

# **The Option of Quality: From Interpretation to Protection**

***Brandon Reyna***

The verdant canopy hung overhead like interlocking fingers. The stream rambled by my feet, gently swirling past rocks, and under the old, wooden bridge to the lake beyond. What was meant to be a moment of rest had lasted over an hour; I had come to the park to think of all the things I had to do, but they'd melted away. And while no solutions to my 'problems' presented themselves, I was mindful, and I resolved to return. That spot, and the entirety of Tilden Regional Park, has become my Walden Pond.

Tilden Park is an archetype of nature and education. The 2,079-acre park is blanketed in forests, laced with trails, and dotted with lakes. It features several educational sites, including its extensive Botanic Garden, the Environmental Education Center, and a small farm. These services are used by both preschool and high school students alike to learn about the region in which they live as well as its history and culture. Guided tours and its thriving naturalist programs provide an easily accessible means of obtaining vital information and appreciation for this site. "We provide a number of interpretive programs that are meant to educate all sorts of people," says Emily McConnell, a naturalist and tour guide at Tilden Regional Park. "Our main goal is to communicate effectively the information we have to offer... we hope that after people leave [Tilden Park] they have a newfound appreciation for the community that we live in." These ideas are based on the doctrines of the park's namesake: Freeman Tilden.

Tilden Regional Park is just one of the 390 parks named after Freeman Tilden, a scholar who has had a profound effect on our perception of nature (Robinson). Through his works, Tilden founded the practice of heritage interpretation, a practice through which important information is synthesized to present why a particular resource is important, why it must be protected, and what it means to us culturally. Heritage interpretation stresses the process of how interpreting nature will lead to its eventual protection. Or as Tilden originally wrote it, "through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation;

through appreciation, protection” (Tilden, *Interpreting* 38). At Tilden Regional Park, heritage interpretation is achieved through its guided tours and naturalist programs, the Environmental Education Center, the Botanic Gardens, and the other services it provides. In his seminal work, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Tilden outlines this practice creating one of the most influential treatises on preservation.



Tilden, born in 1883, did not begin as a naturalist writer. In the beginning of Tilden’s career, he worked as a journalist, fiction author, and screenwriter. As a journalist, he spent much of his time traveling, leaving his native home in rural Massachusetts and worked for newspapers in Boston, New York, and Charleston (Robinson). He would work in these fields for over thirty years, and the influences these styles had on his writing would help communicate his ideas both eloquently and directly.

After World War II, Tilden became “tired” of fiction writing (Robinson). He turned to a close friend, Newton B. Drury, the director of the National Parks Service, for direction. Drury encouraged Tilden to work for the National Parks Service, and at the age of 59, Tilden changed his career (Robinson). Three years after his career change Tilden published his first environmentally focused book, *The National Parks: What They Mean to You and Me*, in which he argued the significance of the National Park system to American culture; it built upon the American national identity which deeply appreciated wilderness. Tilden would publish five more books and a vast number of articles during his time as a writer for the National Park Service. These works helped spread the importance of protecting wilderness and their meaning in American culture (Dewar 179). Tilden’s work built upon the philosophies and writings of many previous naturalists and scholars, including Mark Twain, Harold C. Bryant, and C.M. Goethe (Dewar 180). Their influences can best be seen in Tilden’s most influential work, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, which has become the, “basis for much of the interpretive work done around the world” (Dewar 180).



*Interpreting Our Heritage* developed and articulated Tilden’s belief that nature was an important aspect of the heritage of the United States. Instead of focusing on how nature impacted people as he did in his earlier work, he now focused on why. This helped change and influence the way environmentalists and scholars appreciated the act of protecting

nature. They helped answer the question *why* when asked why we should protect this particular piece of nature. David L. Larson, an interpreter, environmentalist, and writer, has worked for the National Parks Service for over forty years and is considered a leading voice of heritage interpretation, illustrates this concept: “An interpretive product must develop an idea or ideas cohesively to be relevant, provocative, and meaningful throughout its delivery. An idea provides a platform for the audience to consider, react to, build upon, appropriate, and transform” (Larsen). Tilden also seems to stress the importance of mindfulness of the interpreter and the audience, pushing for conversation, new ideas, personal reflection, and to make connections to the current and past moments. These new connections are the interpretation that heritage interpretation attempts to achieve.

