

*An Interpretation Manual for*

# **Silos & Smokestacks**

**National Heritage Area**



*Sowing Stories, Reaping Meaning*

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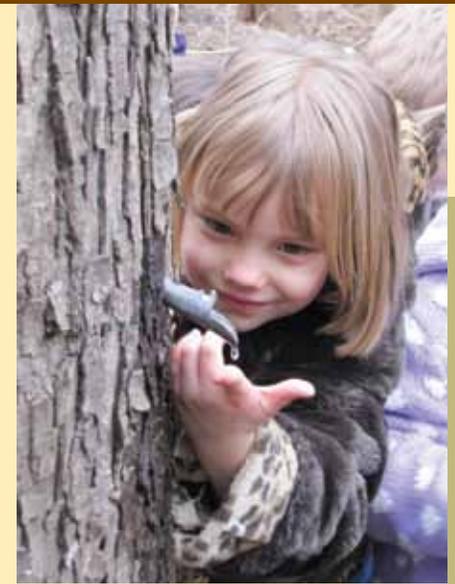
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# Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area

## Who We Are

Federally designated in 1996, Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area (SSNHA) is affiliated with the National Park Service and aims to preserve and interpret the story of American agriculture through a network of more than 100 sites and attractions. Spanning 37 counties, this region is recognized for its nationally significant agricultural resources and heritage.

What is a National Heritage Area? A National Heritage Area is a part of our country's landscape that has been recognized by the United States Congress for its unique contribution to the American experience. A Heritage Area may be created to celebrate a critical moment in history. It may be associated with a large-scale natural resource such as a river valley, or with a cultural resource such as a historic canal or roadway.

Located in the northeast corner of Iowa, the mission of Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area is to preserve and tell the story of American agriculture and its global significance through partnerships and activities that celebrate the land, people, and communities.



## Our Mission Statement

SSNHA preserves and tells the story of American agriculture through partnerships and activities that celebrate the land, people and communities of the area.

## Education

- **Assistance with your site's education curriculum** — Help is available to Partner Sites to develop educational curriculum in relation to agriculture.
- **E-Newsletter for Educators** — Sent to area teachers, this newsletter showcases Partner Sites and new programming ideas.
- **Seasonal Youth Camps** — Based out of Waterloo and organized by SSNHA Staff, youth in grades 3-8 visit various Partner Sites during day-long camps.
- **Teacher Trainings** — Working with Farm Bureau and Effigy Mounds, SSNHA offers continuing education credits to teachers.
- **www.campsilos.org** — A hands-on, primary resource website dedicated to agricultural education. Free lesson plans available.

## How to Become a Partner Site

If becoming a Silos & Smokestacks Partner Site is something you want to pursue, the first step would be to fill out the brief Pre-Application and tell us what agricultural stories you are currently telling or willing to tell to the public.

- A SSNHA Staff person will arrange a site visit to discuss options. Sites that are visitor ready and actively interpreting a story related to agriculture may be invited to become a designated Partner Site.
- Sites that are not visitor ready and/or need further development of interpretation may be invited to become an Emerging Site.
- SSNHA Staff work with Emerging Sites to develop a plan of action to become a designated Partner Site.
- There is no fee to participate.



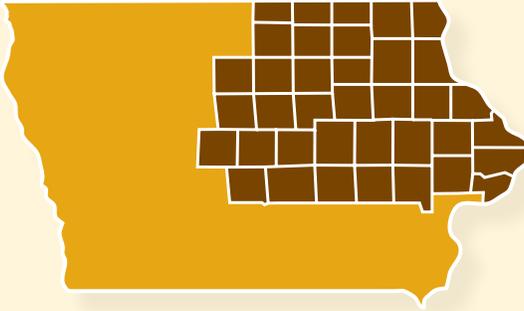
## Grants

- **SSNHA Intern Grant** — Extends a college student's education beyond the classroom at SSNHA Partner Sites. Due February 1.
- **SSNHA Bus Grant** — Helps schools in the Heritage Area fund the transportation costs associated with field study trips to SSNHA Partner Sites. Cycle opens in August.
- **SSNHA General Grant** — 1:1 matching grants to preserve and tell the story of American agriculture through exhibits, interpretive signage, programs, education, events, etc. Due late April/early May.
- **SSNHA Interpretive Planning Grant** — Assists sites in identifying their interpretive significance, stories and themes specific to agriculture. Due late April/early May.



*Grant Programs*

# Programs & Resources



## Interpretive Services

- **1:1 Consultation** — Need an extra set of eyes on an exhibit, brochure or tour? SSNHA is available to visit your site and assist in these efforts.
- **Interpretive Planning** — Through informal discussions, ideas will be discussed on how to create a good visitor experience from entrance to exit at your site.
- **Outdoor Interpretive Signs** — A SSNHA outdoor signage guideline, templates and guidebook are available to assist planning and implementing your outdoor interpretive signs.
- **Group Tours** — By working with farms and Partner Sites, SSNHA is able to offer several group tour ideas for charter buses, school groups or families.

## Program Development

- **Technical Assistance Workshops** — Quarterly trainings on various topics are offered in the region. Workshops previously offered include interpretive techniques and grant proposal writing.
- **Technical Assistance** — If you would like a SSNHA Staff member and/or a National Park Service representative to visit your site for technical assistance, just contact us to schedule an appointment. SSNHA Staff can review and edit brochures, exhibits, signage, etc. for Partner Sites.
- **Silos & Smokestacks 101 Training** — A one-hour training session to connect staff and volunteers to what the Heritage Area is and how to greet visitors.
- **E-Info** — Bi-weekly email regarding various resources, workshops and opportunities available.
- **Speakers Bureau** — SSNHA Staff are available to speak at Partner Site meetings, events, etc. about the Heritage Area.

## Marketing & Awareness

- **Visitor Guide/Website** — Each Partner Site has a detailed listing in the annual Heritage Area guide and website. Distributing 65,000 guides annually.
- **Quarterly Newsletter** — A quarterly newsletter highlighting Heritage Area opportunities and happenings, including a Spotlight Partner Site profile.
- **Online Calendar of Events/Email** — Whether or not you are a designated Partner Site, you can post events to the Silos & Smokestacks online calendar to be seen by 400,000 users annually. An events email is sent to subscribers twice a month.
- **Traveler Newsletter** — Visitor focused, electronic newsletter sent monthly to visitors of the Heritage Area, spotlighting events and activities within the region.
- **National Park Service (NPS) Passport Program** — Select Partner Sites offer visitors the opportunity to have their NPS passport stamped.

## How Can I Contact SSNHA?

For more information about these programs, please contact program staff:

Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area  
Fowler Building  
604 Lafayette Street, Suite 202, P.O. Box 2845  
Waterloo, Iowa 50704-2845

Phone (319)234-4567  
Fax (319)234-8228  
E-Mail [partnerships@silosandsmokestacks.org](mailto:partnerships@silosandsmokestacks.org)  
Web [www.silosandsmokestacks.org](http://www.silosandsmokestacks.org)

Follow us on any of these social media sites.



# Introduction

## Purpose of This Manual

This manual is a step-by-step guide for creating effective interpretation — any activity that strengthens people’s awareness of natural, cultural, and historic resources, enhances their understanding of these resources, and helps them connect to their relevance and meaning. In this manual, you’ll learn:

- Why interpretation is important, and what it can do for your resource;
- How to plan an interpretation strategy that’s linked to larger themes; and
- How to implement your strategy using the tools and techniques that are best suited to the stories you’re telling.

At the end of the manual, you’ll find a “toolbox” with more information to help you plan your interpretation strategy.

The interpretation strategies outlined in this manual aren’t just intended for museums and historic sites. They’re applicable to any kind of resource – from a restaurant, to a bed and breakfast, to a community fair. Anyone can create successful interpretation. Even if interpretation isn’t the main focus of your organization or business, you can still tell authentic stories that will resonate with visitors.

## What Do We Mean by a Resource?

Throughout the manual, the word resource refers to any natural, historic, or cultural asset found in your local community. In the context of SSNHA, the word generally means a “Heritage Resource” — a site, service, event, tour, route, community, or landscape that’s been officially designated by SSNHA, or that has the potential to meet the criteria required for designation.

## Who Is This Manual For?

This manual is designed for anyone who wants to tell the story of a resource that’s significant to the agricultural heritage of the area, whether they are officially designated or a potential SSNHA Partner Site. SSNHA partners manage and promote a wide range of natural, cultural, and historic resources in northeastern Iowa. The hallmark of the SSNHA partner program is the requirement that all participating resources meet strict criteria for authenticity, interpretation, and visitor readiness.

Sites that meet these criteria are invited to participate as officially designated partners. Of course, these sites may include museums and farms, but they also include restaurants, bed and breakfasts, and any other organization that reflects local cultural traditions.

Designated Partner Sites are visitor ready and actively interpreting a story related to agriculture. A site that is not visitor ready and/or needs further development of its interpretative programs may be invited to become an Emerging Site. SSNHA Staff will work with each Emerging Site to develop a plan of action so it can become a designated Partner Site.

For more information on the criteria that resources must meet to be recognized as a SSNHA Partner Site, please see the section on Visitor Readiness & Criteria in Chapter 3.

## Agricultural Heritage

### *Resource Categories and Types*

Bed and Breakfasts  
Fairs and Special Events  
Farms and Wineries  
Historic Sites  
Museums and Galleries  
Parks and Nature Centers  
Scenic Routes  
Ag Businesses

## What Is Interpretation?

Interpretation is the art of seeking to understand and share with others the meaning of the world around us. At its best, it helps people connect intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually with the ideas, principles, beliefs, and values that belong to that world.

Simply put, interpretation is a way of telling stories. Not just the facts of a story, though. Interpretation also addresses why that story matters. If you only list facts, you aren't interpreting your resource, you're just describing it. Interpretation helps visitors connect with what they're experiencing. It doesn't just teach what something is, but what it means. This isn't anything new. We've been using stories to tell what things mean for many, many centuries! We humans have been storytellers probably ever since we learned to talk.

When you tell a story about a resource in your community, and what it means to you, you're "interpreting" something. You're making a connection between things and ideas, and giving visitors an opportunity to experience something with their minds and with their hearts.

It's easy to describe the "tangibles" you experience with your senses — the physical characteristics of a resource. It's tougher to link those things to "intangibles" — things like the meaning, ideas, values, and emotions behind it. The goal of interpretation is to engage visitors' senses while challenging them to think about what things mean — to look at them in entirely new ways.

Interpretation can create memorable and meaningful experiences for visitors, and inspire them to learn more. You want to get visitors buzzing with discussion, and convince them of the importance of the stories you're telling. You may not have a stunningly beautiful landscape to interpret, or an urgent conservation message, but you can still create strong interpretation that reflects enthusiasm for your resource and what it means.

It takes some effort to create effective interpretation — but if you do it right, you'll not only help visitors understand your resource, but you'll do a better job of managing it, and you might even generate more revenue. In the process, you can help your community meet its goals for resource conservation, community development, and tourism.

### *A Brief Look at Mission and Vision*

Your mission is what you do. The statement should be short and sweet, so anyone in your organization can cite it on demand: "Our mission is to teach school children in XX County how to plant, harvest, prepare and consume vegetables."

Your vision describes what the world around you or your organization would look like if you were at "mission accomplished;"

"We envision a world in which the health of every family in the county is improved because they eat a variety of homegrown vegetables."



**Interpretation:** A mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and meanings inherent in the resource.

**-National Association of Interpretation**

### **The Definitions Project**

The Definitions Project was developed to create a set of definitions of common terminology used by people in the field of interpretation. Initially funded by the US Environmental Protection Agency, it has been organized by the National Association for Interpretation (NAI) in cooperation with US Fish and Wildlife Service and Institute for Learning Innovation.

*For more definitions, go to:*

<http://www.definitionsproject.com/definitions/index.cfm>

## Role of Interpretation in the SSNHA

In the Heritage Area, Partner Sites are required to offer interpretation related to at least one of the six SSNHA interpretive themes as a basic requirement for partnership designation. SSNHA defines interpretation as the way the story of a site, collection, or landscape is told to visitors, whether it be a collection of media (signs, brochures, exhibits, audio tours, educational programs, walking tours, driving tours, electronic media, etc.), or people-powered interpretation like guided tours, living history performances, talks and lectures, and the like.

Interpretation is also a tool that helps resources demonstrate their significance and authenticity. Significance is the unique natural, cultural, or historical importance of a place, event or collection to Iowa's and America's agricultural story, past or present. Authenticity is what enables a place, event, or collection to offer visitors original and genuine experiences in a meaningful and credible way — experiences that are real. Interpretation highlights and emphasizes the resource's significance and authenticity to its visitors.

Interpretation is especially important when the significance of a resource isn't immediately obvious to visitors – for instance, archeological sites where physical evidence of the past is hidden underground. Interpretation is also crucial in helping people understand cultural traditions that are unfamiliar to them. If your resource is a great example of local heritage, and no one knows it, it's hard to justify its authenticity. Interpretation makes that connection for visitors.



SSNHA developed this manual to help you create interpretation that meets the standards required for partner designation. Generally speaking, Heritage Area Partner Sites must provide interpretation that:

- Relies on sound research
- Demonstrates a genuine, accurate, and verifiable link to local heritage
- Clearly identifies inauthentic or reconstructed elements
- Shows cultural sensitivity
- Focuses on educating visitors, rather than simply entertaining them
- Is easily accessible to visitors through a variety of media
- Highlights at least one of the six interpretive themes of the National Heritage Area.

It's challenging to meet these criteria, so this manual provides a step-by-step process that starts with basic concepts and moves on to more complex tasks. If you follow the tips in this manual, you won't just be creating interpretation that might qualify your resource for designation as an SSNHA partner. You'll also be helping visitors gain a better appreciation of the region's unique agricultural heritage.



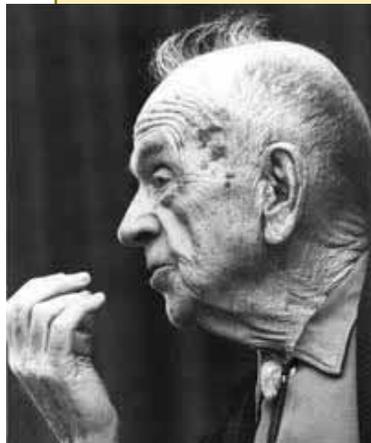
## Evaluating Your Interpretive Programs and Services

In the excitement of developing and producing new interpretive services, it is easy to overlook the need to understand if your visitors are learning from and connecting to your stories in the way you intended. Plan to make evaluation a part of your interpretive program from the very start. You'll be able to demonstrate your successes to your community – and to potential funders. And you will have the chance to head off failures before they begin.

- Ask visitors about the topic you plan to interpret before you begin. Learn what they know about it already, and what they would like to know. This front end phase of evaluation helps you get your interpretive approach off to the right start by targeting the needs of your audience.
- Test prototypes and mockups and do dry runs as you develop new media and programs. Find out what works and what doesn't before you commit to the final product. Formative evaluation like this helps you shape your programming for maximum effectiveness.
- Evaluate the finished product to learn if anything needs fixing. This phase of evaluation is called summative, because it sums up what visitors learn and how they experience your programming. It is sometimes called remedial interpretation, because it highlights features that need to be remedied to make them more effective. When budgeting for new interpretive programs and services, it is always a good idea to make sure you have set aside a small percentage of available funding to adjust any parts of the program that aren't as effective as you had hoped.

Chapter 5 of this manual provides guidance on both formal and informal ways that you can conduct effective evaluation of your interpretive programs and services.

### Who “Invented” Interpretation?



The “grandfather” of interpretation as it is practiced today is Freeman Tilden, a writer who served as mentor and inspiration to generations of interpreters. In his iconic book *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Tilden laid out six principles of interpretation that still guide the profession today.

