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ABSTRACT

Spring Mill Pioneer Village illustrates the problems inherent to most heritage sites. Much is known about the history of the original village, yet there remains a strong disagreement among interpreters and park administration as to the time period the village should portray and the degree of place specificity versus generality. While time and place representations can be more concrete through visual materials (signage, brochures), sites that have interpreters, or actors, add another dimension to the experience. This research presents some of the ways in which site agents contest representations of history and the implications this may have for tourist experience.

Keywords: *history, heritage, contestation, representation, communication.*

INTRODUCTION

Within both the theoretical and development communities of tourism studies, much attention has been drawn to issues of representation and communication of history. From the physical construction of sites to their staff, many concerns surface over time and place representation, not to mention narrative communication. Perhaps the most contested tourism sites are heritage sites, as these are sites that convey selective aspects of history to a particular audience.

Spring Mill Pioneer Village is one such site that is currently experiencing contestation among its site agents as to its representation of time and place. The village lies within the boundaries of Spring Mill State Park, which is located in the south-central region of the state. The village today is a reproduction of the original village of Spring Mill and contains a mixture of repaired, reconstructed, and replica structures (Rickly-Boyd 2009). The park employs eight heritage interpreters who work in the village – a weaver, miller, blacksmith, leatherworker, potter, gardener, quilter, and carpenter – as well as numerous volunteers. These interpreters dress in "old-fashioned" clothing and demonstrate various crafts throughout the village. Open from April through October, tourists experience the village through self-guided tours. While much is known about the history of the original village, there remains a strong disagreement among interpreters and park administration as to the time period the village should portray and the degree to which site details should be accurate to the original village setting. All in all, there are two distinct contests playing out at Spring Mill Pioneer Village – one over time period representation and a second over generality versus place specificity. In terms of the time period there are three arguments – "the 1800s", 1830s-40s, and 1863. As far as place representation, the site's agents are divided; some want the site to represent the original village, while others wish to provide a general pioneer community. Of course these two categories of contestation are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they are linked in terms of representation and have implications for the communication of the site's narrative and its credibility to tourists.

LITERATURE

Broadly, the heritage tourism industry is defined as any "activity by tourists in a space where historic artifacts are presented" (Poria et al. 2004, p.19, citing Garrod & Fyall 2001; see also Ashworth 1994). The heritage industry, therefore, utilizes historic objects or locations as a means of experiencing the past (Ashworth 1994; Brett 1996; Timothy 1997; Edson 2004). However, as Lowenthal (1996) has demonstrated, history, heritage, and the past are quite different (see also Edson 2004). Moreover, the past, Lowenthal (1985) suggests, is always understood from the perspective of the present. Heritage sites, therefore, function as conduits between the past and present. The past is experienced as a function of the present through symbolic cues and narrative communication. While all tourism sites construct narratives; heritage landscapes are, in particular, texturally rich. Heritage sites generally provide tourists with metanarratives of national significance, but they can also tell localizing narratives of place uniqueness by illustrating examples of local community provenance (Timothy 1997; Ashworth and Tunbridge 2004; Metro-Roland 2009). While sites provide tourists with a narrative of place, tourists ultimately form their own narratives about heritage sites. This is a "co-construction" (Chronis 2005); just as sites construct place and time narratives, so too do tourists choose which pieces to accept and which to include in their narratives of the site. Therefore it is the tourists' levels of familiarity that will form the basis of contestation with the historical narratives provided by the site's agents (Chronis 2005). Ashworth (1994, p. 24), argues that a successful tourism product is, "an interpretation of the local historical experience in so far as it can be related to, and incorporated in, the historical experience of the visitor." Narratives are negotiated, shaped, and transformed through personal experience and interaction with landscape; it is not restricted to a "cognitive process… [n]either is it solely a visual experience" (Chronis 2005, p.395), rather it is facilitated by all senses and sensations experienced in a landscape.

METHODOLOGY

Spring Mill State Park receives about 600,000 visitors annually; according to park officials, an estimated 90% of these visitors come to see the village. Likewise, 85% of village tourists surveyed stated that touring the village was their primary motivation for visiting the park. The village was established in 1815 with the construction of its first gristmill. It reached its peak in the 1830-40s selling goods throughout southern Indiana and shipping others down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers as far as New Orleans. However by the 1890s the village sat virtually abandoned as a result of being bypassed by two railroad lines, inefficient technology compared to contemporary steam power, and the impact of the Civil War which blocked southern markets. Preservation, establishment of the state park, and reconstruction of the village began in the early 1900s.

