that Chapter One will do the same for Conner Prairie.

Chapter Two, "The Development of a Conner Prairie Philosophy: 1932 to 1975," explores Conner Prairie's early years and devotes attention to Eli Lilly's motivations for developing public programming at the William Conner House (and later, Prairietown). The pivotal moment when Conner Prairie's management determined to try out living history as its interpretive schema for Prairietown fell during the 1970s, a time when the country's founding was being celebrated and debated by the public against the backdrop of the bicentennial. 1975 is a good place to close out this chapter--that year Myron Vourax gave voice to the seminal elucidation of the Conner Prairie philosophy in "The Conner Prairie Concept," presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums.

Chapter Three, "A Transition from Folklife and Experience to Authenticity and Education: 1976 to 1998," shows Prairietown during the 1980s and 1990s, as the

professionalization of the museum began to draw its focus away from its original theoretical foundation. At the dawn of America's bicentennial in 1976, changing demographics and audience expectations for museums around the country influenced what administrators at Conner Prairie perceived the museum's role in society to be. Prairietown's place in the debates about authenticity and entertainment (as well as how staff at the museum reacted to the changing atmosphere) illustrates how other museums faced similar challenges in the years from 1976 up through the 1990s.

Chapter Four, "Do You Really Live Here?' and Other Visitor Responses: 1935 to 1998," takes a different approach from the strictly chronological one that precedes it. This chapter begins with a short look at the early historical pageants and house tours that were the first presentations to the public at the William Conner House in the 1930s. By examining how visitors to Conner Prairie perceived their experiences and how management responded to that feedback, this chapter also shows how the competing pressures of engaging an audience while at the same time presenting programs that were based on solid historical research played out at Conner Prairie. In addition, the chapter provides some initial suggestions for how museums can present both historically rich and entertaining interpretations of the past. 1998 marks the year before significant learning studies and a renewed focus on audience took place at Conner Prairie, which changed the museum's approach.

Chapter Five, "Opening Doors: A Return to the Paradigm of Prairietown's Founders: 1999 and Beyond," explores the transformative changes in Prairietown in the early twenty-first century and ends with some ideas for how this work thesis might inform the future direction of the recently rechristened Conner Prairie Interactive History

Park. Evidence from visitor research led Conner Prairie to make dramatic changes to its presentations to the public that both affected the visitors' satisfaction as well increased visitation. In doing so, Conner Prairie carved out a place for itself as a leader in the field of public history.

The author of this thesis found himself in the midst of this transformation when he began working at Conner Prairie as a front-line interpreter in 2002.<sup>10</sup> As he got more involved in the changes, he questioned why the museum was able to buck the declining attendance trend and indifferent audiences at other museums around the country. Reflecting on how this change took place can help Conner Prairie to continue to grow and to evolve in the twenty-first century and beyond. Other museums now look to Conner Prairie as a model for growth and viability in uncertain economic times.

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<sup>10</sup> The author was Junior Project Manager for Conner Prairie's *Opening Doors to Great Guest Experiences* DVD/CDROM project from 2003-2006, which was funded by an Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership grant. The author also served as Team Leader from 2004-2006 for the group of front-line interpreters who instituted the initial changes to interpretive and training philosophy that was based on research conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The primary Conner Prairie management staff members who drove the research and implementation of *Opening Doors* were Dan Freas, as Programs Director from 1998-2010, and Ken Bubb, as Prairietown Manager and Senior Project Manager for *Opening Doors* from 2002-2006.

CHAPTER ONE  
LIVING HISTORY MUSEUMS IN CONTEXT

Living history museums are a relatively new phenomena, but the desire to relive an idyllic past is a universal and age-old yearning. There is ample evidence, from the Bible and Plato's *Dialogues* to escapist science fiction (which used time machines as vehicles for social commentary about the depravity and inanity of the modern society), that humans throughout history have desired to revisit the past "as it was." Additionally, people recreate history in ways that suit their own purposes.<sup>11</sup> A modern example of this is from Oliver Stone's 2004 film *Alexander*. Stone used *Alexander* to try to persuade audiences that war is a great evil. History was merely a backdrop for this agenda. Re-created history often speaks more to the motivations of its creator than to the actual past as represented by careful academic historians.

With an acknowledgement of the personal bias inherent in any history-making, it is not a far leap to understand the theoretical basis for living history museums. Creating fake towns from the past is a way for people to understand themselves and the world around them as well as to experience a sense of nostalgia for a time that is perceived as more simple and pure.

One source that provides excellent insights into popular "constructions of the past" is historian David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Lowenthal emphasizes the importance of the past to humanity's present conception of itself. He argues that the desire to recapture an idyllic age inevitably leads to a romanticization of

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<sup>11</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 26.

the past. Lowenthal's thoughts in *The Past is a Foreign Country* are further developed in an essay that he wrote that appeared in the book *History Museums in the United States: a Critical Assessment* (edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig). In this article he argues that pioneer museums are often considered to be the "least authentic" (the use of this troubling word seems to refer primarily to "sticking to the facts") because they celebrate uniquely American myths.<sup>12</sup>

In this same collection of essays, radical historian Michael Wallace contrasts "Disneyfied" history, where distortion of the past is acceptable as a means toward entertainment, with "real" history, which at its best seeks to propel people toward action as a way to learn from the past.<sup>13</sup> Wallace also argues that the past "is too important to be left to the private sector." Because corporations are beholden to profits and production and not obligated to presenting aspects of history that might challenge their narratives of capitalism, he asserts that non-profit museums are in the best position to affect change through stimulating action by providing more complete pictures of past.<sup>14</sup> He argues for a closer connection between scholarly and popular history. Wallace ties his points together by arguing that the proper role for historians and museums is to highlight the intersection between human agency and historical circumstances. He writes that "museums should

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<sup>12</sup> David Lowenthal, "Pioneer Museums," in *History Museums in the United States: a Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 117.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Wallace, "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World," in *History Museums in the United States: a Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 179. Wallace used the term "real" to describe history that was not beholden to corporate whims.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

consider it their fundamental mission to assist people to become historically-informed makers of history.”<sup>15</sup>

Wallace’s focus on museums’ role in advocating for social and cultural change to bring about justice in society merits attention as it relates to living history. Living history museums in America, as conceived as purveyors of folklife and the stories of the “common man,”<sup>16</sup> have had a strong human agency core; the stress on the pioneer spirit and the drive of people like William Conner to carve out a place for themselves in a difficult land, was a key philosophical underpinning. Since the villages, homes and farms are populated by interpreters dressed in historic clothing, the backstory and biography assigned to these characters made them fully-formed human agents, who did not follow a script to the letter, and could share their dreams for the future with visitors. The historical circumstances that the interpreters found themselves in was then whatever time-period given and the research into that time-period that resulted in the material culture and setting of the site. In this context, a living history museum is perhaps the best example of good history. Living history museums, with their daily displays of the intersection of human agency and historical circumstances, provide a clear picture of a unique place and culture in a specific time.

#### Examples of Living History in the United States and Abroad

Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, in their 2007 work *The Presence of the Past*,

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 25.

<sup>16</sup> The term “common man” here is one used primarily by social historians and the staff and consultants who helped to develop Conner Prairie’s Prairietown in the 1970s. Other terms that will be used throughout this paper interchangeably with “common man” are “ordinary people,” “average man” and “regular people.”



demonstrate through extensive interviews with a wide cross-section of the country that many Americans are turned off by history as presented in the classroom setting and instead view museums and personal accounts from relatives or witnesses to historical events as being the most trustworthy sources of information about the past.<sup>17</sup>

Rosenzweig and Thelen come to the conclusion that personal meaning-making is the prime motivator for interest in history and they posit that history museums may be seen as so trustworthy because people often use museums as catalysts for developing their identity and becoming more self-aware. They also argue that the national narratives which reigned in the historiography of the 1950s through the 1960s became less and less useful or relevant for most Americans as their sense of alienation with the government deepened during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>18</sup> The didactic and expository educational theory in vogue at museums prior to the 1970s had fed into their desire to showcase national meta-narratives. Places like Colonial Williamsburg and Plimoth Plantation, with their portrayal of critical nation-building moments, were excellent examples of this type of celebratory national history on display.<sup>19</sup>

Although the national meta-narratives at Williamsburg and Plimoth Plantation were becoming more prominent during the 1970s, the lengthy exposition and strong focus on information-giving belied best practices in learning theory. Experiential learning as a way to discover more about the past has been shown to be an important tool for

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<sup>17</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>19</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen make it clear that while white Americans had mostly positive associations with national meta-narratives, African Americans and Native Americans were not as likely to have that same positive sense. *Ibid.*, 127.

museums to promote self-awareness and reflection.<sup>20</sup> In addition, an understanding of the constructivist approach to learning, which acknowledges that people are not blank slates upon which information is written, but are instead constantly combining new information with memories of prior experiences, has affected how museums presented the past to the public.<sup>21</sup> Museums such as Williamsburg and Plimoth that have an overtly national or political perspective may find it more difficult to pull away from their overarching narratives to break history into easily relatable, experiential nuggets that can spark visitors' curiosity.

More recent research into how children engage with the past has shown that imagination and creative play are key drivers for early entry into historical thinking and appreciation.<sup>22</sup> Learning theorists are beginning to rally around experiential learning through engaging visitors' senses and immersing them in a time and place as the most effective ways to provide a gateway into the past to make history less abstract for young people.<sup>23</sup> The appeal of history museums to children is an important aspect of museums' continuing relevance in our society. The audience frequenting museums from the 1950s up through the 1980s were primarily adult history enthusiasts who liked to travel to historical destinations out of a sense of civic and national pride or duty.<sup>24</sup> As early as the mid 1990s, sociologists and commentators like Robert Putnam noted that civic and community organizations were slowly dying off as involvement in voluntary associations

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<sup>20</sup> George E. Hein and Mary Alexander, *Museums: Places of Learning* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums Education Committee, 1998), 35.

<sup>21</sup> John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>22</sup> D. Lynn McRaney and John Russick, eds., *Connecting Kids to History with Museum Exhibitions* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010), 119.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>24</sup> Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 211.

dipped and the Greatest Generation (those who lived through World War II) was supplanted in numbers by Baby Boomers.<sup>25</sup> This newer audience had a variety of motivations for visiting museums, and a key driving force for many Baby Boomer parents (and now as grandparents) was (and is) to help provide experiences with the past for their children that are both fun and promote learning.<sup>26</sup>

An understanding of the importance of the social and interpersonal aspect of a museum visit is becoming more prevalent among public historians, with museums seen as being safe places for families to spend time with each other and build memories. History museums that have been able to change their audience focus to families with children have been better equipped to respond effectively to the downturn in museum visitation than those that continue to rely on civic-minded history enthusiasts as their core audience. As they widen their audience focus, living history museums have begun looking beyond the scope of what other history museums have done to provide experiences to guests and have started to take cues from children's museums, science centers and even amusement parks as they seek to provide more varied and accessible experiences for family groups.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, borrowing from amusement parks is a full-circle proposition for living history museums in particular. Jessica Swigger, in her doctoral thesis about the development of the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, explored at great length

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<sup>25</sup> Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (January 1995): 65-78.

<sup>26</sup> McRaney and Russick, eds., *Connecting Kids to History with Museum Exhibitions*, 23. See also Melissa Bingmann, Tim Grove and Anna Johnson, "Families and More: Intergenerational Learning," a chapter in *The Museum Educator's Manual: Educator's Share Successful Techniques*, edited by Anna Johnson, Kimberly A. Huber, Nancy Cutler, Melissa Bingmann and Tim Grove (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2009), 61-74.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

Walt Disney's visits to Greenfield Village in 1940 and 1948 that served as inspiration for Disneyland in southern California.<sup>28</sup> Disney was drawn to the nostalgia-laced and sanitized vision of America as presented at Greenfield Village, and sought to reinvent amusement parks by creating one that provided the fun of fair rides, food and a Main Street without the dirtiness and consumer excess that he saw at places like Coney Island. As Swigger astutely notes, both Disney and Henry Ford also sought to rid their respective utopias of the minorities, laborers and liberated females that were becoming more prominent and vocal aspects of post-Depression society.<sup>29</sup> Ford's and Disney's recreations of idyllic pasts that were separate from the reality of modern society spoke to their desire to enshrine and celebrate the traditional American ideals of democracy, frugality, patriotism and white male domination.<sup>30</sup> For those men, each of those ideals stood in opposition to the supposed threats of communist infiltration that dominated the popular and political zeitgeist during the 1950s.

In much the same way as Swigger with Greenfield Village, Seth Bruggeman argues that the virulent anti-communism of the Cold War sparked an advance of American ideals and values at historic sites like Washington's birthplace through historic preservation.<sup>31</sup> By presenting a supposedly truer picture of the past and the objects and inventors that made America what it was, historic sites could help to persuade the

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<sup>28</sup> Jessica Swigger, "History is Bunk': Historical Memories at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 94.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>30</sup> Disney (the corporation) and historians intersected most vividly and controversially in the mid-1990s, when Disney proposed building a theme park on the Manassas Civil War battlefield in Virginia. See Marcia G. Synnott, "Disney's America: Whose Patrimony, Whose Profits, Whose Past?" in *Public Historian* 17, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 43-59.

<sup>31</sup> Seth Bruggeman, "George Washington Birthplace National Monument: Administrative History, 1930-2000" (Williamsburg, VA: College of William and Mary, 2006), 140.

American public that democracy could be a bulwark against the anti-American forces of communism.

Other museums around the United States also became enamored of living history throughout the 1950s and 1960s; however, many of these were not labeled as such until 1970 with the creation of the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM). With the new social history driving much of the new focus on providing history of regular people, even National Park Service sites began to ride the wave of living history during the 1970s. Seth Bruggeman, in his administrative history of the George Washington Birthplace National Monument, found that the development of living history at the site, while serving primarily to show visitors a glimpse into the everyday workings of an eighteenth-century plantation, was also a way for the museum to get maintenance work done by costumed interpreters using historic tools.<sup>32</sup>

Bruggeman notes that 1970 was a pivotal year for interpretation at George Washington's birthplace, as the site sought to raise itself out of the mire of two buildings with competing claims for authenticity as Washington's "true" birthplace.<sup>33</sup> The functionality of the landscape, manifested in living history displays of the historic agriculture, rare breeds and trades of an eighteenth-century tidewater plantation, was given precedence over the memorializing house tours that typified pre-1970 interpretation at the site.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>33</sup> Seth Bruggeman, *Here George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 171.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 168.

Royal Berglee, a geographer by training, wrote a doctoral thesis in 2000 about what he called “re-created heritage villages” in the Midwest. This study contains piles of data about visitor numbers, visitor motivations and entrance fees for a variety of historic sites, one of which was Conner Prairie’s Prairietown. The data is certainly copious, but the analysis is not on the whole very enlightening toward why these villages are important to the cultural landscape of the Midwest. One part of his analysis is intriguing, however. Berglee concludes that re-created villages began to spring up (in many cases independently of one another) after 1950 as the number of family farms began to decline in the Midwest.<sup>35</sup>

Although not noted by Berglee, perhaps some of this surge in interest in village museums can also be attributed to the types of anticommunist tendencies that Ford and Disney articulated. Eli Lilly was never as vocal (or as influential) as his peers in expressing much in the way of public anticommunist sentiments.<sup>36</sup> Conner Prairie was also certainly a different situation, since during the 1950s, its visitation was small and it had not developed any significant interpretive programming at the Conner House beyond perfunctory tours led by Tillman or Louisa Bubenzer. As will be shown, the developments of the counterculture movement played a much larger role as Lilly and the staff he worked with developed Prairietown. Lilly’s primary concern was character development in young people, and the challenges to traditional values presented by the

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<sup>35</sup> Royal E. Berglee, “Re-Created Heritage Villages of the American Midwest: Report to Village Managers and Owners” (Ph.D. diss, Indiana State University, 2000), 9.

<sup>36</sup> James H. Madison, *Eli Lilly: A Life, 1885-1977*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 2006), 218. Madison noted that the Lilly Endowment tended toward supporting conservative, anticommunist causes throughout the 1960s. This conservative swing was, however, led by his brother, J.K. Lilly, and the director of the Endowment at the time, John S. Lynn. Madison observed that “strident anticommunism and emotional, rock-ribbed fundamentalism did not much appeal to [Eli] Lilly.” (217)

1960s counterculture could be combated through the representations of the past at Conner Prairie.

Many scholars point to the Scandinavian folklife recreations of the late 1800s as the inspiration for the vogue in America for living history.<sup>37</sup> These presentations not only set out to represent the past as it actually was, but also attempted to preserve the historical skills and trades of earlier times. In addition, these nascent museums often had political motivations. At the beginning of a 2005 interview with Conner Prairie staff, Henry Glassie,<sup>38</sup> professor of folklore at Indiana University, argued that Skansen, one of the most prominent living history museums in Sweden and the ancestor of folklife museums around the world, had an explicitly political frame of reference.<sup>39</sup> Glassie noted that Skansen's creator, Artur Hazelius, hoped that Skansen:

might reverse time and might work against the homogeneousness of Sweden. [Hazelius] was thinking of not only displaying or preserving a few interesting Swedish things, [he] was interested in erecting a kind of bulwark against French culture that would allow . . . regular Swedish people to come and see it. [Hazelius] wanted the museum to become a part of an argument in the mind of the Swedish people about the Swedish destiny.<sup>40</sup>

Hazelius, thus, had an overly political message in mind throughout the creation of Skansen. He was also open about the fact that he wove a political message through his

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<sup>37</sup> Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville: AASLH Press, 1984), 18.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Glassie, Indiana University Professor and Folklore Consultant with Conner Prairie from 1971-1976.

