

Researching the Contemporary Population of a 19th Century Museum Village: Visitor Services at Old Sturbridge Village

David M. Simmons
Old Sturbridge Village
Sturbridge, Massachusetts

The quietude of a nearly abandoned crossroads neighborhood in the northern reaches of Worcester County, Massachusetts is broken by the scraping of trowels, the rustling of sifters, and the lively conversation of archaeologists engaged in the midst of discovery. Hunkered down upon the homelot enveloping a surviving residence of this once-thriving community, these researchers systematically reveal the stratigraphic sequence of the site. Embedded in this three-dimensional web of relationships are the material expressions of the day-to-day world of a blacksmith, his wife and daughters—discrete episodes from construction activity to the wholesale discard of broken dishes, together with broader patterns of site use, including trafficway location, and repeated sweepings of refuse through open doorways. All of these combine to document the behaviors, preferences, and attitudes of those, who, perhaps unknowingly, left their mark here more than a century and a half ago.

The house, like the strata of its yard spaces, is subject to the same rigorous analysis of structural evolution, embellishment, and use recovered within its oft-changed fabric. Study of surviving household furnishings expand our knowledge of the appearance and arrangement of interior spaces. Painstaking dissection and statistical manipulation of the accounts of blacksmith Emerson Bixby provide a new look at the shape and texture of his economic network as it once unfolded within, and extended beyond, Barre Four Corners. Wider examination of probate, school district, and Census records ground the study in a broader context.

Each of these parallel avenues of inquiry—archaeological, architectural, material, documentary—inform and enhance each other. Points of dissonance provide opportunity for re-evaluation, and new, more complete interpretations are forged (Simmons, Stachiw, & Worrell, 1993). Our enriched understanding of the Bixby family is melded with other studies which flow from artifact to site, through neighborhood, community and region. Together, they create a “thick description”—an ethnography of the cultural system which guided the thoughts and actions of those who lived in rural, central New England during the 1830s (Geertz, 1973). This ongoing, extensive program of research undergirds and authenticates the rebirth and public presentation of that culture at the largest living history museum in the northeast—Old Sturbridge Village (see Krugler, 1991).

Nestled upon the former site of an 18th century farm in south central Massachusetts, the Museum is comprised of more than 40 structures which join the Bixby house in a setting typical of the towns once dotting the central New England countryside in the 1830s. Moved from within the region, the buildings are appropriately furnished from rich collections of household and commercial items, tools, and accoutrement, and are set amidst field, garden, homelot, and wood; collections of back-bred livestock and flora enrich the setting. The Village is peopled by historically-costumed staff who, informed by a broad research base, enact myriad daily, seasonal, and celebratory activities that once unfolded within the lives and upon the cultural landscape of early 19th century New Englanders. The staff themselves extend our knowledge by their participation in this virtual "living laboratory" through kinetic interaction with reproductions of period artifacts; the efficient swing of a grain cradle, or the stacking and firing of a kiln of redware, for example, are historically undocumented motions and activities that are recoverable—testable and repeatable—within this environment (Worrell, 1985).

Herein lies the stage for dynamic interchange with almost 500,000 visitors each year. Significantly, it is they who, en masse, truly populate this other-world town, painstakingly revived through study of vestiges of a bygone culture; and by turn of tide, it is they who, as well, become the objects of our study.

"The 1830s are only an hour away," harkened recent billboard copy off the major western artery out of Boston. The cultural distance between the confines of the museum and 20th century life is, indeed, remarkable. For nearly a half century, the museum's visitors have found themselves entwined in discovery. Like archaeologists, they are explorers of a world whose technological, socioeconomic, and belief systems may seem as foreign as those of Trobriand islanders or the Anasazi. The visitors are outsiders, looking in upon our closest approximation of the everyday affairs of 1830s New England. Appropriately known as "interpreters," our costumed staff are the cultural intermediaries. In effect, the visitors become ethnographers, and the interpreters become informants—not informants who, in the purest sense, are grounded in a single cultural milieu, but ones capable of bridging between extremes.

Not all aspects of our museum's mission-defined presentation are immediately approachable: physical barriers impose the distance necessary to afford preservation and protection of collections. Cognitive distance and dissonance, however, may be addressed and ameliorated. Rare is the visitor who has experienced travel to a distant, if not exotic, culture. Current advertising copy: "The experience of a lifetime," and "Adventures your family has never had before," ring true to our first-time visitors as they sort out how best to approach the experience before them. "Where do I begin? What's the best route? Will interpreters respond to my questions from an 1830s or 20th century perspective? Will my kids enjoy it?"

Helping to sort it out and facilitate a positive museum experience is one of the charges of the Department of Visitor Services at Old Sturbridge Village. At the doorstep to the institution, Visitor Services staff are most often the first and last points of contact during the course of a visit. They are the guideposts from, and back to, the present. Department staff oversee ticketing, signage, maps, formal orientation, event registration, and coordinate with other departments in areas ranging from brochure distribution to issues of access. Paramount in all this is an embedded sense of value and service to the customer (see Albrecht, 1992).