1. Interpretation must relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor.
2. Information is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But the two are entirely different things.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole person.
6. Interpretation for children should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best, it will require a separate program.

# Introduction

## Steps in Creating Your Interpretation Strategy

This manual describes a five-step process for creating interpretation. Each of the five numbered chapters describes one of these steps, and the chapters are numbered in the same order as the steps. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 are intended for people who are new to the field of interpretation, so interpretation professionals might want to just skim this section. Chapters 4 and 5 explain how to get the most from your interpretation, no matter what your experience or training might be.

### Step 1: *Define Significance*

Why should people visit your resource? What makes it significant?

### Step 2: *Develop Your Stories*

What stories will help you explain the significance of your resource?

### Step 3: *Consider Your Audience*

Who's the audience for your interpretation? Will your visitors understand and appreciate what you're telling them?

### Step 4: *Choose Your Media*

What tools will you use to communicate your message?

### Step 5: *Evaluate Your Strategy*

How can you find out if your interpretive programs and services are effective or not?

## Worksheets

Throughout the manual, you'll find worksheets designed to help you formulate your thoughts at different stages in the process of creating interpretation. You can complete all of them, or just the ones you find helpful. The main idea is to inspire you to think creatively about your resource, what it means to you, and what it means to visitors.

## Check the Appendix!

As you read through the manual, you'll see a few boxes like this one, reminding you to check the appendix. The different sections of the appendix contain a wealth of information about interpretation, including:

- **Research Tips**  
Where and how to find trustworthy information about your resource;
- **More Resources**  
More organizations to turn to for help;
- **Interpretive Media**  
A discussion of the pros and cons of using different kinds of tools to present your interpretation to visitors;
- **Best Practices**  
A list of institutions, businesses, and programs in the Heritage Area that are noteworthy for the interpretation they provide; and
- **Resources for SSNHA Partner Sites**  
Information about services and programs available through [www.silosandsmokestacks.org](http://www.silosandsmokestacks.org)



## Before You Get Started . . .

If you want your interpretation to be truly effective, don't work alone! Your interpretive strategy will be more effective if you get some outside input. Talking to people with different viewpoints can give you new perspectives, generate great ideas, and "model" the attitudes and preferences of your visitors.

Even if your interpretation is aimed at visitors from outside the area, it's helpful to involve local residents and organizations in your work. Tell your neighbors and other resource managers what you're doing. Ask them what makes your resource special, and what they tell people about it.

Give your fellow citizens a chance to learn more about your resource and contribute their ideas. Resources like yours are often the icons of the community — features that make your community distinctive. Involving other people in your plans will encourage local "buy-in" and help your fellow citizens understand the importance of your resource and what your organization or business has to offer.

When you talk to other people about your plans to develop interpretation, consider asking questions like the ones you'll be asking yourself during the process:

- What makes my resource special?
- How do my resource's stories relate to larger trends and events in my community, the nation, or the world?
- What stories about my resource might interest visitors?
- Am I providing experiences that are geared to the visitors I'm likely to see?
- How should I tell my stories?
- What media would help me communicate my message?
- Are there any potential audiences I'm forgetting about?



## Whose Opinion Matters?

Your interpretation strategy will be stronger if you get outside input and advice. As you develop your strategy, consider talking to:

- Board or staff members (especially those who interact with visitors);
- Owners or managers of nearby heritage resources, or other resources that share your theme or focus;
- Municipal officials, representatives from community groups (local historical society, chamber of commerce, etc.), and others who are familiar with your community;
- People affiliated with the history of your resource (family members or descendants, ethnic or religious groups);
- Neighbors (especially those who might be affected by your interpretation); and
- Investors or other funding sources.

If you want to improve the effectiveness of your interpretation, it's also important to get input from a variety of potential visitors. Don't forget to consider people with different needs and perspectives, especially if they're part of your target audience. Try to get feedback from:

- Both men and women;
- Members of minority groups;
- People with physical challenges; and
- People of different ages, such as children, young people, and seniors.

Finally, before you create interpretation entirely on your own, consider whether you can partner with someone else to achieve your goals for interpretation. Rather than duplicating efforts, look for opportunities to collaborate. What else is going on in your community? Can you develop a coordinated approach with other resources that share your focus? Organizations like SSNHA can provide invaluable help in linking you with others.

# Chapter One

## Define Significance: *Why Is Your Resource Important?*

**Step 1:** *Define Significance*

**Step 2:** *Develop Your Stories*

**Step 3:** *Consider Your Audience*

**Step 4:** *Choose Your Media*

**Step 5:** *Evaluate Your Strategy*

The process of creating interpretation begins with this question: Why would visitors want to experience my resource in the first place? What makes it relevant for them?

Maybe it's what happened there, or the people who were associated with it. Maybe it's still an important part of local culture. Even if it's just an ordinary example of something from the past, or something that's typical of the local area, it could be a significant piece of a larger puzzle.

Interpretation describes the significance of places, events, people, and things. To understand the significance of your resource, ask yourself why people should care about it. Of course, there may be more than one answer to that question, because your resource could be significant for more than one reason.



### What Makes Your Resource Worth Visiting?

#### Could it be the People?

Many resources focus on people who are perceived to be important, famous, or wealthy. A classic example is the familiar phrase, "George Washington slept here." That phrase has become a joke because so many Americans have made that claim for so long. Even if Washington himself never visited your resource, it may be significant because of the people who lived or worked there – whether or not they are famous folks you've read about in history books.

For the last several decades, professional historians have spent more time talking about groups that have often been overlooked in the past, such as women, minorities, working people, servants, and slaves. When you ask yourself what might be significant about your resource, don't forget to consider what these groups may have contributed to its significance.

Think about people who might have flown under the radar in the past. If your resource is a farm or factory, who might have worked there, other than the owners? What kinds of lives did the children lead? This kind of information is challenging to uncover, but well worth the effort.

#### Could it be the Scenery?

Charming landscapes, a panoramic view, and a pastoral farm scene please the eye and attract visitors. But sites don't need to be beautiful to be significant. Think of an industrial site, dirty and blackened from years of manufacturing. Think of an "insane asylum," a County Poor Farm, or imposing prison walls. These places play a valuable role in interpreting our heritage, too. They provide a "reality check" about our history, and remind us not to romanticize the past.

## Impressive Architecture?

Stained glass windows and gingerbread trim might make the pages of *Old-House Journal* or win a spot on *This Old House*, but they're not always the most significant or interesting aspect of your resource. Even a humble farm house or country store contributes to our local heritage. Who built it? Who lived and worked there? How did the building change over time? What factors led to these changes?



## Could it be an Important Event or Trend?

Not every resource can boast a Civil War battlefield as its most significant feature. Your resource may not be directly linked to an event recorded in history books, but it's almost certainly been influenced by an event or trend that played out at the regional or national level. What impact might that event or trend have had on local people? Think about the impact that the events of 9/11 had on people throughout the nation and the world. You didn't have to be at Ground Zero to be influenced by what happened.

Think about something that might have happened at your resource as a result of an historic event or trend. Maybe your site is associated with an innovative invention that changed the way we farm. Does it demonstrate the impact of the Industrial Revolution? Maybe World War II had an impact on your site, affecting the crops that were grown, or efforts in the community to support the war effort.

Remember, nothing happens in a vacuum. Even if your resource seems unimportant by comparison to one that's earlier, larger, or better known, it still contributes to the significance of your community and to the nation as a whole. When you connect your resource to larger events or stories, you're helping people understand why it's important. It becomes more than four walls and a roof, or a simple everyday activity – it becomes an example of an event or trend that had regional, national, or even global significance.



### Check the Appendix!

For help in researching the natural, historic, or cultural significance of your resource, please consult the "Research Tips" section of the appendix to this manual.

### Example:

*Why should people visit Living History Farms?*

Living History Farms (LHF) in Urbandale, Iowa, is an interactive, 42-building, 500-acre outdoor museum. It tells the story of how Iowans transformed the fertile prairies of the Midwest into the most productive farmland in the world. Dr. William G. Murray, a professor at Iowa State University, founded the museum in 1969 with the purchase of 335 acres of land near Des Moines. Dr. Murray envisioned a “living history” farm that, instead of just preserving farm machinery and artifacts, would interpret the impact of agricultural history through demonstrations of farm machinery and processes. Programs began in 1970 with the construction of a log house and a working 1850 Farm. LHF now includes the 1871 Martin Flynn House and Barn, both of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places; a 1900 farm that demonstrates the impact that the Industrial Revolution had on agriculture; an 1875 town called Walnut Hill that features 15 historic buildings and interprets the interdependence between farm families and townspeople; an exhibit center; and a 1700 Ioway Indian Farm, developed with the guidance of the Ioway tribe. The site attracts more than 120,000 visitors annually.



### So What Is Significant about Living History Farms?

*Why should people visit? What makes it relevant and interesting to visitors?*

- In a world where fewer and fewer people are involved in farming, Living History Farms provides a connection to the rural culture that produced our state and nation.
- It offers first-hand, hands-on opportunities for visitors to interact with their agricultural heritage while enriching their understanding of the lives of many of our ancestors.
- It encourages discovery of where food comes from for visitors who have become disconnected from an understanding of those sources.
- It enhances our insights into the many environmental and economic issues that we face today in the Midwest.
- It provokes visitors to consider how the culture of the Midwest evolved into its present form, and how it will react to changes in the future.
- It encourages reflection on broader themes in society, such as the impact of technological changes on the way we live, work, and feed our families.

This list of the ways that Living History Farms is significant can help you determine what visitors might find interesting about your resource. Once you know the answer to that question, you'll be able to identify the kinds of stories you should be telling visitors.





# Worksheet 1: *Defining Significance*

**What aspects of your resource might interest visitors? What makes your resource significant?**

Start with the obvious. Is your resource an outstanding example of something? Is it the first, largest, or most complete of its kind? (*Don't worry if it isn't – your resource can be significant without being the biggest or earliest.*)

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**1. What's special about your resource?**

**What makes it different from other resources in the region, the nation, or the world?**

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**2. Does your resource provide opportunities for the public to learn about the historic, cultural, or natural heritage of Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area? *How?***

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**3. Is your resource more authentic, "original," or "intact" than other resources of its type?**

*(Again, don't worry if it's not – staying relatively unchanged for a long period of time is pretty unusual.)*

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## **Worksheet 1:** *Defining Significance*

4. If your resource is historic, what makes it typical for its time period? If it's cultural, how does it relate to local traditions? If it's natural, what makes it typical of the area? Are there other nearby examples of this type of resource? How are they similar or different?

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5. What are the key events that relate to the history or development of your resource? Can you link them to larger events in the region or the nation?

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6. Do different parts or aspects of your resource have different stories to tell?

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## Linking Your Resource to the Big Picture

Now that you've thought about some of the things that make your resource interesting and significant, you need to "connect the dots" for visitors. In other words, you need to find some common threads that link your resource to the bigger story. If you tell your visitors how it relates to something bigger, they'll begin to understand why your resource is important.

Take another look at the example we presented earlier in this chapter — the section that outlines the reasons why people should visit Living History Farms (LHF). If you read those statements closely, you'll notice that they don't just describe what the site offers — they explain why visitors should care about what it offers. By providing that explanation, the statements define what makes the site significant. They create a link between the programs at LHF and the ways in which they are relevant to the daily lives of visitors, today and in the future. They show that LHF stories mean something to people, here and now.

To help visitors make sense of your resource and what it means, you need to do the same thing. You need to link your resource to larger trends and events. Names and dates are a part of interpretation, but they're meaningless without the context — the "story behind the story." One way to develop a context for your resource is to ask a series of "why?" questions. Here's how the "why?" approach can help you link a simple fact to a much larger chain of events. By making that link, you're helping to explain why your resource is significant — why people should care about it.



### Start with a basic fact about your resource. For example:

My Great-great-grandmother Olivia used to come to meetings here back in the 1870s.

#### 1. *Why did she come to meetings here?*

She was a member of the local Grange.

#### 2. *Why did she join the Grange?*

She thought farmers weren't getting any breaks, and the Grange was trying to help them.

#### 3. *Why weren't they getting any breaks?*

Lots of reasons: the railroad was ripping farmers off by conspiring on transportation costs. Grain elevators ganged up on farmers and refused to pay fair prices. The Grange was a national organization created right after the Civil War to advance farming interests. By banding together, Grange members were able to lobby successfully for regulation of the railroads. They lobbied the government to create programs to help farmers, like the Cooperative Extension Service, Rural Free Delivery, and the Farm Credit System. And the Grange was just about the only organization of its time that not only allowed women to join as members, but insisted on including them.

In the case of great-great-grandma Olivia, it took three "whys" to connect events in her life to a major story: the power of American farmers banding together in a national organization for their common economic good — a story that still has relevance today.

By making the connection between the Grange Hall and a much broader story, you've explained why the building is significant — it's the tangible result of a historical organization that not only had a strong impact on the lives of American farmers, but continues to advocate for farming causes today, like free trade and farm policy. You've shown that it's not just a local meeting hall — it's evidence of something truly important and influential on the national level. It means something. Its story has relevance to visitors today.

# Interpretive Themes

### Our Mission Statement

SSNHA preserves and tells the story of American agriculture through partnerships and activities that celebrate the land, people and communities of the area.

Every resource has many, many stories to explore and share. You could probably tell a new one every day for a year, and still not run out of things to talk about. But without a way to organize those stories, you could easily confuse your visitors. They might find it hard to tap into the meaning of the resource, or connect with it in significant ways if confronted with a wide selection of random, mostly unrelated stories about it. In order to make sure visitors “get” why their resource is important and significant, most interpreters organize their stories into themes. Whether they are used in the context of a Heritage Area, or just for a single site, themes are a way of collecting and gathering stories into cohesive sets that help convey that significance and meaning. By drawing attention to key facets of the region’s history, culture, and geography, these themes tie individual resources together into a recognizable whole. The SSNHA themes are listed below. **Notice how each theme makes room for a multitude of related stories, all of which directly correlate to the mission of the Heritage Area. You’ll have a chance to develop themes for your own resource in Chapter 2 of this manual.**

### THEME 1 – *The Fertile Land*

**Theme Statement:** Working the lands of northeast Iowa has fostered a connection between humans and the earth.

**Key Concepts:** The varied terrain of northeast Iowa has some of the most fertile soils in the world. Formed by the effects of climate, water, and plant communities, this terrain and its soils support the ongoing development of a rich and productive agricultural landscape. Human habitation is imposing its patterns upon the land, forever changing it.

### Subthemes:

- **Landforms**  
The landforms of northeast Iowa continue to change as water carves the sedimentary deposits of limestone and shale into wide, shallow valleys in the western and central section of the region, and hills and deep ravines in the eastern section.
- **Prairie**  
Born of climate and of fire, the ocean/desert of tallgrass prairie restricted settlement until it was broken. The resulting soil is ideally suited to the types of agriculture — both prehistoric and historic — that have been practiced here for centuries. Non-prairie lands and habitats, wetlands in particular, have allowed other opportunities for farming, logging, and mining.
- **The Grid**  
The imposition on the land of a geometric system gave order to the irregularity of the prairie, fueling rapid settlement. The grid also formed the basis for the extensive farm-to-market road system. The rivers and their varied topography break the grid across the region.
- **Communities**  
As the agricultural landscape developed, communities formed at key locations, influenced by the availability of milling, processing, transportation, and power.
- **Farms**  
Farming is an intensive activity that has forever changed the landscape of Iowa. Changes in farming have resulted in changes to the farm landscape.
- **Weather**  
Farming depends on the weather in ways few other industries do. Good weather can bring wealth, but years of bad weather can bring ruin.

## THEME 2 – *Farmers and Families*

**Theme Statement:** Farm life and farming culture present images, at once nostalgic and ever-changing, of middle America and the values the nation espouses.

