GUERNSEY VISITOR CENTER/MUSEUM
ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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“The camping ground at Big Springs was delightful, an abundance of pure, fresh water and meadows of rich green grass. The supply of wood was good, and the weather perfect. After viewing these splendid surroundings, Captain Constant ordered the train to stop and rest for a few days so that the weary travelers could be relieved of the strain of mind and body consequent to the long and fatiguing journey. The livestock too would have an opportunity to recuperate.”

- Isaac Constant Oregon Trail Diary, 1852

Introduction

The travelers on the Oregon Trail stopped in the place that would become Guernsey for a reason. It had rich grass for their livestock and fresh water for all. It offered cliffs where they could record their names, as both a legacy and a record for those who would come after them. Here also were the warm springs, the emigrants’ wash tub, which remained warm year around and where they could bathe and wash clothes. Since the days of the Oregon Trail, the area around Guernsey has been a welcoming place for visitors.

The Guernsey Visitor Center/Museum (hereafter abbreviated as the Center) continues this tradition. The Center exists for two primary purposes: to welcome and provide information to visitors to the town of Guernsey and to share Guernsey’s history with visitors and locals. This was made clear by the people with whom I spoke during my visit to Guernsey. But those conversations revealed a strong concern that the Center needs to make some changes in its efforts to meet those two purposes.

The Guernsey Visitor Center/Museum has made some important strides in providing information to visitors over the years, ranging from collecting and sharing brochures to providing information about the community. In this respect it has functioned similarly to chamber of commerce visitor center throughout the country. All of this has been done by small staff putting in many hours. But approaches change and the older style chamber of commerce model for visitor centers is outdated. It simply does not work anymore. It is time for the Center to move in new directions as it provides visitor information. By including a museum component, the Center has already acknowledged that visitors, particularly heritage travelers, are interested in the history of the places they visit. Guernsey is surrounded by an interesting history, a history that is of national importance and even international interest. The next step for the Center is to find an effective and engaging way of sharing that history. Visitor centers like those at National Park Service sites, state historic sites, and places like the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center in Casper set the standard for the Center. There is already a network of interpretive centers associated with the Oregon Trail. Properly developed, the Guernsey Center can take its place on
the list of Oregon Trail visitor centers from Missouri to Oregon.

But changes must be made. A visit to the Center can be confusing, with different messages and no clear organization of information. Vital information about the Oregon Trail sites, the main information most visitors are seeking, is difficult to find among the confusion of artifacts, large brochure racks, notices of public events, etc. The result is that the Center does not adequately share Guernsey’s story, whether it be in dealing with the Oregon Trail and Pony Express, or communicating the story of the community after the trails period. The museum portion of the Center has little interpretation of the various trails, including Oregon Trail and the Pony Express, which passed through the area. While a few local historical artifacts are presented with minimal information, Guernsey’s story is not being told either. Similarly visitor behavior in the Center demonstrates that it is not effectively sharing information about Guernsey today. Only three of seventeen visitors that visited while I was in the Center actually sought out information, the rest chose not to look at the Center’s information, even while “killing time” waiting for their companions to finish using the toilets. As far as they were concerned, the Center was a bathroom stop and nothing else. They were not compelled to use its information. Of the many thousands of people who pass through Guernsey between Memorial Day and Labor Day only around 1500 stop at the Center. They are not aware of it as a potential destination because it needs to offer more as a destination. For example, TripAdvisor, which has three sites listed as attractions in Guernsey, doesn’t even mention it. That is because while it does offer visitor information, it is not an attraction as currently presented.

The purpose of this report is to present ways in which the Guernsey Visitors Center/Museum can present Guernsey’s story, past and present, in a compelling manner and better serve its primary purposes.

Mission Statement

The Guernsey Visitor Center/Museum has operated with the following mission statement:

“The mission statement of the Guernsey Visitor Center is to provide visitors with knowledge about Guernsey: its vibrant past, its merchants, area activities, and information pertaining to the surrounding areas. It is our mission here at the Guernsey Visitor Center to provide a welcoming and educational environment for visitors to be able to learn about the unique and diverse historical background of the Guernsey area. We are also here to provide visitors with additional information about the area, upcoming events, and local businesses.”

The above mission statement has served the Guernsey Visitor Center/Museum for a number of years. But in this day and age, organizations are moving toward shorter mission statements. It is also not uncommon for organizations today to re-visit and revise their mission
statement to not only keep them more contemporary but also reflect changes in operations. For these reasons, the Guernsey Visitor Center/Museum has reached a point where it needs a new mission statement that is shorter, summarizing what the existing statement lays out.

