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Loading Chekhov's Gun in 9-Times: The Fundamental Disconnect in Historical Interpretation

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Abstract

Thursday night brings into Gettysburg an avalanche of historians (both public and academic) to discuss the [Future of Civil War History](#) for a whole weekend. That means I'll be taking some annual leave from work and participating in a working-group investigating "Training Seasonal Historians in the Age of Holding the High Ground." It's still unclear who will be able to attend our panel thanks to sequestration and a [moratorium on NPS travel](#). Still, those of us who can make it will soldier on. [*excerpt*]

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Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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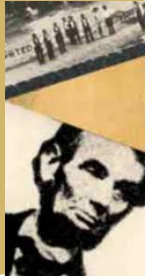
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Interpreting the Civil War

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Today's post is somewhat unique and calls for a different sort of introduction.

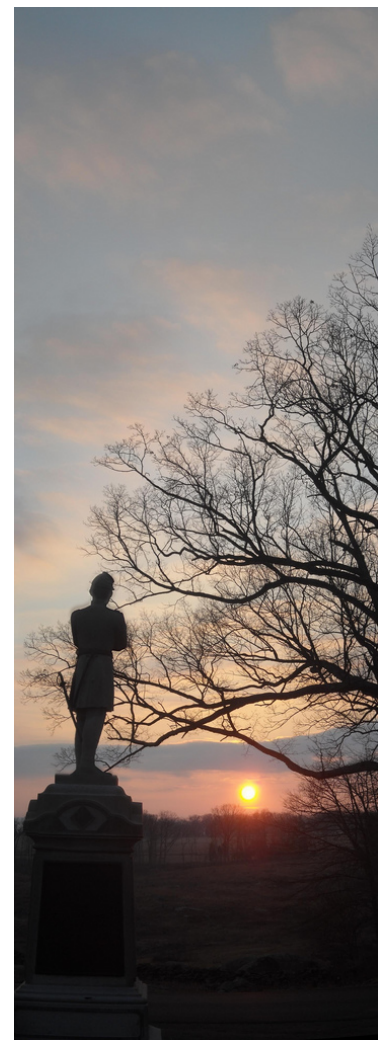
Thursday night brings into Gettysburg an avalanche of historians (both public and academic) to discuss the [Future of Civil War History](#) for a whole weekend. That means I'll be taking some annual leave from work and participating in a working-group investigating "Training Seasonal Historians in the Age of Holding the High Ground." It's still unclear who will be able to attend our panel thanks to sequestration and [a moratorium on NPS travel](#). Still, those of us who can make it will soldier on.

But I didn't want just the folks who find themselves in Gettysburg this weekend to join the conversation. So I'm posting a truncated version of my position piece for the working group. Some of it's a bit out there; I know my positions on how we could make visitors experience better can seem a bit fringe. Because it's a position piece, it's a bit longer than my typical blog post. But I think there's some interesting concepts here that need to see the light of day.

We *do* have a relevance problem in our Civil War sites. We're not speaking to America. Here are some of my thoughts on how we might start doing that...

Anton Chekhov, famed 19th Century Russian playwright, died of Tuberculosis in 1904. I like to envision Chekhov's parlor. I have no clue what his parlor looked like or where it even was. I would presume it was in Russia, or perhaps the Ukraine. In my mind, it looks like the set to his play *The Cherry Orchard* that my college theatre department put on while I was an undergrad. The shape of the room, though, doesn't matter.

What matters is that on the wall of Chekhov's parlor in my imagination, displayed prominently on one wall is *the absence* of a gun. It's not there. It is not neatly hanging on the wall. There is no fouling piece cradled from



two hooks. There aren't even two hooks from which to hang a gun at all. And (obviously) because it's not there, it's not loaded. It's not ready to be fired. The hammer is not cocked and waiting. Chekhov's parlor in my mind has a floating empty space on the wall precisely where a gun is not. There is no gun.

....

Seventy-five percent of National Park Service interpreters were classed as, "Walking Encyclopedias," in [a recent study by](#) Clemson University's Marc Stern and Virginia Tech's Robert Powell of personal-services interpretation. These types of interpreters were wholly, "focused on conveying a large volume of facts."

