

# **JOURNEY STORIES**

## **Ideas for Local Exhibitions and Public Humanities Programs**

*The following information has been assembled to assist and inspire you in developing local exhibitions and public humanities programs around the themes of the Journey Stories exhibition. The information is organized according to the themes of each section of the exhibition.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Program Ideas**

- There are a wide range of films that depict various aspects of America's journey stories (see accompanying list of films). Work with your local video stores in displaying any titles they may have in stock (or encourage them to add to their inventory). Work with your local movie theatre to dedicate one screen, one night a week, to a film in conjunction with the exhibition's run in town.
- There is also a wide range of children's books exploring America's journey stories (see accompanying reading list of children's books). Work with your local library and/or bookstore in developing children's reading programs that relate to the themes of the exhibition:
  - Set aside a space in the exhibition area that can be a reading room for children and families;
  - Ask the local librarian to focus the story time selections to books that explore the exhibition's themes;
  - Have a reading contest: children who read X number of books related to the exhibition will receive a special reward: discount to local business, posters, etc. (A good way to get sponsorship from local businesses.)
- In the same way, work with the local library and/or bookstore in developing reading programs and learning opportunities for adults (see accompanying reading list of adult books):
  - Host book club meetings focusing on books related to the exhibition's themes;
  - Set up a Journey Stories Station at the local library, displaying books on the subject and having a computer to explore related web sites (see accompanying list of web sites).

### **ONE WAY TRIP**

#### **Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas**

- Are there people in your community who are descended from early colonists or are they the descendents of slaves brought to the colonies from Africa? Work with your local genealogical society to tell the stories of these ancestors through letters, diaries, etc.
- Using a globe or a map of the world, indicate the places people made one way trips to/from your community. What path did they travel to get there?
- Do an exhibit about Native American settlement patterns in your region. Where were the communities? How and why did they move around? Use maps and illustrations to help tell your story.
- Hosts located in what was once the original colonies can develop exhibitions of items brought from Europe and Africa on the journey or created and/or used by early colonists.
- Provide an exhibit of Native American trade items which illustrate the mobility of Native Americans before and after contact with Europeans.

## **Programming Ideas**

- Provide a small box, trunk, or sack, along with appropriate and inappropriate items for a journey across the ocean to the colonies. Allow visitors to choose what items to take along. Can they fit everything they want/need? Provide a key that suggests what things early colonists actually brought with them.
- Create a small, cramped space to reflect the size of part of the hold of a slave ship. Tell visitors how many slaves would have been kept in the space you've created and ask them to step in and sit down. This could be done successfully with tape on the floor or a few short walls, any structure, real or imaginary, that gives visitors the sense of cramped space and the length of time slaves had to remain in that cramped space.
- Provide lectures and demonstrations about Native American crafts appropriate to the pre-contact period, to the post-contact period, focusing on materials and techniques. In the same vein, you could provide an exhibit of objects made by slaves and how they incorporated materials brought from Africa and materials found in the colonies.
- Provide opportunities for visitors to experience the chores of daily life in the colonies, i.e. making soap or candles, sewing, hoeing crops, mending a fence, etc.

## **PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES**

### **Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas**

- What are the natural obstacles in your part of the country that might get in the way of the movement of people, livestock, and goods? Use maps and images to show where those obstacles are and what they look like? Could natural features be obstacles as well as assets?
- When and how did roads get built in your area? Have an exhibit case with maps from different periods showing the progression of road construction. Why were roads built where they were? Who paid for them? Why were they needed?
- Create an exhibit that explores the same objects used by different people, illustrating the coming together of or deep conflict between peoples coming into contact with one another after the English began to move across the mountains. For example, do you have an English pipe and a Native American pipe? Were they used for the same purposes or in the same way? If not, how were they different?

## **Programming Ideas**

- Hold a photography contest. Have community members, kids or adults, take photographs of natural features they think might have served as obstacles to anyone trying to migrate to the area. The photographs could then become part of the exhibition. Entries could include a written description of the obstacle as well as potential solutions for overcoming it.
- Hold a writing contest asking entrants to tell a story about a perilous journey or, if you have a major river in your area, have writers imagine a river journey; what is their destination? Who are they journeying with? What brought them on their journey? What do they see?
- As part of the Underground Railroad theme, provide a simulated journey northward, utilizing the special codes used by slaves, i.e. patterns in quilts, songs, etc.