The Guernsey Visitor Center/Museum could also use a new name. The current name, seen on the wooden sign outside of the building, does describe the purpose of the place. But “Visitor Center/Museum” does not capitalize on that which makes Guernsey remarkable. There are few other places in the United States which are associated with so many historic trails. To capture that uniqueness, I would suggest that a name change be considered.

Thus the following suggestion for a new name and mission statement:

“The mission of the Guernsey Trails Center is to provide hospitality to visitors, sharing information about the Guernsey area’s past and present place in the American story, with particular emphasis upon the nationally significant trails that passed through the area.”

A Travelers’ Tale

To illustrate how the new visitor center/museum could function, I present you with the following story.

John and Mary Tomlinson, a retired couple beginning a summer trip around the West, are headed north toward Yellowstone Park from Denver. As they drive along I-25 they see a sign for Oregon Trail historic sites at exit 92. A quick check of their map shows the sites aren’t too far away so they decide to take the exit. They are not sure just where the sites are located but as they come toward the town of Guernsey, they see a sign for the Guernsey Trails Center. That is where, they hope, they can get the information they need.

Parking at the Center, a small but attractively landscaped building, they walk to the door. On one side of the door is a banner with a pioneer man and on other side is a banner with the photo of a pioneer woman, each welcoming them to the Center. Their first view through the door is of a large color photo mural showing a section of Register Cliff. To the right of the mural is the door to the restrooms and to the right of the entrance is a small desk with a smiling greeter, who welcomes them to the Center. John and Mary have been driving for a while so they choose to go into the restrooms. In the women’s restroom Mary sees the pioneer woman again, this time on a sign with the woman’s story of her experience on the Oregon Trail. John sees the pioneer man in the men’s room, with his particular story of the Oregon Trail. John leaves the restroom first and is attracted to an exhibit just beyond the greeter’s desk.

The entrance to the exhibit is another mural, this time of the Oregon Trail ruts, with the
title “Guernsey: Hub of the Trails.” Mary joins John and they learn that because of its important position on the North Platte River, many trails passed through the Guernsey area: the Oregon Trail, the California Trail, the Mormon Trail, the Pony Express, and the Texas Trail. As the West became more settled, the Cheyenne-Deadwood Stage Route and then the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad also passed through Guernsey. When the US highway system was created in the 20th century, US26 followed the old Oregon Trail route, the old covered wagons replaced by automobiles and RVs. During this time the town of Guernsey, first settled in 1880, grew to what it is today. Today this history has led to the town being a stop along Wyoming’s Oregon Trail Historic Byway as well as the National Park Service’s Oregon Trail National Historic Trail.

Walking through the exhibit, the Tomlinsons read the story of the area: its wildlife and geology; its earliest inhabitants; the trails period; the Guernsey reservoir and CCC camp; and the town of Guernsey. They see old and new photographs of the sites, graphics of the people and wildlife, and maps of the various trails. There are original and reproduced artifacts that add a three-dimensional appeal to the exhibit. A smaller mural of the Register Cliff stands behind a kiosk that has a flip book with names from the Register Cliff. There they find the name of a possible relative, Alvah Unthank. Beside the flip book is a computer where they register their own names on a computer database of people who have passed through Guernsey since the Oregon Trail days. They also get a chance to visit Ancestry.com to see if they might indeed be related to Alvah Unthank. Mary decides to do more research in Ancestry.com when they get back home. The last part of the exhibit is a panel with a map showing all of the places in the area they can visit: the Register Cliff, the Trail Ruts, the various monuments around town, Guernsey State Park, and Fort Laramie. There is even a flyer for a walking tour of Guernsey, with the names of local businesses, like cafés where they can have lunch.

After walking through the exhibit, the Tomlinsons go past the restroom entrance to a small brochure rack with more information about the town. There is a bulletin board with notices of local events above the rack. On that side of the Center there is also a small gift space with books, cards, t-shirts and other souvenir items. In a corner with two large windows is a Pony Express sculpture with two comfortable chairs near it. The couple rests in the chairs for a moment, discussing where they want to go next. There also a small table where they can make their own Pony Express cancellation on a souvenir postcard from Guernsey. John and Mary take a postcard and stamp it. After buying a Register Cliff t-shirt they pause for a moment at the cutouts beside the Center. Each gets a photograph of the other as a pioneer man and woman in front of their covered wagon. They immediately send the photos to their friends back home. Getting into their car and heading for the Oregon Trail ruts, they decide that there is so much to do in the Guernsey area that they want to spend the night.
Re-visualizing the Guernsey Visitor Center/Museum with a scenario like the one just posed illustrates the ways it could be reconfigured to prove a better visitor experience. This “Travelers’ Tale” demonstrates the many possible dimensions that a visit to the Guernsey Trails Center can include. All of the activities can be done within and outside the present building. What is needed is a reconfiguration of functions within the building, making them more efficient, and creation of an interpretive exhibit about Guernsey’s history as a hub or center of trails. Both efforts should be guided by the mission statement.

