THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG
interpreter
VOL. 2 NO. 2 MARCH 1981

On Interpretation

This issue of The Interpreter *discusses interpretation. Bill Tramposch, the director of interpretive education, shares some of his thoughts on this subject in light of the current in-service training programs.*

One of the most successful interpretations I've observed took place in a printing office and concerned a newspaper printed in 1826. As the interpreter held the paper in front of the group, the issue looked like any other nineteenth-century newspaper: a monotonous series of columns with no rest in sight for the reader. He spoke of the printing process, and that was interesting. Then he opened the paper. Twice as much print appeared. Yet several columns were enveloped by thick black borders. Therein were announced the deaths of two presidents, Jefferson and Adams. "They died on the same day, July 4th, fifty years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence," the printer said. The interpretation was now becoming more interesting. He continued, "However, this paper is dated July 12, 1826. Why is this?" No one answered, but all were stimulated. "The telegraph was invented in 1848," the interpreter added. "This means that, until this time, news generally travelled only as fast as man." As if this weren't enough to relate to his audience, the interpreter paused and then nailed the lid on his interpretation: "When President Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, more than 68 percent of the American public knew within thirty minutes." *(Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information* by Alan Pred).

I enjoyed this interpretation because it was so artfully composed on the theme of continuity and change over time. It provided the visitor with a link to the past, and it recognized that learning is based upon comparisons.

It would be a couple of years before I read Freeman Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage,* a resource that Colonial Williamsburg interpreters have been using in this year's in-service education programs. When I read this book, I realized that the printing office interpreter was either a born teacher or a prize student of Tilden's.

As we know, Tilden's principles of interpretation advise that effective interpretations generally incorporate the following elements:

1. they relate to the visitor's experience,
2. they reveal the life behind the artifact,
3. they are presented imaginatively,
4. they provoke rather than simply instruct the visitor, and finally
5. they attempt to draw the larger picture.

This interpreter made a vigorous effort to *relate* to the visitor's experiences by drawing a parallel between both the deaths of presidents and communications over the years. Through its comparison with Kennedy's death it *revealed* a sense of the emotion that must have accompanied such tragic news. To continue, I think there's no question that this interpretation was *imaginative*; it took a potentially dull artifact and gave it life. It *provoked* me to wonder about the worlds of differences as well as similarities between twentieth- and nineteenth-century America. I wanted to learn more as a result of this experience. And, finally, from a single document, the interpreter drew a *larger picture* of nationwide events and communications.

Being impressed by this and by many other successful interpretations, it wasn't long before I began interpreting at an outdoor history museum. I think such museums are one of America's best forums for public education, because they presuppose that people learn at their own rate and that they come to a learning experience expecting to enjoy it. In other words, such museums assume that learning is recreation, for recreation means to "create anew, to restore, refresh." Open air museums, when properly interpreted, do just this. As the architects and curators of Colonial Williamsburg restore our artifactual environment, interpreters help to restore and re-create the life that radiates from this setting. Furthermore, our visitor requires these enclaves we

continued, page 2

call outdoor history museums. They provide him with perspective on today's world. In *Future Shock,* Alvin Toffler explains:

> No society racing through the turbulence of the next several decades will be able to do without specialized centers in which the rate of change is artificially depressed. To phrase it differently, we shall need enclaves of the past, communities in which turnover, novelty, and choice are deliberately limited... These may be communities in which history is partially frozen, like the Amish villages of Pennsylvania, or places in which the past is carefully simulated like Williamsburg, Virginia, or Mystic, Connecticut.

Therefore, an interpreter assumes a commanding position in the field of public education, one envied by many educators. Proof of this is the fact that every year more teachers turn to outdoor history museums for programs that will assist their students in understanding America's past. They feel that their formal curriculum thrives when complemented by a visit to such enclaves. The good interpreter also is envied because he can almost always refer directly to his setting for substantiation of a point. Such luxuries are next to nonexistent in a classroom. In many ways the outdoor history museum is the antithesis of the classroom. While a student might have geometry from 10:00 to 11:00 and American civilization from 11:00 to noon, in an outdoor museum the visitor is always enveloped in a tiny, yet clear representation of the past. Of course we can't re-create the past, but at Colonial Williamsburg one's imagination is well provided with the images, actions, and interpretations of an earlier time. One interpreter recently compared our setting to a buffet — "The guest chooses his fare and eats until satisfied."