## ACROSS THE GREAT 'DESERT' TO THE WEST

### Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas

- Because families on the trails were separated for many months, communication with loved ones was rare and unreliable. Letter-writing and personal journals/diaries were critical means for pioneers to stay in touch. They're also the richest source of first-person accounts of these journeys for present-day historians. Make an exhibit of local letters and diaries. Call for temporary loans of family journals; display period writing utensils and supplies to demonstrate travelers' commitment to documenting their experiences. In order to illustrate the personal hardships in "waiting for news," you may want to juxtapose pioneers' letter-writing with the instantaneous travel blogs of today.
- Many sacrifices that pioneers made are well-known, but select objects are more powerful than others in conveying these hardships. Among the most evocative artifacts are simple exhibits of immigrant's shoes or hats/bonnets. Using original head- and foot-wear samples from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (or even contemporary costuming), visitors can see the physical hardships of walking great distances. Supplement your "shoe show" with maps and photos of the trail, and selections from diaries which refer to the physical demands of the trail, the relentless sun, the dust, the mountains, the rocks, snakes, water, etc.
- Because there were long stretches without any vegetation, bison and cattle "chips" were essential sources of fuel along the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails. Of course cooking with cattle droppings may be alarming to 21<sup>st</sup> Century sensibilities but it was par for the course for pioneers. A simple recreation/diorama of cooking/campfires on the trail might highlight this fact (and utilize youngsters' creative crafts in forming the most realistic "patties"). As an activity extension, visitors will be interested to know that trail journals cite cow pie throwing as a common children's game – the precursor to the Frisbee!

### Programming Ideas

- Months of travel on dusty Western trails gave rise to many new American songs, as well as distinctive genres of American music. Public programs that demonstrate the variety of trail music (by music historians or Western history scholars) help evoke the trials of the trail and the importance of music in raising spirits and forming community. Even piano sing-alongs of trail music (including displays of popular sheet music) can be a fun and illuminating way to better understand pioneer sagas.
- Living history or demonstration programs are very popular as part of Family Day activities. Consider craft-making of parasols, rag rug weaving, adobe brick making, or sod-house architecture. Tastes from the Trail are also crowd-pleasing when using recipes of jerky and corn cakes, etc.
- Much of our understanding of the American pioneer experience has been shaped by Hollywood. Film historians might give excellent presentations on how stereotypes of gold miners, Native Americans, pioneers, cowboys, homesteaders, and mountain men have been formed and reinforced. Selections from key films can help de-mythologize our understanding. Showing a feature of a classic film such as John Ford's "Stage Coach" is an excellent means of surveying the stock characters of the trail.

## RAILROADS SPAN THE NATION

### Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas

- Create an exhibition on the history of your local railroad station. Objects may include memorabilia, photos, ticket stubs, train schedules, travel journals. Include a map showing the routes that led into and out of the local train station. Research the average speed of trains at

different periods in history and calculate the time it would take to travel from your station to a nearby station(s). Research the impact that the railroad had on your town in terms of population, housing, business, economy, etc. What are the stories of the immigrant groups that migrated to your community because of the railroad?

- May 10, 1869 marks the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. What was happening in your town on that day? What was the local reaction to the news? Call for family journals and letters that might mention that event and reaction to it.

### **Programming Ideas**

- Research your newspaper archives and see if you can find any advertisements enticing people to emigrate to your community (territory or state). Which arguments used back then still hold true for today? What would modern-day advertisements for your town say? Have a poster contest enticing people to move to your community.
- Interview community members that may have worked on or for the railroad. Conduct oral histories and post their memories (with photos) in your exhibition or in your local newspaper. Don't forget to include them on your organization's web site.
- The Homestead Act was put in place by President Lincoln in 1863 and lasted until it was repealed in 1986. What impact did it have on your community? Research plat maps to discover which properties in town were first claimed during the period of the Homestead Act. Display maps which demonstrate how the town was built over time. What local families owe their property to the Homestead Act?

## **ACCELERATED MOBILITY**

### **Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas**

- Create an exhibition that explores how the changes in transportation and commerce in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century affected your community: It might include:
  - Early photographs and memories of early automobiles (Model T), early car dealerships, family trips or vacations across country.
  - Impact that the building of local roads and highways had on your community
  - Impact on local population of the Great Migration North. How many and which families in your community first arrived in town during this period? Where did they come from? Use a map to demonstrate their journeys. Include excerpts from family diaries, photographs, etc.
  - Early air transportation and air mail: Are there any sample postage from early air mail? Conduct oral histories of those who traveled by air in the early days of aviation or those who worked in early aviation.