<sup>39</sup> The influential theories of cultural nationalism and the importance of the *volk* (everyday expressions of culture from the "commoners") to the development of nations espoused by German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) swept through Europe during the early part of the twentieth century and undoubtedly spurred some of Hazelius's desire to showcase traditional Swedish culture as being worthy of remembrance and enshrinement.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Glassie, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 27 May 2005, transcription, CP Archive: 2.

historic site when he established it in the 1890s. Glassie was aware of the folklife model during the early conversations about Prairietown, and Skansen's trades and common man approaches certainly influenced Glassie's work with Conner Prairie.<sup>41</sup>

The founders and financiers of other living history museums, especially in the United States, also displayed political or cultural aims in their interpretations of history.<sup>42</sup> Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia (which began significant restorations in 1928) and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan (begun in 1933), were both founded by wealthy men, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and Henry Ford, respectively, who wished to influence the public's perception of history. For Rockefeller, the industry and civic virtue of America's Founding Fathers merited a commemoration of their lives and times. Indeed, as Rockefeller wrote, Greenfield Village would be a way for "the future to learn from the past."<sup>43</sup> For Ford, preservation of the quickly decaying past was a way to educate the public about the importance of invention to the advance of industry and to train them to be patriotic citizens.<sup>44</sup> Both Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village developed during the Great Depression and gained prominence through the Second

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> At this point it may be useful to clarify the difference between open air museums and living history museums. Open air museums are most often grounded in folk life representations, such as Skansen. These museums may have costumed staff using third person presentation techniques populating structures, or they might be merely displays of material culture inside buildings from whatever time period is being represented. Open air museums are more common in Europe. Living history museums differ in that they are typically a village, farm or house that is populated by staff using first person techniques to portray composite characters or actual historic figures. Living history museums of this type are more common in North America.

<sup>43</sup> Cary Carson, "Colonial Williamsburg and the Practice of Interpretive Planning in American History Museums," *Public Historian* 20, no. 3 (1998): 11-51.

<sup>44</sup> Ford's desire to use Greenfield Village as a way to show immigrants what it meant to be an American was also a strong motivator for him as he built his museum in Dearborn, Michigan. Anderson, *Time Machines*, 28.



World War. Both Rockefeller and Ford sought to idealize the past in order to boost Americans' view of themselves and to provide an escape from the harsh realities of the tough economic times and the engulfing struggles of the war.<sup>45</sup> Both Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village were retreats from reality that claimed to be accurate and unfiltered depictions of the past.

Since any interpretation of the past is necessarily influenced by the biases of those doing the interpreting, any museum that claims that it presents the past “as it was” must be viewed warily. Hazelius, as a Swedish nationalist, used Skansen to argue that imported continental European culture should not be the highest ideal for the Swedish people. Skansen showed the traditional trades and lifestyles of the Swedish *folk* as worthy of remembrance and emulation in the present.<sup>46</sup> Rockefeller and Ford sought to deliver their message differently--both men enshrouded their political message in the rhetoric of authenticity. Visitors to these museums were supposed to think that they took a time machine into the past and could see an unbiased picture of what life was like in the time periods represented.<sup>47</sup> Since the presentations at Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village were sanitized and emphasized the stories of the wealthy, visitors must have left those museums with a warped and de-contextualized historical understanding.

Richard Handler and Eric Gable in *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* explore how Rockefeller's “great man” approach to history had to go through a full makeover at Williamsburg after the social history of the

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<sup>45</sup> Sten Rentzhog, *Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea* (Kristianstad, Sweden: Carlssons and Jamtli Press, 2007), 151.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>47</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 325.

1970s became in vogue.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Henry Ford's approach of purchasing and then arranging historic homes and items from inventors from all over the country has been criticized by historians as creating a mishmash of de-contextualized buildings at the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village.<sup>49</sup>

As social history emerged as a force among museum professionals in the 1970s, museums became more willing to present history as encumbered with uncomfortable and challenging aspects of the past.<sup>50</sup> In the case of Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village, overcoming their challenging institutional history has been difficult, and both still struggle with their legacy of jingoist patriotism swaddled in supposedly neutral and authentic depictions of the past.

Philosophically, the planners of Conner Prairie fell somewhere between the tropes of authenticity pronounced by Ford and Rockefeller and Hazelious's explicit acknowledgement that history cannot be "objective." For Hazelious, history was a way to advance a political agenda. For his part, Eli Lilly was motivated in his initial decision to preserve the William Conner House by the desire to emphasize the enterprising spirit of early white settlers, whom he referred to as "pioneers," to Indiana.<sup>51</sup> Like Rockefeller and Ford, Lilly highlighted the importance of the prototypical American entrepreneur

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 61.

<sup>49</sup> Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* 19.

<sup>50</sup> George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 9. See also Peter Stearns, "The New Social History: An Overview," in *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History*, ed. James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1983). Stearns' chapter is an overview of the historiography and goals of social history. He wrote it for museum professionals as a way to validate social history's usefulness as an intellectual schema for museums.

<sup>51</sup> Eli Lilly to Landrum Bolling, 12 October 1965, CP Archive.

(typically seen as a white, male pioneer who made a life for himself out of the “untamed wilderness”) in shaping a quintessential American worldview. He also had similar goals of educating the public (with a particular interest in character formation for youth) through explaining how people in the past were hard workers. Lilly used Conner’s story because of his importance to the history of early central Indiana and because, out of sheer serendipity, he heard about the decaying building from a friend.<sup>52</sup>

Evidence from correspondence between Lilly and various Conner Prairie stakeholders suggest that although Lilly began with this great man vision for his portrayal of Indiana’s history, from a very early stage he hoped to portray the frontier experience of the common man.<sup>53</sup> Lilly’s previous historical interests, as described in two books that he authored, one titled *The History of the Little Church on the Circle: Christ Church Parish Indianapolis 1837-1955* (published in 1957) and the other *Early Wawasee Days: Traditions, Tales, and Memories Concerning That Delectable Spot* (published in 1960), were focused on local, personal and “regular” people, places and events.<sup>54</sup> *Early Wawasee Days* “concentrated on the people--the Indians and first settlers and the fisherman, guides, hotelkeepers, sailors, and vacationing families,” in other words, the work-a-day people who formed the backbone of the Lake Wawasee region in northeastern Indiana.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Henry Glassie, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 27 May 2005, transcription, CP Archive: 8.

<sup>54</sup> Lilly wrote about Christ Church because he was a lifelong parishioner of that church. His interest in Lake Wawasee stemmed from the enjoyment he found at his long-time vacation home there. Madison, *Eli Lilly*, 167.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 168.

While this desire to showcase the regular people of history was certainly a part of Lilly's motivations for restoring buildings near Conner's home, Henry Glassie also postulated that Lilly was a "Hoosier Nationalist" who wanted "to celebrate what was true and native and fine about Indiana."<sup>56</sup> This perspective is corroborated by Lilly's charitable giving. Throughout his life he supported Indiana institutions that he felt represented the Hoosier spirit and ethos. Lilly's turn toward the common man approach could also boil down to the fact that since central Indiana did not have as many highly famous "great men," it was easier to place a stronger emphasis on more mundaneeveryday history. Williamsburg in Virginia was a common haunt of Thomas Jefferson, and Ford was interested in bringing the homes of famous inventors like Thomas Edison and the Wright Brothers to his museum. Central Indiana was not able to showcase as many famous sons as Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village could.

However it came about, in the 1930s and 1940s, Lilly brought two log cabins and a log barn that dated from the early 1800s to portray the lives of regular people. He had the buildings placed across from the Conner House, but did not use living history interpretation in its strictest definition. Rather, Lilly's farm manager or manager's wife, Tillman or Louisa Bubenzer, would show visitors, who called ahead to schedule a tour, the interior of these reconstructed buildings. To create a richer context and to add to this collection, Lilly added other buildings from around the state to the site to represent William Conner's original home, trading post, stable, springhouse and stillhouse.<sup>57</sup> The

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<sup>56</sup> Henry Glassie, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 27 May 2005, transcription, CP Archive: 16.

<sup>57</sup> Madison, *Eli Lilly*, 175.

buildings were not furnished using documented evidence from the historical record.<sup>58</sup> Instead, to fill out the buildings, Lilly relied on his own personal taste and whatever he could find that looked like it could have fit the time-period. Lilly was not unique in this mix and match approach to collecting and furnishing. During this time many philanthropists, Ford being one other example, were hungry for nineteenth-century artifacts of all types, and feared that these items were rapidly being lost or ruined.<sup>59</sup> They hoped to gather these items into collections before they were gone, and contextualization was not a high priority, to the detriment of the public's historical understanding.

The Impact of Countercultural America of the 1970s  
and the Living History Response

The late 1960s and 1970s were times of profound disillusionment with government and the idea that America was an essentially righteous nation. Beginning in the late 1960s with racially-driven urban riots, the dramatic expansion of the Vietnam War and the general unrest of the country's youth, the change ushered in by these societal pressures affected all areas of American life.<sup>60</sup> The rise in the popularity of living history museums was one offshoot of these pressures.

Living history museums were in one sense reactionary to change and modernity. They ostensibly crystallize a moment in time for eternity. No matter what was going on

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<sup>58</sup> Author's notes from lecture by Timothy Crumrin, Historian, 22 March 2006, CP Archive.

<sup>59</sup> Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*, 61.

<sup>60</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 9. Schulman posits that the "radical challenge to liberalism" can be traced to 1968, when students clashed violently with police in the wake of the announcement of plans at Columbia University to build a new gymnasium on park space in Harlem (9).

in the world outside the walls (or split-rail fences) of the museum, at least the security of being able to step back into a time that was known and predictable remained. People could use living history museums to escape the change that they saw all around them. In the process, many walked away with the notion that life was simpler then and that they wished that they could go back to that time permanently. Implicit in this type of mindset is the sentiment that the present has been corrupted by the forces of change.

As the bicentennial approached, many Americans had conflicting emotions about its meaning.<sup>61</sup> For some, it was merely a jingoistic celebration of the military prowess and superiority of the American people throughout history since its inception in 1776.<sup>62</sup> For others it signaled the decline of values over time. What had been a nation founded on the principles of hard work and dedication to family and community had become so fragmented and dysfunctional by 1976 that for many, the bicentennial was a time for bittersweet and melancholy reminiscence. The economic downturn of the late 1970s gave rise to the term “stagflation.” This economy of stagnant growth, high unemployment and substantial inflation only deepened the disillusionment that contributed to the national

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<sup>61</sup> By 1976, consensus historiography and a sense of the rightness of white national meta-narratives had been challenged by the Civil Rights movement and the growth of African-American counter-narratives. During the 1961-1965 Civil War Centennial, the national narrative was still entrenched with most historians and the majority of the white public. As Robert J. Cook points out in *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), in 1960 the Civil War Centennial Commission set out to convey to the public that the Civil War “had been a collective, national experience” and that the centennial was a time to celebrate the unity between the North and South that arose in the aftermath of the war (41). Cook argues that as the Civil Rights movement challenged this white-centric understanding of the Civil War and its aftermath with regards to the African-American experience, the public’s perspective on the meaning of the war changed as well (273).

<sup>62</sup> Kelly Boyer Sagert, *The 1970s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 4.

“malaise” in America at this time.<sup>63</sup>

Burgeoning environmental awareness was yet another influence on the developers of living history museums as they reflected on the impact of museums like Conner Prairie on interpretations to the public of the land they occupied. The popular “natural living” magazine series *Foxfire* became a widespread phenomenon in the mid- 1960s and culminated in a book series published in the early 1970s. In the dedication of the second *Foxfire* book (which contained articles on topics as varied as “How to Wash Clothes in a Pot,” “Spring Wild Plant Foods,” and “Old-Time Burials”) the editor, Eliot Wigginton, wrote that, “this book is dedicated to high school kids . . . all searching . . . for the serenity, the chunk of sense and place and purpose and humanity they can carry with them into a very confusing time.”<sup>64</sup> *Foxfire* was concerned about the loss of “sense and place” among young people and sought to redress that loss by providing instructions and admonitions from people and times that were quickly being lost to the past for how to live more simply and naturally.

Through their recreations of the past, living history museums could show earlier forms of agriculture that were effective, yet did not rely on chemicals or factory farming to produce food for people and to show young people how to find their way in the changing world around them. The creation of ALHFAM (the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums) in 1970, an organization specifically dedicated to the growing crop of agriculturally-driven museums, is reflective of a spike in interest in conservation and sustainable agricultural practices that first became widely present in

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<sup>63</sup> Schulman, *The Seventies*, 132.

<sup>64</sup> Eliot Wigginton, ed., *Foxfire 2* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), dedication frontpiece.

the American public's conscience during the celebration of Earth Day in April of 1970.<sup>65</sup>

The 1970s, often known as the "Me" decade, also saw a renaissance in interest in family history, which undoubtedly led to a greater interest in living history as a way to "get in touch" with one's ancestors.<sup>66</sup> The wildly popular *Roots* miniseries (which appeared on television in 1977) based on Alex Haley's novel spoke to this interest. *Somerset Homecoming: Recovering a Lost Heritage*, a 1986 book by Dorothy Spruill Redford, was an extension of the *Roots* phenomenon. Redford used a combination of oral history and documentary evidence to create an accessible account of her discovery of her previously untold family history.<sup>67</sup>

The spike in attendance at living history museums around the bicentennial spoke to visitors' desire to make connections to their ancestors and the wistfulness of many Americans for the better days of the past.<sup>68</sup> The assumptions made at living history museums (including Conner Prairie) during this time conveyed the image that life in the 1800s was somehow more pure and honest than life in the present period. Learning from the mistakes of the past was less important than wallowing in the glory of the successes

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<sup>65</sup> Kirkpatrick Sale, *The American Environmental Movement, 1962-1992* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 25.

<sup>66</sup> The 1970s also saw an upsurge in the number of small historic house museums and other non-museum settings like churches and bars that featured local history displays. See Tammy Stone-Gordon in *Private History in Public: Exhibition and the Settings of Everyday Life* (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> Dorothy Spruill Redford, *Somerset Homecoming: Recovering a Lost Heritage* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 34.

<sup>68</sup> Two examples of this spike in attendance are from Mount Vernon and Colonial Williamsburg. Mount Vernon averaged 1,054,000 visitors in the 1970s, then dropped to 1,011,000 in the 1980s and 992,000 in the 1990s. Colonial Williamsburg had "a high of just over a million paid admissions" starting in the mid-1970s and continuing through the 1980s and then dropped to an average of 954,000 in the 1990s. Cary Carson, "The End of History Museums: What is Plan B?," Paper delivered at conference: New Audiences for Old Houses: Building a Future with the Past, Boston University (28 September 2007): 8 [paper in author's possession].



of the early pioneers to Indiana. These pioneers, not coincidentally, were predominantly presented as white, male and dedicated to their country--the very same values that seemed so under attack by the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Living history museums in this sense became oases of backlash against the trends of modern America--much like the growing private school movement and the back-to-the-land movement of the time.<sup>69</sup> Both of the latter movements were responses to the perceived fragmentation of life (which was often spurred by the increasingly urbanized society) of the 1970s. As noted earlier, geographer Royal Berglee regarded the decline of family farms as a motivator for interest in living history museums. Similar to the back-to-the-land movement, the museums reflected efforts to recapture a lost farm heritage by “well-educated city people who . . . made a definite break with their urban past.”<sup>70</sup> As Hoosiers saw family farms quickly becoming a relic of the past, places like Conner Prairie provided a connection with the land and their agricultural heritage that was attractive during the 1970s.<sup>71</sup>

With the private school movement of the 1970s, parents sought alternatives to supposedly corrupt and bureaucratized public schools. Unlike the private school and back-to-the-land movements, living history museum apologists did not often articulate an

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<sup>69</sup> Works such as Jeffery Jacob’s *New Pioneers: The Back-to-the-Land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) show how the growth of factory farms and the decline of small towns and rural areas led to disillusionment with the homogenized suburbanized America of the post-World War II time-period.

<sup>70</sup> Jacob, *New Pioneers*, 43.

<sup>71</sup> Barbara J. Steinson in “Rural Life in Indiana, 1800-1950,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 90 (September 1994): 203-250, notes that in 1950 in Indiana “the total farm population was 667,154. In the next forty years the farm population fell to 188,133. . . . By 1990 only 9.66 percent of rural Hoosiers lived on farms, which represented a scant 3.39 percent of the total population.” (229)

adversarial relationship toward the cultural shifts of the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>72</sup> More often living history proponents couched their descriptions of the museums in the language of authenticity and presenting the past “as it actually was.” By doing so, they subtly made living history a sanctuary for people who wanted to celebrate America’s past while at the same time lamenting its present.

Thomas Schlereth, in an article that appeared in *Museum News* in 1978, critiqued living history museums for their celebratory treatment of United States’ history. He argued that living history museums were relying on the 1950s’ consensus historiography and presented the “worship” of American myths and heroes.<sup>73</sup> Consensus historians had sought to use history as a way to affirm values that supposedly uniquely united Americans in order to provide a bulwark against the threats of Communism. Almost thirty years later, Sten Rentzhog, author of *Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea*, echoed this critique when he wrote that in American living history museums, “romanticism hovered in the background the whole time. Always, in some way, the myth of the birth of American society was being recreated, in this case through the heroic struggle of hardworking farmers.” He continued, “It is not surprising, therefore, that a conspicuous number of open air museums...were oriented towards the

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<sup>72</sup> See James Deetz, “The Changing Historic House Museum: Can it Live?” in *Historic Preservation* 23 (Jan-March 1971), 50-54 for a discussion about how Plimoth Plantation during the 1970s hired young people who liked to wear their hair long and walk around barefoot to both use the historic record to justify their staff’s sartorial choices as well as to stay in tune with the social mores of the countercultural movement.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Schlereth, “It Wasn’t That Simple,” *Museum News* 56 (January-February 1978): 36-41.

‘pioneer period,’ or that interest was at its height in the face of the Bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1976.”<sup>74</sup>

James Madison, in his thorough biography of Eli Lilly, describes Lilly’s disdain for the rising materialism and self-centeredness in the America of the 1940s and 1950s and this concern helps to explain Lilly’s investment in Conner Prairie. Concurrent to his burgeoning interest in historic preservation, Lilly became enamored with the writings of two sociologists. One of these, Russian-born Pitirim Sorokin, warned that America was in crisis and that the only remedy for the materialism of the age was a return to the values embodied in Christ’s Sermon on the Mount.<sup>75</sup> The other, Ernest M. Ligon, also focused his writings on the Sermon on the Mount, but with a special emphasis on its power to transform the character of children in their earliest years.<sup>76</sup> Lilly invested substantially (both financially and with his time) in Sorokin’s and Ligon’s projects and initiatives throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Despite his initial excitement with their work, Lilly eventually became disillusioned with a lack of tangible results. Examining Lilly’s correspondence with Landrum Bolling,<sup>77</sup> a close friend and the president of Earlham College during this time, makes clear that by the early 1970s, Lilly began to shift his focus away from the sociologists’ initiatives and toward Conner Prairie’s potential to help a wider audience understand the importance of returning to the morals of scripture, upon which he believed our country was founded.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Rentzhog, *Open Air Museums*, 263.