With over a million visitors to Colonial Williamsburg each year, one of the greatest challenges an interpreter has is to provide them all with what *seems* to be an individualized encounter. To do this successfully, each interpreter constantly needs to ask himself, "How can I relate this setting to what might be the experience of my visitor?" Consequently, we need to make some large — but safe — assumptions about our public. For instance, a gaming table could open the door widely upon such topics as the use of leisure time, class structure, and manners, all of which relate in some degree to the visitor's background. The more comparisons the interpreter can make, the better. We all learn by comparisons. This is evidenced by some of our most frequent history museum questions: "We people shorter then?", "Were things simpler then?", and so forth.

Another special challenge for the Colonial Williamsburg interpreter is in trying to represent the larger picture to our visitor. We are five separate interpretive departments working together to represent a larger community, the largest museum community in the country. This charge makes the programs of the department of interpretive education crucial. In our programs we must continue to address the topics that will assist all interpreters in moving from the specific artifacts to the larger concepts behind them. As you know, we rely heavily on the evaluations of training sessions in order to develop the programs that help you to meet these ends.

One of the chief advantages of in-service interpretive education programs is that members of all five interpretive departments are brought together to discuss ideas. Although each department has different responsibilities, here in training we feel a sense of unity. For this reason, on-going educational activities will continue to be an integral part of our programs. When such training is not in progress, however, it will be the publications of this department (*The Interpreter* and *Questions & Answers*) that will try to underscore these similarities we all share.

Current in-service programs have examined what goes into an effective interpretation. Soon members of this department will lead small group workshops during which each interpreter will be videotaped while giving an interpretation. The purpose of this program is to let each of us see how we appear in front of our public. After every presentation, the videotape will be reviewed and everyone will critique his own interpretation. More information will be distributed about this program soon; but as you can see, it is based on the belief that every person is his own best critic.

If you have questions about this or any of our other programs, any member of this department will be delighted to talk with you. As I've said many times, the department of interpretive education is a support group. As you've noticed from in-service programs, so much of what we do is a result of the suggestions interpreters have made.

Questions & Answers

How much did it cost to rent a bed in a tavern in Williamsburg? Could one rent a private room?

By law, eighteenth-century tavernkeepers in the Williamsburg area could charge travelers up to 7½ pence to spend the night at a tavern. Travelers who wanted privacy arranged in advance for a private room at a lodginghouse, similar to today's tourist home, or at a tavern. Charges for private accommodations were not set by the local courts.

Did county courts regulate tavern prices to protect the owner or the visitor?

The regulation of tavern prices was to prevent overcharging by the tavernkeepers. Overcharging was an ever present problem in colonial Virginia.

Was it ever acceptable for a woman to go out unescorted to a private dinner at a tavern?

No. In fact, even with escorts women seldom attended private dinners at taverns.

What was the average age for marriage in the eighteenth century?

Because the research necessary to answer this question is still going on, we can only give a tentative answer. Results of the research may show that on the average men married in their mid-twenties and women in their early twenties.

Which president did not live in the President's House at the College of William and Mary?

Robert Saunders, who lived in the Robert Carter House on Palace Green, was elected president in 1847 and continued to live in his own house.

Did Virginia import beeswax for candlemaking?

No, beeswax was exported from Virginia.

Did they have a lamplighter in eighteenth-century Williamsburg?

We have no evidence of a lamplighter in Williamsburg.

How many taverns were there in Williamsburg during the colonial period?

From early travelers' accounts we know there was one tavern here in 1699 and eight in 1702. Thereafter until 1780, the number fluctuated from about eight to fourteen. The most accurate count is nine in 1769, which we know from the Badminton materials.

While the number of taverns operating at any one time was small about a hundred people are known to have kept taverns in Williamsburg between 1700 and 1775.

Inside the Great House

A book review by Nancy Carter Crump

In his introduction to *Inside the Great House* Daniel Blake Smith states that he will attempt "to explore the character of the family experience in the preindustrial South." He begins his discussion with a description of early family life prior to the mid-eighteenth century, which tended to be one of no privacy, little affection, with an emphasis on patriarchal power, and affected by outside influences such as church, kin, and friends.