Recent improvement in many of these areas has been generated through input by both the institution and the visitor. As an example, introduction of an automated ticketing system has increased speed of visitor entry, while offering flexibility in defining categories of admission and strengthening accountability controls. Importantly, it has also allowed us to more effectively monitor the museum's marketing initiatives through tracking coupon redemption and capturing our visitors' zip and country codes.

Another notable improvement is a newly introduced visitor map guide. The color guide replaces both a folded, monochrome map, and separate, printed handouts listing the day's activities. All information is now combined in a single format. As an aid to wayfinding, structures appear in their true color. Moreover, the three major areas of the village are, themselves, color coded. These colors are repeated in exhibit names, in exhibit descriptions on the map's reverse, and in the computer-generated daily listings of special activities for each area. Keyed codes have been expanded, most important elements of standard messaging have been afforded greater prominence, and automated over-printing allows the map guide to note last-minute activity changes, as well as to promote registration for the evening's events. All told, the new map is a success: it has increased institutional efficiency, while offering visitors a format which advances how, where, and when to explore various components of the Village before them. Visitors seem immediately engaged with the map. They are watching the orientation program in greater numbers than in recent memory, they are signing up for special events, and, while there remains an inability among many folk to be able to read a map, our visitors seem to be navigating a bit more effectively.

Advances in areas such as these—ones which will substantially improve the quality of the entire museum experience—are the watchword of the Visitor Services Department. We regularly hear, as well, about areas beyond our purview which also greatly influence visitor comfort and ease: for example, restrooms, benches, the grounds, and food service. While such comments are often verbal, they have also, for a number of years, been codified in written comment cards. These are one of a number of expressions of feedback which help define areas for experiential improvement, including the breaking of cognitive barrier and distance between our public and our historical presentation.

While the institution has, for some 15 years, engaged outside marketing researchers in a variety of focused inquiries, the past year-and-a-half has seen visitor evaluation and audience research move within the institution, to the Department of Visitor Services. In this nascent effort, we are beginning to measure our success at both marketing and delivering a unique experience. Toward that end, we are applying to the visitor the techniques, approaches, and rigor that have long been employed in the historical research efforts which are at the core of the museum's mission. Operationally, this has both increased efficiency and heightened the quality of results.

On a daily basis, the admission ticketing system provides a census, by ticket category and coupon redemption, of the visitors who populate the re-created Village. Moreover, all paying general admission visitors are asked for their zip code or country of origin. This significant databank provides critical feedback, by discrete zip, or, in aggregate, by county, Metropolitan Statistical Area, Area of Dominant Influence, state, or country. In this way, for example, we are able to test against last year's baseline the efficacy of recent television spots in certain markets, and, through international tracking, are able to see that the state's international tourism campaign is reaping some rewards for us as we, like the greater Boston area, see increases in visitors from Great Britain and Germany (Sit, 1993, July 2).

Like archaeological test probes, which both randomly and selectively provide stratigraphic windows on areas across a site, Quality of Experience Surveys, administered by staff on peak season weekends and holidays, have provided snapshot views of visitor assessment of their experience in areas ranging from program to infrastructure. While the quality of our living history presentation and interpretive knowledge has shone brightly in these responses, inconsistency has surfaced in some areas—for example, the cleanliness of restrooms. We have, as consequence, expanded quality assurance controls.

Written questionnaires systematically administered to segments of our visiting population, like the careful collection or harvesting of ceramics from an exposed surface, offer a synchronic look at a variety of attributes. Unlike the mute artifact whose meaning may be shrouded beyond explication in such analysis, however, attitudes and feelings of respondents are direct and to the fore. We have profited from questionnaires to families, who tendered newspaper coupons toward museum admission, and to a random sample of our current membership. We look forward to completing the statistical analyses of these two instruments. This fall, we examine a weakness in membership holding power through questions addressed to a large sample of lapsed members. We, as well, shall initiate a longer-term incursion into general visitor responses and socioeconomic, demographic, and psychographic profile as we begin a year-long, on-site exit survey program.

Comment cards and letters, like historical correspondence, provide more qualitative measures. Focus groups among certain of our lapsed members,

like oral history interviews, substantially increase our depth of understanding at the affective, individual level. Potential contributors, as well, in this vein are some additional measures which have been contemplated. These include an updated community perception study, and two untested, yet potentially powerful formats: ethnographic interviews of selected visitor "informants" through which we seek their "emic" understanding of the museum; and open-forum meetings, where visitors have the opportunity to meet and discuss issues with key museum personnel (Spradley, 1979).