### **Programming Ideas**

- There are many poems that relay journey stories, such as Langston Hughes' "One Way Ticket," Philip Larken's "Poetry of Departures" and Edward Fields' "A Journey." Post copies of the poems and provide space for readers to provide their reaction to it—the thoughts and memories it evokes. Invite the audience to write their own version of a poem on this topic, or create artwork depicting what the poem means to them or the feelings it evokes.
- Songwriter Woody Guthrie and photographer Dorothea Lange used their art to share with us their perspectives on the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Invite community members to use their art to share their memories and perspectives of their life's journeys—through song, drama, creative writing, photography, art, etc.

## OUR EXPANDED WORLD

### Local Exhibit Themes/Ideas

- An exhibition featuring and contrasting the stereoscope and the Viewmaster might make for an easy way to illustrate American fascination with travel. By looking at our historical efforts to share vacation hotspots, natural wonders, and urge others to “take to the road,” visitors can compare the technologies used in both the Viewmaster and stereoscope. Though the Viewmaster may be more nostalgic for present-day audiences, the stereoscope (along with their attendant viewing cards featuring natural beauty across the country) was far more popular in its day. Local collectors might help explain the history and impact of these 3D magic viewing glasses as part of an exhibit extension.
- Americans often move freely for economic opportunity, but World War II was a benchmark event that transferred people across the country, out of their regions, and settling families in far-flung states. If your community is near a military base or a factory that was instrumental in relocating local populations, curate an ancillary exhibition relating personal journey stories. Provide individuals with parameters for telling their individual story of relocation. Encourage brevity and adherence to themes of travel, journey, and discovery. Share first-person quotes along with family photos, travel ephemera, and especially letters back home to loved ones.
- Kitschy and historical postcards are very collectible, and nearly every family has samples lying around their own home. Scholars of American road travel study postcards as they relate to community identity, the formation of geographical and cultural stereotyping, and the history of tourism marketing. But an ancillary exhibition of local postcards can yield a broad sweep of on-site inter-actives as well, particularly if they can be mounted to read the reverse message (a wonderful source of first-person travel narrative), or if the postcards are curated to feature certain locations, or are simply arranged according to theme: awe-inspiring, funny, irreverent, ugly, or inspirational.

### Programming Ideas

- **Vacation Photos: the true untold stories**\_Make a call to collect local vacation photos from visitors’ scrapbooks old and new. Sort them according to similarity in their form (for instance, family members standing in front of a large state border sign, at the entrance to a National Park, or on a similar ride at a popular amusement park). Settle on just one standard type. Enlarge photos (as possible or as needed) and then ask each family representative to supply a two sentence interpretation of the photo, answering a targeted curatorial question. The question might be related to our *need* to travel, being *on the road*, or something more light-hearted like, “describe the atmosphere inside your family’s vacation station wagon.”
- **World’s Largest Things Explained:** Artist and pop cultural scholar, Erika Nelson of Lucas, Kansas, is the curator of the “World’s Largest Collection of the World’s Smallest Versions of the World’s Largest Things.” She travels the country in her bus, its own “roadside attraction,” documenting American communities’ claims to “the World’s Largest” and making miniature versions of the same. She studies different types, like accumulation claims (e.g. World’s Largest Ball of Twine, or the World’s Largest Stack of Empty Oil Cans). She also documents “World’s Largest Things” that used to be useful, but aren’t anymore, like the World’s Largest Hand-Dug Well or World’s Largest Electric Shovel. But she also delights in visiting America’s unending fiberglass statues of things that are ridiculously oversized, like the World’s Largest Badger or World’s Largest Donut. Ms. Nelson is a traveling humanities and arts program; schedule her in conjunction with your exhibition stay and she’ll drive her “museum” to you, regale you with tales of the road, and engage students and families in a wide variety of journey-related Americana activities.
- **To Tell the Truth / What’s My Line? – Humanities Style:** By focusing on both the personal and commercial, the sixth final section of *Journey Stories* celebrates Americans’ rights (even

responsibilities) to travel. Using themes from the exhibition, as well as the format of a classic game show like "To Tell the Truth," locals can relate true-life happenings from their own vacations or journeys. Audiences or "celebrity" judges can help determine the authenticity of their tales, by keeping with the game show's design. For a different spin better-suited for younger students, use "What's My Line?" as your program format. Have working individuals such as tug boat captains, railroad engineers, package delivery pilots, or diesel truckers relate road stories, and have children question and guess their professions.