Transforming the Guernsey Visitor Center/Museum into the Guernsey Trails Center can be done in two major steps, implemented in phases according to financial resources. The first step should be to make the interior of the building more efficient in its operation by rearranging its spaces and bringing focus to their uses, thus claiming more space for visitor services and interpretation. The second step should be to install an interpretive exhibit and activities.

**The Guernsey Trails Center - Claiming Space**

The Center is currently laid out with visitors services and artifacts co-mingled, which makes a visit confusing (Figure 1). Future development should separate the various functions of the Center and eliminate this co-mingling. This will also eliminate visitor confusion. By carefully examining the different elements of each function and elimination/consolidation of materials, a good deal of space can further be claimed for more effective visitor services and historical interpretation.

**Brochure Area**

The purpose of the Center is first and foremost to provide visitor information about the area. One of the largest spaces in the Center is occupied by brochures. The problem is that nearly all of the brochures are for places that are away from Guernsey. These brochures direct people away from Guernsey to places like the Black Hills, Yellowstone, etc. rather than encouraging them to spend time in Guernsey. Yes, the Center provides a service to visitors by giving them those other brochures but, in effect, the brochure area also drives people away from your community. The purpose of the Center should not be to provide regional or statewide information, it is to provide information about your community and its surrounding assets. The large brochure area should be put to a better use that is more closely aligned with your purpose.

The brochure area can be cut to one-third its present size by eliminating nearly all brochures that do not promote Guernsey or its immediate vicinity. Specific information about
places in the Black Hills, like Reptile Gardens, or elsewhere in Wyoming, like Powell or Laramie, can be found in many other visitors centers. Acknowledging that people coming to the Center will desire information about other places, instead provide some general area guides, like the Wyoming Visitors Guide, a Yellowstone guide, and a Black Hills guide. Brochures offered by the National Park Service on the Pony Express, Oregon Trail, Mormon Trail, and Fort Laramie deal with subjects vital to Guernsey and thus should be in the brochure area. Whenever possible, work out reciprocity agreements with the places for which you distribute brochures so your brochures get distributed as well by them.

The large brochure rack, with its drawers, is very useful but occupies far too much space. Get rid of it in favor of a smaller rack, also with drawers for brochure storage. Based on assessing the brochure currently distributed in the Center, a rack closer in size to the wooden rack next to the restrooms entrance should be sufficient.

The wildlife posters and the poster of
Wyoming explorers on the wall above the brochure racks are nice but, rather than adding to the story told in the Center, take valuable space and add to the overall cluttered feel of the brochure area. Remove the posters and mount a bulletin board over the smaller brochure rack. The board can provide information about community events that might be of interest to visitors. Doing this will also allow the elimination of one of the free-standing fabric dividers, claiming more space in that area.

Gift Space

Entering the Center, the first thing the visitor sees is a Pony Express sculpture on a pedestal, behind which is a glass shelving unit holding t-shirts. To the right is the entrance to the restrooms. That entire wall area is occupied by the gift area and it appears that all of the shop’s stock is displayed. Despite that, most of the shelving unit cubicles are less than half filled.

First, the gift area should be moved so it is not the first thing viewed in the Center. While gifts are certainly appropriate in a visitor center or museum, they are not primary to either and should be not be front and center. Once the brochure area has been reduced, the gift space should be moved to that area, basically on the opposite side of the restrooms entrance from where it is now. There are a variety of books for sale on the front desk, on a book shelf in front of the brochure area, and on another shelf in the museum area. These should be moved into the gift area, consolidating all sales items in one space.

Central Pony Express Pedestal

The Pony Express pedestal is much too large for its function and adds little to the Center to compensate for its size. Its size is disproportionate enough to the Pony Express sculpture that it tends to diminish the sculpture visually. For the moment it serves but should be removed when a new interpretive exhibit is installed. I suggest making a new pedestal that is more appropriately proportioned and the Pony Express sculpture be positioned elsewhere (see below).
Window/Display Case Area

This is potentially a nice space for visitor hospitality. It is currently a table with two display cases of rocks and minerals on top and three dining chairs pushed under it. One of the display cases has examples of petrified wood. Only six of the specimens have identification and those are from other parts of Wyoming or out of state. The other case is identified as “Rock of Wyoming” and there are labels for the different specimens.

The two cases constitute a nice collection but serve no purpose in a visitor center devoted to the Guernsey area. While the rocks and minerals might serve some purpose as curiosities because of their beauty, they have minimal information with them and certainly add nothing to the local story. They could be exhibited at the local library or senior center but they have no place in a visitor information center.