Smith then examines the evolution that took place in family patterns during the eighteenth century and bases his study on various family records of Maryland and Virginia upper class society and on demographic trends. He sees, especially after 1750, a major thrust toward a more modern family structure, where privacy and autonomy were encouraged, affection for marriage partners and children emphasized, and outside influences waned to be replaced by a closely knit nuclear family style of living. He attributes these changes to several factors and believes, for instance, that longer life spans led to more emotional investment in the immediate family. The southern trend toward secularization, the use of slave labor to permit more leisure time, and rising literacy rates were also contributing factors.

The author treats each chapter as an individual essay on various aspects of the family such as sex roles, affection between parents and children, relationships outside the family, and illness and death. Unfortunately, Smith's exploration yields little that is really new or exciting in the field of family and social history. While the breadth of Smith's research seems adequate, his use of that research presents real problems for this reviewer. For example, he states that because of the paucity of records about the lower classes, his study will deal with the well-to-do planter. However, he then proceeds to use his information to generalize about all ranks of southern society.

continued, page 4

The King's English

Petticoat — the garment that in the twentieth century we call a skirt.
Gown — the piece of clothing known to us as a dress.
Breeches — knee-length pants.
Overalls — long pants, usually military, worn over breeches.
Trousers — breeches with long legs.
Stockings — socks.
Stock — a short, unattached, stand-up neckband.
Cravat — a long, thin neckpiece worn wrapped around the neck and folded in front.
Bandanna — a square scarf worn folded and tied about the neck. Bandannas were about the size of large handkerchiefs for men.
Undress — common or everyday dress.
Dress — full dress or fancy clothing.
Spatterdashes — gaiters of leather of canvas shaped to the leg from the knee to the ankle with extensions over the foot and laced or buttoned. They were worn instead of boots.
Sea coal — mineral coal rather than charcoal. In early times the chief supply may have been beds of coal exposed along the coast of Northumberland and South Wales. Coal was shipped from England as well as mined in the colonies. Palace fireplaces were equipped with grates for burning coal.
Cistern — a vessel, often richly ornamented, used at the dinner table to hold large quantities of liquor or wine. Botetourt's possessions at the Palace included "2 japann'd wine Cisterns."

Occurrences

The 1981 cricket season opens Wednesday, May 6th. **We need cricketeers!** All you need to qualify is a costume and a willingness to play the game. Our cricket veterans, led by George Pettengell and Victor Shone, will take care of the rest.

If you're interested in participating in this pleasurable eighteenth-century pastime, please contact George Pettengell, master cooper.

Book Review, *continued*

He uses the diaries of William Byrd, Landon Carter, James Gordon, and Francis Taylor to make sweeping generalizations regarding familial changes. Unfortunately, these are narrow sources upon which to depend, and the chronological, economic, attitudinal, and social disparities among them are so great that Smith fails to convince this reviewer that his findings are entirely accurate.

Smith also attempts to make a case for extreme deference of sons toward their fathers. He states that "young men depended so greatly on paternal approbation for their motivation and inner sense of worth" that the withdrawal of such approval would result in "a flood of anxiety followed by effusive efforts to regain their parents' respect." He quotes extensively from letters to prove his point but again fails to convince the reader. Two questions arise: could not this effusiveness have resulted from the mode of letter writing at that time when deference between most correspondents appears to have been the norm? And what about the financial factor as a reason for showing filial respect? The very real threat of being "cut off" certainly could have contributed to the outpourings of love and submission Smith cites.

Another problem is Smith's use of chronology: he jumps from the seventeenth century to the early or late eighteenth century, frequently making it necessary for us to reread sections and go to the footnotes to be certain just what time period he is referring to. Small factual errors and an ineffectual use of psychology add to feelings of unease about the book.

The author contributes to our study of eighteenth-century life by updating Edmund Morgan's *Virginians at Home.* Smith's use of new techniques in the study of social history makes for interesting reading, although at times his style is awkward. As Smith himself admits, further study of the subject is needed. Perhaps, therefore, his book can be viewed as an inchoate step toward that study.

The Interpreter is a bimonthly publication of the Department of Interpretive Education.
Editor: Barbara Beaman
Assistant Editor and Feature Writer: Lou Powers
Editorial Board: Bill Tramposch, George Collins, Dennis O'Toole, Jim Rubley, Jane Strauss, and Shomer Zwelling.