

# **CONTACT**

## **The Southwest Region Interpreter's Newsletter**

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### **INTERPRETING INDIANS AND INDIAN CULTURES**

*A Cross-Cultural Approach*

**". . . for so long we have gone without having  
people hear our side of the history."**

**June Greene, Nez Perce NHP**

## THOUGHTS ON CROSS-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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### Selena

She spoke softly, but there was still anger as she spoke. "If we had fought, at least we would have a reservation."

Since there was no way to prove her age, she did not begin to receive Social Security until her son turned sixty-two.

And so here she was, among the last of the Atsugewi, a northern California tribe that once lived on the forested slopes of Lassen Peak and land to the north. Perhaps five feet tall, Selena possessed the blackest of long, long hair. Even in her late 70s, so we guessed, she was attractive. Not in polish and chrome and physical perfection, for she was plump, but in demeanor, kindness, and modesty.

Widowed and discreetly poor, Selena lived quietly for many years alongside the road north of Lassen Volcanic National Park, largely unknown to the travelers who sped by on Highway 89.

Then, in a stroke of insight, the park's Chief Interpreter creatively crafted a one-of-a-kind position description, and hired Selena as a seasonal naturalist. Selena would play a special role.

Each summer day Selena would drive to the visitor center at Manzanita Lake, quietly walk into the museum, largely unnoticed in her Western clothes, and reappear attired in a deerskin dress lightly decorated with beads. Selena had used fresh deer brains to tan the hide in the tradition of her tribe, then she had patiently chewed the skin until it was soft and pliable and the color of cream. Her dress was as original as the earth, a creation of her own hands and heritage.

Twice a day, in her leathern attire, Selena would seat herself on a bearskin-covered log, and we traditional naturalists would join her for a conversation about her life on the mountains. Visitors would gather on

adjacent logs and listen to stories, always unpredictable in the directions they took, about the 1914 eruption of Lassen Peak, which she had witnessed as a young woman, about Atsugewi child raising, recipes, the use of medicinal herbs, or the treatment of her people at the hand of Whites. And all the while Selena would weave intricately designed baskets from the tiny, split roots of ponderosa pine.

The people loved her. And year after year parents would bring their children, friends would bring friends, so they too could experience a rare vision of life on Earth.

Years later, after I left the park, word came that Selena had passed away. It was perhaps her 83rd year. But still it hurt, for she was a special lady. And with her went most of the remaining language of the Atsugewi. A unique culture was all the less with her passing, and the world lost some of its human richness.

Boo-noo-koo-e'e-men-orra. Sunset Woman. Selena LaMarr. Even her Western names were beautiful.

Glen Kaye, SWRO

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### Culture And Interpretation: Potential Points Of Conflict



The national parks were created, and are preserved, according to the values embedded in American society. However, the values of the majority are not fully shared by groups whose

lifeways are an expression of other American cultures.

Historically, park interpreters have attempted to answer the questions the

greatest number of visitors ask. Until recently, interpretation in the parks was designed almost exclusively to meet the demands of a majority rule philosophy especially predominant during the time when the "melting pot" theory of the evolution of American culture was most in vogue. This philosophy assumed that all individuals would blend in; their historical stream and cultural beliefs would add to a new and different whole. In this environment, a single interpretational perspective was considered sufficient. But history has dramatically failed to produce the "melted" society the theorists predicted.

Instead, we are faced with a fascinating pluralism held together by an overarching social and political system, but made up of a strong and persistent diversity of cultures. These include the regional Anglo subcultures and the long lasting cultural traditions of American Indian, Hispanic, Asian, African-American, and other groups found in the United States. They are multiple audiences and interpretive contributors which create a need for the NPS to diversify its approach, to aggressively pursue interpretation that takes into account the differences between the cultures that are being interpreted and the groups to whom that interpretation is being directed. In response to this issue, we conducted an ethnographic research project at Wupatki National Monument during the summer of 1989, with the help of American Indian, Hispanic, and Black anthropology students. Part of our purpose was to discover the questions visitors ask at archaeological parks in order to help us understand the interests of all of the culturally diverse audiences that make use of the national parks, as well as people whose ancestors are being presented to park visitors.

The students and I spent several hundred hours observing and interviewing visitors. We recorded the questions they would like to have answered about archaeological ruins in general, and Wupatki in particular. This allowed us to explore areas which members of various minority groups felt comfortable with, and areas of interpretation they found difficult or offensive. The following is a preliminary exploration of these topics.