I would suggest removing the rock display, table and three dining chairs. Two comfortable easy chairs could then be moved into the window space, perhaps with a low end table or coffee table. A “do not remove” copy of one of the books that are for sale in the gift shop could be put on the table. The information, about churches and other facilities, which is currently on the bulletin board above the display case to the right of the window area could also be put in a binder on the table.

A centerpiece of this visitor relaxation area would be the Pony Express sculpture, on a new smaller pedestal. There could also be an interactive station where visitors use a Pony Express rubber stamp on a souvenir card from Guernsey. The Pony Express Museum in St. Joseph, Missouri uses this quite successfully (see Appendix).

The ice cream freezer (the only artifact identified), pressure cooker, and three other appliances that are in the display case are items that are co-mingled from the museum area on the other side of the entrance door. Without appropriate labeling they have no business being exhibited. Even the freezer has only the name of the family that used it and the donor. There is nothing to tell the visitor why it is there or anything about the family’s importance to Guernsey’s history. These artifacts
simply take up space better used for other functions; the case and artifacts should be removed. That space could then be devoted to visitor services.

Office Space

Space is limited and thus must be allocated to the most vital functions of the Center. In any visitors center the number one priority for space usage should be visitor information. While it is necessary for staff to be comfortable, staff needs should always be second priority to visitor needs. This applies to allocation of office space as well.

A disproportionate amount of space in the visitor center is occupied by the office space. A very small portion of the large office area directly serves visitors’ needs. Most of the space is devoted to staff functions and comfort. The office includes all of the customary things one might find in an office cubicle plus a small refrigerator, microwave, coffee maker, stereo system, several calculators, and an old Apple computer. And, while it may function very well for the staff persons who use it, it also has a cluttered appearance, providing neither a positive nor welcoming image.

Space that serves staff needs, ranging from file cabinets to a food preparation area, should not impinge on the visitor experience. By eliminating unnecessary items and consolidating other items, the area occupied by staff functions can be cut by half. Those are mostly behind-the-scenes functions (file cabinets, coffee maker, stereo, refrigerator, microwave). A small walk-in storage room could be constructed in a portion of the current office space to house those things that are associated with such behind-the-scenes functions.

The amount of area used by the staff for welcoming and providing information for visitors need not take a lot of space. Less than one half of the space on the table currently used by the Center is devoted to basic visitor services. A smaller table with a small ergonomic chair would be sufficient. There would still be room for the laptop currently used by staff, which would provide access to Google and other services to answer visitor questions.

Before I left Guernsey I stopped by the Center to use the restroom and take one more look around. The staff person at the desk, because of the positioning of the desk and chair, did not see me come in. I used the restroom and wandered around the brochure area for several minutes before she realized I was there.
The current position of the desk clearly makes it difficult to monitor who enters the Center. It is also difficult to provide the smiling welcome that is associated with visitor hospitality from across the room and around a corner. The welcome desk area should instead be positioned near the entrance. Removing the display case from the area between the windows and the entrance, as suggested in the section above, will free up space to move a welcome desk to that position, placing it so visitors pass it when entering.

The welcome desk area should be kept free of materials not needed to serve visitors. While a desk and chair are necessary for use by the person staffing the center, they can be both comfortable and still smaller than what are currently being used. Most activities associated with operating the Center, answering questions, answering the telephone and doing sales can still be performed as needed in that smaller space.

Visitor Seating

The placement of the welcome desk near the door will change its function from being a place where people sit to chat to a place where people are greeted and make inquiries. It will not be necessary to provide a second chair for those functions. With such limited space in the visitor center, visitor seating needs to be at a minimum. The comfortable chairs in the window area mentioned above will provide seating for those occasional visitors who may wish to sit and look at brochures or other informational materials. The majority of visitors to information centers do not spend much time sitting. For those who do wish to sit for a while, more benches could be installed outside the Center as part of the landscaping along the trail. Finally, some folding chairs could be kept in the storage room for use in meetings and as otherwise needed.

The Museum/Artifacts

In evaluating the museum artifacts and displays I will be frank, since this has been my area of expertise for nearly 40 years. The museum portion of the Center is disappointing and told me nothing about the history of Guernsey and the
many trails that passed through the area. There are not a lot of artifacts but those which reflect the least about the history of Guernsey seem to occupy the most space (e.g. a baby crib) while items that might be of interest to a visitor occupy minimal space with minimal labeling (e.g. some of the paper items from local businesses and photographs). Most of the artifacts in one of the display cases, ranging from a camera to an early calculator, have simple labels telling what they are but no information that provides a local context, if there is one. They could be from anywhere and can be seen almost everywhere. Information about the Oregon Trail and other major historical aspects of the local history was relegated to a series of photographs pinned on two of the free-standing fabric dividers while a large case was devoted to a Santa suit with extensive information about it. While the Santa suit might be important to the local community, it is not something of interest to most visitors, and takes up space that could be devoted to something more of their interest, like the Oregon Trail.