This study is qualitative in nature, and therefore, employs multiple methods to examine the complexity of social processes at work in the representation and communication of Spring Mill history. Observation of the village, as a participatory tourist in the village's self-guided and interpreter guided tours as well as distance observation of tourists, continued throughout this investigation. During the summer of 2007 (June through August) observation resulted in 604 photographs. This period of continual observation allowed the researcher to become acquainted with the village and its staff, and therefore report on changes and disparities in their narrative communication of village history. In order to understand the official narrative of Spring Mill textual analysis of brochures, signage, and historical documents was used. In addition, landscape analysis interrogated the visual representation of village history. Interviews with park staff,

administration, and heritage interpreters provided access to the agent's perspectives on the site, its narrative, and communication of this story. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for follow-up questions and provide a more conversation-like, informal flow (Dunn 2000; Leedy and Ormrod 2005). In addition, audio recording was used for capturing the interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Walking along the path toward the village, one passes a sign that informs visitors the village represents "life in the 1800s". The park, however, has set a more specific time period for the village, 1863. But this was not always the case. Until the mid-1990s the village represented the 1830s, the most successful years of the village's history. According to the park administration and heritage interpreters, this date was changed to allow "more interpretation." (interviewee 10) By shifting the time period to 1863 the park could also host re-enactments of Civil War-type events. This change happened fairly rapidly, however, with virtually no adjustments to the village structures. The only alterations were in the heritage interpreters' costumes and the dyes used in the craft items. Neither the buildings' facades, nor interior furnishings were updated. Several interpreters expressed dissatisfaction with the village represented as just one year. Statements such as, "what is difficult about this village is that the year makes it frozen in time … but that is not the history of the village." (interviewee 11) expressed such sentiments. As another interpreter noted, "this place is more than just a date, it is the stories that make it special" (interviewee 3). There is a general consensus on how the heritage interpreters deal with this mixture of "updates" to the village's time period. Most interpreters commented that they "tell the story of the village" (interviewee 5); they do third person interpretation, which allows them to narrate the events of the village from 1815 to the 1890s. While the administration has chosen 1863 as the village's represented time period, the heritage interpreters contest this by telling a more encompassing story of the village, which in turns, helps them to compensate for the inconsistencies in the village.

Interestingly, time is not the only point of contestation in the representation of pioneer life at Spring Mill Pioneer Village, so too is place. There are mixed views from both the heritage interpreters and the park administration as to whether the village represents the former Spring Mill village or "a general pioneer community" (interviewee 10). This contestation over place representation in the village is not resolved through the introductory marker either. The entering tourist reads that this is a "restored 19th century village", which makes the village seem more general - it could be any 19th century village. The marker also notes, "this community prospered until the late 1800s". This statement is specific to this location, but for the tourist who is unfamiliar with the history of Spring Mill, this statement does not clarify the significance of *this* place, as many pioneer communities prospered until the late 1800s. Those who feel the village should represent, "any pioneer village in the 1800s" (interviewee 10) support their perspective by noting the multitude of interpreters in the village. Not all of these people (for example, leatherworker) had a shop at Spring Mill, but some pioneer villages in the 1800s did. By presenting "any village" (interviewee 6) of the 1800s, Spring Mill Pioneer Village can offer more interpreters and demonstrations. On the other hand, a more accurate representation of the original village provides the potential to petition to have the site placed on the national registry of historic sites, and therefore legitimacy of the site's historical significance (interviewee 1). Contestation over place representation does not exhibit the dissent of time representation in communication of the village's narrative. The fact that the site is called "Spring Mill Pioneer

Village" accounts for either perspective an interpreter takes – telling the narrative of Spring Mill or a pioneer village.

CONCLUSION

The representation and communication of history at Spring Mill Pioneer Village has revealed a unique disparity among the perspectives of park administrators and village staff. While the administration has set a distinct time period, place representation is much more ambiguous. Moreover, strict boundaries have not been set as to the heritage interpreters' communication of history, which allows them to narrate the site according to their own perspective. Therefore, each interpreter is uniquely selective in their communication of history, suggesting that what is actually being presented is heritage. The site's time and space ambiguity also adds to its symbolic value for the tourist, as it leaves the tourists open to create their own narratives about the site. The village is general enough to contribute to the national narratives of pioneer and frontier life that built America, but for those who know the local narratives, the village is also specific enough to represent the former community that actually existed here.

Spring Mill Pioneer Village illustrates the problems inherent to most heritage sites. While time and place representations can be more concretely founded through visual materials (signage, brochures, landscape cues), sites that have interpreters, or actors, add another dimension to the experience. Communication of history by interpreters may not always correspond to the official narrative. This research presents some of the ways in which site agents contest representations of history and the implications this may have for tourist experience.

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