<sup>75</sup> Madison, *Eli Lilly*, 193.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>77</sup> Landrum Bolling, Earlham College President, 1958-1972. Bolling’s educational background was political science. After his tenure as president of Earlham, he was appointed head of the Lilly Endowment and served in that position from 1973-1978.

<sup>78</sup> Madison, *Eli Lilly*, 205.

Although Lilly never expressed this view explicitly, it seems clear from his interest in character development that he viewed the recreations of the past at Conner Prairie as a way to share the values of a more frugal, honest and biblically-rooted time. When, in 1969, Lilly gave Earlham College forty thousand shares of stock, he specified that the gift was to be used “to operate the Conner Prairie Farm Museum complex . . . on a basis which will effectively and appropriately communicate to young people and to the general public the record of Indiana’s early history.”<sup>79</sup> The important phrase here that connects his interest in Sorokin’s and Ligon’s work with what he hoped Conner Prairie would accomplish, is “young people.” By specifically calling attention to this demographic group, Lilly emphasized the importance that he placed on character development for youth.

As Prairietown took shape in the 1970s, Lilly made frequent visits to the museum to check on the progress of construction or to take in a lesson at the “country schoolhouse.”<sup>80</sup> His satisfaction with the direction of the museum during its formative period,<sup>81</sup> as evidenced by increased financial support, shows that Conner Prairie was using the recreation of the past to contrast modern values with the idyllic character of Indiana’s pioneers.<sup>82</sup> Harold Cope,<sup>83</sup> Earlham College’s Business Manager in 1970, said as much in a revealing statement to a joint meeting of the Conner Prairie Advisory Council and the Earlham Board of Trustees:

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<sup>79</sup> “Deed of Gift by Eli Lilly to Earlham College,” 24 Jan. 1969. CP Archive.

<sup>80</sup> Madison, *Eli Lilly*, 267.

<sup>81</sup> Prairietown’s early years correspond with Lilly’s declining years. He visited Conner Prairie often until his death in January of 1977. *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>83</sup> Harold Cope, Earlham College Business Administrator, 1946-1972.

With increased leisure time and growing population many opportunities present themselves in the field of education outside the areas of formal instruction. Our young people, above all other things, are searching for an identity and a purpose. Whether they know it or not, they hunger for situations where they can step outside their normal life and seek for a different perspective. Many of them have never seen the process of making an article from a raw material. Many have never seen or experienced the dignity of work or the pleasure of a simple, slower-paced way of life. Here is what Conner Prairie can contribute. We can transport the individual back in time, and at a slower pace, demonstrate the virtues and strengths upon which our present society has been constructed . . . to understand that his fore-fathers had a hard, but not unsatisfactory life, and one which does not always conform to our present day ideals and aspirations.<sup>84</sup>

A key insight here from Cope was his statement that young people are “searching for an identity and purpose.” Against the backdrop of change that characterized America in the late 1960s, Cope set Conner Prairie as a remedy for young people’s perceived aimlessness and ennui. Middle-class young people of the 1960s had an unprecedented amount of disposable income and free time, and were choosing to express themselves through consumption.<sup>85</sup> Cope puts the 1960s in context even more stridently later in the same statement, “Old patterns of living and values are being challenged. . . . The ideals, mores and religions of our Society are being questioned, investigated, and discussed. No aspect of our lives is considered sacred, or above scrutiny by our younger generation.”<sup>86</sup> The antidote to the questioning and search for purpose, from Cope’s perspective, was for countercultural young people to see the “dignity of work” and the “slower pace” of life in the past; then they would be more likely to strive to be productive members of society.

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<sup>84</sup> “Director’s Statement to Joint Meeting of the Conner Prairie Advisory Council and the Earlham Board of Trustees,” 18 April 1970. Earlham College Archive, Richmond, IN. [Hereafter “Earlham College Archive” will be referred to as EC Archive.]

<sup>85</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1978), 71.

<sup>86</sup> “Director’s Statement to Joint Meeting of the Conner Prairie Advisory Council and the Earlham Board of Trustees,” 18 Apr. 1970. EC Archive.

By extension, they would also be more willing to conform to the pioneer values if they could experience them in an informal setting that *showed* them how average people lived, instead of merely *describing* how they lived.

The history experience at living history museums is formed in the interaction between the museum's interpreters and the public. The importance of that information as constructed rather than received points to a critical aspect of this thesis--that we need to look at how the public experiences their visits and not at simply the message promoted by museum professionals. In doing so, we can determine to what extent historical education can be gained there.

### How Visitors Create Meaning at Museums,

#### Multiple Perspectives and Presenting Uncomfortable History

David Glassberg in *Sense of History: the Place of the Past in American Life* writes that "every person is his or her own historian, creating idiosyncratic versions of the past that make sense based on personal situation and experience."<sup>87</sup> Visitors to museums, then, are not just passive recipients of the information presented, but are rather continually constructing their own meanings of what they are seeing. Clearly, however, the way that museums present the history and the prejudices and biases they bring to the design process will affect the meaning that individuals construct for themselves. Glassberg's analysis supports this idea. He continues later, "But our individual memories are not solely the product of idiosyncratic recollection; they are also established and

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<sup>87</sup> David Glassberg, *Sense of History: the Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 9.

confirmed through dialogue with others.”<sup>88</sup> Glassberg conceived dialogue as the most important transmitter of culture and values. By promoting dialogue (either within the visitor group or between the interpreter and the visitors), Prairietown’s first person characters could help to stimulate learning and transmit important history lessons.

One assumption of the professionals, in their push to contextualize history and show how visitors construct meaning, was an understanding that all presentations of the past necessarily involve some aspect of “invention.” Since museums can never exactly replicate a place in time “as it was,” approximations of the past that attempt to educate the public through entertaining, invented vignettes are the most stimulating way to present history.

The issue of the construction of meaning at living history museums and how visitors entered into this experience peaked during the mid-1980s, just after the “golden age” (which was marked by heavy attendance) of living history museums that crested in 1976. A spate of works that examined the “heritage tourism” industry began to appear in professional magazines and books that examined how public history endeavors related to their audiences to create meaning. One of these, *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audience*, brought together museum professionals and historians to examine the theoretical assumptions behind public history in America.<sup>89</sup> In this volume, many of the authors argued that museums needed to move toward a social history perspective that uses objects to tell the stories of specific cultural groups. This movement toward using public history to explore multiple perspectives toward historical

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>89</sup> Jo Blatti, ed. *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987).

events was a hallmark of museums during the 1980s. Colonial Williamsburg (and other living history museums, no doubt) felt that their emphasis on authenticity and showing history in its social totality “as it actually was” gave them a moral high-ground in this debate.

Phillip Kopper, on the cover of a 1990 coffee-table book of photographs taken at Williamsburg, wrote that, “today Colonial Williamsburg remains a pioneer in its field, continuing . . . to present an ever more faithful portrait of life in our ancestor’s time.”<sup>90</sup> By the 1990s, the “faithful portrait” of the past included what Handler and Gable described as an “authenticity [essential to] Colonial Williamsburg’s mission” that sought to portray “the history of previously excluded people such as African American slaves, and the social history of consumerism, of the material culture of everyday life.”<sup>91</sup> The gritty authenticity that living history museums tried to achieve in theory often hit a tense reality when one-on-one interactions between interpreters and visitors took place. The controversial and painful aspects of the past (domestic violence, racism, slavery, child labor and unsanitary conditions) are often neglected or only briefly mentioned at living history museums because they tend to make visitors feel uncomfortable when they are trying to enjoy leisure time.

Handler and Gable vividly conveyed the tension between discomfort and entertainment during an interview with an interpreter at Williamsburg, who said “in academia you can ask probing questions that will make people feel uncomfortable. You do not have that sanction in a museum that is . . . here to entertain people and help people

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<sup>90</sup> Phillip Kopper, *Colonial Williamsburg* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1986), cover text.

<sup>91</sup> Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*, 6-7.



feel good. . . .”<sup>92</sup> This supposed tension is actually based on a faulty assumption that it is impossible to present history that challenges the public without making them uncomfortable.

A case study approach to the issue of discomfort in museums could illuminate the fallacy that challenging history and comfort cannot exist. Much has been written about Conner Prairie’s award-winning program “Follow the North Star,” that debuted in 1999 in which guests take on the role of escaped slaves in 1830s Indiana and meet people on their journey to freedom who are either trying to help them (a Quaker family) or hinder them (a slave catcher).<sup>93</sup> Participants are given the chance to “opt out” of the program and become observers if they tie a band around their head, which signifies to staff that the participant prefers not to be involved in the action. “Follow the North Star” effectively immerses participants in the painful historical circumstances of slavery in antebellum America, while at the same time providing opportunities for them to restore a measure of twenty-first-century comfort if the situation becomes too intense.

The middle ground between authenticity and visitor comfort with a difficult topic as exemplified by “Follow the North Star” seems to be the telling of good stories. Disney (the corporation), as a purveyor of comfortable and fun experiences, tells good stories and so can historians. The difference is that the stories told by historians are documentary evidence-based. Prairietown’s developers (being aware of the sea-change in historical thinking due to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s) were cognizant of the

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>93</sup> Amy Tyson is one academic who has written about the “Follow the North Star” program as an example of civic engagement at museums that uses historical theater to challenge visitors’ assumptions about race relations in the United States. Amy M. Tyson, “Crafting Emotional Comfort: Interpreting the Painful Past at Living History Museums in the New Economy” *Museum and Society* 6, no. 3 (November 2008): 246-262.

dangers of romanticization of the type presented by Disney so they strove to recreate the past, warts and all.<sup>94</sup>

The struggle between presenting accurate and inclusive history and an entertaining presentation to the public has been a constant theme for living history museums since the 1970s. The medium is so unique and fraught with pitfalls that the most common explanations to justify its paradoxes are arguments that try to describe what living history museums are not. Museum professionals have been known to visibly shudder at the word “Disney.” Any comparisons to or potential lessons from the theme park industry are typically met with derision and revulsion.<sup>95</sup> But, as Tity DeVries explains in her excellent case study about Alaska’s Pioneer Park titled, “Ambiguity in an Alaskan Theme Park: Presenting ‘History as Commodity’ and ‘History as Heritage,’” the Park’s “location is not historically authentic and most of its buildings and attractions were relocated from elsewhere . . . [and] making money from the park was considered more important than preserving Fairbanks’ heritage.”<sup>96</sup> Similarly, the motivations for creating Conner Prairie also included a desire to, if not actually make money, at least

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<sup>94</sup> Henry Glassie, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 27 May 2005, transcription, CP Archive: 7.

<sup>95</sup> Douglas Greenberg in “‘History is a Luxury’: Mrs. Thatcher, Mr. Disney, and (Public) History,” *Reviews in American History* 26, (1998): 294-311 argues that academic historians who treat the public with contempt and look down on making connections with the public are doomed to be marginalized. In this piece Greenberg posed a series a rhetorical questions that suggest that perhaps academic historians could learn from Disney--“What would be so bad about making a history exhibition that entertained people? If public historians wanted to imitate Disney’s methods, would they even know how? Are entertainment and serious history really antithetical, as some would argue?” (303) Greenberg’s statements called out navel-gazing historians who dismissed Disney’s influence and techniques out of hand, without thoughtfully considering if the communication *medium* used by Disney could be applied to the thoughtfully researched *message* of academic historians.

<sup>96</sup> Tity DeVries, “Ambiguity in an Alaskan Theme Park: Presenting ‘History as Commodity’ and ‘History as Heritage,’” *Public Historian* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 56.

break even. Conner Prairie management during Prairietown's formative years in the 1970s recognized the balance that both breaking even and keeping true to the historical record would entail, "while we definitely do not want a tourist trap, people are looking for interesting things to do."<sup>97</sup>

When interested "tourists" come to experience the past at living history museums, they do so in a specific spot of land that has been populated with a network of meanings and perspectives meant for public consumption. Some historians, such as Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, a landscape and museum studies historian at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, have attempted to synthesize public history with landscape history. In "Sites of Power and the Power of Sight: Vision in the California Mission Landscape," she examines how the design of missions in California serve very specific interests. Kryder-Reid argues that though these missions are portrayed for tourists as beautiful expressions of Catholicism, they were historically oppressive vehicles of colonization.<sup>98</sup>

As in the example of California missions, those in power greatly influence how the public perceives the meaning of a physical space--even if the meaning of the space is contested.<sup>99</sup> Patricia West in *Domesticating History: the Political Origins of America's House Museums* also explores this phenomenon by showing how the interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village reflected middle-class male-centric values

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<sup>97</sup> "Notes from Conner Prairie Advisory Committee Meeting," 8 September 1964, CP Archive.

<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, "Sites of Power and the Power of Sight: Vision in the California Mission Landscapes," in *Sites Unseen: Landscape and Vision*, ed. Dianne Harris and D. Fairchild Ruggles (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007): 181-212.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

when philanthropists and male architects took over the governance of those sites from women's associations in the early twentieth century.<sup>100</sup> Conner Prairie differs from Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village in this case because when Eli Lilly purchased the property it had never been run as a historical monument.<sup>101</sup> However, Lilly did align himself with Rockefeller's and Ford's approach through his hope that, as James Madison wrote, "the buildings and artifacts of frontier America would build character in modern Americans who saw them."<sup>102</sup>

Parsing out the various motivations for recreating a specific time and place (whether to enforce a specific political or societal agenda, to make money or to challenge previously-held visitor assumptions about the past) highlights a critical juxtaposition for museums and historic sites. On one hand, museums have an obligation (as purveyors of history and the "power-wielders" who portray the past to a trusting public) to be as accurate as possible in their interpretation of the past, even to the extent of presenting uncomfortable historical situations.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, museums must continue to pay the bills and draw enough visitors to stay solvent and maintain their endowment. Progressive (and often radical) social historians such as Michael Wallace have often presented these two goals as inherently at odds with each other in the museum world.<sup>104</sup> But an analysis of the history of Conner Prairie complicates this understanding and

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<sup>100</sup> Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 97.

<sup>101</sup> Madison, *Eli Lilly*, 172.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 175.

<sup>103</sup> Numerous studies have shown that the public views museums as inherently trustworthy. One recent example is from the Reach Advisors blog at <http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/> titled "The Magic of Seven-Year-Olds," 7 August 2009.

<sup>104</sup> Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, 10.

allows us to see that tension as not inevitable. Instead, in the 1970s Conner Prairie found a unique way to present the often uncomfortable past to the public using both entertaining and educational techniques.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Conner Prairie is not unique among museums in the 1970s in trying to combine education and entertainment as a way to bring in money through gate receipts and other on-site purchases. Plimoth Plantation and Colonial Williamsburg were both able to achieve an entertaining and educational setting that proved financially viable. Cary Carson noted the huge attendance and financial gains at both museums during the 1970s in “The End of History Museums,” 8 [paper in author’s possession].

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONNER PRAIRIE PHILOSOPHY: 1932 TO 1975

The seeds of the idea to create an immersive village at Conner Prairie were sown during the late 1960s and began with a different perspective on how to use the land itself. The changes to the physical structure of the site began with Eli Lilly's passing supervision of the farm, the Conner "complex" (consisting of the Conner House, its outbuildings and the two cabins with the log barn), 1,429 acres that served as a "buffer" around the site and a substantial endowment to provide for the Conner House's continued maintenance "in perpetuity," to Earlham College, a small Quaker-founded college in Richmond, Indiana, in 1964. Earlham's administrators quickly realized that they needed to determine what to do with this vast tract of land. At the time, it was losing money each year. Lilly wrote a check at the end of the fiscal year to cover the amount that Tillman Bubenzer, his farm manager, lost during the year.<sup>106</sup>

Over the course of three years after this initial transfer to Earlham, nothing much changed physically at Conner Prairie. Earlham sought guidance from consultants and advisory committees while Bubenzer and his wife continued to give tours to interested individuals and school groups at the Conner House. During this time, administrators decided to separate Lilly's farm operation from the museum operation. Additionally, they sold some of the land across the river from the Conner House.<sup>107</sup> Stemming from discussions with these various advisory boards, Earlham's president, Landrum Bolling,

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<sup>106</sup> Tillman Bubenzer to Eli Lilly, 14 January 1963, CP Archive.

<sup>107</sup> "Conner Prairie Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes," 4 September 1968, CP Archive.

proposed that there were three courses of action that the college could take concerning the gift from Lilly. These were to:

1. Do nothing to develop it; keep it as it is, open it only occasionally and do little more than simply maintain it.
2. Develop it partially, accepting the gift of the Purdue Agricultural Alumni Association and display those farm artifacts along with the historical museum. The Museum would then be opened to the public on a limited basis, but we would not be able to make our expenses.
3. Aim toward rather extensive development of the Museum, with a goal of making it the type of educationally attractive historical center that would be both educational and entertaining, and would hopefully produce income sufficient to cover all expenses and possibly show a profit.<sup>108</sup>

The Earlham board chose the third path (that of creating an educational and entertaining historical center) and, to begin the process of transforming Conner Prairie into a more broad-based and ambitious museum, hired a full-time museum director, Richard A. Sampson.<sup>109</sup> Upon hiring him, Earlham directed that he come up with a workable plan for the future of Conner Prairie that would take into account the landscape of the site, the potential for visitorship from the surrounding areas and the existing resources and expertise of administrators and staff.<sup>110</sup>

Sampson's initial plan (proposed in 1967) to bring in buildings to the site to recreate Indianapolis circa 1825 was scuttled. Objections to this plan included the prickly fact that recreating a city that actually existed twenty-five miles south of the site would most likely be confusing to the public.<sup>111</sup> Other board members felt that the rural

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Richard A. Sampson, Conner Prairie Director, 1969-1971. Sampson was a high school history teacher by training and had been an assistant curator at the Detroit Historical Museum and the director of the Racine County Historical Museum prior to becoming director at Conner Prairie.

<sup>110</sup> "Conner Prairie Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes," 4 September 1968, CP Archive.