I think that perhaps the biggest problem is that the museum did nothing to inform me about the history of Guernsey, ranging from the trails period through its founding and the present day. I left the museum portion of the Center knowing little more about Guernsey’s history than when I entered it. The best summary of Guernsey’s history that I saw while in town was a page in a three ring binder of visitor information at the motel where I spent the night.

My recommendation is that, in order to create a true interpretive and educational experience in the Center, all of the historical artifacts be evaluated as to their importance to telling Guernsey’s story to visitors. Some items may be critical enough to the town’s history that they should remain in the Center, but with better interpretation for visitor and locals alike. Those that are not important should be removed from the Center. The Santa suit in its case and the fireman’s outfit in its case, might be better put in another building, like the library or firehouse, for locals to enjoy. Some items with local importance may hold so little interest for visitors that, if there is not a place for them to be exhibited in a public place, they should be placed in a storage area, perhaps in the town hall. Finally, other items, like the baby crib or calculators, might need to be deaccessioned and sold if they hold no local significance.
Figure 2 - New Center Functions

Space Allocation Summary:

This re-allocation of the various functions within the Center (see Figure 2) so they are more carefully integrated and logical will not only improve the visitor experience but will claim more space for interpretation.

The area to the left of the entrance, currently occupied by the museum displays, the free-standing fabric dividers, and much of the office, is the best spot to locate a new interpretive area about the history of Guernsey. That interpretive area can tell the community’s story, ranging from its earliest inhabitants through the trails period and its founding, then continuing into the 20th century. This can be done as recommended above, by claiming space elsewhere in the Center and ensuring that all non-interpretive functions are removed from that area.

The space taken by the brochures should be greatly reduced, allowing the gift area to be moved to the area near the windows (currently occupied by the large brochure rack). A bulletin board, consolidating all notices of local activities that might be of interest to visitors, will be placed above the brochure rack. The table and rock display cases should be removed; replaced by comfortable seating to entice visitors to relax while looking at brochures or waiting for
friends/family. A small coffee or end table in that area can have literature for them to look at while seated, including a binder with local services. The glass display case and the bulletin board space above it should be removed to allow placement of a welcome desk near the door. The current office space should be reduced in size by half, with behind-the-scenes appliances and furniture concealed in a small storage room. This will allow more space for the interpretive area and present a more welcoming appearance to visitors than having those functions in the open. When the interpretive area is installed, the large pedestal with the Pony Express statue should be removed and the statue moved to a new pedestal in the window seating area, with an associated interactive. This will allow a clear view of the mural, inviting people into the Center, while still keeping the sculpture as a point of interest.

The Guernsey Trails Center – Interpretive Exhibits

When I spoke with three local historians, they all said it was important to preserve local artifacts and interpret the local history. They were concerned that important local artifacts be preserved and, where appropriate, exhibited. But they, like me, saw little historical significance in some of the artifacts on display. They also shared some of the stories which they felt could be told in the Center. Based on that conversation and my observations, the following section contains recommendations for the interpretive components of the Center.

The interpretive experience begins outside. The landscaped area around the Center is very nice with helpful information along the trail walk. The problem with the Center itself is its rather uninteresting appearance, particularly at its entrance, which is quite plain. There need to be some outdoor treatments to make it more inviting to visitors as well as to supplement the interpretive efforts within the building.

The rather plain entrance could be dressed up with the addition of a tall narrow banner on each side of the door. A theme of a pioneer couple on one of the trails can be introduced with the banners, with one side being a woman and the other being a man. Rather than trying to find a period image, use two re-enactors dressed in appropriate clothing (work with the Wyoming State Historical Society to find the re-enactors) for the photos on the banner and elsewhere. The theme of the pioneer couple could be continued near the Center building with a prairie schooner replica and cutouts of the man and woman in front. Visitors of all ages (put steps behind for children to stand on) could pose for photos behind the cutouts. Inside the Center, the theme continues with each pioneer image and text about life on the trail (written as though dictated by
the individual) in the respective restrooms. The man and woman could also appear as recurring narrators in the interpretive exhibit.