**Key Concepts:** The people of northeast Iowa have created a popular American vision of rural culture, evolving out of a great variety of disparate pioneer and ethnic experiences. Adapting to life on the prairie required farmers to develop a frugal outlook balanced by ingenuity.

### Subthemes:

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- ***American Indians***

In Iowa, American Indian cultures combined cultivation of floodplains along river valleys with seasonal hunting, fishing, and gathering.

- ***Early Settlement***

Encouraged by federal policies and international pressures, settlers flocked to Iowa by riverboat, prairie schooner, and train for the opportunity to till virgin land.

- ***Ethnicity***

Early non-native settlers from diverse backgrounds tended to adopt an upper Midwestern culture upon settling in northeast Iowa. Nonetheless, some ethnic traditions survive today, providing fine-grained distinctions between cultural groups.

- ***Rural Character***

Living on the land requires an outlook that is at once conservative, innovative, and competitive. The rural character of Iowa is tied to the rhythms of the land — weather, seasons, planting, harvesting — and its people are known for honesty, hard work, and moral values. This character survives though fewer and fewer people are farming.

- ***The Family Farm***

The family is the central organizing unit of farm life, with distinct gender and generational roles. These roles blur, however, when farm tasks require it.



- ***Cultural and Social Life***

In rural communities, farm families meet in schools, churches, co-ops, general stores, depots, and fairs to strengthen ties and preserve identities. These places reflect the similarities and also the differences between the various social groups.

- ***Non-farm Iowa***

The number of people farming Iowa's fields continues to decrease. As the role of agriculture decreases as a primary social influence, the population and its culture are adapting.

- ***The Image of Iowa***

This image is nostalgic, and largely inaccurate. The origins, evolution, and continuing propagation of this image reveal characteristics of the American psyche.

# Chapter One Interpretive Themes

## THEME 3 – *The Changing Farm*

**Theme Statement:** The role of agriculture in American life and psychology has evolved as changes in farming technique and technology transform the relationships between farmers, consumers, and the land.

**Key Concepts:** Farming has evolved as innovations continually alter the relationships between people and the land, and between farmers and consumers. A persistent concern for farmers is obtaining good prices for their efforts. The practice of farming and the experience of living and working on a farm are continually changing to meet new demands.

### Subthemes:

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- **Products**

The crops and livestock produced on the farm have changed with changes in markets, products, yields, and returns. An early emphasis on a variety of grains gave way to the production of corn for livestock in providing the maximum yield for farmers. Now, market pressures, vertical integration of production, and new types of value-added agriculture continue to transform farming. Farms are becoming more specialized, leading to a greater variety of farm types. At the same time, the varieties of individual products (e.g., corn) decrease as farmers focus on newer, more productive varieties and abandon older ones.

- **The Labor of Farming**

The labor required in working the land has decreased over time. The techniques that reduce labor and increase yields are almost always favored over those that do not. Though sometimes skeptical of change, farmers adopt new techniques when proven to be beneficial. Improvements in techniques and technologies have changed the daily life of farming.

- **Farmsteads**

The organization of farmsteads has changed over time. The types of and relationships among farmhouses, barns, outbuildings, gardens, windbreaks, and other elements of the farmstead have evolved with changing uses and increased specialization.

- **Farmland**

The use of farmland evolves as farmers employ new technologies, change crops, and enlarge fields to increase production and serve new markets.

- **Markets**

Markets, the source of survival for farms, are ephemeral, changing year after year, affected by competition, changes in consumer demand, and changes in farm policies.

- **The Future of Farming**

Changes and advances in farming are raising economic, environmental, and social issues that will affect the future of farming, the future of Iowa, and the role of agriculture in the nation and the world.

- **Iowa and the World**

World markets in which Iowa products are sold, the farms and farming families of the region are indelibly tied to changes around the world.

- **Conservation**

Advancements in the understanding of the effects of farming on the land have revealed trends in farming practices and methods that threaten the future viability of Iowa's farmland. In response, farmers have deployed a variety of techniques to conserve their soils, their water supplies, and their way of life.

**The six themes** are an important part of the Heritage Area's programs, because they help to coordinate the messages that visitors get when they come to the area. Many of these themes emphasize ideas, values, and beliefs — like frugality, innovation, cooperation, transformation, and cultural traditions. Even if you decide not to pursue designation for your resource, this framework is a good example of how the stories of an individual resource can be linked to a larger story at a more regional level.

## THEME 4 – Higher Yields: The Science and Technology of Agriculture

**Theme Statement:** Improvements in science and technology — employing the farmers’ ethic of trying to receive the best return for their efforts — have yielded revolutionary expansions in productivity.

**Key Concepts:** Advances in technologies, for the farm and for getting products from farm to market, have been a constant feature in the efforts to expand production and expand markets. The first three agricultural “revolutions” came with improvements in machinery, crop and animal husbandry, and chemical research. Transportation improvements and rural electrification have expanded markets and reduced the difference between rural and urban lifestyles. Today, a fourth revolution is emerging, adapting the genetic makeup of plants and animals through biotechnology. Each of these revolutions has also come with costs: environmental, social, and economic.



### Subthemes:

- **Machinery**

The steel plows that broke the prairie and other laborsaving machinery greatly expanded both the amount and productivity of arable land in the country, increasing national grain production and ushering in the first agricultural revolution.

- **Hybridization**

Controlled pollination allowed farmers and researchers to select preferred characteristics in crops to increase the quality and quantity of produce sent to market.

- **Science**

Developments in chemical, life, and earth sciences have improved farming techniques, bringing higher yields from soils that had been farmed for more than a century while creating new issues and challenges.

- **Tractors**

From the early Hart Parris to the latest John Deere, tractors replaced animals as the beasts of burden, expanding the size of fields that could be farmed with less labor.

- **Power and Energy**

The availability of energy has played an important role in shaping the agricultural landscape of Iowa. Electrification wired rural towns and farms and brought rapid changes in life patterns on and off the farm. Dams harnessed rivers for mills and factories, adding industry to the farmlands. The introduction of coal later transformed these industries.

- **Genetics**

Genetic engineering, the splicing of DNA to produce custom-designed varieties of crops and livestock, is fostering another rapid expansion in production, ushering in a fourth agricultural revolution, and generating questions and controversy.

- **Sustainability**

Each advance in science and technology has been an attempt to improve, or at least address, the sustainability of agriculture on the land. Each advance, however, has led to new issues that will have to be addressed, possibly by subsequent advances

# Chapter One Interpretive Themes

## THEME 5 – *Farm to Factory: Agribusiness in Iowa*

**Theme Statement:** Farming and the processing of raw agricultural goods into finished products has grown from local networks serving local consumers to a multi-billion dollar industry knitting together farmers, farmlands, markets, and consumers around the world.

**Key Concepts:** Changes in American agriculture has often directly related to changes in American industry. The industry of agribusiness is a key example: Agribusiness has kept pace with the expansion of agricultural production. At times, industry has spurred this expansion, providing farmers with seed and equipment and processing the goods that farmers produce. Many contemporary Iowa companies were developed during a time when smokestacks punctuated the skylines of the major towns and cities across northeast Iowa.

### Subthemes:

- **Field to Table**

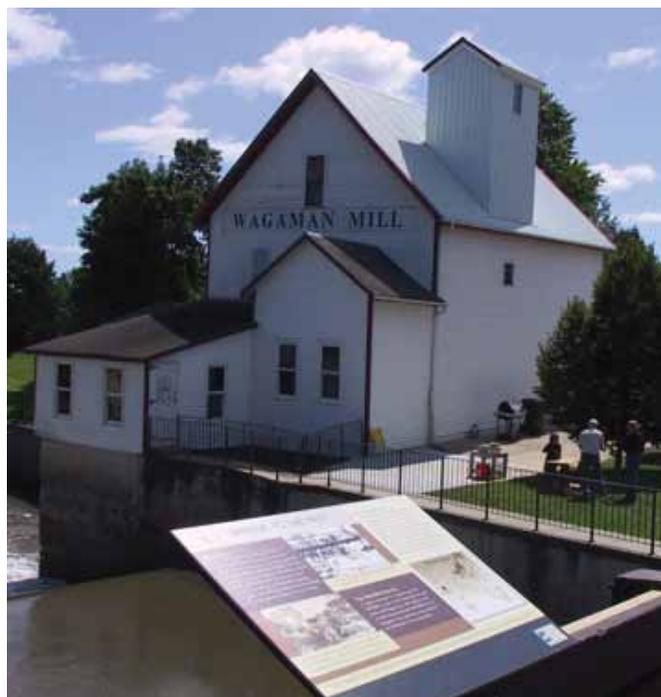
Farming requires secondary industries to convert farm products into consumer goods. A complex, multi-tiered network of transportation systems, processing plants, laboratories, co-ops, and retailing chains has evolved to support this conversion. These networks have grown into a multi-billion dollar industry.

- **Early Industries**

Before the development of an international agribusiness network, farm products were processed locally to serve local, regional, and national communities. Capacity was limited, reflecting the limited production levels of the farms. Advances in transportation, refrigeration, and processing expanded markets that could be served by Iowa's crops.

- **Transportation**

Advances in transportation have altered the relationships between farms and markets, affecting the types of crops farmers plant and expanding the markets farmers can reach.



- **Today's Giants**

John Deere, Quaker Oats, Pioneer, Cargill, ADM, Amana Appliance, and Maytag have become major national and international entities producing retail goods using Iowa's products and labor.

- **Local Foods**

Even as the vast agribusiness network has arisen, there are growing attempts to connect farmers directly with consumers, called the local foods movement. Farmers' markets continue an ancient tradition associated with farming and rural life, and new initiatives seek to connect restaurants and other providers with local producers.



## THEME 6 – Organizing for Agriculture: Policies and Politics

**Theme Statement:** In response to the changing roles of agriculture in American life, farmers have employed a great variety of strategies to protect and sustain their lifestyles and livelihoods.

**Key Concepts:** Policies of the state and federal governments have shaped the efforts to feed the country and keep farms in operation. Farmers have participated in shaping these policies through organizations that have lobbied for farm-friendly regulations, sought to control prices, and disseminated information on developments in farm practices.

### Subthemes:

- ***The Need to Organize***

Agriculture is an industry that is vulnerable to dramatic fluctuations in price. To counterbalance this, farmers have long practiced cooperation and collective lobbying to help keep crop prices and land values stable.

- ***Farmers' Organizations***

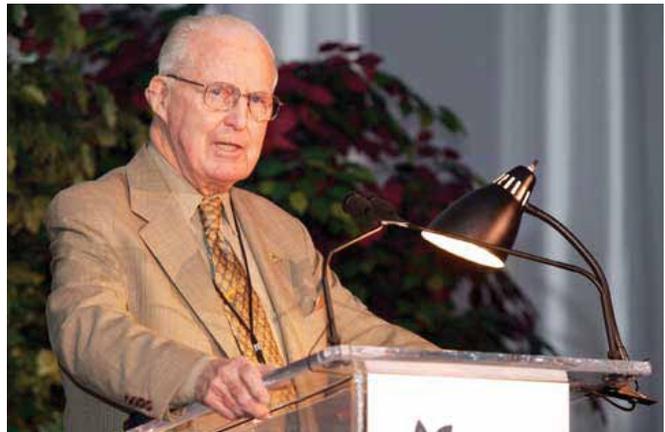
Organizations such as the Grange, the Farmer's Alliance, Farm Bureaus, National Farmers Organization, and cooperatives have helped give farmers collective strength to improve their lot. Extension service agents and clubs, such as 4-H, help disseminate new information and techniques to help farmers grow more for less cost. Collective efforts such as the Farmer's Holiday Movement demonstrate efforts farmers may make to protect their interests.

- ***The US Department of Agriculture***

Iowa farmers have benefitted from a close relationship with the Department of Agriculture. Four Secretaries of the Department of Agriculture have been from Iowa. These men helped shape policies to benefit the farming community.

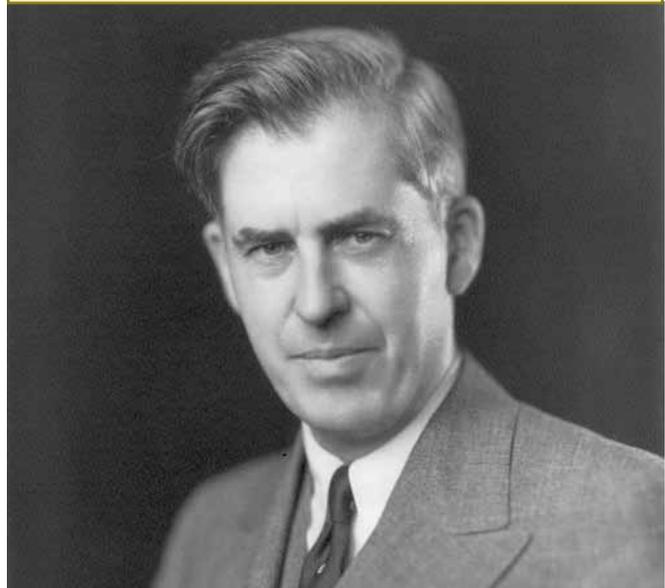
- ***US Farm Policies***

Over the years the demands on American farmers have changed, and, in response, US farm policy has changed. Despite these changes, two goals continue to guide decisions: keeping food costs low and keeping farms in operation.



**Norman Borlaug** 1914–2009

Born in Cresco, Iowa in 1914, Norman Borlaug revolutionized farming by developing high-yield/disease resistant wheat varieties. His innovations have saved millions of lives and continue to help feed a hungry world.



**Henry A. Wallace** 1888–1965

Raised on a farm in Adair County, Wallace spent his life dedicated to agriculture. He founded the Hi-Bred Corn Company which later became Pioneer Hi-Bred and served as Secretary of Agriculture from 1933-1940. In 1941 he became the 33rd Vice President of the United States.



## **Worksheet 2:** *What Themes Apply to Your Resource?*

If you want your resource to be eligible for partner designation in Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area, you need to relate your resource to SSNHA interpretive themes. Where does it fit? Your resource might relate to all six of the themes, but you should focus on just one or two. What themes best help you explain the significance of your resource? Here are some examples.

### **Example 1: Bed and Breakfast**

Your bed and breakfast is an old farmhouse surrounded by a vineyard, a handful of chickens, and a dairy farm. Your family produces local wine that you offer for sale in a small gift shop adjacent to the farmhouse.

**Theme: Farm to Factory**

Subtheme: Farm to Table

### **Example 2: Historic Site**

You sit on the board of a local nonprofit that maintains an old grist mill. Located in the mill is a small collection of historic photos and farming implements. The mill has previously been used to grind grains and generate electricity.

**Theme: The Changing Farm**

Subtheme: The Labor of Farming

### **Example 3: Historical Society**

You're a volunteer at a small historical society. There are several buildings that you help to maintain including a one-room school house where volunteers dress in period costumes and teach day-long classes to local third graders.

**Theme: Farmers and Families**

Subtheme: Early Settlement, Rural Character

### **Example 4: Nature Center**

You're a naturalist at a county conservation board nature center. At your site, you have many exhibits that relate to Iowa habitats. One of the exhibits introduces visitors to the prairie. A short walk from the nature center is a reconstructed prairie that you use to teach about biodiversity.

**Theme: The Fertile Land**

Subtheme: Prairie

### **Example 5: Scenic Route**

You have a barn and on it you have placed a large quilt pattern. Your barn is one of many in the area that together created a Scenic Route. Along with the barn quilts, you have produced a brochure and CD that talks about each individual barn that has a quilt pattern placed on it.