<sup>111</sup> "Earlham Board Meeting Minutes," 30 June 1969, CP Archive.

landscape of the area was worth preserving. They argued that using the museum to interpret rural and “small town” history was a more efficacious approach.<sup>112</sup> Eventually, the board decided to hire an outside consulting firm to conduct a feasibility study for the site.<sup>113</sup>

By 1970, the consulting firm, James and Berger Associates, Henry Glassie and others began to ready the stage for the performance. The land that became Prairietown had been bucolic farmland for many years. In 1970 Tillman and Louisa Bubenzer lived in a farmhouse on a bluff overlooking the White River’s floodplain to the south of the Conner House. Before the Bubenzers and Lilly arrived, William Conner’s descendants and a string of absentee landlords had farmed fields of corn and created paddocks for animals on that land. Before Conner chose that spot of land to build his house, the floodplain had been farmed by Native Americans, who chose that location because they could farm the land there without having to clear any trees.<sup>114</sup> In 1970, for the first time in the history of that particular place, people decided to self-consciously create a village that had never existed there. The land was no longer used for practical purposes. Food production and habitation became vignettes within the play of living history. The land was estranged from the visceral reality of survival that agriculture and shelter represent.

An interesting anecdote which connects Bubenzer’s work on Lilly’s Conner Prairie Farm to the living history museum that took its place comes from an article about Bubenzer’s management in a winter 1956 issue of *The Farm*, an agricultural trade

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> “Landrum Bolling to Guy Jones,” 23 May 1969, CP Archive.

<sup>114</sup> Evidence of a Native American village site has been located at the northern edge of Conner Prairie’s property. Further north, the Strawtown-Koteewi archaeological site has uncovered extensive evidence of pre-contact Native American habitation that dates to circa 1200 CE.



magazine. In this fascinating piece, which came in the midst of a surprisingly profitable two years at the experimental farm, the writer describes Bubenzer thusly:

Having been born in Imperial Germany and worked under conditions of rigid class distinction, it is not surprising to find Bubenzer intensely interested in preserving democracy here. The importance of individual liberty and the economy which makes this possible is a theme he manages to get into almost every discussion. When he talks of this new breeding boar project he says, in an accent that seems more French than German, “We feel that the farmer-owned farm which is so important to our way of life is being threatened because the livestock are inefficient converters of feed into meat. We feel challenged to produce an efficient, meat-type hog that will help the farmer increase the number of pigs he markets and reduce the feed it takes to bring them to market weight.”<sup>115</sup>

Efficient hogs serving as agents of democracy sounds dubious on the surface, but Bubenzer’s desire to create the best hog, regardless of pedigree, is certainly echoed by Lilly’s desire to portray the “pioneer spirit” of the early settlers to Indiana, who worked together to create the best situation for themselves in the hardscrabble wilderness.

1956, the year that this article was written, saw two of the more “hot” events of the Cold War burst into the public consciousness--the Suez Canal crisis and the Hungarian uprising. Perhaps *The Farm*’s emphasis on advancing democracy through agriculture is reflective of the heightened fear of communism during this time. Additionally, the post World War II “flight” from farms and small towns to cities and suburbs was a daily pressure on traditional values of the sort that Lilly and Bubenzer would have supported.

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<sup>115</sup> “Hog Farm Grosses \$250,000,” *The Farm* (Winter 1956): 53.

Myron Vourax, Henry Glassie and the Advent of Prairietown: the 1970s

To understand why the planners of Prairietown felt that divorcing the land from its original purposes was worthwhile, it will be helpful to examine the changes made to the land from two perspectives. The first perspective comes from vernacular architectural historians and folklorists, like Henry Glassie, who saw in Prairietown and other sites similar to it, the chance to preserve building skills and techniques that were no longer practiced (in much the same way as Artur Hazelius with Skansen) and to reintroduce to the public architectural designs and styles that were rapidly vanishing from the American landscape.<sup>116</sup> The second perspective is from the Conner Prairie's directors, administrators and board members, who saw Prairietown as a way to connect people to the past in an entertaining, engaging and educational way.

In 1971, Myron Vourax<sup>117</sup> became Richard Sampson's successor as Conner Prairie's director. Vourax had a background in natural history and had been the director at a small natural history museum in North Carolina prior to his appointment at Conner Prairie. He was a rising museum professional at the time with a strong sense that museums worked best if they engaged the public in meaningful ways.<sup>118</sup> Being relatively new to field of history, Vourax hired Henry Glassie to consult with him about how to use various historic structures that people donated to the museum. Glassie, as an expert on vernacular architecture, had a deep passion for maintaining accuracy in historic

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<sup>116</sup> Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach, eds., *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 316.

<sup>117</sup> Myron Vourax, Conner Prairie Director, 1971-1976.

<sup>118</sup> Myron Vourax, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 31 August 2004, transcription, CP Archive: 4.

buildings.<sup>119</sup> Glassie's interest in vernacular architecture sprang out of his professional interest in the folk traditions extant in the architecture and material culture of the nineteenth century. As a folklorist, Glassie was hospitable to the ideas of the common man and had a vision that would diverge from most academic historians--in particular the "building zoo" concept of uprooting structures from their original locations to create a new village. While the ethical concerns with the "building zoo" approach gives pause to historians today, Glassie did try to faithfully reconstruct the buildings once they were on site at Conner Prairie.<sup>120</sup>

As a result of this approach, Glassie recommended to Lilly and Vourax that any reconstructions use scrupulous documentation to make the building look like what it would have looked like when it was first built. This passion for accuracy not only ensured that the museum could gain accreditation from museum associations. Its commitment to rigorous historical research meant that it would embrace the new social history coming to dominate the academic historical professional in the ensuing years. Conner Prairie, thereby aligned itself with other similarly well-researched reconstructions like Plimoth Plantation and Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts.

Interestingly, Glassie supplemented his commitment for accuracy and research with the belief that museums should be entertaining rather than primarily educational--a perspective he shared with Vourax. In a 2005 interview, Glassie said:

[In the late 1960s] there was a strong interest in using the museum as education, to use it as part of a critique--criticism needn't be negative, it can be quite positive. I . . . would say that there [was] an affirmation of the regular people who have been on the Indiana frontier. I was perfectly

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<sup>119</sup> Henry Glassie, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 27 May 2005, transcription, CP Archive: 8.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

happy in those conversations [with Vourax, Lilly and other Conner Prairie stakeholders] to come to the conclusion that I think we all came to without ever articulating it, that the main thing we were doing here was building a museum that was going to be entertaining.<sup>121</sup>

Glassie saw that museums are, at the most fundamental level, created to entertain the public. Glassie believed that museums should strive to be as accurate as possible and to use that accuracy to educate the public about the past. He also realized, however, that the lofty educational goals that he set developed through the scrupulous reproductions in Prairietown ultimately had to serve the main purpose of entertainment.

Myron Vourax elaborated on this perspective even more explicitly than Glassie, emphasizing that the purpose of building Prairietown was to drive attendance. He realized that visitors wanted to see people dressed in costumes and “living” in 1836.<sup>122</sup> Vourax perceived the success of the museum as being tied to its ability to draw the public to the site through presenting an entertaining product.

In 1975, Vourax presented an intriguing paper, entitled “The Conner Prairie Concept,” to the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums’ 5<sup>th</sup> annual meeting. In it, he echoed Glassie’s perspective on Conner Prairie’s core mission:

For “education” of people to succeed--for their minds to be changed by the Conner Prairie experience--they must be in part entertained on the tour. People can’t be told the tour is going to be “educational”--because few come to a restoration to be educated. People want to be entertained. Education through entertainment is the key to a successful tour experience at Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement.<sup>123</sup>

Elsewhere in the document, Vourax emphasized the importance of being able to

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Myron Vourax, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 31 August 2004, transcription, CP Archive: 7.

<sup>123</sup> Myron Vourax, “The Conner Prairie Concept,” 1975, presented at the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums’ 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting, CP Archive: 4.

fictionalize the past to educate. He compared the Conner Prairie approach to a work of art. “The purpose of . . . art work is to get the viewer’s attention in order to convey a message, a vision, a point of view. We select facts which convey a powerful impression of the reality of past living.”<sup>124</sup> The goal was not to strictly recreate what life was like in 1836, but rather to give a flavor of the time period through representative buildings, artifacts, storylines and environments. An important point here is that the facts selected make all the difference in what the “reality of past living” ends up looking like. To return to Kryder-Reid’s argument, those in power determine the stories that are told and facts that are used. As will be shown, in some cases management neglected stories that could have been explored in creating Prairietown.

Vourax, representing the administrative perspective, and Glassie, representing the preservationist perspective, both contributed their theoretical ideas to Prairietown in its formative days. When their theories came to life in 1974, they played out in intriguing ways that illuminate both the potential for success as well as the difficulties of recreating the past in an “authentic” way through living history.

Here is a good place to explore what Vourax and Lilly meant when they talked about authenticity in Prairietown. On 31 March 1974, Prairietown was dedicated with numerous dignitaries in attendance, including then Mayor of Indianapolis, Richard Lugar, and the Lieutenant Governor of Indiana, Robert Orr. The program for the ceremonies that day began by restating Conner Prairie’s “commitment to portray the realities of early Indiana.” After affirming that William Conner’s life was still an essential part of the stories that Conner Prairie told, it continued, “as we expand the number of buildings and

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 2.

the scope of the interpretation, one thing will remain constant with us--our determination that every architectural detail, each craft product, every explanation by a guide is completely true to the past.”<sup>125</sup> Authenticity, then, was defined as being “true to the past” in everything that the public encountered in Prairietown. From the buildings themselves to those who “lived” in the buildings and talked to visitors, the entirety of the experience should have given this sense of truthfulness to the historical record. Since truthfulness was the goal, it is helpful to examine what living history does best to show where it succeeds and where it often fails in being truthful to the historical record.

Living history interpretation lends itself much more naturally to object and environment-focused presentations--the “architectural details” and “craft products” described in the dedication program. More abstract processes like government, religious beliefs and race relations are much tougher to portray through the “explanations by guides.” The use of guides (who are variously called interpreters, first-person characters and actors) in living history museums represents a shift away from a strictly artifact-driven approach to interpretation at other museums.

The people portraying the composite characters meant to embody people who would have actually lived in the 1830s are fully of their own (subsequent) time period. As such, they have all of the thought-patterns and cultural baggage of the modern era along with the comfort of knowing that they can get in their car and go home to air conditioning when their shift is over. No matter how hard interpreters try to inhabit the nineteenth-century mindset, they cannot escape the modern reality that they actually exist in.

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<sup>125</sup> “Dedication Ceremonies [for the] Pioneer Village,” 31 March 1974, CP Archive.

As an example of this juxtaposition, it seems that the early attempts at first person dialogue being presented at Conner Prairie as a way to communicate history were a scattershot affair, with different approaches and techniques frequently employed. John Schippers,<sup>126</sup> one of the first craftsmen hired to help build Prairietown, wrote, “We, in the beginning, did try a lot of experimenting with our new first person interpretation and we did make a lot of mistakes.”<sup>127</sup> Schippers made it clear that the struggles that guides and management had with first person dialogue were worth it in the end, since visitors responded positively in those initial years of experimentation.<sup>128</sup>

The origins of the widespread use of first person interpretation at museums are rather murky, although many museums, from Williamsburg to National Parks Service sites, did experiment with it in some form as early as the 1960s.<sup>129</sup> By 1977, however, only Plimoth Plantation, under the guidance of James Deetz,<sup>130</sup> had explored installing systematic first person characterizations as the primary mode of communication to visitors at a museum.<sup>131</sup> In an interview, Myron Vourax noted that by 1977 Conner Prairie had begun (simultaneous to Plimoth, but with little knowledge of what they were doing there) widely instituting first person interpretation.<sup>132</sup> Vourax indicated that the

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<sup>126</sup> John Schippers, Conner Prairie Trades Manager, 1978-1992.

<sup>127</sup> John Schippers, “History of Village and Village Construction,” November 1996, CP Archive.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Stacy Roth, *Past into Present: Effective Techniques for First-person Historical Interpretation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 31.

<sup>130</sup> James Deetz had a PhD in Archaeology from Harvard and served as director at Plimoth Plantation during its formative years in the 1960s and 1970s. He was interested in experimental archaeology and how to determine cultural trends by examining the artifacts that people left behind.

<sup>131</sup> Roth, *Past into Present*, 32.

<sup>132</sup> Myron Vourax, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 31 August 2004, transcription, CP Archive: 6.

front-line “guides” and Dick McAlister (Conner Prairie’s Education Manager in the mid-1970s) were instrumental in deciding to use first person interpretation.<sup>133</sup> Vourax, Schippers and other museum administrators hoped to have interpreters speaking as if it were 1836 and wanted to use crafts and trades to show the folk traditions of the time period. In the early days, prior to an institutionalized approach to first person, interpreters seemed to fall back on a generic “aw shucks” approach to interpretation, since they did not have much background research or backstory to their characters.<sup>134</sup>

Individual staff members, the costumed interpreters portraying characters on the grounds, played an important role in how the history was ultimately presented to the public. The program planners could devise scripts, post goals and interpretive points for staff to use, but in the end, those who executed the presentation provided the final (and most influential) filter on the information. Just as each visitor brought their own unique experiences to the interaction, so too did the interpreter. Throughout the late 1970s, the historians and administrators at Conner Prairie continually worked to enforce a standardized presentation grounded in research. As interpreters learned the history and life-ways of the time period, they integrated that information into their preexisting knowledge base and life experiences. As research-based, trained interpreters, their job became building a bridge to the past through their lively characterizations to the public.<sup>135</sup>

The situation for Conner Prairie, a newly christened living history museum, was one of fast-moving growth in the 1970s.<sup>136</sup> In order to begin the process of growing

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 7. Vourax also noted that the most important role he played in helping to develop Prairietown was to “hire people who were smarter than I was.”

<sup>134</sup> “Conner Prairie Key,” June 1966, Staff newsletter, CP Archive: 3.

<sup>135</sup> *The Newspaper* 7, no. 11 (19 October 1979): 1.

<sup>136</sup> In the *Conner Prairie Peddler* 3, no. 6 (November-December 1976): 1, a short article



attendance through building Prairietown, Vourax, Glassie and other planners needed to have the space cleared and buildings to move into that space. They started by attempting to move Lilly's farm manager from the site. Lilly had promised that Bubenzer could live in his house even as the museum was built around him. Vourax thought that the only feasible site, due to its proximity to Allisonville Road and its relatively level terrain, was where Bubenzer's house stood.<sup>137</sup>

Meanwhile, historic buildings were donated to the museum from around the state.<sup>138</sup> Glassie had drawn up a plan for Prairietown after a discussion with Sam Ritter,<sup>139</sup> Vourax's hand-picked builder.<sup>140</sup> This plan was sketched out on a piece of cardboard. No blueprints were created. The decisions to create the various storylines and inhabit the village with craftsmen were made with the intent to create "a little town that need[ed] to

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noted an increase in visitor attendance of 22% in 1976 over 1975. Unfortunately, no hard numbers were given in this article, so the upward trend based on the percent increase noted here is all that can be presented with confidence at this time.

<sup>137</sup> Myron Vourax, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 31 August 2004, transcription, CP Archive: 6. By 1972, Bubenzer was old, his farm operations had continually failed to make money and the burgeoning museum now located just to the south of his house was encroaching on his formerly peaceful life. He and his wife moved to Florida that year. Of this quick move, Vourax said only that, "I don't know why he didn't stay, they [the Bubenzers] had it made here." So thus it was that an old farm hand who had lived the better part of his life ended up in a sunny Florida that was riding the crest of the Sun Belt boom of the 1970s.

<sup>138</sup> "Status of Donations of Historic Buildings," undated, circa 1990. CP Archive. The buildings were all from Indiana (Auburn, Franklin, Muncie, Cicero, Straughn, Rushville, Noblesville- three buildings, Kokomo, Indianapolis- two buildings, Lafayette, Crothersville, Connersville, Greencastle, Versailles and Lebanon.) Henry Glassie served as an architectural consultant for most of the building inspections and purchases to make sure that they were actually made in common Hoosier styles.

<sup>139</sup> Sam Ritter, Conner Prairie Historic Trades and Historic Buildings Manager, 1971-1978.

<sup>140</sup> Myron Vourax, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 31 August 2004, transcription, CP Archive: 6.

have those things that [were] going to be compelling for the visitor.”<sup>141</sup> Glassie wanted to depict blacksmithing and pottery because they “would be good and make for souvenirs-- people would buy what they had seen made.”<sup>142</sup>

So with the buildings coming in and the plan in place, it was only a matter of plugging in the buildings into the plan. Glassie described the process as a “mix and match” that was “organic” in the development process.<sup>143</sup> As buildings were donated, Vourax, Ritter and Glassie would determine what story the buildings could tell about pioneer Indiana and then would fit them into the plan that they had drawn up. The donors of the buildings were generally happy to get the decaying buildings off of their hands. The tax break, the salve to their conscience that the buildings were not being destroyed and the confidence that Conner Prairie could restore the buildings to their former luster were all factors that the donors cited as reasons for giving their buildings to Conner Prairie.<sup>144</sup>

By 1974, Prairietown was a working representation of a small town in central

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<sup>141</sup> Henry Glassie, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 27 May 2005, transcription, CP Archive: 14.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Correspondence between various Conner Prairie personnel, board members and donors from 1969-1980, CP Archive. A point of further research could examine how the neighbors, former residents and local historians perceived the loss of a building from its original context. Joseph A. Amato in *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), discusses the intimacy that residents can have with even the most ramshackle structure in a particular location. Personal and shared memories are powerful influences in peoples’ lives, and the loss of an historic building might have a profound effect on a community’s sense of place and its members’ view of themselves. The environmental impact of the museum (and potential interpretations of that environment at the museum) is another possible topic for further research. See Philip V. Scarpino, “The Creation of Place over Time: Interpreting Environmental Themes in Exhibit Format,” in *Public History and the Environment*, ed. Martin V. Melosi and Philip V. Scarpino (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2004), 139-153.