Even a space as small as the Center needs to have something large that is the first thing seen by visitors, attracting them in and making a statement. This is, for example, what the Disney Imagineers had in mind with the Sleeping Beauty Castle on each of the Disney properties. The Castle dominates the park, drawing people in and establishing a feeling of fantasy and wonder. The Pony Express statue on the round pedestal is a very nice piece but it is not large enough nor does it make a statement that helps define the Center. The Pony Express story is important but it is not the only story nor is it inclusive of the other stories. That story which is most inclusive is that of the geography, the place around which the stories of the Pony Express, the Oregon Trail, the other trails and even the more recent history of Guernsey are woven. I would suggest a large mural of the Register Cliff, which both reflects the landscape and provides the human dimension of the Oregon Trail, the best known part of Guernsey’s heritage. It could be placed on the wall to the left of the restrooms entrance. That is the area first seen by visitors entering the building. Moving the Pony Express sculpture elsewhere, and not putting anything in its current place, will also create a vestibule area where people can gather.

Once visitors pass through the door they may choose to go to the right of the mural into the visitor hospitality area, with the brochures, gift shop, window seating and the restrooms. That is also where the welcome desk will be located. To the left of the large mural, however, could be another slightly smaller mural of the trail ruts and the words “Guernsey: Hub of the Trails,” designed to attract them into the interpretive exhibit area.

Interpretive Exhibit Area - The Narrative

Guernsey: Hub of the Trails

The exhibit should tell the why, where, when, who of the Guernsey story, starting with its natural setting and telling its history up until present times.

1. Before the Trails: Pre-1830s

   The Land
   - The Geology
   - The Animals
   - The Plants
The People
- The Indians
- The early frontiersmen

The “Amenities”
- North Platte River
- The Cliffs
- The Warm Springs

2. The Trails Period: 1830s to 1880s

The Trails
- Oregon Trail
- California Trail
- Mormon Trail
- Texas Trail
- Cheyenne to Deadwood Stage

Stories of the People
- The Famous
- The Ordinary People

The Places
- Register Cliff
- The Trail Ruts
- Fort Laramie
- The Various Historic Markers around Guernsey

3. Guernsey: 1880s to Today

New Trails
- The Chicago, Quincy and Burlington Railroad
- US26
Founding and Settlement

- C.A. Guernsey
- The Town’s History

Places and People

- The Guernsey Dam and Guernsey State Park
- The CCC Story
- CFI and Sunrise
- Camp Guernsey and the National Guard
- Historic Sites in the Town

Interpretive Exhibit Area - The Physical Flow

Figure 3 - Visitor Services and Exhibit Floor Plan
The space for the interpretive exhibits is limited but it is entirely possible to deal with all of the above topics, in a relatively brief manner, within that space (see Figure 3). The interpretive exhibit needs to be visualized not as a full entree but an appetizer, driving visitors to seek more when they leave the Trails Center. Keep in mind what the visitor is seeking, what a visitor might see in the area and be curious about, and what you think the visitor should know.

Because the majority of visitors will come seeking information about the trails period from the 1830s to 1880s, that should occupy the most space in the interpretive exhibit. The exhibit can also be used to introduce people to the Guernsey area’s history since the 1880s as well as the Guernsey of today. Since some things of local interest are of local interest only, this area should be relatively brief.

After seeing the pioneer couple on either side of the entrance, the primary thing visitors will see is the large mural of the Register Cliff. To the left will be the entrance to the interpretive exhibit area, with its smaller mural of the Trail Ruts and the title “Guernsey: Hub of the Trails,” establishing the trails theme that will continue throughout the exhibit. Entering the exhibit, visitors will walk past a panel that establishes the physical context, telling about the geography, flora and fauna of the area. The next panel is about the earliest travelers through the area, the Indians and the early frontiersmen, taking advantage of the amenities offered by the geography.

The largest section of the exhibit should be a series of panels devoted to the trails period from the 1830s to the 1880s, telling about the start of the Oregon, California and Mormon Trails and carrying into the Texas Trail and the Cheyenne-Deadwood Stage. Since some folks will come with little knowledge of the trails, this section of exhibit should tell the story of them in general with particular emphasis on the Guernsey portion. This section should also do a few brief profiles on important individuals who might have used the trails. If they also came through Guernsey that would be good but not be entirely necessary. Of course Buffalo Bill comes to mind first (Mormon Trail, Pony Express, Deadwood Stage) but there are others whose stories could be told. There should also be the stories of the ordinary people (like Alvah Unthank) who were on the trail, with excerpts from their accounts. The interactive in this section could be desk or kiosk with a large color.
photograph of one section of the signatures on the Cliff with the title “Register Yourself.” Here visitors could be encouraged to sign in on a computer to leave their mark, as did the pioneers, and they could look at the names of other people who have visited before. I would suggest that a searchable register of the names on the Cliff as well as names at other places, like Independence Rock, be offered for people seeking genealogical information. An additional service to genealogists would be to allow them to use the computer to visit Ancestry.com. A flip book could also be mounted on the kiosk for use by those who might not feel comfortable using the computer.