In our multi-tiered endeavor, both as executed and as planned, we heed the words of our former Director of Research and Collections, who cautioned: "No individual and no event, much less any cultural process, ever existed within the confines of an academic discipline" (Worrell, 1980). This we second and also amend: No individual (read visitor), and no event, much less any cultural process in which he or she is engaged, will ever be fully understood within the confines of a uni-dimensional approach. The story is broader, deeper, infinitely more complex, and it begs for diversity of measure and analysis. Mindful of bias, we face the challenge of weighing, evaluating, and interpreting one measure against the next, as we seek pattern, understanding, and, mindful of mission, an action plan. This we have opportunity and obligation to test and evaluate not only in synchronic fashion, but diachronic, as well.

Just as the 1830s, with its significant shift in transportation, technology, and social fabric, was a decade of upheaval in the lives of everyday, rural New Englanders, so, too, are the 1990s unfolding a web of changes which enmesh us all and over which we exert little control. Notable among a host of trends, against a backdrop of economic downturn and restructure, are a population which is at once aging, increasingly pluralistic, defined by smaller-sized, two-wage-earner, and, at times fractured familial units, all of whom are bombarded by a plethora of new technologies competing for precious leisure time. These are among the factors cited by a Chicago economist as spelling flat demand for museums in the years ahead (Gerritson, 1989). And these are some of the key markers which demand our attention as we plan for the future visitor.

It is not insignificant that a feeling of comfort and ease in the surroundings topped the list of leisure criteria anticipated in the museum visits of respondents in our coupon-user survey. This is strongly echoed, as well, in the response of our own members. It is clear that attention to the physical and psychological comfort of those within our domain is significant to a positive museum experience, and will potentially translate into repeat visits and, through the word-of-mouth spiral, to audience building. Toward this end, Old Sturbridge Village is in the midst of long-range planning to reshape its threshold area—the main articulation between visitor and museum. Significant improvement to these facilities and their circulation patterns—movement in and out of the museum, shopping,

eating, access to restrooms, orientation, and significantly expanded changing gallery exhibitions—will strengthen the quality of the visitor experience (Dober, Lidsky, Craig, & Associates, 1993).

Such an expansion of the threshold area would, in particular, increase opportunity for those older visitors—individually or in tour groups—who now find it difficult to manage the significant amount of walking entailed in a visit to Old Sturbridge Village. And it would also allow us to extend the time frame of part of the museum's operations—galleries, theater, shop, and eating facilities. Movement of our aging population within the historic environment will continue to be a challenge, and we need to be prepared to meet the needs of this group in a fashion which is sympathetic to the special world we re-create. Modern intrusion would not do. As well, we need to continue to increase access for disabled visitors. This is already well on-track through the established efforts of an access advisory council, access coordinator, and access plan (AAM, 1992). Continued increase in some sectors of international visitation, which now comprises nearly ten percent of our attendance, may necessitate the creation of foreign language map guides beyond the five we now offer, and this we shall monitor closely.

Another area for review is that of formal orientation to the Village experience. Increasing the flow of information available to the visitor, beyond that already in the map guide and multi-image slide orientation program, is on our short-term agenda. New technologies, such as interactive, touch-screen video disc, are attractive in their ability to facilitate individualized pathways to discovery of the 1830s, but questions of location and scaling give us some cause for concern.

In planning for all these endeavors, we shall include the visitor in the huddle, the embrace. This we shall do through diversity of measure, designed to provide valid, reliable data on those of the present, in-house staff using approaches proven in our study of the past, in order to provide better service to those who, in future years, will explore the 1830s as revived at Old Sturbridge Village.

References

- AAM (1992). *The accessible museum: Model programs of accessibility for disabled and older people*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums.
- Albrecht, K. (1992). *The only thing that matters: Bringing the power of the customer into the center of your business*. New York: Harper Business.
- Dober, Lidsky, Craig and Associates, Inc. (1993). *Threshold area plan*. Unpublished report, on file at Old Sturbridge Village.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- Gerritson, S. L. (1989). Is the boom over? *Museum News*, 68(5), 62-64.

-
- Krugler, J. D. (1991). Behind the public presentations: Research and scholarship at living history museums of early America. *The William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Series*, Vol. XLVIII, 347-386.
- Simmons, D. M., Stachiw, M. O., & Worrell, J. E. (1993). The total site matrix: Strata and structure at the Bixby Site. In E. Harris and M. Brown, (Eds.), *Practices of Archaeological Stratigraphy*. New York: Academic Press.
- Sit, M. (1993, July 2). Tourism taking off. *The Boston Globe*, p. 57.
- Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Worrell, J. (1980). Scars upon the earth: Physical evidence of dramatic social change at the Stratton Tavern. In J. Moore (Ed.), *Research Reports Number 19*. Amherst, MA: Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts.
- Worrell, J. (1985). Recreating ceramic production and tradition in a living history laboratory. In S. Turnbaugh, (Ed.), *Domestic Pottery of the Northeastern United States, 1625-1850*. New York: Academic Press.