Indiana during the year 1836. According to Vourax, 1836 was chosen as the date to interpret because it, “was a good round figure for the pioneer Indiana period.”<sup>145</sup> Glassie added that 1836 was “the earliest phase of settlement and . . . that was based upon a very developed geographical theory called first initial occupants.” The theory of initial occupants was developed by geographer Carl Sauer<sup>146</sup> and helped to shape Glassie’s perspective that “the first effective occupants [of a particular space] will govern everything subsequently.”<sup>147</sup> Glassie saw 1836 as the pivotal year for first occupancy in Indiana, and its correspondence with Andrew Jackson’s last year as president made it doubly attractive.<sup>148</sup> A visitor map from Conner Prairie’s Pioneer Craft Days on June 8 and 9, 1974 (Figure 1) shows Prairietown consisting of a Pottery shop and home, a Blacksmith shop and home, a “Weaving” house and a “Widow” cabin.<sup>149</sup> Throughout the rest of the 1970s and continuing into the 1990s, Prairietown continued to expand physically--with stories developed to fit the occupants of the buildings. A house from Holton and an outbuilding from Fortville became the potter’s house and shop. The Barkers are prototypical Scots-Irish “Upland Southerners” who trade furs and sell pottery to their neighbors. A small cabin from Cicero became the house for Mr. McClure, a carpenter and a very traditional Methodist originally from Virginia. A decaying Bentonville log schoolhouse became Prairietown’s schoolhouse. In Prairietown, the

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<sup>145</sup> Myron Vourax, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 31 August 2004, transcription, CP Archive: 4.

<sup>146</sup> Carl Sauer, 1889-1975, was a geographer by training who first widely wrote about the importance of cross-pollinating cultural history with geography.

<sup>147</sup> Henry Glassie, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 27 May 2005, transcription, CP Archive: 19.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> “Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement: Pioneer Craft Days Map,” 8 and 9 June 1974, CP Archive.

schoolmaster, William Ferguson, lives with his parents on a farm outside of town and is only teaching until he has enough money to buy land for himself. A house from northern Marion County in Indianapolis became Dr. Campbell's home. George Washington Campbell and his wife are from Lexington, Kentucky. Dr. Campbell makes his money from land speculation and is the wealthiest man in Prairietown. The blacksmith's house came from Lewisville and his shop came from Angola. Benjamin Curtis, a native of Canandaigua, New York, is the blacksmith. A largish house came from Crothersville. It became the general store for Prairietown. Mr. Whitaker is the avuncular proprietor. He dabbles in farming as well. A few years after the core of Prairietown took shape, a large house from Westfield, Indiana, became Prairietown's Golden Eagle Inn. In the storyline, the Inn is run by Martha Zimmerman, a widow with German heritage, and her sons, who are teamsters.

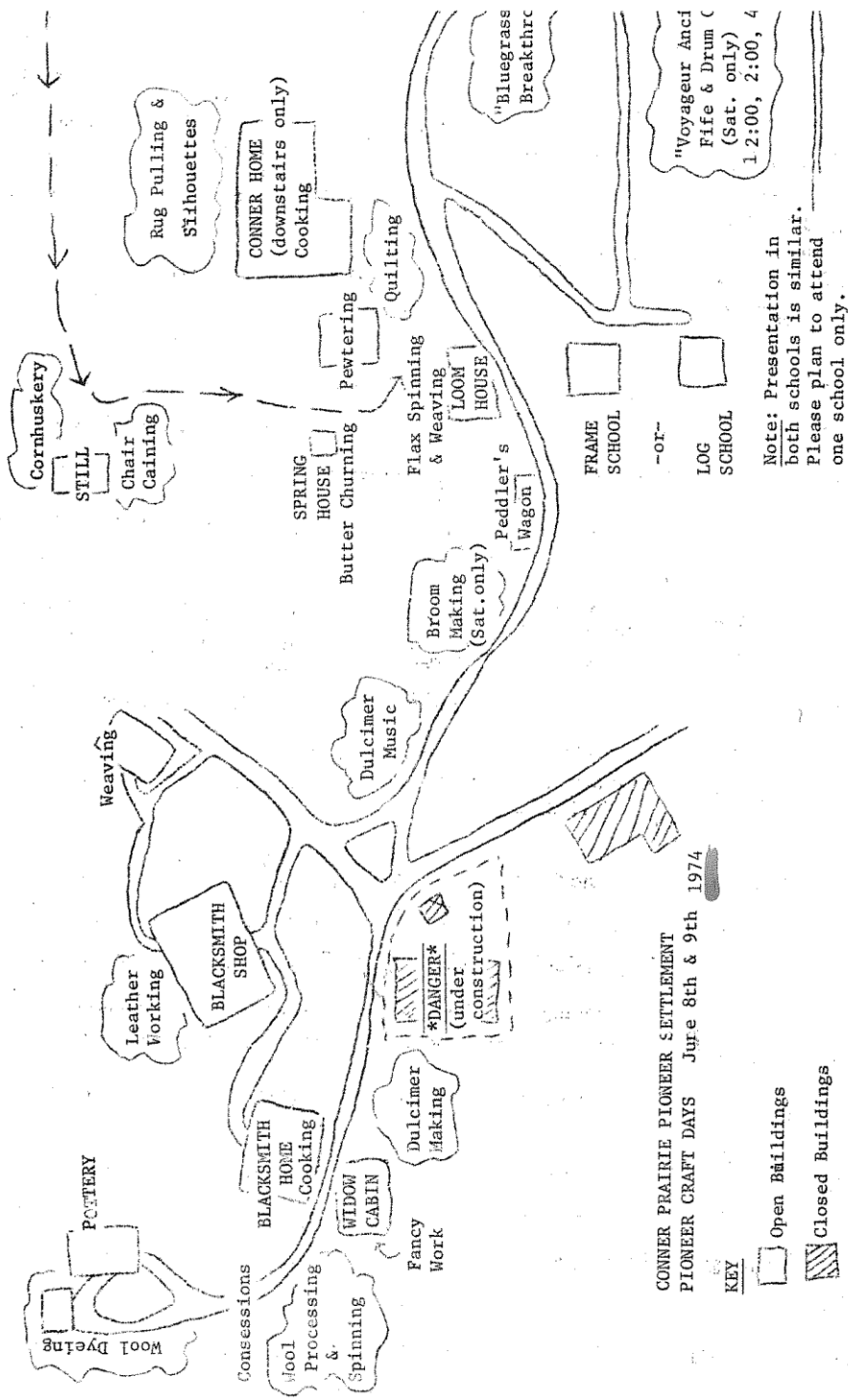
All of these storylines were based on people who might have lived in central Indiana, but are not accurate reflections of what a small town would actually look like in 1836. For example, there are too many craftsmen for a town of Prairietown's supposed size. As Glassie noted, visitors wanted to see crafts and so despite the lack of evidence that there were actually potters in central Indiana, these characters appeared in Prairietown.<sup>150</sup> James Madison's *The Indiana Way: A State History* is a good academic reference point that illustrates the broad disparity between how Prairietown is presented and how actual small towns of the early nineteenth century functioned.<sup>151</sup> By 1990, then, Prairietown had become a sprawling representation of the diversity of trades and white

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<sup>150</sup> Henry Glassie, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 27 May 2005, transcription, CP Archive: 13.

<sup>151</sup> James Madison, *The Indiana Way: A State History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

CONNERS' PRAIRIE



[Figure 1]

American cultural traditions that typified small towns (but was not strictly true to the historic record) in central Indiana during the 1830s.

Right after Prairietown opened to the public, Vourax and Glassie expressed very clearly what they wanted to accomplish with this assembly of buildings. In Glassie's interview, he commented that they were creating Prairietown as an "affirmation of the regular people who have been on the Indiana frontier."<sup>152</sup> Vourax elaborated even further. In a 1975 document titled, "Underlying Philosophy and Tour Plan of Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement in Accordance with Dr. Henry Glassie, Chief Consultant," Vourax wrote that:

Conner Prairie will educate by correcting false stereotypes about pioneer existence. For example, we assume everyone on the frontier was equal--everyone lived in log cabins which looked similar, everyone had thirty dollars, went to church and had a long rifle. The myth of the frontier tells us that rich people were just "lucky" and worked much harder than the poor people--when in fact, wealthy people came to the frontier with their wealth . . . and built huge fancy homes in the wilderness on the next farm to poor settlers in small log cabins. In reality--at Conner Prairie--the accurate past is presented. . . . The building of big, fancy houses was *simultaneous* with the building of small cabins.

*That* is interesting; and *that* is *educational* [emphasis his].<sup>153</sup>

This statement shows that Vourax and Glassie wanted to use Prairietown as a way to combat misconceptions about pioneers perpetuated by other museums (that rich people worked harder than poor people and that everyone was equal) and to do so in a way that

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<sup>152</sup> Henry Glassie, interview by Timothy Crumrin, 27 May 2005, transcription, CP Archive: 13.

<sup>153</sup> Myron Vourax, "Underlying Philosophy and Tour Plan of Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement in Accordance with Dr. Henry Glassie, Chief Consultant," 14 March 1975, CP Archive.

would be more interesting and educational to people than the myths they were attempting to bust.<sup>154</sup>

Conner Prairie did not have the kind of baggage of trying to interpret the stories of famous historical figures that weighed down Williamsburg and Greenfield Village. Because of this, Vourax and Glassie cast pioneer Indiana not only as a place of variety in social situation (as typified by the contrast between William Conner's large, two-story brick house and the small, one-story log "Widow's cabin" in Prairietown), but also as a place where you could see yourself, no matter your socio-economic situation, in history. Harold Cope,<sup>155</sup> even before Glassie and Vourax, wrote that Prairietown was being used to "demonstrate how the 'pioneer' lived, worked and played. It is not our intent to show just the wealthy and their acquisitions, nor do we wish to depict just the crude beginnings. We would like to show the average man--his struggles, his triumphs, and his growth. This is our real heritage."<sup>156</sup>

The average white Hoosier visitors to Conner Prairie, even if they could not identify with the types of history being told by the children (and grandchildren) of immigrants, blacks and women who began writing history about people like themselves during this time, would most likely have placed importance on the unique Indiana stories of regular people like themselves told at Prairietown. Since the East Coast was the nexus of the bicentennial celebrations, perhaps some of Prairietown's popularity can also be

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<sup>154</sup> Although there is no direct evidence to show that Eli Lilly agreed with this perspective, in *Eli Lilly: A Life 1885-1977* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), James Madison intimated that Lilly's frequent visits and generous financial backing to Conner Prairie was tacit approval of the type of history being portrayed at the museum during the mid-1970s (181).

<sup>155</sup> Harold Cope, Earlham College Business Administrator from 1946-1972.

<sup>156</sup> "Director's Statement to Joint Meeting of the Conner Prairie Advisory Council and the Earlham Board of Trustees," 18 April 1970. EC Archive.

ascribed to Hoosiers' seeking to validate their forebears' efforts in the Midwest in the face of the hoopla around Lexington, Mt. Vernon, Williamsburg and other historically significant eighteenth-century sites.

Prairietown, at the time of its dedication in 1974, was created to be a microcosm of the 1830s that told the stories of average Hoosiers. Myron Vourax and Henry Glassie had established an intellectual framework that placed Prairietown's educational focus under the aegis of entertainment. During this time, Conner Prairie aligned itself with Plimoth Plantation and Colonial Williamsburg, which were both moving toward first person interpretation and an integration of insights from the new social history.<sup>157</sup> At this early stage, Conner Prairie's unique stories of pioneer life focused on entertainment as a means to educate. 1977, however, would see new administrators take over leadership of the museum. These new administrators would challenge the education through entertainment focus--to the public's detriment.

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<sup>157</sup> *The Newspaper* 4, no. 10 (4 December 1975): 1.



CHAPTER THREE  
A TRANSITION FROM FOLKLIFE AND EXPERIENCE  
TO AUTHENTICITY AND EDUCATION: 1976 TO 1998

In 1977, just after the celebration of the bicentennial in 1976 and two years after Vourax's "The Conner Prairie Concept" (1975) and the "Underlying Philosophy and Tour Plan for Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement" (1975), the Earlham College president at the time, Frank Wallin,<sup>158</sup> outlined ten goals for the museum (which at this time included Prairietown, the Conner House, Conner's trading post and a late 1800s-era schoolhouse). These goals specifically focused on Prairietown's centrality to the future of the museum. His second goal, coming after the vague first goal, "Conner Prairie will strive to be an outdoor museum of the highest quality," was that Conner Prairie would "present to and educate the public . . . [about] the material and non-material cultures of the first generation of settlers in central Indiana (broadly, the 'New Purchase'<sup>159</sup>) circa 1836 in a holistic, integrated and coherent sociological assemblage." The third goal established that "the intent is *not* [emphasis his] to establish a local shrine, but, using Conner Prairie as an educational instrument, to show a particular person acting within a set of circumstances."<sup>160</sup> These goals depart from Vourax's and Glassie's earlier

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<sup>158</sup> Franklin Wallin, Earlham College President, 1974-1983. Wallin held a doctorate in French history.

<sup>159</sup> "New Purchase" refers to the Treaty of St. Mary's in 1818, in which the Lenape tribe agreed to cede most of their land claims along the White River in the central part of Indiana to the state government.

<sup>160</sup> The other goals touched on how Conner Prairie would be used to interpret historic trades and technology, how it would develop a sound research base, how it would use role play to communicate to visitors, how it would collect artifacts, how it would achieve income growth, and how it would maintain a professional standing in the museum field.

statements about the importance of entertaining visitors first to provide educational experiences. By focusing on the educational goals, the new leadership for the museum drew its attention away from the audience, which, as Vourax noted, wanted to be entertained.

Initially the creation of Prairietown grew attendance at Conner Prairie. Attendance steadily grew at Conner Prairie from 1974 through 1978. After 1978, however, and in the years directly after, the attendance leveled off and then dipped considerably.<sup>161</sup>

Throughout the early 1980s, Prairietown began to stray from its initial goal of entertainment, with Wallin leading the attempts to recreate the past even at the expense of the visitor experience. A further point of research could focus on the leadership of the various directors at Conner Prairie and how their tenures (including their interaction and working relationships with Earlham's leaders such as Wallin) shaped the direction of the museum. A listing of Conner Prairie's directors and their terms of service (from Richard Sampson through Ellen Rosenthal) is found in Chart 1 on the next page.

The professionalization of living history that accompanied the patriotic upsurge in interest in colonial and pioneer history is given voice in Jay Anderson's *Time Machines: The World of Living History*. Anderson, one of the leading living history theorists and champions during the 1980s and 1990s, examined the large living history museums in the United States and provided a mostly celebratory and uncritical explanation of the methods, purpose and educational goals of the museums. This book was written in the early 1980s and helps to contextualize the very strong patriotic and

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Franklin Wallin, "Revision of Dr. Wallin's 'Ten Goals' for CPPS Based on the Minutes of Supervisors' Meetings, 7 and 9 November 1977," CP Archive.

<sup>161</sup> "Conner Prairie's Five Year Plan to Improve Educational Experience for Visitors," August 1998, CP Archive.

## Conner Prairie's Directors and Presidents,<sup>162</sup> 1969-2010

Richard Sampson, 1969-1971

Myron Vourax, 1971-1976

Jim Cope, 1976-1982

Polly Jontz, 1982-1995

Marsha Semmel, 1995-1997

Pat Garrett Rooney, 1997-1998 [Interim Director during search for new Director]

John Herbst, 1998-2003 [fired by Earlham College]

Ellen Rosenthal, 2003-2006 [Acting President] and then after independence from Earlham College and a new board, 2006-2010 [President and CEO]

[Chart 1]

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<sup>162</sup> Starting with John Herbst, the head of Conner Prairie was called a "President" and not a "Director."

education-driven focus of Prairietown in the late 1970s. Throughout *Time Machines*, Anderson remarked on the verisimilitudinal nature of living history and its ability to be more objective and true to the past than other types of museums.<sup>163</sup> What is more notable than this emphasis, however, was Anderson's decided lack of attention on the experience that was actually being provided to visitors. For Anderson, living history museums were doing their job if they represented the past as accurately as possible.

In 1991, Anderson followed up *Time Machines* with a book he edited that contained a collection of essays about living history entitled *A Living History Reader*. This work featured a wide range of opinions from museum educators about living history, but it was clearly an attempt by Anderson to elevate the academic status of living history museums. He also argued in the book's introduction, much as James Deetz did with regards to Plimoth Plantation, for the importance of living history as experimental archaeology and its usefulness for illuminating the lives of the masses. Anderson wrote, "living history has a potential role to play in the field of American studies . . . ; it is part of the democratizing of historiography."<sup>164</sup> This statement, and similar arguments made by most living history apologists, emphasized the democratizing nature of the common man stories that some of these museums tell as the highest good, to the exclusion of the needs of the audience.

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<sup>163</sup> Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville: AASLH Press, 1984), 59.

<sup>164</sup> Jay Anderson, ed., *A Living History Reader*, vol. 1 (Nashville: AASLH Press, 1991), 10.

Professionalization, Education and the Totality of 1836 Life:

Prairietown in the 1980s and 1990s

As the first blush of excitement about living history gave way to steady (if not always growing) attendance figures at Conner Prairie, the leadership of the museum began to strive for greater accuracy in its depictions of the past. The change began in earnest with the hire of Howard Wight Marshall<sup>165</sup> in 1975 and continued with the hiring of John Larson and then David Vanderstel,<sup>166</sup> both of whom were trained academic historians, in the early 1980s. In a “Thirty Year Review” of Conner Prairie’s history, Jane Wheeler<sup>167</sup> (then Programs Director) wrote, “the historians keep us honest in our presentation of life in previous times on what was the Indiana frontier. Their continual investigations into primary sources provide insights into the daily lives of the ordinary people we celebrate in our living history presentations.”<sup>168</sup> Although they were social historians, their interest may not necessarily have translated to a concern for how the audience would access the history presented by interpreters.

Vanderstel himself provided an insightful look into how Conner Prairie portrayed the past during the 1980s in an article that he wrote for the *Journal of American Culture* in 1989. “In essence, Conner Prairie is a simulation, a paradigm, an incomplete mosaic of

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<sup>165</sup> Howard Wight Marshall, Conner Prairie Historian, 1975-1980. Marshall completed a dissertation in folklore at Indiana University in 1977 and had been the director of the Country Music Hall of Fame prior to coming to Conner Prairie. Note that, similar to Glassie, Marshall was a folklorist and not an academic historian.