**Theme: Farmers and Families**

Subtheme: The Image of Iowa

## **Now: Which Themes Best Fit Your Stories?**

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Name of Site: \_\_\_\_\_

Mission: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Theme — The Fertile Land**

Subthemes: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Theme — Farmers and Families**

Subthemes: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Theme — The Changing Farm**

Subthemes: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Theme — Higher Yields: The Science and Technology of Agriculture**

Subthemes: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Theme — Farm to Factory: Agribusiness in Iowa**

Subthemes: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Theme — Organizing for Agriculture: Policies and Politics**

Subthemes: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Exploring What Your Resource Means

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In your interpretation, you'll be linking tangible things to intangible ideas – in other words, making a link between the physical things that visitors see, and the meanings behind them. The following worksheet shows how you can “draw out” the meanings in a chain of events that seems relatively straightforward.



### Worksheet 3: *Discovering Hidden Meanings*

To create effective interpretation, you have to do more than just describe your resource. You need to look beyond the obvious and think about what it means. What ideas, beliefs, and values does your resource symbolize? Here's an example of how you can take a story “to the next level” by exploring some of the ideas behind it.

Our story contains these tangible elements:

- *A pumpkin*
- *A pair of glass slippers*
- *A magic wand*

1. Can you name the story?

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2. What happens in the story?

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3. What does the story mean? In other words, what is it really about?

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The story, of course, is Cinderella. It's a familiar tale from the folklore of cultures all around the world. Some even date its origins to 9th-century China. In the story, mean relatives force a young girl to cook and clean for them until her fairy godmother uses magical powers to find a handsome prince who takes her away to live happily ever after. So. . . What does this story mean?

To some people, it's about:

- *The power of love*
- *The triumph of good over evil*
- *Strength found in hope*
- *Innocent faith in miracles*
- *The value of friendship*
- *The struggle to change life for the better*
- *The idea that dreams can come true*

To others, it's about:

- *The injustice of power that comes from money and status*
- *Male domination over society*
- *The idea that women have to be submissive to be rewarded*
- *The pain that family members can cause*

*Who's right about the meaning of Cinderella?*

Everyone is. Different people have different perspectives on the story, because they all have different ideals and values. Your visitors are the same way. By discussing the meanings behind the stories that your resource can tell, you enable a wide range of people with diverse life experiences to make a personal connection to them. Instead of telling visitors what to think, good interpretation encourages visitors to think for themselves.

Now that you've defined the significance of your resource, thought about what your resource means, and linked it to some larger themes, you're ready to develop a few stories that will be the focus of your interpretation. These stories will be the "vehicles" you'll use to help visitors understand why your resource is important.

Source: National Park Service, Intermountain Region Office of Interpretation and Education, Lakewood, Colorado.

# Chapter Two

## Develop Your Stories: *Start With Your Themes*

**Step 1:** *Define Significance*

**Step 2:** *Develop Your Stories*

**Step 3:** *Consider Your Audience*

**Step 4:** *Choose Your Media*

**Step 5:** *Evaluate Your Strategy*

Storytelling has been an honored tradition of human societies since prehistoric times, because it's a powerful tool for conveying and sharing ideas, beliefs, values, and traditions. Because stories are so effective at explaining the meaning of things, they're at the heart of interpretation. In this chapter, you'll use stories to highlight what is significant about your resource.

No matter how simple your resource might seem, it has a variety of stories to tell. Your challenge is to develop your stories so that people will be able to connect to them in meaningful, relevant ways.

### Creating Your Themes

The secret to successful interpretation is to capture the essence of your resource — to make sure people understand its significance and meaning. By grouping your stories into themes, you will increase your visitors' understanding and appreciation of them. Themes create the foundation for storytelling, grouping the stories so that they work together to send your visitors a carefully coordinated message about your resource. You can use themes to encourage people to explore why events occurred, and to learn about the effects of events and actions. A great theme will get people thinking critically about complex events and issues. They can help explain why a story is relevant ... what it means to us today.



## Here is one way to develop your themes.

1. Make a list of your most important stories, and sort them out into logical groups. What stories seem to fit together? Some people do this by writing each story on a piece of paper, and sticking them to a wall, moving them around into related groupings until they find a good fit for every story. Each resulting group of stories is the beginning of a theme.
2. Many of your stories will feature tangible elements — things that people can see, touch, or otherwise experience through their senses. List those tangibles for every story that has them.
3. What do your stories mean? Look at each group. Think back to the Cinderella story in Chapter 1. What kind of meanings, values, ideas, or emotions does each group represent? Don't forget that many stories will have many different meanings – and might mean different things to different people.
4. Now start looking for broad concepts that might link the stories in each group. The idea is to identify the “big ideas” for each group. Those big ideas will form the heart of each theme. If the stories seem to suggest more than one big idea, try to prioritize them. Which big ideas will be most effective in helping people realize the significance of your resource?
5. Now the fun begins! Take each big idea, and use it to draft theme statements. Don't worry about the exact wording at this point. You can always “wordsmith” later. At this stage, you are just trying to capture concepts. See Worksheet #4 for more tips on writing theme statements.



## What Makes a Good Theme?

### A theme should:

- Explain something significant about your resource;
- Be written as a complete sentence focusing on a single message you'd like visitors to remember;
- Go beyond a mere description of facts;
- Be presented at a level of detail that's appropriate for the audience — something that's interesting, but not too specialized;
- Link tangible things to intangible ideas (explain how different aspects of your resource reflect ideas, meanings, beliefs, and values);
- Allow visitors to decide for themselves what the resource means;
- Give visitors an opportunity to discover a few things on their own; and
- Have room for many related stories within it



Each theme statement should be grounded in the significance of your resource. It should link tangible elements of the resource to its intangible meanings. While it should be broad enough to support a wide range of stories within it, you should still be able to state it in a single sentence.

## Chapter Two Develop Your Stories: *Start With Your Themes*

Try to develop themes that emphasize what's significant about your resource, without repeating the same story everyone else is telling. Almost any resource in Iowa could make a statement like, "The surrounding landscape has been shaped by centuries of human activity." If you know that another resource features a similar theme, consider telling your story from another angle. You could also work cooperatively with other resources to tell different parts of the same story.

### Example:

#### *Themes from Living History Farms*

As you may remember from Chapter 1, we looked at reasons why people should visit Living History Farms in Urbandale, Iowa. Each of these reasons outlines something special about the site — something that makes it significant. To bring these statements to life for visitors, they need to be transformed into memorable themes.

Among the reasons why people might visit Living History Farms were:

- In a world where fewer and fewer people are involved in farming, Living History Farms provides a connection to the rural culture that produced our state and nation.
- LHF encourages discovery of where food comes from for visitors who have become disconnected from an understanding of these sources.
- LHF enhances our insights into the many environmental and economic issues that we face today in the Midwest.
- LHF encourages reflection on broader themes in society, such as the impact of technological changes on the way we live, work, and feed our families.

### LHF Mission Statement:

Living History Farms tells the story of the changes in midwestern agriculture and rural life.

*Here are some possible themes based on these statements:*

### THEME 1- *The Changing World of Farming*

The 1700 Ioway farm with its gardens, bark lodges, and work areas; the 1850s farm, where interpreters raise three acres of traditional 19th-century crops using hand tools and oxen; and the 1900s farm with its heritage breeds of livestock and horse-drawn machinery born of the Industrial Revolution, not only demonstrate major changes in agricultural technology, but also allow first-hand discovery of the impact of changing technology on rural life, while inviting visitors to think about the many environmental and economic issues — both positive and negative — that we face today as a result of new technologies.

### THEME 2- *Farms and Town*

Living History Farms' 1875 town of Walnut Hill, with its historic homes, shops, and businesses, illustrates for visitors the interdependence between farm families, who produce food for market, and townspeople who buy farm products, provide processing for those products, and make available items for sale that farmers cannot or do not want to produce — a relationship that is as important in our world today as it was in the 1800s.

### THEME 3- *Where Does Food Come From?*

The period demonstration farms, along with interactive exhibits and living plots of modern varieties and types of crops, help visitors understand where their food comes from and how it makes its way to their tables.

### THEME 4- *Our Heritage Farm*

In a nation where fewer and fewer citizens have first-hand knowledge of the science, art, and business of agriculture, Living History Farms' demonstrations and opportunities for hands-on activities regarding how crops and livestock were raised, tended, harvested, preserved, and prepared for the table historically encourages visitors to connect intellectually, emotionally, and even spiritually, to the rural lifeways from which our state and nation grew.



## Worksheet 4: *Writing a Theme Statement*

There are many approaches to writing a theme statement, but they're all designed to help you create a single sentence that says something important about your resource. This exercise invites you to try a couple of different approaches. You can:

1. Identify several things you'd like visitors to know about your resource, and combine them into a single idea; or
2. Start with a general topic, narrow it down to a more specific topic, and turn it into a statement.

### **Approach 1-** *Combine Your Observations*

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Imagine a town with a number of different heritage resources. At first glance, the resources don't seem to connect with each other as a single "big idea." One such town is Spillville, Iowa. Here are some facts about Spillville.

- Spillville, the oldest Czech community in Iowa, is well known for the two-month visit the famed Czech composer Antonin Dvorak and his family made in the summer of 1893. While there, Dvorak polished his beloved "New World Symphony," and wrote two new pieces, "String Quartet in F", and "String Quintet in E flat". Certain elements of the last two compositions are said to be based on what Dvorak heard and experienced in Spillville.
- St. Wenceslaus Church in Spillville is the oldest Czech Catholic church in the United States. Dvorak played the church organ for Sunday services while he was visiting, and the church's graveyard is noted for its unique metal grave markers, made by Charles Andera, a "jack of all trades" folk artist who immigrated to America from Bohemia in the early 1860s.
- The Bily Clock Museum in Spillville features a collection of intricately hand-carved clocks made as a hobby by brothers Frank and Joseph Bily in the early 20th century. Coincidentally, the building the museum is housed in happens to be the same one in which Dvorak and his family stayed in 1893.

*What does this collection of stories have in common? How could you combine these observations into a single idea that visitors will remember? A theme based on these observations might be:*

Spillville's history of artistic inspiration includes the bird songs, scenes of nature, and American Indian music that inspired Antonin Dvorak during his visit; the religious symbolism of death and resurrection that inspired Charles Andera; and the voracious reading of the Bily brothers, who had no training in art, no education beyond fifth grade, and never in their lives traveled more than 35 miles from home.

If you want to take this approach, write down at least three things that make your resource significant, and tell us why they're important:

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Now take those three observations and combine them into a single sentence that "says it all":

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Just checking... Does your theme statement:

- Help to explain the significance of your resource?
- Go beyond a mere description of facts?
- Link tangible things to intangible ideas?

## **Approach 2 – Turn a Topic into a Theme Statement**

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Another way to develop a theme is to complete a three-part exercise that begins with a basic topic and turns it into a statement that says something significant about your resource.

### 1. *General Topic*

Decide on a single focus for your story.

Generally, my interpretation will focus on \_\_\_\_\_.

Example: Generally, my interpretation will focus on the history of corn as a global commodity.

### 2. *Specific Topic*

Narrow the topic down by putting it in more specific terms.

Specifically, I want to tell my audience \_\_\_\_\_.

Example: Specifically, I want to tell my audience that, while today corn futures are bought and sold on the Chicago Board of Trade, corn first became a global commodity when explorers in the Americas in the 1400s and 1500s learned about it from American Indians, and introduced it to other countries throughout the world, including in Africa, where it is now the most important food crop.

3. *Theme*

In a complete sentence, state the main message you want visitors to remember.

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After visitors experience my interpretation, they'll understand that \_\_\_\_\_

Example: After my visitors experience my program on corn as commodity, they'll understand that corn, the most widely grown crop in America, has had a centuries-long global impact, beginning as food for people and animals, and later becoming a source of biofuel and manufactured products like plastics, fabrics, adhesives, and chemicals.

The first two steps are just the facts — the topic of your interpretation. The final step is your theme, which is the real point of your interpretation. The theme answers a question that visitors are likely to ask: "Why should I care about corn?"

Are you ready to give it a try? Choose a topic that you'd like to interpret about your resource, and see if you can transform it into a theme. When you write your general topic, don't just write a noun like "corn." Instead, make sure you're really saying something about it – something interesting and significant. In the example above, we said our topic was the history of corn as a global commodity. When you write your topic, tell us why it's important.

1. *My general topic is*

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Now that you know your topic and why it's important, tell us something specific that you'd like your audience to remember about that topic.

2. *My specific topic is*

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Finally, what's your theme? What's the message you really want to get across to visitors? Why should they care about your topic? Remember, try to focus on only one idea, and limit yourself to one sentence!

3. *After visitors experience my interpretation, they'll understand that*

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After you've developed a few themes that will be the focus of your interpretation, it's time to focus your message for the visitors you expect to see, and then decide how to present your stories in a way that will keep their attention.

# Chapter Three

## Consider Your Audience: *Who Are Your Visitors?*

**Step 1:** *Define Significance*

**Step 2:** *Develop Your Stories*

**Step 3:** *Consider Your Audience*

**Step 4:** *Choose Your Media*

**Step 5:** *Evaluate Your Strategy*

Before you implement your interpretation, you need to consider your audience. What kinds of groups might you see? Your visitors could include day trippers, vacationers, local residents, children, and people with a particular interest in your subject matter.

Each group will be looking for a different type of experience, so they'll be looking for different types of interpretation. Visitors' responses to interpretation also depend on their level of education, learning style, language, and cultural traditions — and on more mundane issues like the amount of time that's available to them.

Remember to consider the needs of groups that might be looking for something more than a typical adult visitor would. School groups are a good example. They might be interested in the same stories as your general audience, but they might need an approach that's tailored to their needs. Teachers might be looking for special programming that fits into their curriculum.

In addition, it's increasingly likely that some of your visitors — both local residents and those from further away — will not speak English as a first language. You may not have an immediate need to address this issue, but it's something to keep in mind.

The more you know about your visitors, the more effectively you can communicate with them. The following worksheet will help you build a portrait of them, and take steps to address their needs.

### What Do Visitors Want from a Heritage Experience?

Visitors want:

- Friendly and helpful staff;
- Well-organized, user-friendly information that allows them to quickly and easily learn what opportunities are available to them;
- Interactive experiences that get them directly involved in the learning process;
- A wide variety of media that accommodate their personal learning styles; and
- Souvenirs of their visit – something they can take home.





## Worksheet 5: *Who Are Your Visitors?*

Your visitors are likely to include people from all walks of life. For interpretation to be truly effective, it needs to be geared to a wide variety of audiences. Here are some of the types of visitors you might see.

### Age Groups

- Young children
- Teens/young adults. Only 5% of SSNHA visitors in 2003-04 were under age 25,\* but for those who attended local food-oriented events, 14% were under 25, and 45% were under age 35.\*\*
- Adults. Just over one third of SSNHA visitors in 2003-04 were age 56 or older. The average age was 51.\*
- Seniors. Over 15% were age 66 or older.\*

### Culture, Ethnicity, and Race

- African Americans
- Latinos/Hispanics
- American Indians
- People of Czech, Slovak, Norwegian, or Dutch ancestry (typical of northeast Iowa)
- Groups associated with the history or development of your resource

### Distance from Your Resource

- Local residents
- Day trippers – visitors who live within a couple hours of your resource. A 2004 study\* found about half of SSNHA visitors were day trippers, and half stayed over night. 13% stayed 4-6 nights in the region.
- Vacationers – visitors from farther away

### Reason for Traveling

- Business. 9% of SSNHA visitors came on business\*
- Shopping. SSNHA visitors spent \$86 per party while shopping in 2003–4.\*
- Family gathering. 22% of travelers to SSNHA were visiting friends or family.\*
- Special event: 16% of SSNHA visitors in 2003-4\*

### Seasonal Trends

- Spring, summer, fall, winter
- Visitors who come for a particular event

### Level of Interest and Expertise

- Novices – visitors who know nothing about your subject matter
- Amateurs – visitors who know a little bit about it, but aren't experts
- Experts – visitors who know a lot about the stories your resource tells

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\* SSNHA Economic Impact and Visitor Study, Sustainable Tourism and Environment Program, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, 2004.