Few people before Tilden’s writing could look at the unspoiled wilderness and understand its relevance to our lives. Many could see the old-growth forests, deserts, and prairies but could not understand or interpret what the land meant to us as a culture. By understanding nature, Tilden meant we must understand its place in our culture and society, and the impact it has had in our history and attitudes. Through understanding how deeply rooted nature is in our heritage, we gain a new level of appreciation for the environment in a way we never could before. And without these three aspects coming together, interpretation, appreciation, and understanding, we cannot protect nature the way it should be.

Heritage Interpretation relies on six main principles. These principles outline goals this practice achieves in its effort to communicate interpretation successfully. David L. Larson summarizes these principles:

An interpretive statement summarizes, articulates, and distills the interpretive theme. It is an artistic creation of the interpreter based on the significance of the site. It is the expression of what the interpreter and the organization knows to be meaningful about the resource and in language audiences can connect to their own experiences (Larsen). The goal of heritage interpretation is to cause discussion and thought by presenting a concise message of the importance of this site. The interpretation must also apply to the audience, because if the audience cannot connect to the site then they cannot interpret, understand, and appreciate the site for all its intrinsic value. Furthermore, it is an “artistic expression” intending to shock the reader into intrigue and knowledge. It is not meant to force the

audience to think a certain way, or to only present certain facts or one point of view. It is intended to create an environment for the reader to interpret for themselves what the importance of the subject is, and to create deeper understanding and appreciation essential in preservation.

In his next book, *The State Parks: Their Meaning in American Life*, Tilden evaluates the importance of state parks to American culture through both a historical and moral lens, and argues for their proliferation. From the early parts of the book, Tilden uses heritage interpretation as a device to explain its significance: “a thousand things you see in your fine state parks do not explain themselves to you. Beauty needs no interpreter... But the naturalists, the historian, the archaeologist, or some other trained mind can carry you further into the search for answers” (Tilden, *The State Parks* 38). Here, the ideas of heritage interpretation are manifest: experts in a variety of fields can help provide information to allow the audience to extrapolate their own experiences to the importance of the site. As Tilden eloquently writes, this expert-curated information facilitates a deeply personal journey for the individual.

Heritage interpretation then becomes the means for which the individual comes into contact with the deeply ingrained appreciation for the ideas of wilderness and nature and of the frontier in American culture, and how these apply to our daily lives. These ideas were once of extreme importance to our society, symbols and ideas every person in the United States could relate to, but they are slowly being erased from our national identity. Tilden observed this during the mid-20th century with the successive destruction of nature due to World War II and the industrial complex which rose in its ashes. Our identity shifted towards power on the international level, and the idea we must sustain this at all costs percolated through the American psyche. Tilden’s writings were his attempt to refocus America.

Yet, in recent years there has been push-back against Tilden’s doctrine. Dr. Russell Staiff, in his book *Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation: Enhancing the Past-Future*, contends that on one hand, heritage interpretation assumes the audience has no knowledge of the subject, and on the other hand, he raises concerns interpreters are not presenting all the facts. Instead, he argues they too often provide only one point of view about the significance of a site, excluding alternatives, criticisms, or complexities. Staiff uses personal anecdotes from his travels to the Doi Inthanon National Park in Thailand, the Art Gallery of New South

Wales, the National Museum and the Siam Discovery Museum in Bangkok, and the Chateau de Prangins in France to try to dismantle Tilden's heritage interpretation. He uses these examples to illustrate his issues with modern heritage interpretation, and concludes, "with these thoughts in mind, the writings of Freeman Tilden emerge as considerably problematic on many levels," (Staiff 33).