### Culturally Positive Questions for Interpretation: The People and Their Lifestyles

Some visitor questions present little or no problem for culturally sensitive interpretation, and lead to positive outcomes. These questions allow an explanation of the skills and intelligence of prehistoric peoples and support the development of pride in American Indian history, which is often poorly represented in school text books. Some of the questions commonly asked in parks can be used to develop both culturally sensitive and very interesting interpretations which go beyond a narrower view of human accomplishments.

One major topic that interests visitors is the lifestyle of the prehistoric peoples represented in archaeological parks. Visitors wanted to know about their physical characteristics: what they looked like, how tall they were, and how long they lived. They asked about subsistence: what the people ate, where they found water, how they got their food. Many people wanted to know about cycles of daily life: where, when, and how the people found game, if they hunted; and when, where, and how their crops were planted and harvested, if they farmed. They also wanted to know how the different kinds of foods were cooked. Others wanted to know if environmental factors (plants, animals, and climate) were the same or very different from those which exist at the park today.

Visitors were surprised by the technological knowledge that went into prehistoric construction and wanted more information about the architectural history of ruins and how many people they housed at any given time. Men, in particular, were interested in learning about construction methods. They wanted to know how the stones were shaped, how the walls were laid, what was used for mortar, and the types of tools used in the construction. The women seemed more interested in domestic activities. Where did people do various tasks, and how were the rooms set up for comfort and for useful activities? The women also made more comments about aesthetics and were interested in how people created beauty in their lives.

Visitors wanted to know who the people at Wupatki were related to, whom they traded with, and whether or not they engaged in warfare. They also wanted to know why the people picked the particular building sites they did, instead of nearby sites that looked equally interesting or useful. They were curious where the Wupatki people went when they abandoned the ruin, and why that abandonment occurred. Focusing interpretation on these questions not only answers questions people want to know, it also provides a positive forum for expressing the values, beliefs, and accomplishments of prehistoric peoples and their cultural and spiritual descendants.

#### **Problematic Questions and Difficult Issues: Ceremonies, Sacred Places, and Burials**

It is safe to assume that discussions of religion, ceremonies, and other sacred topics carry a great deal of potential for offending living people. Some of the common questions asked in this realm include, "What kind of rituals did they perform, what were their religious beliefs, and where can their sacred places be found (many of which are also sacred to living peoples)?" These issues can be dealt with in a positive manner, but should be very carefully explored with living groups in the area before they are incorporated into interpretation to the public.

In addition to religion, Anglos are fascinated with burials. The Wupatki trail guide describes an infant burial in one room, a commentary which triggers more questions than any other. People want to know where other burials are located, and they want to know more about the beliefs of the people that would cause them to bury infants in their living rooms. Many American Indian groups are disturbed by the Anglo cultural interest in displaying sacred objects, burial goods, and human remains. These preferences should be taken into account when developing interpretive materials.

This brief summary of visitor questions indicates some differences in cultural interests and ideals. Today, the NPS must speak to a more diversified audience than ever before, and must speak from the vantage point of multiple cultures.

Hopefully, these findings will be useful in supporting this process.

Robert T. Trotter, II, Northern Arizona University

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### **Custer Battlefield As A Symbol Of Cultural Differences**

Perhaps no unit in the National Park System evokes as much controversy as Custer Battlefield National Monument. Fought more than a century ago, the Battle of the Little Bighorn is a myriad of symbols to both red and white Americans -- heroism, brashness, honor, and tragedy. Park rangers have for more than a half-century endeavored to interpret to the public the meaning of the battle. But because the interpreters were mostly Anglos, bearing their particular cultural and historical bias, and the interpretive message was itself a product of the same culture, it is not surprising that the story they told was biased. It is also not surprising that the Indians didn't like it.

The park was established to pay homage to George A. Custer, the legendary commander of the Seventh Cavalry, and his fallen soldiers, with little regard to the Indian point of view or what they had accomplished there. During the Vietnam era, Custer was transformed in the minds of many from hero to villain. He, and the soldiers he led, became symbolic of America's guilt over its sorry treatment of American Indians. Custer Battlefield itself became an open sore in America's past that had not healed. Student protests over military involvement in Vietnam and the rising demand of minorities for equal rights spawned an awareness within the NPS for interpreting minority cultures.

Custer Battlefield, as did other NPS sites, began recruiting minorities and developing programs that focused on contributions made by minority groups or individuals. The park began hiring local Crow Indians to interpret the battle and discuss Indian culture. Despite the park's attempt to reverse the trend from an Anglo-dominated viewpoint to include Indian views, however, it continued to be plagued with interpretive and public relations problems.