\*\* A Study of Place Based Food Tourism in Northeast Iowa Communities, Sustainable Tourism and Environment Program, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, 2005.



## Worksheet 5: Who Are Your Visitors?

Below choose one or two types of visitors that regularly visit your resource, then think of things that depict them. For each outlined person draw your "target" visitor and any attributes that they may have. Then describe how you could accommodate them at your site. For example; your audience may be a teen with an iPod in their hand OR a 90 year old retired veteran.

### Visitor 1

Age Range: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

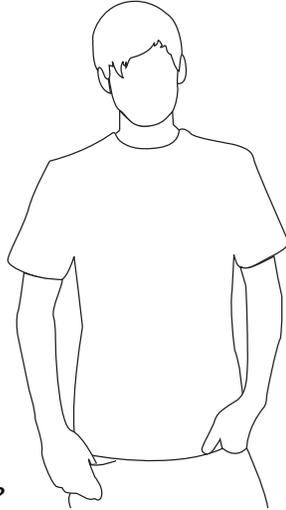
Family: \_\_\_\_\_

HH Income: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

How Would You Accomodate Them?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



### Visitor 2

Age Range: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

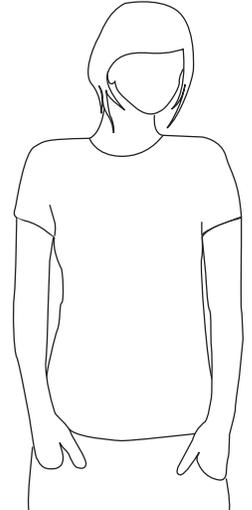
Family: \_\_\_\_\_

HH Income: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

How Would You Accomodate Them?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## Worksheet 6: Are You on the Right Track?

Before you begin to implement your strategy, you should be able to say "yes" to each of the following statements:

- I've consulted with other people about my resource's significance, stories, and audience (existing and potential), and I've incorporated their feedback.
- My stories clearly convey the significance of my resource. My stories connect tangible things with intangible ideas, meanings, beliefs, and values.
- My stories allow visitors to explore the meaning of my resource, but don't tell them what to think.
- I've done enough research to confirm the authenticity of the stories I'm telling.
- My research is based on current and reliable sources of information.
- I've connected my stories to the "big picture" at a countywide, regional, or national level.
- If I'm pursuing Partner Site designation for my resource, I've linked my stories to the themes of SSNHA.
- My stories take note of different perspectives on the same story – even if they differ from my own.
- I've identified my visitors, and I have a good idea of what they want to gain from visiting my resource.
- I've considered the comfort, convenience, health, and safety of my visitors.
- Most of my visitors would agree with the way I've filled out this checklist.

## Meeting Visitor Expectations

When visitors experience a heritage resource, they're looking for something they value — and that “something” might be natural, cultural, scientific, recreational, spiritual, intellectual, or inspirational. They aren't just there to experience the tangible things that your resource has to offer, but to explore their own thoughts and feelings, as well.

Before deciding what you want to tell visitors, ask yourself what they might expect from the experience. Consider what they might hear about your resource before they arrive. They might have a general idea what you offer, but they won't be able to connect all the dots. If you want your visitors to go away satisfied, you have to put the pieces together into a message they can understand and appreciate.

Try to match your visitors to the kind of experience they're looking for. If your resource is famous for bird watching, you'll probably get some visitors who know a lot about birds. Rather than hearing a basic presentation about North American birds, they might want to know what birds have been seen this week, how many birds are nesting on the property this year, and the locations of other birdwatching sites in your area.

Instead of assuming that visitors want to see and do everything you offer, tell them how they can find what interests them specifically. If you regularly get visitors who are familiar with your subject matter, you might need to split your interpretation into two “tracks” – one for experienced visitors, and another for casual visitors.

Don't forget that many visitors are just looking for a break from their daily lives — an opportunity to enjoy some time off or with their families. Most people will spend less than an hour focusing on your interpretation. Although they might stay longer than that, they'll be looking for other activities to keep them busy. If you want visitors to stay longer, one approach is to work together with other resources in the area. Rather than duplicating efforts, look for ways to complement what visitors will experience elsewhere.

## Assessing Your Strategy So Far

Up to this point, your work in developing an interpretation strategy has essentially been an intellectual exercise. Now you're ready to take the content you've developed and bring it to life “on the ground.” The next chapters of the manual will guide you through the process of implementing your interpretation strategy. How will

## Visitor Readiness & Criteria

What can you do to prepare for visitors? SSNHA has established criteria for designation as a partner site. There are both required and preferred criteria.

### *Required:*

- Be physically located in one of the 37 SSNHA counties.
- Be accessible: easy to use, see, or experience, including easy to find through signage, having regular hours of operation, offering visitor services such as parking and restrooms, and ensuring that visitors of all ages and abilities can experience your site.
- Provide consistent interpretation or visitor experiences related to one of the six SSNHA themes.
- Interpret your stories through media (signs, brochures, exhibits, videos, audio tours, electronic media, walking/driving tours, lesson plans, etc.) or people (tour guides, living history performances, teachers, etc.).
- Convey to visitors the significance — the unique natural, cultural, or historical importance — of your place, event, or collection to Iowa's and America's agriculture story.
- Provide a certificate of liability insurance (\$1,000,000 per occurrence) or letter stating you are self-insured.

### *Preferred:*

- Offer visitors authentic, original, genuine, “real” experiences in a meaningful and credible way.
- Provide protection for your natural or historic site or cultural landscape from changes, including those imposed by visitors themselves, that might detract from or destroy the original character of your site or landscape (Minimum/Preferred Requirement)
- Manage your natural, cultural, and/or historical resources (collection, landscape, structure or structures) in a manner consistent with professional preservation and interpretation standards through policies and procedures. (Minimum/Preferred Requirement)

you tell your stories, and how will you know if they are told effectively?

This is a good place to do a quick assessment of what you've accomplished so far. The following worksheet provides a checklist that will help you determine whether you're ready to implement your strategy.

# Chapter Four

## Choose Your Media: *What Tools Will You Use?*

**Step 1:** *Define Significance*

**Step 2:** *Develop Your Stories*

**Step 3:** *Consider Your Audience*

**Step 4:** *Choose Your Media*

**Step 5:** *Evaluate Your Strategy*

Once you've decided on the stories you want to tell, and how you want to tell them, it's time to consider the right interpretive "media" — the different tools you can use to present interpretation. Interpretive media include everything from printed brochures to guided tours to digital formats.

When you're planning your interpretation strategy, don't just focus on the written word. Heritage resources have many options for telling their stories. Some of these are "tried and true," such as wayside panels, brochures, and guided tours. Other options include scheduled events, like storytelling, musical or theatrical performances, lectures, and festivals. In addition to these more traditional methods of interpretation, new technologies are appearing with dizzying speed.

The best way to tell a story depends on the nature of the resource and the story being told. As noted elsewhere in this manual, try to think like a visitor. Let their needs determine the paths you take. That way, it's more likely that your message will resonate with them. Choosing how you tell your story is as much an art as a science.

Also, think about ways your visitors can contribute to the content of your interpretive programs. These

days, storytelling in interpretation is often a two-way street: visitors appreciate the opportunity to contribute personal experiences that are relevant to the topic at hand. They could contribute their stories in bound notebooks, by posting index cards, by creating video messages, entering them on a keyboard, or leaving responses to your website.

It is not enough that your visitors share their stories. You need to find a way that other visitors can access these stories, too. Make them a changing part of an exhibit, for example, or make sure people can view the online comments of others. It helps people to engage with your stories when they see how others have responded.

### Types of Interpretive Media

#### Printed Materials

Printed materials include handouts, brochures, newsletters, newspapers and magazines, educational books, maps, guides, curricula and teacher guides, and special publications targeted to families and children (such as treasure hunts and quizzes).

#### Panels and Banners

Panels and banners usually appear in outdoor settings. Outdoor interpretive panels, sometimes called wayside exhibits, are commonly made of solid phenolic or laminate material that is weather and vandal resistant (but not weather or vandal proof!). Banners of lightweight printable mesh allow wind to pass right through, reducing the possibility of weather related tears.

#### Electronic Media

Electronic media items are the fastest growing and evolving segment of interpretation media. As with all such media, it's difficult to identify their advantages and disadvantages when they're first introduced. Unless you're looking to project a "cutting edge" image, it's best to let others test new

technologies for a year or two. Today's hottest item might be at a yard sale by this time next year. For technologies that survive the shakedown, costs inevitably decrease, making them more affordable later on.

Types of electronic media currently include:

- Audiovisual (slide shows, film, video)
- Computer-based (mainly interactive stations)
- Roving (handheld audio or video units, tours on CD or DVD, radio broadcast)
- Visitor-controlled (podcasts, cell phone tours, smart phone and tablet applications, and other mobile media)

## Personal Interpretation

*(People-Powered or Face-to-Face Interpretation)*

In an ideal world, every visitor would find interpretation that was just right for his or her interests and for the length of time he or she wanted to spend. Personal interpretation can actually come close to achieving this goal. Effective tour guides help visitors connect emotionally with the meanings inherent in a resource: to feel genuine pride, empathy, or even anger. Personal interpretation includes such activities as guided tours, factory tours, craft demonstrations, storytelling, first-person interpretation (the interpreter impersonates a historical figure), reenactments, and participatory learning.



## Interpretive Exhibits

This type of display can help to connect a wide variety of objects to a larger story, and help visitors make sense of them. They also provide opportunities for creative educational programs.

## Web-Based Interpretation

Not long ago, the internet was the cutting edge of information technology. These days, a resource without a website seems almost invisible. Most websites provide information about how to find a resource, and when it's open to the public. But websites can be a valuable interpretive tool, as well, when they include the site's history and some of its stories, along with lesson plans, references for further study, and downloadable trail guides, for instance.

Websites also offer great opportunities for audience-contributed content. Of course, this means someone will need to monitor the responses to weed out those that aren't on topic. This kind of audience participation has become so popular that a term has been invented for it: Web 2.0. It refers to web-based applications that help people share information, interact, and collaborate with each other by creating content as part of a virtual community. This contrasts with earlier web applications, where users could only look at content that was created for them by someone else. You have probably experienced Web 2.0 yourself. Some examples are blogs, wiki sites (where people write their own encyclopedia entries, for example), social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

## Other Interpretive Methods

New technologies and ways of communicating with visitors are introduced on a regular basis. If traditional methods of communication work well for your resource though, don't worry about installing the latest technology. It's useful, however, to stay aware of new developments in interpretation and compare options, especially when you're replacing a piece of equipment. Sometimes, new technology makes it cheaper to meet your interpretation goals. If you're curious about what's available, discuss your needs with an interpretation consultant. Program staff at SSNHA can get you headed in the right direction.

The appendix to this manual lists some of the methods and techniques that are available to you, and discusses the pros and cons of each. Take a look at them and consider what might work best for you.

## Chapter Four

### Things to Consider When Choosing Media

When you think about what kinds of media might be right for your resource, put yourself in the shoes of your visitors. Remember, they're looking for an experience that's fresh, accurate, meaningful, and exciting — and it takes some work to meet those expectations.

#### Budget

How much money do you have to spend on interpretation? Set reasonable goals for the short term, and more lofty goals for the future. Start with what you know you can afford.

#### Staff Involvement

If you're considering personal (face-to-face) interpretation, can you devote the time and effort necessary to make it truly effective? Don't provide guided tours unless you've thoroughly prepared yourself or your staff to do it right!

Are you prepared to provide your staff with solid training, supportive supervision, and opportunities to research new material? It's important to keep your interpretation from stagnating through constant repetition of the same stories.

#### Technology

Are you or members of your staff reasonably computer literate? Don't invest in computer-based applications unless you have the skills to keep them in working order.

Are your visitors familiar with technology such as podcasts or smart phone applications? Do you want to attract more visitors who are skilled with those kinds of technology? Focus on the message, rather than the medium. If your stories aren't well conceived, the technology won't be worth the investment.

#### Type of Story You're Telling

Are you telling stories that are good candidates for multi-media interpretation? Could your stories benefit from music, sound effects, recordings, or video? Do they have dramatic storylines that could come to life in this kind of presentation? If you have a lot to say, consider working with a professional to develop a short audio or video presentation.



#### Type of Features You're Emphasizing

Does your resource have interesting features that can be experienced outdoors, no matter when people visit? If so, make sure that you provide materials that visitors can access when no one's available to greet them or share your stories.

Does your interpretation rely heavily on images such as photographs and works of art? Don't lock them away in an album. Give visitors a chance to interact with them in a display setting. If possible, protect your original materials by displaying copies.

Do you have any other objects, artifacts, or original documents you can use to enhance your stories? Can you acquire or borrow them?

#### Visitors' Mode of Transportation

How do visitors get to, from, and around your resource? Are you prepared to provide enough signs, maps, or diagrams to help them get around?

## Accessibility

Do you own or have access to all the features you'd like visitors to experience? If not, can you get permission for visitors to gain access to these features? Your visitors will be disappointed if you tell them about something they have no opportunity to experience for themselves!

When you decide where to locate your interpretation, are you keeping your visitors' safety in mind? You should be especially conscious of safety when you decide where to place signs at your resource. For example, if visitors are likely to read a sign from their cars, or stop to listen to an audio presentation, do they have a safe place to pull off the road?

Are some features of your resource inaccessible to physically challenged visitors? Are you providing interpretation that's accessible to all? The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not require that visitors be given physical access to all areas of a property, but it does require you to provide materials that offer an equivalent experience. For example, if you have interpretation on the second floor, but don't have an elevator, consider taking photographs of the interpretation and creating an album that gives physically challenged people an opportunity to see what it looks like.

Are some features of your resource inaccessible during certain times of the year? Does your resource look significantly different during different seasons? You might consider explaining or illustrating how your resource changes as the seasons change.

Are some features of your resource too fragile (or maybe even too sacred) to share with visitors?



## Appropriateness

Does the interpretation you're planning have the potential to mar the natural, cultural, or historical environment of your resource? In other words, will your interpretation have an impact on the integrity or ambiance of your resource?

## Maintenance

Are you or your staff available for routine maintenance (and possibly security) of your interpretive media? Do you have the time and money to make periodic updates to your interpretation?



## Check the Appendix

For more information about the ways you can deliver interpretation, take a look at the "Interpretive Media" section of the appendix to this manual. It provides detailed information about the pros and cons of using different methods to communicate your stories.



## Worksheet 7: *Choosing Your Media*

Below are some examples of topics that need to be told at Heritage Area Partner Sites. Read over their descriptions and then describe what methods they could use to effectively interpret their stories. Remember the media you choose is up to you but must fit within the financial means available to the Partner Site.

1. Located in a rural area, the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum has six to seven large agricultural implements that are currently in storage. The staff would like to interpret these implements but they do not have an indoor space to dedicate to the project. They have \$1,000 available to interpret the agricultural tools but are unsure what media to use.

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2. Motor Mill is a historic site located on the Turkey River. Due to the hilly terrain they do not have internet or cell phone service at the park. Currently, the story of the mill is only being told through personal interpretation (eight weekends a year) and a static brochure. What are some other methods or media they could use? Money for this project will need to be raised.

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3. Tyden Farm is a working family farm. The family is restoring the property in order to tell Emil Tyden's story. Located on the farm is a large barn, the original house and corncrib. Currently the farm is open by appointment only. The family has created a video and has walk through tours. They are looking for a way to expand their interpretation so individuals driving by can learn more about Mr. Tyden. They are up for any suggestions and have a \$10,000 budget.

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4. Soaring Eagles Nature Center is an Emerging Site with a barn/nature center, restored prairie, and one-room school house. They have no interpretation of any kind currently and are looking for inexpensive ways to tell their story. (You can focus on the whole site or just one area.) Their budget is \$500, although they are willing to write a SSNHA General Grant Application.