Tilden envisioned Heritage Interpretation to be guidelines for institutions to emulate, rather than a set of unbendable rules. This inherent flexibility within Heritage Interpretation is both a strength and a flaw- and with this in mind, to view all of Tilden's writings on heritage interpretation as problematic is a problem itself. Staiff seems to forget principles four and five, two of the six principles the practice is based on. Principle four, as outlined by Tilden, says interpretation should be "not instruction, but provocation" while principle five asserts, "interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part," (Tilden, *Interpreting* 9). Tilden believes when heritage interpretation presents the entirety of the facts, an environment is created in which the audience is forced into thought and discussion. Since thought and discussion arise not from the passive reception of information, but through the tension of complexity, he is not saying only one point of view must be presented and certain information should be suppressed; he argues for the holistic and provocative presentation. Returning to Straiff's examples, he recounts his experience at two museums in Bangkok. He calls the Siam Discovery Museum, "interpretation rich" (Straiff 13) and made for a, "memorable experience" (Straiff 13). However, his experience at the National Museum was not as good, and he laments, "something vital was missing" (Straiff 12). The contrast between these two experiences shows the effects well practiced interpretation can have. The Siam Discovery Museum uses historical, contemporary, and religious lenses to interpret material and several mediums, such as videos and writings, to present (Straiff 13). These layers add to the overall experience of visitors, and are meant to create intrigue and discussion. As Straiff accounts, he asserts experience at the Siam Discovery Museum was more enjoyable, immersive, and educational- these are the goals as outlined by Tilden in his writings, and obviously achieved by this particular museum. It is therefore not the fault of the practice, but rather the fault of the institution whose flawed practice of heritage interpretation leads to negative experiences by visitors.

Furthermore, in the largest study conducted on heritage interpretation, Dr. Robert Powell of Clemson University and Dr. Marc Stern of Virginia Tech University, visited 24 national parks and observed 376 live interpretive programs throughout the country. In their investigation, they found that when heritage interpretation is practiced the way Tilden intended, an environment is created in which, “holistic perspectives on practices related to positive outcomes for program attendees” (Stern and Powell). This study found a direct link between the level of enjoyment a park attendee had when interpretation is practiced. This is exactly what Tilden had described in his writings. However, the same study reaffirmed heritage interpretation is not a hard science. There is no formula for a park or institution to follow to create good interpretation. The researchers further found, “interpretation is a complex phenomenon that requires competence in a range of techniques and approaches that should be responsive to different audiences and contexts” (Stern and Powell). To create an interpretation that connects to the audience, the researchers believe the ability to create unique ways to connect to the audience is necessary. This necessity to recreate and reevaluate how to connect to the audience has created new forms of interpretation that are based on Tilden’s work, but also fosters a new environment meant to connect to our contemporary society.

New forms of interpretation were created to combat the problems of heritage interpretation. Thematic interpretation, one of the first evolutions of heritage interpretation, became influential and widespread after Sam H. Ham wrote his book, *Environmental Interpretation* in which he formulated the groundwork of thematic interpretation. Ham writes, “when the information we present is thematic- that is, when it's all related to some key idea or central message-it becomes easier to follow and more meaningful to people” (Ham 36). Thematic interpretation presents a central, concrete theme for the audience to follow. It does not limit the information and interpretation to this one theme, however it creates an overarching idea that is meant to better connect with the audience. It is a more structured approach to heritage interpretation with the intent to better communicate the importance. Researchers Phillip Gordon Ablett and Pamela Kay Dyer further built upon Ham’s theories, and in noting the complexities and shortcomings of heritage interpretation, believe new forms of interpretation have the, “potential to reinvigorate Tilden's holistic, ethically informed and transformative art of heritage interpretation, developing it in new

direction,” (Ablett and Dyer). These new forms of interpretive practices include environmental interpretation, interactional interpretation, and ecotourism interpretation and many others, which Ablett and Dyer say, “sustain Tilden's major claims concerning the nature of interpretation but offers a coherent framework for furthering heritage interpretation as a broadly inclusive, culturally situated, dialogical and critically reflexive art” (Ablett and Dyer). Without Tilden’s original work of creating heritage interpretation, none of these other lenses used to interpret nature would be here today.

At Tilden Regional Park, the thematic idea is meant to better direct us to the idea of the uniqueness of California. The botanic gardens only have indigenous California plants, containing, “the world's most complete collection of California native plants, including rare and endangered species” (Botanic Gardens). Guided tours and naturalist programs hosted by the Environmental Education Center focus on protecting and appreciating California’s nature. The theme presented in this park connects to the park’s audience, and presents the idea that California is special. However, the park is careful not to take this idea too far and provides the necessary information to allow visitors to come to their own additional conclusions.

Freeman Tilden believed that nature is ingrained in the American dream. In this contemporary era, as we, as more and more people lose sight of what nature means to American culture, Tilden’s ideas are transformed by environmentalists and parks services to ensure that nature appreciation remains both nationally relevant and deeply personal..

Beside the gentle flow of the stream at Tilden Regional Park, his message became clear to me: “the aim of man is to rise above himself, and to choose the option of quality rather than material superfluity” (Tilden, “Interpreting” 54)

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