First and foremost, that is not intended as a positive assessment. Those words should sting. They should sting with all the weight of words hurled by a fourth grade bully at a book-toting, glasses-wearing pre-teen as he ambles down the hall of the school. Because in the end that's what those words mean: just like the classic stereotype of a nerd, the label, "Walking Encyclopedia," is not a damnation of knowledge but fundamental social skills. The "Walking Encyclopedia" Park Ranger is aloof, unreachable and unrelatable. They are principally not an effective communicator.

This class of primary interpreter identity, the report went on to show, correlated negatively with visitor outcomes. In short, the more like a "walking encyclopedia" an interpreter is, the less likely the visitors are to have a positive behavioral change because of a program.

Encyclopedias have one key goal, be they the traditional kind which sit on library shelves, the new digital encyclopedias of the internet age or the walking variety: imparting knowledge. But imparting knowledge as a goal is not necessarily the most effective tactic when it comes to interpretation. "Interpreters who expressed that a primary goal of their program was to increase the knowledge of the audience about their program's topic," the Stern & Powell report concluded, "achieved lower visitor experience and appreciation scores than others."

Setting out to teach facts and figures, information and events, tactics or biographies is simply not as effective as other more noble endeavours. When an interpreter intends to increase visitor knowledge, when she desires to cram facts into their heads, programs begin to become less effective on the whole. "Those aiming to change their audience's attitudes, appreciation, understanding, and/or desire to learn achieved more positive attitudinal outcomes," Stern and Powell continued, "Interpreters who explicitly aimed to increase their audience members' levels of concern or change their behavior were more likely to achieve more positive post-program behavioral change than others."

Knowledge is power, as the adage from Francis Bacon and 1990s Saturday Morning Cartoons exclaim, but it certainly is not the key predictor of success in Interpretation. Setting out to impart knowledge to visitors, setting out literally to teach them facts, is not as powerful or pure a motive as the myriad other options an interpreter has when stepping out into the field to give a program.

Yet one of the key metrics for success in both National Park Service interpretation training and beyond is the measurable outcome. These types of goals and objectives are typically phrased as a, "by the end of this tour/talk, visitors will be able to..." formulaic phrase. Often, the next few words are something akin to, "name three generals who commanded troops at Cold Harbor and explain their significance," or, "list two of the three major branches of the Army during the war and explain their utility."

....



A whole wall of Chekhov's Guns
/ [CC Chris O'Donnell](#)

When we let our primary selection criteria for guides or interpreters be raw knowledge and when we eschew the ability to process that story into a more powerful meaning, then we will find we have hired an extremely knowledgeable corps of interpreters who have not a lick of skill when it comes to the basics of storytelling or molding a narrative. We find ourselves with a workforce composed primarily of researchers and not communicators, primarily of brains without mouths, of minds without meaningful vocabularies. And the most apparent expression of this, in our Civil War landscapes, is the proliferation of interpretive programming which concerns itself heavily with the facts of the historical events at play, but nearly always ignores the broader scope of the narrative and its personal significances to the audience in front of us.

It seems one of our most desperate fears is that one of our visitors might know more than us. Culturally within

the National Park Service, we have a deep-set fear that we cannot possibly survive that type of scenario. So we arm our staffs, both temporary and permanent, to constantly play a game of 'stump the ranger.' We focus our seasonal training initiatives on cramming as many facts about our park narratives, predominately battle tactics and movements at Civil War sites, into a budding ranger's head instead of turning the focus toward technique and delivery methods. *It is not a sin* to turn to a visitor who is trying to engage in a game of 'stump the ranger' and say, "I'm sorry, I don't know the answer to that one. But here's a good book to try." And if that visitor persists, *it is not a sin* to tell them that an interpreter's job is not to know every fact, but simply to help visitors have meaningful experiences using the facts the interpreter does know.

Facts and knowledge are important, just not paramount. The raw stuff of history is wheat and chaff waiting to be separated at the mill of the mind. This much the interpreter shares with the historian. Both take the raw material of history, the documents, letters, censuses, notes scribbled in the heat of the moment, and do something with them. The historian runs all this through the grist mill of the mind, grinding the facts and figures against the wheel and bringing forth massive 50 lb. bags of fine ground flour. The historian captures every viable grain of wheat, leaves behind the chaff and crams the fine flour into the larders of knowledge. That's not a fault, it's simply a definition.