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# Chapter Five

## Evaluate Your Strategy: *Is Your Interpretation Effective?*

**Step 1:** *Define Significance*

**Step 2:** *Develop Your Stories*

**Step 3:** *Consider Your Audience*

**Step 4:** *Choose Your Media*

**Step 5:** *Evaluate Your Strategy*

Creating interpretation isn't a "once and done" kind of exercise – it's a dynamic process that requires an ongoing commitment to maintain visitors' interest in your resource and in the stories you're telling. To keep things fresh, you need to continuously update your presentation with new material, different media, and fresh perspectives on your subject matter. How many visitors will keep returning to a museum that never rotates the objects on display, a restaurant that never varies its menu, or a tour with a tired old script?

One way to keep your interpretation from growing stale is to step back every so often and ask yourself how effective it really is. Are you meeting your goals for what you want visitors to learn and connect with? After your interpretation has been in place for a while, set aside some time to consider whether your programs are working as you want them to. Don't be afraid to ask yourself tough questions like, "Are my visitors really interested in the interpretation I'm providing, or are they just looking for a warm room on a cold winter day?" To answer these questions, you need a measuring stick that allows you to see where you're succeeding, and where you could improve. If you're not sure you have enough information to answer, you will need to do some homework. That's where evaluation comes in.





## What's the Outcome?

Before you can evaluate a program, you need to think about what you want it to do for people. How does it benefit your visitors? Does it matter to them? Has it made a difference? How are people's lives better as a result of participating in the program? By answering these challenging questions for yourself, you are defining goals for your interpretive program. Evaluation pushes you to clarify those goals. It helps you accomplish what you've set out to do.

At their best, outcomes of your interpretive program will reflect some kind of change in your visitors. Your program had an impact. Maybe they've gained a skill, or learned something new. Maybe they've developed more self-confidence, or changed their attitude about something. Maybe people's behavior could change as a result of something they experienced at your site — it's an accomplishment hard to achieve, but amazing when it happens.

What are some outcomes that you could hope your programs might achieve?

- A workshop attendee learns how to quilt.
- College students learn about the benefits of no-till farming.
- Someone attends a local food festival you've sponsored and makes up her mind to seek out and eat more local foods in the future.
- A visitor sees an exhibit on non-point source water pollution, and resolves to be more careful about what he pours into the drain on the street in front of his house.
- A kid attends your summer camp at a living farm, and decides he wants to be a farmer.

## Do I Have to Evaluate?

Of course you don't have to evaluate your programs — unless you want them to be as effective as they can possibly be. Here are some reasons to consider regular, ongoing evaluation of your programs:

- You are more likely to achieve success if you have taken the trouble to define what it looks like.
- It can save you time and money.
- Being able to demonstrate success can help you leverage funding and get support for projects.
- You can be more responsive to your visitors' needs.
- It can help your resource change and grow in positive ways.

## Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts

One way to think about program effectiveness is to consider outputs, outcomes, and impacts. According to the Definitions Project organized by the National Association for Interpretation (NAI), these are:

**Outputs:** The material products, programs, or other media of a program or project. Examples include maps, workshops, curriculum materials, and other media.

**Outcomes:** The achievements or changes brought about by a program, project or activity that help lay the foundation for longer impacts or benefits. Outcomes can involve changes in behavior, skills, knowledge, attitudes, values or conditions after participating in a learning activity or experience.

**Impacts:** The collective effects, achievements, benefits or changes brought about by an interpretive or education program on its intended audiences or on the environment. Impacts often embody lasting changes such as improved environmental conditions and changes in the way people think and live.

*For more definitions, go to:*

[www.definitionsproject.com/definitions/index.cfm](http://www.definitionsproject.com/definitions/index.cfm)



## **Worksheet 8:** *Understanding Outputs, Outcomes, and Impacts*

When evaluating an exhibit, program or interpretive walkway, it is important to have measurable outputs, outcomes, and impacts outlined before your plan is implemented. This allows you to measure your success or failures in an accurate manner.

*As a reminder-*

***Outputs:***

Are what you/your organization do.

***Outcomes:***

What a visitor will do as a result of contact.

***Impacts:***

How site, community or resource will benefit from successful outcomes.

### **Example:**

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***Goal:***

Encourage understanding of the unique role agriculture plays in Iowa.

#### **OBJECTIVES-**

***Output:***

Develop an exhibit that tells Iowa's agricultural story.

Host six public programs over the course of six months on various agricultural topics, including; land conservation and current farming practices.

***Outcome:***

At least 100 people will attend programs.

10% of those individuals will visit local farms or farmers markets.

Five individuals will buy agriculturally related items at gift shop.

***Impacts:***

Two Local farm families will agree to host future farm tours in order to preserve and tell the story of American agriculture. One farm family will become a SSNHA Emerging Partner Site, working with staff to preserve their agricultural story.

Following the above example, write a general goal and fill in at least two objectives for each category.

**Goal:**

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**Outputs:** Things you do.

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**Outcomes:** What the visitor does; change in visitor behavior.

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**Impacts:** How site or resource benefits; increased budget, decreased vandalism, change in the way people think.

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### What Do Your Visitors Think?

There are two types of information you can gather that will help you find that out.

- **Quantitative:** Statistics like the number of visitors, how long they pay attention to your interpretation, and how many of them can tell you why your resource is significant — things that you can count.
- **Qualitative:** The opinions, attitudes, perceptions and feelings of your visitors — the “subjective” things that might be expressed just a little differently by each of your visitors.

*And you can collect that information in two ways:*

- **Indirect** – Observe visitors without their knowledge.
- **Direct** – Use interviews, focus groups, or questionnaires to ask visitors what they think.

### Observation

Try to watch unobtrusively. Notice what your visitors do. Are they engaged in the program or just going through the motions? How long do they linger? “Dwell time” — the amount of time a visitor spends in an exhibit, for example — is an important quantitative measure of success.

Although it might sound kind of sneaky to eavesdrop on your visitors, listening to what they say can help you find out what they think of your interpretation. It can give you clues to the thoughts and feelings you’ve inspired — and maybe the misconceptions and misunderstandings you need to correct. Here are some of the things you can hope to hear:

- “I certainly want to come back to do this again!”
- “Uncle Joe ought to see this — he would love it.”
- “I never knew that!”
- “Come over here! Look at this!”
- “I’ve always wanted to hear a real ....”
- “Let’s buy the catalog to remind us about the great time we had.”



Although you can certainly hang out and listen informally to what your visitors have to say anecdotally, a more scientific way is to create a form upon which you can record your observations. You should list the social composition of the group — a lone visitor, a family, a group of adults, a parent and child, etc. List their gender, race, and approximate ages. Look at your watch and time how long the group or person spends with each activity. Describe their interactions. Write down what they say. Later, you can enter all the information you’ve gathered into a database so you will have a record of all of your observations.



## Interviews

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You've probably been approached by a person with a clipboard asking you to take a survey. That's a time-honored method that many organizations use to evaluate their interpretive programs. Just as you would for indirect observation, create a data form so you'll be able to capture information in a consistent, systematic way. You might want to ask how interviewees heard about your program, why they decided to attend, to what degree it met their expectations, what they liked best and least about it, and so on. Be sure to ask questions that address your stated goals. If one of your goals is that most visitors who've experienced your program will be able to name three strategies to improve soil conservation, be sure to ask how many they can name. If your program emphasizes the significance of your site, see if interviewees can tell you what it is.



## Focus Groups

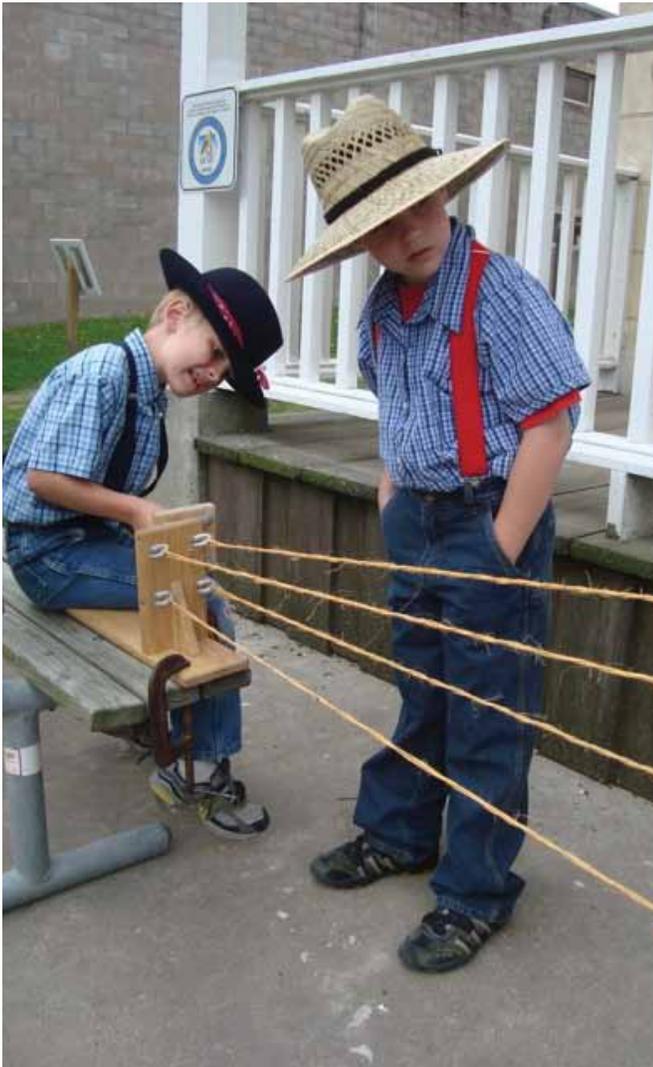
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To convene a focus group, you'll bring together a few people — about 8-12 — who have similar backgrounds and interests. For example, maybe they are elementary school teachers, senior citizens, or African-American moms. You'll start a conversation with them — which should be recorded, either on audio tape or by someone (not you) taking notes — that will help you see your resource from their point of view — what they like about it, what they would like to see improved, etc.

The most important skill to bring to a focus group is your ability not only to listen, but to make it clear you are hearing what the participants are saying. You might want to write down their most important observations on a big flip chart. Pay attention to body language, facial expressions, the way people express themselves. Ask probing questions, and keep following up to get as much information as you can. Be careful that you don't do most of the talking — let the participants do that. But you might want to repeat what someone says, or summarize their response, as a way of prompting them to keep talking.

### Questionnaires

You can create a simple questionnaire that visitors can fill out on their own. This could be a paper questionnaire that visitors complete after they've experienced your program. Or it could be an online questionnaire, posted to your website, that visitors would fill out on their smart phones, or on their computers once they got home. Survey websites like SurveyMonkey.com are inexpensive, and offer an easy way for you to "crunch" the data the responses provide.



No matter if your questionnaire is on paper or in cyberspace, give careful thought to the questions you write. It is harder to write good questions than you think! Some things to keep in mind:

- Use simple language. Avoid technical terms or words that might not be familiar to people whose native language is not English.
- Make each question as specific as possible to avoid confusion.
- When drafting each question, try to imagine how it could be misinterpreted. Look for anything that could be ambiguous.
- Use one question per idea. Use a separate question for each thing you want to know.
- Start with the "easiest" questions (like visitor's interests, and personal responses to their experiences), and move up to the more challenging ones (like what they learned or understood about the content of the program).
- Don't make it too long — unless you plan to offer a prize for completing the questionnaire.
- Run your draft questionnaire by others. They will see potential pitfalls and confusing points much more easily than you will.
- Try it out on a few people before you commit to the final version. Make sure people can interpret and understand what you want them to tell you.
- Make sure your questions aren't leading.

Each of these evaluation strategies will give you insight into what your visitors need and expect. If you had lots of time and energy, you could spend most of it evaluating your programs! Luckily, that really isn't necessary. But do create an evaluation plan that allows you to regularly take an honest look at your programs' effectiveness. You might decide to try a different evaluation method every few months to make sure you are gathering a variety of impressions.

*"Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted."*

**-Albert Einstein**

# Conclusion

## So here we are...

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At the end of the manual, but at the beginning of telling your stories. You've defined the significance of your resource, whether that significance is national, regional, or local. You understand — and are ready to show visitors — how your resource fits into the big picture. You've thought about your stories and how to tell them, using what media. You know which SSNHA themes those stories fit into. You've considered your visitors and what they are seeking. And you are eager to ask them what they think of your programs.



## You are reaping meaning...

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People come away connected. You've touched upon their values, their ideas, their beliefs. You've made them stop and think, reflect, and reconsider. You've "provoked" them, in the Freeman Tilden sense. Congratulations! You're an interpreter!



## You are sowing stories...

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Planting them in people's minds, where they will grow and flourish, and — maybe, hopefully — make a difference, somehow, some way, some day — in peoples' lives.

# Appendix

## Interpretation Toolbox

### This toolbox contains:

- **Research Tips**  
In this section, you'll learn about different types of source material and different places to find the information you need to interpret your resource.
- **More Resources**  
Here you'll find a list of professional organizations that provide a variety of services to the field of interpretation.
- **Interpretive Media**  
Today, many kinds of media are available to deliver your interpretation to visitors. This section outlines these, discusses their pros and cons, and provides tips about how to use them effectively. An overview of media types is also found in Chapter 4 of this manual.
- **Best Practices**  
For each type of partner in the Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area, this section lists organizations and businesses that provide excellent interpretation for visitors. They are not the only ones who provide great interpretive services, of course — there are many other such organizations in the region. The examples are included simply as inspiration for the development of your own programs.
- **Sustainable Tourism**  
Tourism should not just help the local economy. It should benefit “people, planet, and profits.”
- **Resources for Partners**  
This section is the place to learn about the many services that SSNHA provides its partners.

### Research Tips

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To discover the significance of your resource, you'll probably need to do some research. There are three main types of sources: 1) *primary*, 2) *secondary*, and 3) *tertiary* sources.

How your sources fit into these categories depends on how “close” they are to the times or events you're describing. Primary sources are the most closely associated with these times or events. Secondary and tertiary sources are written or assembled later on.

### Types of Sources

#### Primary Sources

Primary sources are documents that were created during the period you are studying, or near the time an event took place. These might include:

- Eyewitness accounts, oral histories, diaries, or letters created by someone with direct personal knowledge of those events and times;
- Period newspapers, printed speeches, pamphlets, and formal reports if they were issued during the time you're researching;
- Records created by government or other organizations such as churches; these include such documents as census records, vital statistics like birth, death, and marriage; tax and court records; and other legal documents; and
- Photographs, paintings and other artwork, and film footage.

If you can include original quotes and images in your interpretation, your stories will be strengthened immensely. Primary sources are the starting place to look for this kind of information.

## Secondary Sources

A secondary source is a work, usually by a professional historian or a devoted and talented amateur, that relies on primary sources to analyze, interpret, and evaluate a period, person or event in history.

An example of a secondary source is a biography that's based on a person's letters and diaries, as well as photographs, newspaper accounts, and official records of his or her time. The biographer pulls together and interprets information from primary sources to create as complete a picture of the person's life, motivations, and accomplishments as possible.

Reliable secondary sources use citations of primary sources to indicate where each bit of information originated. Professional sources of this type are subjected to peer review and evaluation in scholarly publications, so they can generally be trusted as accurate. Still, it's important to consult more than one of these sources and compare what you read, because different authors may have different opinions about your subject matter.

## Tertiary Sources

Tertiary sources are compiled from secondary sources, and they digest this information into a readily accessible form. In other words, they're the kind of sources that allow you to "look something up." Encyclopedias, textbooks, and wikis (online user-created information) are among these tools. They're a good place to get a quick overview of people, events, and trends, but you need to take them with a grain of salt. Don't base your interpretation solely on these kinds of sources, because you might not be getting a complete or balanced picture of the topic you're researching.