<sup>166</sup> David Vanderstel, Conner Prairie Senior Historian, 1981-1990. Vanderstel earned a PhD in U.S. History in 1983, specializing in immigration history, from Kent State University.

<sup>167</sup> Jane Wheeler, Conner Prairie Programs Director, 1987-1996. No disciplinary background for Wheeler could be determined from the Conner Prairie Archive or discussions with long-tenured staff.

<sup>168</sup> Jane Wheeler, “Conner Prairie 1964-1993: Thirty Year Review,” 23 March 1994, CP Archive.

images from the past. . . .” He continued, “Each building and each individual reflects a different regional or cultural background, lifestyle, belief system, and perception of the world of the 1830s, yet each is connected . . . with the other parts of the village in order to present the richest interpretation of a past social system as possible.”<sup>169</sup> Vanderstel posited that history museums like Conner Prairie should use all research techniques at its disposal to portray social history and to help to “illuminate the issues relevant to human behavior, the meaning of daily life, the state of the economic system, the use of space, the role of men and women in society, and the development of technical processes in the early nineteenth century, as well as to describe how those objects fit into the daily lives of those individuals.”<sup>170</sup> Clearly the weight of the world was being placed on interpretive staff here, and it was no wonder that a content-heavy approach to portraying the past emerged from this time. As interpreters were asked to elucidate more and more aspects of the time period, regardless of whether visitors were interested in the state of the economic system (for example), visitors to Prairietown began to experience museum fatigue of the type that typically happens in narrative-rich contextual history exhibits.<sup>171</sup>

Vanderstel’s focus on using the museum to present a behavioral and “humanizing” view of the average people of the 1830s departs from the importance that Lilly, Glassie and Vourax placed that the historical content be presented entertainingly. However, he was clearly an heir to their sentiment that the ordinary people of history should be the focus of historical interpretation. As a professional historian, Vanderstel

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<sup>169</sup> David Vanderstel, “Humanizing the Past: The Revitalization of the History Museum,” *Journal of American Culture* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 22.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>171</sup> “Conner Prairie Visitor Study: Presentation of Findings,” May 1992, Conducted and compiled by Strategic Marketing and Research, Inc., CP Archive.

also used the language of the new social history that emerged in the 1970s. He credited intellectual historian Richard Hofstadter and Robert Ronsheim<sup>172</sup> as the historians whose work justified Conner Prairie's existence.<sup>173</sup> The latter, in addition to his scholarly pursuits, also served as Conner Prairie's associate director in the early 1980s.

Vanderstel's strong emphasis on the museum as the best way to illuminate the totality of the societal milieu puts the onus on the interpreters and the recreated environment to bring the past to life as accurately as possible.<sup>174</sup>

Another piece, also presented in 1989, at the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums' annual conference by Janet Kehr,<sup>175</sup> Conner Prairie's Education Supervisor, echoed Vanderstel's perspective. "The raw data--historical facts and artifacts--the stuff of historical life--is a beginning point for the interpreter to develop and implement memories, emotions, attitudes, opinions--the stuff of social history."<sup>176</sup> Kehr argued that interpreters need to (almost metaphysically) inhabit the minds, memory, dress, speech and attitudes of the people of the past. This type of characterization, although on the surface a logical progression of the early Conner Prairie attempts to

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<sup>172</sup> Robert Ronsheim, Conner Prairie Education Director, 1978-1983. Ronsheim earned a master's degree in Colonial American History from Harvard University and served as the Education Director at Plimoth Plantation from 1969-1974.

<sup>173</sup> Vanderstel, "Humanizing the Past," 23.

<sup>174</sup> It is important to also note that while the historians, managers and front-line staff provided the final filters on the information presented to the public, these people ultimately answered to the Director, who in turn answered to the board, which in turn answered to Earlham College as trustee. The turn away from the folklife model set out by Glassie and Vourax can be seen as a shared responsibility for the leadership and staff of the museum during this time.

<sup>175</sup> Janet Kehr, Conner Prairie Education Supervisor, 1985-1996. Kehr began her career at Conner Prairie in 1978 as a front-line interpreter and had no formal training in history.

<sup>176</sup> Janet Kehr, "Historical Mindset: To Be What You Were When," 1989, The Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums' Annual Conference Proceedings, CP Archive: 104.

recreate a time and a place, took an approach well past a reasoned and reflective interpretation of the past. By attempting to break down interpreter's modern ways of thinking by encouraging them to immerse themselves so fully in how people of the 1830s thought and felt, Kehr tacitly conceded that interpreters will have done their job if they merely "act" as if they are in the 1830s, as opposed to realizing that they are talking to modern audiences. Instead, interpreters are best able to make connections with visitors and to open the door to the "foreign country" of 1830s life when they realize that their audience has motivations for coming to the museum. When interpreters take the time to listen to visitors and engage in dialogue, versus merely presenting play-acted historical vignettes as Kehr described, visitors are much more likely to retain information and learn about the past.<sup>177</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, it seems that heavy-handed content and the minutiae of the past became dominant. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s a natural progression of staff turnover began to take place and, concurrently, a deepening professionalization of the organization. Trained historians had a greater influence in making sure that everything was totally accurate to the extent that the visitor experience suffered. Staff who had previously been under attack for their refusal to cater to visitors needs now took on roles of leadership. These staff had their thinking reinforced by a management team that steered the museum away from the experiential, folklife core of the 1970s and toward a content-heavy, didactic museum that strove to gain cachet in the museum field over truly meeting the needs of a changing audience.

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<sup>177</sup> Mary Theresa Seig and Ken Bupp, "The Culture of Empowerment: Driving and Sustaining Change at Conner Prairie," *Curator* 51, no. 2 (April 2008): 204.



A Conner Prairie member newsletter from 1995 gives a glimpse into interpreter training during the 1990s that speaks to this fact-heavy focus. After a brief nod to some of the minor aspects of the training program (the museum's policies and procedures, artifact handling, safety and security regulations and visitor interaction) the article described the primary thrust for the "neophyte interpreters."

Of course, 19<sup>th</sup> century training is their primary focus and involves learning how to cook on the hearth, what types of food would have been available, methods of transportation, how to spin and knit, methods of treating disease, the life of William Conner and Hamilton County history-- all of this in addition to knowing every small detail about the character they will portray.<sup>178</sup>

The minutiae of life in the 1830s was the focus for training and the scant attention paid to how to share that information with visitors in interesting ways further estranged Prairietown from the integrated educational and entertainment approach of the 1970s.

In this same article, Janet Kehr expanded on how the detail-oriented approach played out at Conner Prairie during the 1990s. "You really have to re-program yourself as an interpreter. You have to remember little things like the fact that ladies in the 1800s sat up straight and didn't cross their legs."<sup>179</sup> Visitors to Prairietown were getting an accurate portrait of life in Indiana in the 1830s, but the picture must have been uninspiring, since attendance and interest in the museum was fading throughout the 1990s.<sup>180</sup>

"A History of the Village at Conner Prairie" is a twenty-two page document from the 1990s that provides further insight into the content-heavy theories that undergirded Prairietown at the time. It is an exhaustive fictional take on how the characters got to

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<sup>178</sup> "Bringing 1836 to Life: First Person Interpretation at Conner Prairie," *Conner Prairie Peddler* (April/May/June 1995): 3.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>180</sup> "Conner Prairie Attendance Data," January 2010, compiled by author, in author's possession.

Prairietown and the cultural backgrounds that each of them brought to the town. Essentially, this is backstory for the moment in time that was supposed to be recreated each day that Prairietown was open to the public. In the preface, the unknown author wrote, “By design we have not copied any one village exactly or bound our program to rigid formulas resulting from local historical realities or statistical evidence. At the same time we are committed to representing a community that is accurate *on the whole* [emphasis theirs]. . . . Intentional deviations from the dictates of evidence are justified by instructional purpose. . . .”<sup>181</sup> This disclaimer elevates the educational role of the museum and neatly skirts the idea that Prairietown needed to be accurate in the strictest sense of the word. At least intellectually, Prairietown was not seen as a place that was rigidly true to the past.

Part of the past at Conner Prairie that was not as true to the historical record involved the stories of minorities. Native Americans and blacks were seldom included in meaningful ways, and the images of the pioneers portrayed at Conner Prairie through the 1970s and 1980s were invariably white. It was not until the mid-1990s that an African-American family was introduced to the storyline of Prairietown. While it is true to the historical record that Hamilton County only had one black family resident in 1836, the absence of any stories or mention of black history (although on the surface justified by the demographics of 1830s Indiana) is noteworthy because inclusive history was well-entrenched in academic circles by the 1980s.

More significantly, in light of the history of Indiana, the early days of Conner Prairie made no explicit mention of the Native American story, particularly that of the

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<sup>181</sup> “A History of the Village at Conner Prairie,” ca. 1990, CP Archive: 1.

Lenape, who prior to white American settlement, had most recently occupied the space that became Prairietown. Although the removal of the Lenape tribe from the state in 1818 through the Treaty of St. Mary's (William Conner served as an interpreter during the deliberations) paved the way for white settlement on the land, there was nothing in the Prairietown storyline or interpretation that would reveal this fact to visitors. An additional gloss to the William Conner story was the lack of significant discussion about Conner's first wife, Mekinges, and the fact that Conner sent his wife and children with the Lenape when they went west. Shortly after their departure, Conner married a white woman, Elizabeth Chapman, who lived in the area.<sup>182</sup>

Conner Prairie was not alone in being slow to tell the stories of minorities. In *The New History in an Old Museum*, Richard Handler and Eric Gable explored how Colonial Williamsburg eventually dealt with the issue of slavery in the late 1980s and through the 1990s. Handler's and Gable's insights are a helpful benchmark for understanding how living history museums have typically interpreted slavery. Until the Civil Rights Movement and the upsurge in attention to the rights and history of African Americans and women, Colonial Williamsburg typically papered over the lives of women, blacks, children and common folk in favor of a focus on the great politicians of the eighteenth century who peppered Virginia of that time. During the 1980s, however, Williamsburg, under the direction of social historian Cary Carson, started developing programs that guided visitors into an understanding of how the objects and stately homes of the wealthy

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<sup>182</sup> The Lenape story was not more extensively told at Conner Prairie until the development, in the early part of the new millennium, of the 1816 Lenape Indian Camp as a separate historic area specifically focused on white-native interactions on the Indiana frontier. These more recent changes will be discussed in Chapter Five, "Opening Doors- A Return to the Paradigm of Prairietown's Founders: 1999 and Beyond."

signified social status, while at the same time interpreting slave quarters and servant's lives on tours.<sup>183</sup> Likewise, in the late 1990s, Plimoth Plantation introduced Wampanoag Village, a "homesite" for interpreting both the historic and modern viewpoints of the Wampanoag people, as a way to combat their entrenched Anglo perspective as manifested in the English settlement site that gave them their namesake.<sup>184</sup>

An examination of what the visitors to the museum thought about Prairietown might have helped to show administrators how well their detail-rich educational goals were being met and if the lack of inclusive history was noticeable to the predominately white Hoosiers who came to Conner Prairie. Countless obstreperous schoolchildren have streamed through the cabins and tromped down Prairietown's wagon-rutted paths. Discovering if these children and other visitors viewed Prairietown as a reasonable facsimile of the actual time-period or as an exact replica might have helped to show if the goals met reality. In addition, the continuing struggle between presenting both an entertaining and an educational product gained an essential voice when the audience's perspective is listened to. The next chapter will examine the people for whom Prairietown was built.

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<sup>183</sup> Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 69.

<sup>184</sup> Erica Noonan, "Learning More than History at Plimoth Plantation," *Boston Globe*, 24 November 2008, 1.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “DO YOU REALLY LIVE HERE?”

#### AND OTHER VISITOR RESPONSES: 1935 TO 1998

Determining how visitors learn at museums is complex. It is important to keep in mind that education is most effective when it is dialogic and based in constructivism. George Hein, a leading learning theorist who advocates for a constructivist approach to learning at museums, writes that, “It is not only difficult but almost impossible to learn something without making an association with familiar categories.”<sup>185</sup> People are not empty vessels into which knowledge must be poured. The poet William Butler Yeats reportedly wrote, “Education is not the filling of a pail, it is the lighting of a fire.”<sup>186</sup> With this theoretical basis as our starting place, let us explore how Conner Prairie attempted to educate the public.

Prior to the creation of Prairietown, Conner Prairie’s perspective and reason for being were fairly clear. There was William Conner’s house itself, a federal-style two-story brick edifice sitting comfortably on a small hill overlooking the White River, and William Conner’s “trading post,” a small cabin housing furs, traps, trinkets and a coonskin-cap and leggings-clad man portraying a trader. An article in the 26 January 1944 edition of the *Indianapolis Times* provides some insight into the stories being told at Conner Prairie during this time, “it [the William Conner house] became a landmark with the result that the legislature picked it in 1820 for the meeting place of the commission

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<sup>185</sup> George Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 156.

<sup>186</sup> This quote is attributed to William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) but documentation for the quote is lacking in the historical record.

whose duty it was to select a site for the permanent capital of Indiana.” The article continues by chronicling some of William Conner’s accomplishments (such as his role in the first Indiana state legislatures and his role in the development of Noblesville). It ended with, “Little did William Conner realize that ‘moonlight [*sic*] night’ that some day somebody like Eli Lilly would come along and preserve it as a consecrated shrine.”<sup>187</sup>

Other sources corroborate that visitors came away from their experience at “the Lilly Farm” during the 1930s and 1940s with the idea that the Conner house was a shrine to progress, a paean to William Conner’s entrepreneurial spirit and a swan-song to the “noble Indians” who once lived on the land. On the front page of the *Noblesville Daily Ledger* from 18 May 1935, right next to headlines that read, “Excitement Is Caused By A Woodpecker” and “Corn Planting To Be Resumed Next Week,” was a piece about a reenactment that took place the previous day at the Lilly Farm. The writer waxed eloquent, “It was a bright, pleasant day, and the warm sunshine brought a large crowd to the Lilly farm, which is rated by many as the most historic section of land in Indiana. It is rich with Indian lore and all of the original settings have been restored by Mr. Lilly, so far as humanly possible. . . .” The author continued by describing scenes between William Conner (who is mislabeled as a General) and the Commissioners who were tasked with helping to choose the site of the state capital. Another scene was a reenactment of the first session of Hamilton County’s court, which was held in William Conner’s parlor. In the dialogue that follows, Conner recounts his life story, culminating in a wistful reminiscence about the Delaware Indians who preceded him in settling the area where his house now stood. According to the article, Judge Wicks “interposed” on

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<sup>187</sup> Anton Scherrer, “Our Town: Period Piece,” *Indianapolis Times*, 26 January 1944, sec. 2, p. 2.

Conner's thoughts, "The Indian made very little use of the fertile valleys and God intended those crops to support many. I haven't much use for an Indian. The only good Indian, in my estimation, is a dead one." After this dubious quote (which most historians have attributed primarily to General Philip Sheridan, who post-dated the time of this interaction by over thirty years), William Conner replied, in part, "The eternal strife between the British and the French in this country, coupled with the use of fire-water, which was introduced by the White Man, changed the nature of the Indian."<sup>188</sup>

Here Judge Wicks is cast as the ignorant white man, who was happy to see the Indians eradicated to make way for a more deserving race. William Conner is cast as a man who understands the problems that Indians face and wants to do what is best for them. Conner's perspective is one that most late-twentieth-century white Americans would take for themselves, and simultaneously salved many American's consciences about the injustices suffered by Indians in North America and deprived Native Americans of personhood by patronizing them and failing to take into account their motivations and actions as determinate to their eventual fate.<sup>189</sup>

These early interpretations at Conner Prairie are clear examples of the "great man"-focused history that was in vogue in the historiography of the late nineteenth

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<sup>188</sup> "Interesting Event on Eli Lilly Farm," *Noblesville Daily Ledger*, 18 May 1935, p. 2.

<sup>189</sup> Further research on this topic could explore how this early pageant at Conner Prairie connects with the fashion for these types of presentations at history museums throughout the country during the 1930s and 1940s. David Glassberg's *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) explores the meanings of historical pageants in the United States and helps to further contextualize the William Conner reenactments of the 1930s. Glassberg posits that a romanticization of the "noble" Native Americans was a key part of the pageants' appeal as purveyor of, "a variety of genteel, popular, counter and ethnic cultural elements." (238)

century through the 1930s up through the 1960s.<sup>190</sup> William Conner's house took center stage as a "consecrated shrine" to progress and Conner himself was portrayed as the noble white man who first settled the area and brought civilization to a rough wilderness. His marriage to Mekinges, a Lenape woman of standing who lived in the area, was interpreted as a helpful expedient to enhance his fur trading business and solidify his relationships with the Indians.<sup>191</sup> Although not noted at the time, this example is ironic, since Conner sent Mekinges and his Lenape family west in the aftermath of the Treaty of St. Mary's in 1818.<sup>192</sup>

The predominantly white, Hoosier observers of the pageants at the William Conner house during the 1930s and 1940s were receiving a celebratory recounting of the past. The pageant affirmed their beliefs that Indiana's history was a record of the achievements of hardy pioneers like William Conner, a man who looked and acted like themselves. William Conner's story is still told at Conner Prairie in the twenty-first century, but now it is described as an "archetype" for the many frontier entrepreneurs who crossed the cultural line between white and Indian society. Visitors are asked to reflect on Conner's choices (especially his decision to send his Indian family west with

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<sup>190</sup> In a chapter in *A Century of American Historiography*, edited by James M. Banner titled, "More than Great White Men: A Century of Scholarship on American Social History," (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), 11-20, Gary J. Kornblith and Carol Lasser point to the consensus history of the 1940s and 1950s as the prelude to the new social history which began to question assumptions about the type of "pioneering spirit" and democratic rectitude embodied by William Conner.

<sup>191</sup> "Interesting Event on Eli Lilly Farm," *Noblesville Daily Ledger*, 18 May 1935, p. 2.

<sup>192</sup> In the Conner Prairie Archive see "Feasibility Study of Development Potential, Conner Prairie Museum Advisory Council, prepared by James and Berger Associates: September 1969" for a clear explication of some of the limitations that planners of what would become Prairietown perceived in presenting solely the William Conner story to a broad audience.



the rest of the Lenape) and consider how they would respond if they were in his situation. The temptation to lionize William Conner as a “great man” has dimmed considerably since the 1930s, but his story is still a powerful narrative example of the white-Native interactions on the frontier and the encroachment of white settlement throughout the Midwest.