The interpretive panels could be configured to fill the center of the exhibit area, allowing more surface space for information as well as creating a hidden storage area that could be accessed by hinging the panels.

The concluding panels in the exhibit should focus on Guernsey’s history since the 1880s, beginning with the story of Charles Guernsey himself and then focusing on significant aspects of that history. Continue the trails theme by talking about the “new” trails, the railroad and the highway system. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the Guernsey area became not just a place to pass through but a place to settle and live. In this section, visitors can learn about the most obvious features of the area’s ongoing history, ranging from the lake and the CCC story to the very obvious presence of the National Guard as they drive around. It can also include a summary of the various historic markers they will see as they drive around the community as well as a map of the area that shows historically significant sites. Here also would be a space where a video about Guernsey’s history could be shown. Finally, like a good sales presentation, the exhibit should conclude with an invitation for the visitors to enjoy Guernsey as it is today. That could be in the form of a flyer with a concise history of the town, other places in town to visit, a listing of the businesses in town that provide visitors services, and a map of historic sites.

As visitors exit the Center, they can have one last interactive experience. Outside, perhaps to the north where drivers will see it as they drive from US 26 and at the beginning of the historical trail that winds into the park, could be a covered wagon. In front of the wagon, accessed by visitors both coming to and leaving the Center would be cutouts of the pioneer man and pioneer woman. People could pose behind them for photos of themselves. “Guernsey or Bust” or some other message that could be seen in their photographs could be written on the side of the canvas of the wagon as a plug for the town (see Appendix).
Interpretive Exhibit Area - Making It Happen

Throughout the exhibit there should be artifacts (some original and some reproduction) that add to the stories as well as extensive graphics. All text should be relatively short but informative. Since text will be so important to this exhibit I suggest you find someone who has extensive and successful label writing experience. My experience is that curators provide too much information and exhibit designers too little, with both often not having the necessary writing skills. While local historians can help with the content, label writing is something that should not be left up to volunteers unless they are accomplished writers.

I would suggest hiring a professional exhibits firm or designer, with the caveat above in mind, to create the interpretive portion of the Center. There are a number of smaller firms and individuals who could provide a very good interpretive exhibit without being too expensive. As suggested already, decisions need to be made as to what current museum artifacts should be kept, which could be part of interpretive exhibit, and which should be disposed of. The same decision-making group, comprised of local historians and interested individuals could also provide the historical information and advice that the firm or individual will use for exhibit planning and label creation.

Funding for creating the interpretive area, from hiring an exhibits firm to paying for the exhibit panels and artifact cases, can come from two main sources. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) provides Museums for America grants to assist museums in improving their services to the public, including “exhibition research, development, design and fabrication” under the grants’ Learning Experiences category. Grant amounts range from $5,000 to $150,000. Any requests that are more than $25,000 require a match. Guernsey could apply to the Wyoming Cultural Trust Fund, which provides up to $50,000, also requiring a match. The two grants could be used to match each other. The deadline for IMLS requests for 2015 is December 1, 2014.

To be eligible for an IMLS grant the Guernsey Trails Center will need to meet several criteria. One is to be a unit of government or a private nonprofit. The second is to be an institution that uses a professional staff and is organized on a permanent basis for educational purposes, owns or uses objects, cares for those objects and exhibits those objects to the general public. Professional staff is defined as being at least one staff member or the full-time equivalent, either paid or unpaid, who is primarily engaged in the acquisition, care or exhibition of the objects in the institution. The third is that the institution must be open to the public for at least 120 days per year.

In order to be eligible for an IMLS grant, the Guernsey Trails Center will need to be open for a longer season. The Center is currently open from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Having
been in Guernsey to see the Oregon Trail in the months of May and October, I think the hours could be increased, particularly when the improved interpretation attracts more visitors. The increased cost of the longer hours plus any costs involved in providing one FTE could be absorbed by the lodging tax, particularly if the county-wide lodging tax is passed.

There is no question that some costs will be incurred in creating and maintaining the Guernsey Trails Center as proposed. In addition to grants, there are other ways in which the money for the operation can be raised, including solicitation of donations. Perhaps one of the larger companies that is involved in the area would be interested in donating in return for a sponsorship mention ("Guernsey: Hub of the Trails" “Sponsored by the Burlington, Northern and Santa Fe Railroad”). The bottom line is that the Center will end up being an investment that will bring more money to the community by attracting more people to spend more time there.