## Sources of Information

### Libraries and Books

Your local library is a fantastic resource. If it doesn't have the information you're looking for, your librarian may be able to find it through interlibrary loan. Your library's website will also offer links to reliable internet sources on a variety of subjects.

## Watch Out!

A primary source is not necessarily more accurate than a secondary one, even though it was created at the time of the event or period you are researching. Even a person's diary reflects his or her perspectives and biases. Is the writer trying to enhance her own image by what she writes? Does he have prejudices that might affect his perspective on the subject matter? Newspaper accounts from the past are no more accurate than they are today, and they frequently reflect political, social, or cultural biases.

Errors may occur even in official records, as people from any time period can confirm. Is a government report really an accurate, unbiased description, or does it include elements of propaganda? Was it censored, or intended to cover up misdeeds? Keep in mind that court records may reflect the opposed positions of plaintiff and defendant, and may include exaggerated accounts of certain events.

Photographs can be staged, and artists may have employed "artistic license" to make their subjects appear more attractive. Secondary and tertiary sources can also be biased.

Keep a skeptical eye when using any source of information. Take nothing for granted. Try to cross-check your facts, finding two or more independent sources for each. Make sure one of your sources isn't just quoting the other one!

### Google Books:

[books.google.com/bkshp?hl=en&tab=wp](https://books.google.com/bkshp?hl=en&tab=wp)

This huge searchable data base provides previews, and in some cases if a book is out of copyright, full text of books on every imaginable subject. For books still under copyright, Google Books tells you where you can buy them or borrow them from a library.

### Bookfinder:

[www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com)

If you've looked everywhere, and you just can't locate a free source for the book you need, try this site. It has a searchable database of sellers of used, out-of-print, and rare books throughout the United States.

**Internet Archives:** [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

**Online Books Page:** [www.onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu](http://www.onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu)  
Sites such as Internet Archives and Online Books reproduce a huge number of secondary sources. Internet Archives has a search engine that lets you locate any reference to your topic in thousands of publications. The Online Books Page at the University of Pennsylvania is an index of books available online on a variety of Web sites.

## On-Line Resources

The internet provides a huge number of research resources — primary, secondary, and tertiary. Of course, not every internet resource is a reliable one, so you need to approach them with a healthy dose of skepticism. The following Web sites are fairly reliable, mainstream sources, but they aren't the only ones out there.

**Encyclopedia Britannica:** [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)

This is a reliable tertiary source that provides good bibliographies and other aids to learning. The basic service is free, but premium service, which you should be able to access through your local library, provides more detail.

**Wikipedia:**

[www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

This is a popular online encyclopedia, but use it with caution, because all content is user-contributed, and may not be accurate.

**Library of Congress:**

[www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets)

Access the Library of Congress archives and find lesson plans on historical topics such as the Wright Brothers and Native American Tribes of the United States.

**State Historical Society of Iowa Digital Resources** <http://www.iowahistory.org/libraries/shsi-digital-resources.html>

Online resources include county maps, information about Iowa's governors, a collection of children's diaries, and much more.

## Genealogy Sites

Genealogy has become one of America's favorite hobbies, and the internet has responded with thousands of genealogy Web sites. Be careful when using this kind of site to conduct research, however. Many of these sites include user-contributed information that may not be accurate. You also need to be aware that few names are truly unique. At any given time in any town in America, it's likely that several different people shared the same name as the person you're researching. This was especially true in 18th- and 19th-century America, when large families often lived in close proximity to one another and named their children in honor of close relatives. So... the first time you see your subject's name in a record, don't be too sure that it's the one you're looking for.

- Ancestry.com: [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)
- Genealogy.com: [www.genealogy.com](http://www.genealogy.com)
- Heritage Quest: [www.heritagequestonline.com](http://www.heritagequestonline.com)

Subscription services like these that provide access to primary documents, such as original census data forms, can be very useful. In some cases, these services may be available free through your local library.

**Family Search:** [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

A free service provided by the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, this website contains mostly user-contributed content for many regions of the world.

**The USGenWeb Project:** [www.usgenweb.org](http://www.usgenweb.org)

This site provides information transcribed by volunteers throughout the US. Although it contains user-contributed information that may not be accurate, it can be an invaluable resource for researching some topics.

## More Resources

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Look to these organizations for information and support as you plan your interpretive services.

### **Iowa Museum Association (IMA):**

**[www.iowamuseums.org](http://www.iowamuseums.org)**

The IMA provides quality training and development to Iowa museum professionals and volunteers, advocates for support of Iowa's museums, and works to build a strong community of museums and museum supporters in Iowa.

Cynthia Sweet  
Executive Director  
Iowa Museum Association  
1116 Washington Street  
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50613

### **State Historical Society of Iowa:**

**[www.iowahistory.org](http://www.iowahistory.org)**

Access everything from the collection catalog to tax incentives for rehabilitation.

### **Camp Silos:**

**[www.campsilos.org](http://www.campsilos.org)**

SSNHA has created this award-winning, kid-centered online resource that introduces youth to agricultural practices and pioneer history. Lesson plans on prairies, corn, and pioneers are available for anyone to use.

### **Iowa Barn Foundation:**

**[www.iowabarnfoundation.org](http://www.iowabarnfoundation.org)**

The Barn Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving Iowa's rural buildings as symbols of Iowa's early heritage.

### **Institute for Museum & Library Services:**

**[www.imls.gov](http://www.imls.gov)**

A national agency dedicated to creating strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas, the Institute makes an impact in a number of diverse issue areas through grants, research, and initiative activities.

### **National Association for Interpretation:**

**[www.interpnet.com](http://www.interpnet.com)**

Dedicated to advancing the profession of interpretation, NAI currently serves about 5,000 members in the United States, Canada, and over thirty other nations. Individual members include those who work at parks, museums, nature centers, zoos, botanical gardens, aquariums, historical and cultural sites, commercial tour companies, and theme parks. Commercial and institutional members include those who provide services to the interpretation industry.

### **American Association for State and Local History:**

**[www.aaslh.org](http://www.aaslh.org)**

AASLH provides leadership and support for its members who preserve and interpret state and local history in order to make the past more meaningful to all Americans.

### **National Trust for Historic Preservation:**

**[www.preservationnation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org)**

The National Trust for Historic Preservation is a private, non-profit membership organization dedicated to saving historic places and revitalizing America's communities.

## Note about website addresses

The website addresses listed in this appendix were current when this manual was written, but addresses often change as organizations update the material on their websites. If you find that one of these website addresses isn't working, delete all of the address except for the first part, called the domain name. The domain name usually lends in ".com" or ".org." On many websites, the domain name is the part before the forward slash (/).

If this approach doesn't work, the organization or business may have changed its domain name. In that case, go to a search engine like Google and type the name of the organization in the search box. That approach will generally lead you to the organization's current website.

## Interpretive Media

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### Printed Materials

#### ADVANTAGES

*Printed materials can:*

- Tell visitors how they can get the most from their visit.
- Provide an overview of the stories that the resource tells.
- Allow visitors to absorb information at their own pace.
- Provide detailed information about the resource.
- Tell visitors how to access additional information about the resource.
- Be useful in presenting a sequential or especially complex story.
- Be useful in situations where there are no objects to display.
- Provide a self-guided tour of the resource, where appropriate.
- Show what the resource looks like at different times of the year.
- Go home with the visitor, which extends the interpretive message off site, provides a souvenir, and encourages return visits.
- Generate income, if offered for sale
- Be published in different languages and specifically for different audiences.
- Be affordable.

#### DISADVANTAGES

*Printed materials may:*

- Discourage people who don't like to read (a surprisingly large percentage).
- Create litter.
- Require frequent revision to remain up to date.
- Require a distribution system.
- Be expensive, if writing and design consultants are involved.
- Clutter up inventory stock if they don't sell well.

#### TIPS

*Content Development*

- Know your audience. Use your publication to target a specific audience. Make sure your goals for the publication are clear, and that they address audience needs.

- It often surprises people to discover that content development often costs more than production. Budget for each of the following content development tasks:
  - Conduct research and write the text
  - Find photos and commission artwork
  - Create draft design
  - Review the design and make changes
  - Produce final design
- Break your text down into segments with subheadings, so users can find the part they want.
- Use interesting headings, such as "Ships, Sheep, and Riots" instead of "Maritime Trade, Agriculture, and Civil Disobedience."
- Use your text to say one thing, and your illustrations to say another. Don't duplicate your message in two different formats. Instead, use them to reinforce each other.
- A picture is worth a thousand words, so use illustrations as much as possible.

*Design and Graphic Production*

- Make the design as professional and attractive as you can afford. A cheap, amateurish publication won't project a professional image. Think of good design as an investment.
- Think about how your publication will be used. Does it need to fit into standard-sized tourism literature racks? If it's meant for outdoor use, arrange the content so it doesn't blow away when it's unfolded. Don't lay out a brochure so that the map is on one side and all the information is on the other, because that requires users to constantly flip it back and forth.
- Don't fill every available space with text and illustrations, because good design needs space to breathe.
- Create a mockup of your publication and share it with your others. This is especially valuable if your publication contains instructions and directions. Make sure people will be able to understand them.
- If you're printing a new edition of something, you can stimulate renewed interest in your message by changing the cover image.
- You can reduce printing costs by ordering in large numbers, but only print enough for a year or two at most. Visitor surveys or sales figures from similar resources can help you decide on a reasonable quantity.
- If you create a publication for sale, remember that your

- choice may have implications for the funding sources available to you. Public sector agencies may not be able to provide funding for materials that will be sold for profit.
- If you decide to sell your publication, consider what people might be prepared to pay. Selling a \$10 booklet requires a different strategy than selling a 50-cent handout.
  - If you're selling a publication, do you have any competition? This might influence your pricing strategy.
  - Work back from your desired selling price to see what you can produce within your budget and still achieve your goal. This challenge can encourage you to adopt a more disciplined approach to content and clarity.
  - For larger publications, explore "print on demand" options, so you won't be burdened with overstock if the publication doesn't sell.

## Panels and Banners

### ADVANTAGES

Panels and banners can:

- Welcome visitors when no one is available to greet them.
- Help to establish an identity for the resource and reinforce its brand.
- Provide orientation to the resource and tell visitors where they're allowed to go and what they're allowed to do.
- Provide interpretation at any time of the day, exactly where it's needed.
- Interpret things in their own setting, providing visitors a more direct experience with the resource.
- Alert visitors to resource management issues such as environmental impact or dangerous conditions.
- Be designed to blend in with the local environment.
- Show a feature from a view that's difficult for visitors to reach.
- Show how the resource looks in all seasons.
- Integrate pictures and diagrams with text – for instance, show how a scene the visitor sees today might have looked in the past, or how a geological formation was created over time, or how invisible phenomena affect the resource.
- Be relatively inexpensive.

- Be replaced relatively quickly and inexpensively, because they are produced from digital files that are easily reproduced.

### DISADVANTAGES

Panels and banners may:

- Look intrusive in some settings.
- Be difficult for groups of people to read at the same time.
- Frustrate visitors who have additional questions.
- Be inadequate to interpret complicated stories, because the space available for graphics and text is limited.
- Seem static when compared to multi-media presentations.
- Be subject to vandalism and wear, especially under extreme conditions.
- Require expensive site preparations before installation.

## Check with Municipal Officials!

Before you spend a lot of time and money on panels or signs, find out what municipal regulations might affect their installation and maintenance. Program staff at SSNHA can direct you to the right people.

### Content Development

- Keep it simple, and be concise! Restrict text to less than 100 words per panel.
- Try to limit sentences to fewer than 15 words.
- Reading level of the copy should be eighth grade or lower. This allows for a wide range of people to be able to read and understand your message. It doesn't mean you are "dumbing content down."
- You can use Microsoft Word's spelling and grammar checker to measure reading level if you activate the "Readability Statistics" function.
- Develop just one main message and no more than two secondary messages per panel. Make sure that all the words and images reinforce your message.
- Use active voice, not passive. "Passive voice should not be used."

- Arrange text in blocks or short paragraphs of about 50 words, or about three sentences.
- Keep line lengths short, because long lines of type are hard to track from line to line.
- Use headings to attract attention and emphasize main points.
- Spend extra time proofreading your work, and ask others to look at it, too. Nothing's more horrifying than having the mayor point out a typo before she even cuts the ribbon!
- A picture is worth a thousand words!
- Use illustrations to show things visitors can't see, or how things looked in the past.
- Don't use illustrations that duplicate what visitors can see for themselves — except for labeled illustrations that call attention to specific features of the view.

### *Design and Graphic Production*

- Text on the panel should be high contrast and large enough for people with less-than-perfect vision. On a panel, never specify text smaller than 24 point for an interpretive message.
- Don't fill up every square inch of space. Good design needs space to breathe.
- Be sure to insist on a color sample or proof before full production proceeds.
- Hang on to the digital files for your design, because they'll save time and effort if you want to make changes or produce more signs of the same type.

### *Fabrication*

- From the start, seek advice on available materials, construction, and printing techniques. Experienced designers can lead you through the process and explain your options. If you're doing it yourself, talk to several manufacturers. Companies that deal with one process won't necessarily tell you what's available elsewhere. No matter what you're told, there are options.
- Don't be afraid to reject materials that aren't suitable for your purposes, because panel manufacturers can offer various designs for framing and supports. It's preferable to use local materials that blend in and enhance the sense of place.
- Consider whether to use an upright or angled panel. When you're deciding where to install it, try not to obscure or clutter the view you want visitors to see.

### *Installation and Maintenance*

- Don't forget that preparing a site to install the panel can be a significant part of your costs. At minimum, installation will involve concrete mix and a hole digger.
- Some kinds of panels are guaranteed against fading for upwards of 10 years — but try to avoid putting them in full sunlight.
- Ensure that someone will check the panel regularly, and clean, repair, or remove it if necessary. If you can't afford to maintain a panel in good condition, don't install one! A run-down, shabby looking sign will reflect poorly on your resource.
- Plan to redo the panels every decade or so. That will allow you to update the information and the design, and perhaps take advantage of new production technologies.

## Digital/Electronic Media

### ADVANTAGES

#### *Electronic media can:*

- Create a mood or atmosphere
- Tell stories with excitement, drama, special effects, and music.
- Capture actual events and provide emotional impact.
- Speed up time (two hundred years of history), slow it down (the flight of a hummingbird), or illustrate "before" and "after."
- Provide views of places, features, or seasons not otherwise accessible.
- Excel at the presentation of chronological and sequential material.
- Provide a consistently high-quality performance – and good control over the message.
- Present interpretation in other languages.
- Present lots of layered information in a relatively small space.
- Be easily transported for use off site.
- Reach many visitors at once.
- Be adapted for visitors with physical challenges.

### DISADVANTAGES

#### *Electronic media may:*

- Not be appropriate in all locations (for example, many outdoor settings).
- Make the interpretation more spectacular than the resource itself.

- Seem isolating, cold, or impersonal compared with guided tours or other face-to-face interpretation.
- Distract visitors and annoy staff, especially if a presentation is repeated over and over again.
- Disappoint visitors who like to browse, study an item in depth, or proceed at their own pace.
- Not work for many people at once (as in the case of interactive computer stations).
- Require professional production — since visitors are accustomed to what they see and hear on television, they won't tolerate an amateurish production.
- Be heavily influenced by the whims of fashion. Today's state-of-the-art presentation may be outdated tomorrow.
- Be expensive.
- Need careful monitoring, backup equipment, and regular maintenance by knowledgeable staff members or reliable contractors.
- Break down, causing disappointment for visitors, especially if you don't provide any other readily available interpretation.