Visitor Comments, Staff Reaction and Management Response:

Prairietown in the 1970s

The 1930s-style pageants and house tours gave way to a social history focus as Prairietown became the cornerstone of interpretive programming at Conner Prairie in the mid-1970s. In the wake of the sweeping changes as to how interpreters in Prairietown presented history to the public, as elucidated through Myron Vourax’s “Conner Prairie Concept,” visitor comments pointed to the attention to detail that Vourax championed. In 1975, a visitor to Prairietown said about his experience there, “I felt I had visited real people in their homes. Late that night it began to snow very hard, and I found myself wondering how those people out on the prairie were doing.”<sup>193</sup> This empathy is precisely what Conner Prairie intended to happen through its first-person characterizations. Vourax wrote, “Conner Prairie is one of the few places where an atmosphere conducive to . . . reflection [can take place]. . . . Our first person presentation and our desire not commercialize your experience . . . will, we hope, enhance your enjoyment and appreciation. . . .”<sup>194</sup> Despite the strangeness of the other culture of the 1830s depicted in

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<sup>193</sup> “Conner Prairie Without Its Guides?” *Conner Prairie Peddler* 2, no. 2 (March 1975): 3.

<sup>194</sup> “Director’s Corner,” *Conner Prairie Peddler* 1, no. 6 (November 1974): 2.

Prairietown, interpreters were trained to make the experience as accessible to modern audiences as possible. Vourax again gave voice to this sentiment, “Our present and future success depends on how extraordinarily easy we make it for others to honor and enjoy the past.”<sup>195</sup>

By the time of Prairietown’s development in the 1970s, many people had begun to distance themselves from an authoritarian-style of educational philosophy.<sup>196</sup> Places like Conner Prairie, which offered an integrated, hands-on approach to history became popular field trip destinations for teachers seeking to provide experiences to their students that could not occur in the classroom. John Dewey’s theory of experiential instrumentalism was becoming well-entrenched in educational circles,<sup>197</sup> and Conner Prairie, by allowing children to see, touch and do at the site, reflected this theoretical approach to a high degree. A 1977 article in a member magazine by Conner Prairie’s Curator of Education, Willard Moore,<sup>198</sup> explained how Conner Prairie intended to appeal to teachers:

. . . perhaps one of the most pivotal groups in the region is the school teachers and college instructors who teach our children and use the museum as a resource site for learning. Our responsibilities in this quarter are largely by-products of our educational system--democratic, inclusive and, lately, tending toward interdisciplinary programs.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> “Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement Annual Report: 1976: Message from the Director of Conner Prairie,” CP Archive: 2.

<sup>196</sup> John Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2000), 213.

<sup>197</sup> Hein, *Learning in the Museum*, 22.

<sup>198</sup> Willard Moore, Curator of Education 1975-19???. Moore completed some graduate coursework in the folklore department at Indiana University and had worked in secondary education prior to becoming Curator of Education at Conner Prairie.

<sup>199</sup> “Museum Education and Continuing Regional Traditions,” *Conner Prairie Peddler* 4, no. 5 (September-October 1977): 3.

Conner Prairie's Associate Director in 1978, Robert Ronsheim, echoed and expanded on Moore's thoughts by giving a brief history of "village museums" and describing the experiences as primarily "gestalt" and "holistic."<sup>200</sup> Ronsheim explained that the gestalt nature of living museums provides an antidote to the fact that museums could never be totally accurate in detail.<sup>201</sup> That is, they could provide a greater emphasis on the processes of crafts and the lifeways of the people of the past than on the content and details of the past "as it really was." Since it was impossible to truly recreate the past, village museums served their audiences best when they gave a sense and a feel of the past through the representation of a relatable community of fellow human beings.<sup>202</sup> This article by Ronsheim shows that the Skansen-style folklife museum model was still preeminent at Conner Prairie in the late 1970s. A strict adherence to educational goals had not yet become the driving force behind the presentations to the public during the 1980s.

Ronsheim also realized that the ability to convey social history at Conner Prairie would be enhanced if the public had an opportunity to engage with the experience. "The distance between the present and the past can be effectively interpreted at an outdoor museum with the help of the material context . . . and by engaging the visitors--by getting

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<sup>200</sup> "Gestalt" therapy was described amongst psychologists of the 1970s as a holistic approach to studying individuals motivations. Holistic healthcare also gained widespread credibility during the late 1970s, and Ronsheim's use of the words "holistic" and "gestalt" was quite reflective of the thinking of the time period. See Kelly Boyer Sagert, *The 1970s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>201</sup> "Director's Corner," *Conner Prairie Peddler* 5, no. 3 (May-June 1978): 2.

<sup>202</sup> For example, the people portraying historical composite characters cannot be anyone but their modern selves, however diligently they research the culture and mindset of the past.

the visitors to participate.”<sup>203</sup> Participation was seen as key to helping visitors make connections to their own lives. If visitors were relegated to merely watching interpreters going about their 1836 lives, they would be much less likely to become emotionally involved with the characters or to have a physical experience that would remind them of something in their own lives and possibly lead to learning.

A collection of letters from a school group from Rushville, Indiana, who visited Prairietown in the spring of 1983 is also illustrative. Of the seven letters, three mentioned the food that the students saw being cooked. Two letters commented on the “dead animals” hanging in the houses. These types of experiences imprinted themselves in children’s minds because they had had a visceral physical reaction to them, as opposed to merely reading about what was cooked or about how pelts were used for trade in the 1830s. One of the letters exemplifies “scaffolding” in learning, where a student made connections between what she (or he) learned with something that she (or he) had heard about before or had already experienced. “I enjoyed coming there for our trip, because it made me think back to when my mother told me that people like you ate things like that. I didn’t believe her.”<sup>204</sup>

While the letters above show that visitors to Prairietown were enjoying the touchable, immersive spaces, staff often did not approve of how the visitors treated the environments that were created in the buildings. One anecdote from a Conner Prairie staff newspaper from July 1982 gives evidence for some of the staff attitude towards visitors at the time. The museum as protector of artifacts still figured strongly into this quote, “When you visit museums, at least the people I know . . . show some manners and

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<sup>203</sup> “Director’s Corner,” *Conner Prairie Peddler* 5, no. 3 (May-June 1978): 2.

<sup>204</sup> *The Newspaper* 11, no. 1 (3 August 1983): 4.

discipline but I'm never sure around here. Maybe we need Plexiglas [*sic*] to protect us from . . . well, yesterday, a lady started tearing the bed apart to see the ropes and a man started working the loom and someone else was at the fireplace grabbing a bowl and I felt like I was going to be the next one they tore apart."<sup>205</sup> The type of defensiveness this interpreter expresses toward the artifacts belies best practices in learning theory, which would champion open-ended exploration and physical experiences that help make connections to visitors' lives as a way to stimulate learning.<sup>206</sup>

An encouragement to interpreters from management during this time highlighted the discrepancy between how many interpreters viewed their educational role and how management hoped that they would interact with the public. "A reminder to Maggies [a costumed character role] in the Conner Kitchen: as long as we are conducting school tours, you are to make bread dough for the children to knead each day. We serve bread in the dining room to begin discussing food and how it is prepared." The end goal was not to be the production of a good, edible loaf of bread, but rather a tactile experience for the children that would lead to discussion and a more intimate understanding of the nineteenth century. The instructions continued, "Maggie is to continue the discussion and let the children participate in kneading. If you do not make bread dough, serving the finished bread in the dining room then has no importance to the tour and is merely a treat."<sup>207</sup>

Other similar reminders from management throughout the interpreter newsletters of the early 1980s emphasize that although management had a clear idea for how to

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<sup>205</sup> *The Newspaper* 10, no. 4 (30 July 1982): 2.

<sup>206</sup> Hein, *Learning in the Museum*, 22.

<sup>207</sup> *The Newspaper*, 8, no. 7 (21 May 1980): 3.

present history in an engaging, hands-on manner, interpreters often fell back on patterns that were counterproductive to creating rich educational experiences. Many interpreters viewed the ultimate goal of their position as merely inhabiting their characters and living and working as if they were in the time period, with no effort on their part to interact with visitors or get them involved.

Institutionalization of deep characterizations with little regard to visitor experience in Prairietown in the late 1980s took the form of the creation of the Pioneer Adventure Center as an area “devoted to experiential learning and group participation for both adults and children, families as well as individuals.”<sup>208</sup> By abdicating experiential learning to the Center, Prairietown became defined by its “role-playing interpretation” that increasingly focused on lectures and content monologues from interpreters to visitors.<sup>209</sup> The emphasis on participatory social history that Ronsheim and Vourax had envisioned for Prairietown was losing ground.

Visitor comment cards are often not the best way to truly gauge the effectiveness of an experience. They often highlight the very best experiences and the very worst experiences, but do a poor job of giving insight into how the majority of visitors perceived their visit. The strength of comment cards, however, is that they do provide a certain measure of basic feedback on how visitors are experiencing the museum when that information is not available from more detailed studies. One theme in visitor comments from the 1980s (as tracked through their occasional appearances in the Conner Prairie internal staff newsletter) was an emphasis on the importance of first person

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<sup>208</sup> “New Programs Expand Museum Experience,” *Conner Prairie Peddler* 10, no. 2 (June 1983): 1.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

interpretive techniques “giving a true feeling of a pioneer village.”<sup>210</sup> Up through the 1990s, visitors to the museum consistently returned to the experience of reliving the past and stepping back in time as the reasons why they came to Prairietown. Just as teachers did, the general public viewed the museum primarily as a place to have a tactile, visceral experience of the past and not primarily as a place to learn about history.<sup>211</sup>

In 1992, then Conner Prairie Director Polly Jontz<sup>212</sup> hired an Indianapolis-based marketing and research firm to conduct an in-depth visitor learning study to discover demographic trends, to get a baseline for a typical trip to Conner Prairie and to evaluate the competitive environment of not-for-profit organizations in central Indiana.<sup>213</sup> One key finding was that visitors consistently ranked Conner Prairie very highly in terms of its authenticity and the opportunities it afforded to learn about history. At the same time, they gave lowest scores to the categories of “I will probably return some day” and “It has lots of things to see and do.”<sup>214</sup> Visitors viewed Conner Prairie as an authentic, but not terribly repeatable, attraction. Conner Prairie had devoted many resources to making Prairietown a totally accurate and detail-rich microcosm of 1830s Indiana. In the process management had narrowed its focus to the point that visitors considered Prairietown to be always frozen in time and unchanging. As such, there was no reason to come back,

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<sup>210</sup> *Chimney Smoke*, no. 3 (5 October 1983): 2.

<sup>211</sup> Royal E. Berglee, “Heritage Tourism and Re-created Heritage Villages of the American Midwest: A Geographic Analysis” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana State University, 2000), 51.

<sup>212</sup> Polly Jontz, Conner Prairie Director 1982-1995. Jontz had an undergraduate degree in political science and journalism from Indiana University and had been the Development Director at The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis prior to becoming Conner Prairie’s director.

<sup>213</sup> “Conner Prairie Visitor Study: Presentation of Findings,” May 1992, Conducted and compiled by Strategic Marketing and Research, Inc., CP Archive.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

because the experience would always be the exact same. Since the rote content that each interpreter presented rarely varied (due to the insistence upon conveying specific historic information to visitors), the only reason to return to Prairietown would be to reinforce those same lessons, as if the interpreters were “living exhibit panels” or tape recorders.

A long-range planning data report filed by visitor researcher Marilyn Hood in the late 1980s reminded Conner Prairie administrators (in particular Polly Jontz, who had hired Hood) about their core values from the advent of Prairietown in the 1970s.

“Remember that most of your audience come [*sic*] for pleasure, for a good time, as well as for learning--and that combining education and entertainment offers the most satisfying experience for most visitors.”<sup>215</sup> Hood continued with her summary of her research findings by encouraging the museum to provide “variety within consistency, flexibility within authenticity, to coax people into return visitation.”<sup>216</sup> It was clear to Hood that visitors expected more variation from the Conner Prairie experience and would be excited by deviations from the typical Prairietown interactions with interpreters. Hood’s advice was not acted upon until her findings were reinforced by another visitor study that took place as the museum continued to have faltering attendance into the late 1990s.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Marilyn Hood, “Long Range Planning Data for Conner Prairie,” ca. 1989, CP Archive: 37.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> “Attendance Figures: Ten Year Trends,” 8 February 2006, CP Archive.



CHAPTER FIVE  
OPENING DOORS: A RETURN TO THE PARADIGM OF  
PRAIRIETOWN'S FOUNDERS: 1999 AND BEYOND

Throughout the 1980s, attendance figures and visitor satisfaction (as measured through surveys at Conner Prairie) had showed that merely presenting the past accurately would not be a successful way to build attendance at the museum and continue to keep the doors open.<sup>218</sup> By the 1990s public history had developed to the point that learning theory, paying attention to audience needs and using entertainment as a valid technique for piquing curiosity came into the mainstream of thought for progressive museums.<sup>219</sup> This audience focus hearkened back to the vision set out by Glassie and Vourax of using social history to provide an entertaining experience. It is important to note, however, that the context had changed by the 1990s (both with regards to the societal differences that arose in twenty years, as well as with the new modes of thinking about public history) and so the seemingly same vision meant something different to administrators in the 1990s. As has been shown, staff at Conner Prairie had drawn away from Glassie's and Vourax's initial vision for Prairietown, and at the same time, were not conversant with the newer public history trends of the 1990s. It was not until a pioneering study in 1999 that the problem with living history as it was being presented at Conner Prairie (which Marilyn Hood noted in her research findings a decade earlier) was re-identified.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> *32nd Annual Proceedings of the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums* (Williamsburg, VA: ALHFAM Press, September 1988), 37.

<sup>219</sup> Stephen S. Weil, *Rethinking the Museum* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 64.

<sup>220</sup> It is worth noting that Conner Prairie's "Follow the North Star," which debuted in

Between 1999 and 2002, Conner Prairie conducted three separate learning studies. In all cases, researchers transcribed and analyzed the visitors' experiences at the museum. The first came about in 1999 after Ellen Rosenthal arrived at Conner Prairie to serve as Vice President of Operations. Having previously assisted the Pittsburgh-based Museum Learning Collaborative (MLC)<sup>221</sup> on studies of the Pittsburgh Children's Museum and the Heinz History Center, Rosenthal asked MLC if they would informally advise her and Conner Prairie researcher Jane Blankman-Hetrick on a study at Conner Prairie. Rosenthal's interest in finding out what visitors were learning at Conner Prairie arose from her observation of the usefulness of visitor-generated content as a contributing factor to the success of static exhibits at the Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh. She took a cue here from Michael Frisch, whose concept of "shared authority" echoed through the public history field in the 1990s.<sup>222</sup>

As they formulated their evaluation plan for Prairietown, Rosenthal and Blankman-Hetrick decided to limit their work to family groups and combine techniques used in various MLC studies. For the Conner Prairie study, visitors were outfitted with handheld audio recorders and video cameras. Five family groups were asked to document thirty minutes of their time at the museum with video cameras. The researchers thought that this process would provide them with an opportunity to see the Conner Prairie

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1999, is somewhat of an outlier in this discussion, since it is a scripted and seasonal evening program and not a part of the core daily offerings at Conner Prairie.

<sup>221</sup> The Museum Learning Collaborative began in 1997 as a project funded collaboratively by all the federal agencies that make grants to museums--IMLS, NSF, NEH, and NEA. Although MLC included researchers at museums and universities throughout the country, the principal investigators were Gaea Leinhardt and Kevin Crowley, who were on the faculty of the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh.

<sup>222</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 10.

experience and visitor/interpreter interaction from the perspective of the visitor. However, visitors did not seem to be as interested in interacting with interpreters as they were interested in videotaping the grounds, themselves or the other visitors who were around them. By allowing visitors to videotape their own visit, little insight was gained into how they learned, but enough information was gathered for the researchers to know that there was much to discover about visitor's experiences and that more examination was required.<sup>223</sup>

In the meantime, MLC conducted its own small-scale learning study at Conner Prairie in 2000. Findings from this study supported what had already been discovered in earlier studies.<sup>224</sup> Blankman-Hetrick and Rosenthal noted in an analysis of the results of the pilot study that, "A large amount of the conversation at Prairietown was from the interpreter, not the visitor."<sup>225</sup> This finding was troubling to Rosenthal and John Herbst<sup>226</sup> as president of Conner Prairie, since the dialogic approach to learning had been established as foundational to best practices in public history theory of the 1990s.

A third, full-length study was conducted in collaboration with the Linguistics Department at Ball State University in 2002. In order to improve the data, the researchers needed to find a way for the visitors to forget that they were being studied. They also

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<sup>223</sup> Author interview with Jane Blankman-Hetrick, 7 March 2005, in author's possession.

<sup>224</sup> The 1999 study inaugurated by Ellen Rosenthal and the findings from market research firms like Strategic Marketing and Research, Inc. in the early 1990s were the antecedents for this larger study.

<sup>225</sup> Jane Blankman-Hetrick and Ellen Rosenthal, "Travels Across Time: Family Learning in Living History Museums," in *Learning Conversations in Museums*, ed. Gaea Leinhardt, Kevin Crowley, and Karen Knutson (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 305-329.

<sup>226</sup> John Herbst, Conner Prairie President 1999-2004. Herbst holds a master's degree in Education and had been executive director of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania prior to becoming president at Conner Prairie.

needed a snapshot of the learning conversations that were occurring throughout the entire visit. To that end, they outfitted visitors with lapel microphones and mini-disc recorders in order to capture their entire stay at the museum. They collected fifty families' conversations resulting in over 200 hours of data that required in-depth analysis.<sup>227</sup>

The earlier findings were corroborated by this study, which showed few instances of interpreters and visitors actively conversing. Instead, transcripts showed multiple examples of interpretive monologues interspersed with surface-level questioning by both visitors and interpreters. An example of "interpreter as information-giver" with examples of basic questioning is the following exchange from 2002:

Interpreter: Well, you got any questions about school or anything?

Woman: I was wondering how you can afford to eat if you only make three cents a day?