But History is to Interpretation as a fifty pound sack of flour is to a cupcake; they partly comprise the same basic materials, but one takes a lot weirder fine grain control. The interpreter, the truly skilled interpreter like Larsen, runs that same grist through the mill of the mind and comes out with 50 lb. bags of fine ground flour as well. But the interpreter looks for the one cup in that fifty pounds, the one scoop of flour that will make the perfect cupcake, a scoop that will make the most amazing meaning. Then they politely dump the majority of that flour into the hog trough, not to be used for human consumption but not decried as entirely useless.

Interpretation is a fundamentally different philosophy of research and construction. The Historian amasses the aggregate of the world's knowledge. The Interpreter combs the world's knowledge for one or two amazingly meaningful tastes.

What does this look like? The Interpreter digging through history seeks out resonances, not complete bodies of knowledge. Resonances are the echoes of the past forward into the human soul. So instead of worrying about learning an order of battle or a table of organization, the interpreter's job is to build a small but ever-growing toolkit of meanings and stories, small morsel ready to whip out and build greater meaning in a place.

So what does a future for Civil War Interpretation look like, then? First and foremost, it is not a rote listing of facts. It is not taking visitors onto a battlefield and endlessly explicating minute movements of company level bodies of troops with no sense of meaning or purpose. It needs to be something more, something truly interpretive. It needs to not focus on imparting facts as much as inspiring wonder and curiosity within the visiting public. It needs to be personally relevant to the whole American people, and not simply those visiting our sites. In short, it needs to be conveyed by Park Rangers who identify themselves as interpreters first and historians second, as servants always to the *meanings* of the past and not solely to the facts.

....

And so we return to that first damnation of Stern & Powell's report: the Walking Encyclopedia. This is the ever flowing font of knowledge. It is not so much a font as a fire hose, spewing out a constant, blistering stream of water. This is our primary character trait as interpretive park rangers at National Parks. We gather our crowd near the fire hydrant that says, "Ranger Programs Begin Here," hook up a hose and kindly ask them to drink, before open the nozzle on them at full bore. And the rules of narrative have an answer for the Walking Encyclopedia as well.

In a letter to fellow playwright Aleksandr Lazarev in 1889, Anton Chekhov noted about exactly how much detail he intended to include in a play. "One must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it," Chekhov mused. Muscovite businessman and art collector Sergei Shchukin purportedly remembered an even more descriptive maxim from Chekhov in his own memoir: "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there." The gun is detail. If it will never go off, it is simply an adornment on the wall. It is a distraction for the audience. Hand the gun on the wall and someone, even if it is just one mind sitting in the balcony, will forget that the entire rest of the play is happening and wait for the flash and the bang.

The literary principle of Chekhov's Gun is one antidote in a medicine case of many waiting to be applied like a poultice to Civil War interpretation. Does this or that fact contribute to understand? Does it lend meaning? Does it throw an amazing light on a truly meaningful opportunity for the visitor to connect with this place, with the real? No? Were you just including it to show the depth of knowledge you have and nothing else? Lose it! Don't hand the gun on the wall if it will never go off. Don't establish where a man is from if you never bring it up again? Did this soldier have four children? Was he a carpenter? Are you going to do something with those facts more than just hang them on the wall and forget them? Will you churn them into meaning later on? If not, don't go to the bother of hanging them on the wall. Strip the story to its meaning, so that no one's eyes or ears are waiting for the bang that will never come.

The simple tools of communication are the greatest antidote we have to the grand disease that is the Walking Encyclopedia in the National Park Service. The cure is simple; we simply need to stop being historians and start being communicators and partners in our visitors' own discovery. When we help them to find meaning, and not a litany of facts, then we will be relevant to the whole American people. Right now, our relevance is in a downward spiral and there aren't many parachutes hanging on the wall of the

plane. Someone, anyone, needs to pull up on the yoke.

The parlor in my imagination, the one Anton Chekhov left behind inside his villa in Yalta in 1904, has no gun on the wall. It's not waiting to be fired. No maid lightly dusts the cocked hammer. No cap sits atop the cone. No hammer falls down. A plume of gun smoke doesn't drift through the air. The playwright is not

stunned by the lack of an explosion. He does not clutch his stomach; there is no gaping hole in his gut. There is no gun.



Anton Chekhov, famed 19th Century Russian playwright, died of Tuberculosis in 1904.

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