#### TIPS

- Involve interpretation professionals and technical experts. Of course, few people are familiar with all the possibilities, so consider several options before deciding which ones suit your needs. If you visit the exhibit hall at a museum or interpretation conference, you can explore the latest options. You can do this without any obligation, and vendors will be happy to share information about their products.
- Interactive computer stations are fun for visitors, and they'll please computer-savvy adults and kids, but they may not be the most appropriate medium for your goals. They're great for simulations, especially those driven by visitors. But be sure to include additional monitors that allow more people to see what's happening when just one person is at the controls.
- Large screen and multi-screen presentations can provide vivid and detailed effects and prompt an emotional response. For this kind of investment, you need a theater space, an appropriate environment for your equipment, and a good sound system. Theaters can accommodate large groups, and visitors often appreciate the opportunity to sit down and enjoy a show.
- It's easy to be excited about the possibilities of multi-media presentations and lose sight of the real purpose of

interpretation. Effective use of technology requires you to have discipline and clear ideas about your objectives — beyond simply enjoying the technology.

## Face-to-Face Interpretation

### ADVANTAGES

- Face-to-face interpretation can:
- Provide direct and interactive contact between visitors and interpreters.
- Provide effective but subtle ways to present your message.
- Interpret complicated processes and help visitors understand difficult issues or activities.
- Allow you to customize interpretation to visitors' interests.
- Be changed or modified fairly easily.
- Allow you to experiment with your message or respond to the needs of particular audiences.
- Be relatively cost effective.
- Provide employment.
- Celebrate, share, and enhance community identity.

### DISADVANTAGES

- Face-to-face interpretation may:
- Require a lot of organization and an ongoing training program.
- Involve teams of people who need close supervision and management.
- Be inconsistent in delivering your message.
- Be difficult to maintain consistently throughout different seasons of the year.
- Result in high personnel costs.
- Never be quite finished, because there are always demands to accommodate changes and update your presentation.
- Need a strong commitment to maintain quality. Of course, this commitment can also be an advantage, because it forces you to stay on top of your game.

## TIPS

- Always involve your “frontline” interpreters — the people who are interacting directly with visitors — in your interpretation planning.
- Insist on consistent quality, and accurate, well-documented information, but allow enough flexibility to encourage creativity.
- Even if your frontline interpreters are familiar with your subject matter, they may still need some training in:
  - Speaking to large groups, indoors and out, without shouting.
  - Structuring and timing their tour or performance for greatest effect.
  - Dealing with obstructive people and persistent questions.
  - Accommodating all visitors, including persons with physical challenges and those who aren’t fluent in English.
  - How to deal with emergencies and cope with the unexpected – for example, two groups arriving at the same time. No two days are ever quite the same. Everyone involved with a resource or program needs to have the same ground rules and know about contingency plans.
- Ideally, groups should never include more than twenty people – this means that a motor coach group should be divided into three groups.

## Interpretive Exhibits

### ADVANTAGES

*Interpretive exhibits can:*

- Give visitors a chance to interact with objects.
- Be viewed at visitor’s own pace and desired level of complexity.
- Transcend barriers of language and culture.
- Allow visitors to use all their senses, which adds to the enjoyment and education of all types of visitors, including the physically challenged.
- Allow several methods of interpretation to be used together (or on different occasions) to suit different requirements.
- Accommodate a broad range of stories.

- Be especially suitable for stories that can be illustrated graphically.
- Build excitement and publicity for your resource, especially if they’re short-term installations.
- Provide year-round, all-weather facilities.
- Control access to the resource and the way visitors use it.
- Generate income.
- Create employment.
- Become a focus for community involvement.

### DISADVANTAGES

*Interpretive displays may:*

- Need major investment and planning.
- Need to be very well designed and well mounted to stand out among the many museum exhibits out there.
- Be ineffective at telling stories that are largely verbal, complex, or sequential.
- Require sophisticated facilities with environmental controls and good security.
- May subject valuable collections to deterioration and the threat of theft.
- Need staff, especially for supervision and security.
- Not be available after hours.
- Need maintenance and continuing investment.

### TIPS

- Developing a display doesn’t start with a layout. Start by studying the habits of your visitors. Do some front end evaluation, and ask them what they know about your topic, and what they would like to know.
- Test your exhibit concepts with mockups or prototypes before you commit to fabricating your exhibit.
- Where and how do they arrive? What information do they ask for? Plan to give visitors an overview of your resource and what’s available, so they can decide what to do first. It’s difficult for visitors to absorb a lot of information at once, and it’s also tough for groups to decide what to see and do. Providing information at the right time can help visitors get more from their visit.
- From the beginning of your process, think about how your interpretation will be integrated into the available space. How is the display material going to be presented? Too often, interpretive displays focus only on the objects being displayed, and not on what visitors are likely to do.

- Involve your entire team from the start.
- Leave enough money in your budget to fix anything that needs fixing after you complete summative or remedial evaluation of the finished exhibit.

## Web-Based Interpretation

### ADVANTAGES

*Web-based interpretation can:*

- Attract a huge audience worldwide.
- Reach people who can't physically visit your resource.
- Reach a high number of potential visitors at low cost.
- Offer good control over your message.
- Serve as a pre-visit "orientation" to your resource.
- Create an identity and "mood" that enhances your message before visitors experience the resource in person.
- Be easily updated with information or stories.
- Be effective at reaching people with different learning styles.
- Offer interactive media to engage visitors.
- Provide a platform for visitor feedback and inquiries.
- Provide "virtual" access to elements of your resource that may not be otherwise accessible (for example, because a resource is too fragile for visitors to experience directly, or because it's inaccessible to the physically challenged).
- Easily be developed in phases as funding permits.
- Offer visitors the opportunity to research your subject matter in more depth, if you provide links and other material.
- Provide an opportunity for "Web 2.0" features, where visitors to your website can contribute their own content.
- Create a sense of community through the use of social media.

### DISADVANTAGES

*Web-based interpretation may:*

- Require a large initial investment, especially if professional designers of web-based interpretation are involved
- Create additional demands on management because it must be kept current and constantly updated. This is especially true of social media, like Facebook pages and blogs.
- Discourage those potential visitors who are content with a "virtual" visit from planning an "actual" visit.
- Create a bad impression if not well designed and maintained.
- Not reach visitors who are not computer literate, or those without computer access.

### TIPS

- If you're going to do it, do it right. Don't rely on volunteers who might use "canned" templates, unusual typography, or confusing animated graphics and sound effects. A bad website is worse than none at all.
- Don't assume that web-based interpretation is always going to be the best choice. While it's often true that "the medium is the message," there may be more effective ways to tell your stories.
- Consultation with professional interpretive planners is a good investment, even if you don't have the money to implement your ideas right away.
- Develop web-based interpretation in phases as funding becomes available.
- Check out the organization Museums and the Web (especially its annual conference) for information on web-based interpretation.

## Best Practices in the SSNHA

This section provides examples of how a variety of resources in the Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area have met interpretation challenges and taken advantage of unique opportunities to tell their stories. While some of the sites listed here are run by museum or interpretation professionals, others are not.

The examples provided here are meant to stimulate your creativity and inspire you to take your interpretation “to the next level.” If you are interested in the challenge, and would like to know what the very best interpretive organizations in the nation are doing, the National Association of Interpretation offers some guidelines on the “Standards and Best Practices” section of its website [www.interpnet.com/standards/](http://www.interpnet.com/standards/). They offer four documents that describe good, better, and best practices in Academic Curricula for Interpretation, Interpretive Methods, Interpretive Organizations, and Interpretive Planning.

### Bed and Breakfasts

To qualify as an agricultural heritage resource, a bed and breakfast must offer authentic features that convey local heritage. It does not have to be specifically designed for an educational purpose. Since education is not the primary focus of a bed and breakfast, it is important that it provide an experience that is unmistakably linked to local heritage. In addition to overnight lodging, a bed and breakfast may offer guests the opportunity to observe and participate in farm operations.

#### Farm House B&B

2866 270th St., HWY 18E, Fredericksburg, Iowa  
[www.thefarmhousebb.com](http://www.thefarmhousebb.com)

Visitors to this real working dairy farm can pitch in with the chores, including feeding the calves and gathering eggs. The farm features a 10-acre vineyard – the owners began selling their own wine in 2007 — and a shop selling agriculture-related antiques, as well as local cheese, meats, and jellies.

### Fairs and Special Events

A heritage event is an organized public activity that provides

an authentic experience that directly relates to local heritage. Heritage events don’t have to happen in a historic setting, but they must result in a better understanding of local heritage. They can be one-time or ongoing events. Some are continuing, time-honored events that have become integral parts of community life, and whose importance is widely recognized by the geographic, social, or cultural community it represents.

#### Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum

##### Christmas Weekend

Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, 523 W Water St., Decorah, IA  
[www.vesterheim.org](http://www.vesterheim.org)  
Visitors experience the living traditions of a Norwegian Christmas featuring folk-art demonstrations, live music, Scandinavian food, and many holiday traditions, both old and new.

### Farms and Wineries

Farms and wineries that offer heritage experiences invite visitors to join in activities that teach them about farm life and how agricultural products are produced in the local community.



#### Hansen’s Farm Fresh Dairy

8617 Lincoln Rd., Hudson, Iowa  
[www.hansendairy.com](http://www.hansendairy.com)

This working dairy farm offers two kinds of tours. The walk-through tour demonstrates how milk gets from the farm to the table, showing calves, the milking parlor,

cow barns, creamery, and farm equipment. Visitors who arrive between 4-6:30 p.m. can see the cows being milked. Those who take the hands-on tour get to feed calves, make homemade butter, and milk a cow by hand. And every tour ends with a dish of Hansen's Farm Fresh Dairy ice cream.

### **Tabor Home Winery**

3570 67th St., Baldwin, Iowa  
[www.TaborHomeWinery.com](http://www.TaborHomeWinery.com)

The oldest estate winery in Iowa, Tabor Home Winery offers tours of its 6-acre vineyards and winemaking operation.

### **Seed Savers Exchange**

3094 N. Winn Rd., Decorah, Iowa  
[www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org)

The organization's Heritage Farm is dedicated to the preservation of heirloom vegetables and apple varieties. An educational center displays and interprets the farm's collection of endangered food crops.

### **Historic Sites**

A historic site usually features a building or structure that has played a first-hand role in local heritage — although it could also be the location of an important historic event.

### **Richardson-Jakway Historic Site**

2791 136th Street, Aurora, Iowa  
[www.buchanancountyparks.com](http://www.buchanancountyparks.com)



The Richardson-Jakway site, with its National Register-listed farmhouse, provides visitors a glimpse into a 19th-century home, farmstead, and community. Interpretive exhibits, a prairie plot, educational programs, and an annual music and heritage crafts festival complete the offerings.

### **Cascade Historic Limestone Silo**

215 Pierce St. SW, Cascade, Iowa  
[www.cityofcascade.org](http://www.cityofcascade.org)

Early farmers used the location of this unique historic limestone silo, built in the early 1930s, to feed and fatten livestock. The agricultural interpretive center teaches visitors about pioneer farmers and displays antique farm equipment.

### **Museums and Galleries**

A museum is an educational institution that acquires, conserves, and maintains exhibits, displays, or collections related to local heritage. Galleries usually concentrate on showing arts and local craft traditions.

### **Wapsipinicon Mill Museum**

100 1st St W, Independence, Iowa  
[www.buchanancountyhistory.com](http://www.buchanancountyhistory.com)

The Wapsipinicon Mill, a National Register site, links the pioneer farmer to agricultural modernization and tells the miller's story of how the mill served to provide the early settler with processed food and then feed for livestock. Visitors can view original 1870 millstones, belt and bucket elevators, grain storage bins, shafts and gearing, milling machines and other equipment, plus photo exhibits, interactive exhibits and agricultural artifacts from pioneer days.

### **Carl & Mary Koehler History Center**

615 1st Ave SE, Cedar Rapids, Iowa  
[www.historycenter.org](http://www.historycenter.org)

This county historical museum interprets Linn County's agricultural history from prehistoric occupation to rural farming communities to urban immigration, manufacturing, and food production.

## Parks and Nature Centers

A nature center is an educational facility aimed at teaching visitors about the natural aspects of local heritage – in particular, the ways in which humans affect and influence the environment and natural systems. Parks may feature outstanding geological, ecological, or scenic features in the local community.

### Fossil & Prairie Park Preserve and Center

1227 215th St., Rockford, Iowa

[www.fossilcenter.com](http://www.fossilcenter.com)

You might wonder what a fossil bed has to teach visitors about farming. But the Fossil and Prairie Park Preserve and Center gives visitors the opportunity to wander through an example of the native prairie that made Iowa an agricultural leader. In addition, the beehive kilns of the Rockford Brick & Tile Company interpret the ways the brick and tile industry helped expand agriculture.

## Scenic Routes

Scenic routes offer guided or self-guided interpretive experiences that educate visitors about local heritage while they enjoy beautiful scenery. They can include a variety of heritage-related experiences linked by a common theme, and showcase exceptional or distinctive features that exemplify local heritage.

### Barn Quilts of Grundy County

705 F Ave., Grundy Center, Iowa

[www.grundycountya.com/Quilt\\_Website/indexbq.htm](http://www.grundycountya.com/Quilt_Website/indexbq.htm)

The Barn Quilts of Grundy County, a unique form of public art, was a project conceived as a way to bring visitors off the newly completed Highway 20 to promote tourism in Grundy County. Designed to highlight the rural, agricultural heritage of the county, as well as the important folk art of quilting, the Barn Quilt Loop features large patchwork quilt blocks that have been painted onto the sides of barns and other farm buildings in the area.

## Sustainable Tourism

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It's wonderful to know how many heritage sites are providing exciting, innovative interpretive programs to their visitors. What's even better is to realize that organizations like SSNHA look at the big picture to ensure that heritage tourism activities across the region remain sustainable. Heritage tourism is often thought of as a means for economic development, but that is only part of the equation. Sustainable tourism means that benefits accrue not just economically, but also to the environment and to the social fabric of the region — what is sometimes called “the triple bottom line.” Tourism that destroys, threatens, or diminishes the very resources that bring people to a region is decidedly not sustainable.

Several organizations have established criteria for what makes tourism sustainable. The National Geographic Society publishes “The Untold Story: A Travel Writer’s Guide to Sustainable Tourism and Destination Stewardship”. It's meant as a tool for travel writers to assess if an area's tourism industry is managed sustainably. But it is a handy guide to anyone looking at the sustainability in the realms of aesthetics, environmental stewardship, interpretation, tourism management, and community interaction. It is available at [www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable/pdf/sustainable\\_writers\\_manual.pdf](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable/pdf/sustainable_writers_manual.pdf).

The Global Sustainable Tourism Council also publishes criteria for measuring sustainability. These can be found at [new.gstcouncil.org/resource-center/gstc-criteria](http://new.gstcouncil.org/resource-center/gstc-criteria). Finally, there is a home-grown, Iowa-based organization, Sustainable Tourism and Environment Program (STEP), based at the University of Northern Iowa, that promotes tourism planning and policy and supports sustainable practices and beneficial social, cultural, and environmental relationships in the tourism industry. More information is available at [www.uni.edu/step/index.html](http://www.uni.edu/step/index.html).

## Acknowledgements

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Produced by  
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PO Box 2845  
Waterloo, Iowa 50704-2845

*with the assistance of*  
Interpretive Solutions, Inc.  
West Chester, Pennsylvania

We are thankful and indebted to the Lancaster County Planning Commission in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for the use of many ideas from its publication called Telling Our Stories: An Interpretation Manual for Heritage Partners, published in 2007. Their manual served as a model for this workbook. We are truly grateful for their willingness to share lessons learned.

Manual designed by Ben Rendall  
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### **Our Mission Statement**

SSNHA preserves and tells the story of American agriculture through partnerships and activities that celebrate the land, people and communities of the area.



*Funded in part by the National Park Service*