Interpretive Exhibit Summary:

Visitors are immediately captivated by the banners of a pioneer woman and man on either side of the Guernsey Trails Center entrance. These help establish a human element to the visit. The man and woman can be seen again in the respective restrooms, with each conveying a story of life on the trail, and are the basis for cutouts where visitors can pose outside the Center. Upon entering the Guernsey Trails Center the first thing seen is a large mural of the Register Cliff, which helps define the space. All visitor services are to the right of the mural, including the restrooms. There is a visitor information desk to the immediate right where they are greeted. The positioning of the desk allows the attendant to monitor people who enter the Center, answer immediate questions, and easily do sales from the gift area. Continuing through the information area, they encounter a small display of brochures and a gift area. In a space bounded by two windows is a seating area and a sculpture of the Pony Express on a pedestal. There is also a small coffee or end table with literature about Guernsey. Between the window area and the visitor information desk is a table where people can get a Pony Express stamp on a special postcard of Guernsey as a free souvenir.

The interpretive exhibit is to the left as visitors enter the Center. It opens with an eye-catching mural of the Oregon Trail ruts and a possible title of “Guernsey: Hub of the Trails.” Within the exhibit will be text, artifacts, and graphics about topics within the history of the area, following a trail theme and dwelling primarily upon the area’s trails period. The primary interactive within this exhibit will be the “Register Yourself” idea based on the Register Cliff. The exhibit concludes with a history of Guernsey itself and an invitation to enjoy Guernsey as it is today. As visitors leave the Center there is a final opportunity to pose behind cutouts of the pioneer man and woman in front of a covered wagon.
Outreach: Getting the History of Guernsey Out of the Museum and Into the Community

When examining the artifacts within museum collections, and deciding what artifacts to add to a museum collection, the value of the artifacts to the purpose of the museum must always be considered. At the Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave, for example, we only accept artifacts which forward our purpose of collecting, preserving and interpreting artifacts associated with the life, times and legacy of Buffalo Bill. If someone approaches us with a very nice and valuable vase that has no connection to this purpose we will not accept it. And one of the first things I did when I became director of the museum back in the 1990s was to get rid of a collection of arrowheads and stone tools that came from Ohio. Over the years we have also gotten rid of artifacts that are not appropriate in our museum.

The collection that is currently within the Visitors Center/Museum should be evaluated to determine its importance to the history of Guernsey. Does the White Mountain ice cream freezer come from a very important family in the community that has had a lot of influence on local history? Does it represent a really important community event, like an ice cream social, within the history of Guernsey? If it really doesn’t play an important part in Guernsey’s history, why is it being kept? The artifacts need to be evaluated as to their importance as relics, if you will, of the history of Guernsey.

The second step, once it is determined that some of the collections should be kept, is to decide how to use them. Some may fill a role in the interpretive exhibit but others may be of no use to the exhibit, even though they might preserve and interpret some aspect of Guernsey’s past. The association with the national trails makes an interpretive center critical for Guernsey. It will still function as a history museum but there may be materials better exhibited elsewhere. In the case of artifacts and topics that might not fit into the interpretive exhibit, those aspects of Guernsey’s history can be put back into the community. As already suggested, the firefighter’s outfit could go in an exhibit in the local fire station. Small exhibits of more local interest could be put in the town offices, the library, the senior center, and other community gathering places. Staff members at the Center can oversee the placement of these exhibits throughout the community. Over time interpretive plaques, kiosk, and even shadow boxes could be placed around town pointing out significant aspects of the town’s history. The flyer about Guernsey that visitors to the interpretive exhibit receive can also direct them to the other exhibits around the community.

Another outreach dimension would be to foster better partnerships with the Wyoming State Historical Society and the National Parks Service. Both will be helpful in ongoing development of the Center as well as being places that send people to the Center. It would also be to the advantage of the Center to become an active advocate for the Oregon Trial Historic
Byway. I helped found two byways in Colorado, both of which have had a very positive impact on the economies of the communities with which they are associated. I am currently President of the Lariat Loop National Scenic Byway (it was a state byway but was given national status in 2008), which drives a good deal of traffic through the foothills outside of Denver and has been very good for the participating institutions.

**Concluding Thought**

Before I began on this project I had been in the Guernsey area around five times to visit the Trail Ruts, Register Cliff and Fort Laramie. I always made a point to go out of my way to see them and simply passed through the town on my way to those objectives. The idea of stopping in Guernsey did not occur to me because I knew nothing about the town and its place in history. That story needs to be told and, if Guernsey spends the time and money transforming the Guernsey Visitor Center/Museum into the Guernsey Trails Center, that story will be told.
Appendix

Pony Express Cancellation Station at the Pony Express Museum, St. Joseph, Missouri.
Painted cutouts with tepee backdrop at the Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave, Golden, Colorado.

1840s covered wagon reproduction made by Hansen Wheel and Wagon Shop, Letcher, South Dakota.