Interpreter: Ma'am, I've got a farm outside of town. And you see, most of the children, a lot of them, don't even have three cents a day. So what I do is I take items to trade, see for education, so they can bring me in—you know—just like now, berries will be coming along pretty soon. So they can bring me in a pie, something like that, you know. I'll wait until next fall and say, let's see, they brought me in three pies, they brought me in a cobbler . . . . Things like that.<sup>228</sup>

Researchers discovered that visitors typically listened to the monologue, left the post, and, within their group, conversed in an attempt to make sense of and analyze the information they had just heard. These types of interactions were problematic. With most of the learning indicators occurring after the families left the interpretive posts, questions arose that no one in the group could answer.<sup>229</sup> With few exceptions, interpreters did not

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<sup>227</sup> Author interview with Jane Blankman-Hetrick, 7 March 2005, in author's possession.

<sup>228</sup> Mary Theresa Seig, "Ball State University Learning Study at Conner Prairie, 2002," transcription of visitor and interpreter interaction, CP Archive: 20.

<sup>229</sup> John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking posit in *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2000), 109, that through discourse analysis, specific learning indicators can be identified in

play an active enough role in the facilitation of the learning process. This realization prompted Conner Prairie's administration to take steps toward making fundamental internal improvements.<sup>230</sup>

The findings from these learning studies altered how interpreters were trained. Prior to these changes, Conner Prairie's training program was content-heavy and emphasized the importance of conveying "post goals" to visitors.<sup>231</sup> These post goals were content-based and varied depending on the physical location the interpreter "inhabited." For example, the 1836 Prairietown innkeeper character was expected to discuss travel and transportation, women's roles, and the economy of the 1830s, regardless of whether the visitor was interested in these subjects.

In the aftermath of the 1999 Learning Study, a small team of managers and interpreters from the Museum Programs Division took on the task of making significant changes to the visitor experience at Conner Prairie by redirecting the way that the interpreters conceptualized their role in visitors' learning process. By reworking the foundational training and management structures of the museum, Conner Prairie's leadership, under the direction of President John Herbst and then-Vice-President Ellen Rosenthal,<sup>232</sup> initiated a change in its organizational culture. The team's proposed

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visitor conversations. These indicators generally take the form of application to prior knowledge. As a visitor comes across new information, they relate that information to something that they have already experienced.

<sup>230</sup> The action began under John Herbst, was continued by Ellen Rosenthal and was carried out by Dan Freas, Programs Division Director 1997-2010, and the Programs Division management staff.

<sup>231</sup> The concept behind post goals arose out of the content-heavy focus of the 1980s and were driven by the idea that interpreters needed to provide "information dumps" for visitors through their presentations.

<sup>232</sup> Ellen Rosenthal, Conner Prairie Vice-President of Operations 1999-2004 and then Interim President 2003-2005. Since 2006, Rosenthal has had the title of President and

changes became known as Opening Doors,<sup>233</sup> a reference to the new guest-focused approach that strove to “open the door” to learning. Beginning in 2003, Conner Prairie trained interpreters to provide engaging hands-on activities and a fun, interactive environment for visitors.

This new approach combined the thorough research and educational goals that are Conner Prairie’s heritage with a re-vitalized entertainment focus that hearkened to the original intent of the museum’s founders. Conner Prairie dispensed with post goals as the main focus of each post; interpreters were encouraged to try to determine what visitors were interested in by watching their body language, listening for verbal cues, and making eye contact.<sup>234</sup> In addition, interpreters used a variety of “hooks” to provoke visitor interest. Prior to these changes, interpreters were taught to allow visitors to look but not touch, but with the introduction of Opening Doors, these hooks took the form of artifacts, stories, or the physical environment itself.<sup>235</sup> For example, a visitor to Conner Prairie

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CEO of Conner Prairie. Rosenthal holds a master’s degree in Early American Culture from the H.F. DuPont Winterthur Program and a master’s degree in management from Carnegie Mellon University.

<sup>233</sup> Opening Doors began as an organizational initiative and became the basis for a training DVD/CDROM resource that debuted in 2006 titled *Opening Doors to Great Guest Experiences*.

<sup>234</sup> Further research may contrast the type of dialogic interpretation in action at Prairietown with the scripted, narrative-based styles that are key features of museum theater. “Follow the North Star” is the closest example of a consistently offered museum theater-style (often called second person) program at Conner Prairie. For an explication of “Follow the North Star” as impactful second person museum theater see Scott Magelssen, “Making History in the Second Person: Post-touristic Considerations for Living Historical Interpretation,” *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 2 (May 2006): 291-312. As noted before, “Follow the North Star,” as a scripted evening program, is different enough from the daily experience offerings at Conner Prairie, that its impact on the changes taking place during the 2000s was negligible.

<sup>235</sup> This change in training coincided with the development of a 6-week seminar for full-time interpreters and some Programs Division managers. The seminar, dubbed the Visitor Research Seminar, sought to examine the learning study data and visitor experience in

might be encouraged to help an interpreter scythe the grass. The activity's uniqueness and the feel of the scythe in their hands would pique the visitor's curiosity and they would be more open to conversing about agriculture in the 1830s.

With funds from the Institute for Museum and Library Services,<sup>236</sup> a follow-up learning study was conducted (using the same techniques as the 2002 study to ensure consistency) in the summer of 2004 to determine the effect on the visitor experience due to the changes that had been made. This study focused on the Golden Eagle Inn in Prairietown, where a team concept to interpretation had been implemented.<sup>237</sup> A marked difference in visitor experience was observed by Ball State researchers in both the transcripts collected from visitors and from comments made by visitors and interpreters. Visitors were spending, on average, twenty more minutes in conversation with Golden Eagle interpreters in 2004 than they had in 2002.<sup>238</sup> Visitors to Conner Prairie now had a

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order to help staff gain a better understanding of the visitor perspective. The seminar proved fruitful. As one participant (Vinona Christensen, written statement, 26 October, 2004, in author's possession) noted at the end of the graduate-course-style seminar, "I want to look at my own interpretation and take steps to make it more conversational." Another interpreter (Edward Grogran, written statement, 26 October 2004, in author's possession) wrote, "I found the seminar to be much more interesting than I would have imagined. Meetings often bore me, but I found each session we did was . . . different from the preceding one. The questions asked in the assignments did indeed stimulate thought. . . ." This seminar concept was expanded in 2007 and 2008 to other divisions across the institution in an effort to create a more guest-centric culture at the museum.

<sup>236</sup> Conner Prairie received an Institute for Museum and Library Services National Leadership Grant in 2003 to conduct a learning study in conjunction with Ball State University and use the findings from the learning study to create and distribute a training DVD for docents and interpreters at museums around the country. *Opening Doors to Great Guest Experiences* debuted in the fall of 2006 and the resource has been sold to over a thousand organizations around the country and the world.

<sup>237</sup> See David B. Allison, et. al., "Building Staff Investment through a Teams: Conner Prairie Museum's Shift to a Team Structure," *History News* 61, no. 3 (Summer 2006) for examples of how working in a team provided staff at the Golden Eagle Inn with more interpretive tools and ideas to provide richer experiences for guests.

<sup>238</sup> Author interview with Jane Blankman-Hetrick, 7 March 2005, in author's possession.

more dynamic, engaging and enjoyable experience during their visit. The rewards for listening to and acting upon visitor input have been great for both visitors and staff at Conner Prairie.

In January of 2006, Conner Prairie became an independent not-for-profit institution. Many of the changes taking place at Conner Prairie (which were focused toward providing more entertaining and enriching experiences for visitors) occurred during a difficult period of uncertainty for the museum. In June 2003, Earlham College had fired the Conner Prairie Board (except three individuals who had been appointed by Earlham) and Conner Prairie's president, John Herbst. Herbst's tenure saw increased attendance at Conner Prairie. Attendance at Conner Prairie hit new highs due to the Lenape Camp and Liberty Corner expansions (these expansions will be explained below) of 2001 (316,580 visitors) and 2002 (307,636 visitors). Typically in the year after a new exhibit opening, attendance drops dramatically. Conner Prairie saw 250,393 visitors in 2003, then saw attendance of 253,437 in 2004, a low for the decade of 246,728 visitors in 2005, followed by steadily increasing numbers of 258,254 in 2006, 284,608 in 2007 and 293,690 in 2008.<sup>239</sup> Chart 2 shows attendance figures at Conner Prairie, including the evening Symphony on the Prairie<sup>240</sup> concerts, in 1996 and then from 2001 to 2009 in a table format.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Attendance data gathered from "Outdoor History Museum Forum Report, 1996 and 2001-2009," in author's possession.

<sup>240</sup> Since 1982 Conner Prairie has been the summer home for the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. These evening concerts attract over 100,000 people each summer.

<sup>241</sup> "Outdoor History Museum Forum Report, 1996 and 2001-2009," in author's possession.



<b>Attendance Totals at Conner Prairie, 1996 and 2001-2009</b>										<i>% Change</i>
<b>1996</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>1996- 2009</b>
272,303	316,580	307,636	250,393	253,437	246,728	258,254	284,608	293,690	297,746	9.3%

[Chart 2]

The learning studies described above began in earnest under Herbst's watch.<sup>242</sup> Also significant were new attractions (including a working farm set in 1886 and a recreated Lenape Indian Camp set in 1816) that were built during his tenure and drove attendance during the first years that they were open.<sup>243</sup> Though these new attractions did not sustain attendance, the goal for their creation was to entertain and to educate the public, based on the original model for Prairietown. Related goals were to help visitors make connections between the different time-periods represented (1816, 1836 and 1886) and to show change over time.

When Earlham took control, plans for further development were put on hold.<sup>244</sup> Earlham fired Herbst and the Conner Prairie Board ostensibly because they were overspending. Later litigation brought to light Earlham's conflict of interest in the property and an unequal division of the endowment Lilly granted to Earlham for the continuance of Conner Prairie. The remaining Conner Prairie staff (particularly in the Programs Division) realized that Conner Prairie should not remain static through this time of uncertainty. Changes to how interpreters were trained, a rethinking of how visitors experienced the physical space, and an inculcation of a new guest-centric culture

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<sup>242</sup> Although Herbst carried these learning studies forward, during her short tenure at Conner Prairie, Marsha Semmel (Conner Prairie Director 1995-1997, who had an MA in Art History and a background with funding organizations like the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts) began the push to get funding from grant-making organizations for research that she hoped would lead to change in Prairietown.

<sup>243</sup> John Herbst steered the creation of the 1816 Lenape Indian Camp (which features a trading post, wigwams and other interactive examples of Native American life) as well as 1886 Liberty Corner (which was a working farm set in a rural "crossroads" with a district schoolhouse and Quaker Meeting House set in the Victorian Era.)

<sup>244</sup> Herbst and the board had plans to create a 1940's war-era farm across the White River (where Lilly's farming operation used to be) from the heart of Conner Prairie. A steel bridge had already been acquired to span the White River and transportation options were being considered at the time of the firing.

at the museum continued through the nearly three years of scanty financial support and absentee management.<sup>245</sup>

In January 2006, with a new board<sup>246</sup> and a new President and CEO (Ellen Rosenthal, who had been Conner Prairie's Vice President of Operations under John Herbst), Conner Prairie set out to create a new strategic plan. The philosophical underpinnings of this new strategic plan were found in the new mission statement, "Conner Prairie will inspire curiosity about America's past through providing engaging and unique experiences." Any future plans for further development at Conner Prairie will be guided by this entertainment-focused mission statement. Attendance data in three years since these changes took place reflects the efficacy of this approach. Starting in 2007, each year since 2006 has seen at least a 5% increase in attendance over the previous year.<sup>247</sup>

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The changes made at Conner Prairie as a result of visitor research echoed the original intent for Prairietown elucidated by Henry Glassie, Myron Vourax and Eli Lilly. Conner Prairie evolved out of Eli Lilly's vision to promote Hoosier pride through

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<sup>245</sup> In 2004, Conner Prairie changed how visitors experience the physical space in Prairietown. To create a space for visitors' physical and mental rest, two buildings were made into entirely touchable environments. No one staffs these buildings and visitors are allowed to explore the space on their own without any commentary from characters in costume.

<sup>246</sup> The "new" board was actually primarily comprised of members of the "old" board that had been dismissed (along with John Herbst) by Earlham in 2003.

<sup>247</sup> "Conner Prairie Attendance Data," November 2010, compiled by author, in author's possession.

preserving one of the first brick homes in central Indiana. When Prairietown opened in the 1970s, the managers, consultants and interpreters knew (in many cases intuitively) that to interest the public in history, they would need to entertain the public. Finding out what visitors would enjoy became paramount, resulting in a village that catered to their interests, while at the same time presenting (on the whole) an accurate picture of life in 1830s Indiana. Henry Glassie and Myron Vourax built on Lilly's original vision to present a social-history celebration of the regular folks who peopled the frontier in the nineteenth century.

Prairietown's creators had believed that the land and physical structures should be used at the museum primarily to entertain the public to pique visitor curiosity about Indiana's history. Since the 1970s, goals for living history changed to the detriment of their audiences. As Conner Prairie's experience showed, many museums became dry, insular and focused on a fact-heavy presentation to the public. As a consequence, they suffered from low attendance and a taciturn audience in the years following the bicentennial. By the late 1990s, however, learning theory caught up with the visitor-focused approach described in Vourax's 1975 paper "The Conner Prairie Concept" and proved the efficacy of the early presentations of the past at Prairietown.

Stephen Weil, a leading public history theoretician, wrote in 1999 that, "museums have changed from being about something to being for somebody."<sup>248</sup> Weil recognized that over the previous twenty years, museums that had emphasized their role as preservers of the past and repositories of knowledge--without listening to their audience

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<sup>248</sup> Stephen S. Weil, "From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: the Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (1999): 229

or catering to their needs--have become isolated and ineffectual in their communities.<sup>249</sup> In the 2000s, Conner Prairie took steps to hearken back to the 1970s approach (although staff may not have realized it at the time) by listening to their guests again and trying to determine what would stimulate their curiosity about history. The impact of this guest-centric, but still historically-oriented, approach is demonstrated by both its high regard in the museum field and the increased learning and enjoyment given voice by guests who are coming to Conner Prairie in greater numbers than ever. Conner Prairie is now the only Smithsonian Affiliate museum in Indiana (awarded in 2009) and its *Opening Doors to Great Guest Experiences* training resource is used by thousands of museums around the country and world-wide, and has influenced broad changes at such places as the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.<sup>250</sup> As an affirmation of its high standing in the field, Conner Prairie was awarded the nation's highest honor for museums (the National Medal of Honor from IMLS) in November of 2010. Despite the bleak outlook for most history museums around the country, Conner Prairie is now thriving and setting the standard for guest-focused public history.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Stephen S. Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2002), 37.

<sup>250</sup> Ken Bulp and Dave Allison, "Opening Doors to Great Guest Experiences," *History News* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 20-23.

<sup>251</sup> Cary Carson, "The End of History Museums: What is Plan B?," Paper delivered at conference: *New Audiences for Old Houses: Building a Future with the Past*, Boston University (28 September 2007): 3 [paper in author's possession].

Taking a cue from a historical analysis of Conner Prairie's practices, other museums (and, to a large extent, the field of history in general) should realize that the most accurate information and authentic-seeming depictions of the past can fall on deaf ears and be ignored if not told in an engaging and entertaining way. The very survival of history's relevance in an age of declining attention spans and technological wizardry is in jeopardy. Historians have the obligation not only to tell the right stories, but to also to tell them so that people--young and old--will listen.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

### David B. Allison

#### **Education:**

Bachelor of Science in Social Studies Education, Taylor University, 2001.

Master of Arts in U.S. History, Indiana University, earned at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, 2010.

#### **Honors, Awards, Fellowships:**

Visitor Studies Association's April Award for 2005 which, "identifies and honors those with potential to contribute to the visitor studies field."

Interpreter/Program Support Employee of the Year at Conner Prairie, 2005.

American Association for State and Local History's Seminar for Historic Administration Participant, November 2006.

Aurora Award for excellence in multi-media for *Opening Doors to Great Guest Experiences*® DVD/CDROM (David Allison and Ken Bulp, producers), 2007.

Indiana Governor's Award for Tomorrow's Leaders, 2008.

Faculty, Seminar for Historic Administration, November 2010.

#### **Professional Experience:**

##### Conner Prairie, Fishers, IN

General Manager for Experience Delivery, Feb. 2009 – present.

Experience Manager, Dec. 2005 – Feb. 2009.

Interpretive Team Coordinator, Feb. 2004 – Dec. 2005.

Interpretive Specialist for 1886 Agriculture, Nov. 2002 – Feb. 2004.

Interpreter, June 2002 – Nov. 2002.

##### Covenant Christian High School, Indianapolis, IN

U.S. History and Government Teacher, Aug. 2001 – June 2002.



## **Conferences Attended:**

### Visitor Studies Association

- Philadelphia, PA: Aug. 2005  
Acceptance Speech for 2005 April Award.
- Grand Rapids, MI: July 2006  
Session Chair, "From Research to Practice in a Living History Museum."

### American Association for State and Local History

- Pittsburgh, PA: Sept. 2005  
Session Chair, "Training Methods for Education Staff at Museums."
- Indianapolis, IN: Aug. 2009  
Presenter, "Four Decades of Innovation at Conner Prairie."  
Keynote Speaker, Educator and Interpreter Roundtable Breakfast.

### Indiana Association for Historians

- Bloomington, IN: Feb. 2007  
Session Chair and Presenter, "Controversy, Audience and Good History- Using Museum Programs to Convey Multiple Perspectives" with guest panelist Dwight Pitcaithley, former Chief Historian, National Parks Service.
- Anderson, IN: Feb. 2010  
Presenter, "Conner Prairie in the 1970s: Bringing History to the Public."

### 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Cornelius O'Brien Mainstreet Conference

- Richmond, IN: Oct. 2007  
Featured Presenter, "Opening Doors to Experiential History."

## **Publications:**

- Allison, David B., et. al. "Building Staff Investment through Teams: Conner Prairie Museum's Shift to a Team Structure." *History News* 61, no. 3, Summer 2006.
- Bub, Ken and Dave Allison. "Opening Doors to Great Guest Experiences." *History News* 62, no. 2, Spring 2007.