

# Lessons from the Road



## Case #4: Telling the Story of a Scenic Byway

“Interpretation” is often associated with park rangers leading walks or tell the story of, the natural world. At historic sites and museums, interpreters bring to life historic events and cultural themes. Typically, in both situations, people, signs, and displays explain a site owned by a single public agency, or private group. With the growth of heritage corridors and scenic byways, the settings for interpretation have expanded in number and scale, redefining the very nature of interpretation.

Promotional, advertising, educational, and marketing materials, as

well as visitor services, each interpret the corridor. Managers must use the inter-relationships of these many information sources to deliver a coherent, effective, and interpretive message. This case study looks at the development of interpretive programs along the Salt Missions Trail in New Mexico. It also describes the relatively new concept of “demar-keting” places the community wishes to shield from increased visitation.

*Interpretation is “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”*

—Freeman Tilden,

Interpreting Our Heritage

### About Lessons from the Road

This case study features lessons learned by scenic byway advocates across the country that are applicable to many scenic byway initiatives.

Scenic byways are public roads with special scenic, historic, recreational, cultural, archaeological, and/or natural qualities that have been recognized as such through legislation or some other official declaration.

Nomination guidelines for National Scenic Byway designation require a series of planning and management elements. Some byway efforts lead to nomination, and possibly national designation; the rest choose other paths for implementation. These case studies show how various byway managers address planning and management issues in distinctive ways.

Each case study in this series concludes with a resource list of helpful publications and details on how to contact the National Scenic Byways Clearinghouse.

Good luck with your byway.

#### The Series

1. Mapping
2. Design and Maintenance
3. Assess Intrinsic Qualities
- 4. Telling the Story**
5. Conserving Intrinsic Qualities
6. Visitor Experience & Services
7. Manage Development
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# Organizing a Byway Interpretive Program

Fundamental to any interpretive program is the story. Partners in a corridor must find consensus sometime during the Corridor Management Planning process for a central story of the byway. What are the key themes that a visitor can follow along the way?

In Torrance County, the Byway corridor planning process has stirred interest, and even some controversy, related to the future of byway roads and communities, and developments in the County as a whole. At lively community

meetings, residents not only debated ideas, but also investigated new ways to control the future of their towns and the corridor. Key stakeholders—private land owners, businesses, Federal and State land managers, and other interest groups—share a common interest in facilities and activities that present the byway's special qualities, but have strong concerns about the potential impacts of increased tourism.

## The Salt Missions Trail Scenic Byway

The Salt Missions Trail Scenic Byway makes a 113-mile loop in Torrance County, in central New Mexico. It traces a route along pre-historic trade routes, a Spanish wagon road, an abandoned railroad right-of-way, and Old Route 66.

Communities and land managers along the route vary in their support of the Byway plans and management proposals. Some are concerned with possible impacts of increased tourism and explicitly wish to be left out of Byway promotion. Other communities see the Byway as a boon for the four local communities operating Main Street programs (sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation).

Nevertheless, even these divergent interests agree on the need to build understanding and respect—among both visitors and residents—of the relationships between communities and the intrinsic qualities of the Salt Missions Trail.

## Unique Qualities of Corridors

While standard interpretive methods used in parks and museums can be applied to byways, the Salt Missions Trail and most other byway corridors differ in three ways:

- ✓ No single entity has the authority or the capacity to design and implement a corridor-wide interpretive program. Coordinating an array of interpretive “messengers” and sites may be as important (and just as time-consuming) as deciding what to say and how to present it.

- ✓ To protect residents' wishes and fragile intrinsic qualities, byway managers

need to shield certain areas of the corridor from increased visitation. The interpretive program must discourage inappropriate activities and even steer visitors

away from certain places. This is known in tourism circles as “demarketing.”

- ✓ Because visitors receive information from so many sources, a cohesive interpretive program must be supported by promotions, advertising, educational programs, signs, as well as visitor centers and roadside displays.

# Key Interpretive Planning Steps in a Corridor



Use a Corridor Management Plan to ensure that visitor centers, signage and other amenities add to byway interpretation.

With a newly-minted byway, there is a natural tendency to jump right into thinking about signs, facilities, brochures, and other interpretive devices that can be put in place along the route. But, there are hazards with this approach—signs in the wrong places, visitor centers with few visitors, and brochures that leave the visitor wondering “so what?” The Corridor Management Plan establishes a framework for interpretation by setting up a four-step process.

## Step One:

### Define the Overall Purpose

The plan sets out four objectives as the purpose of interpretive activities:

- ✓ Provide for the conservation and enhancement of the byway’s intrinsic qualities.
- ✓ Increase visitors’ and residents’ enjoyment.
- ✓ Promote appropriate tourism and economic development.
- ✓ Assist communities in developing and carrying out their own plans for conservation and development of local resources.

## Step Two: Develop Themes

The inventory and evaluation of intrinsic qualities on the Salt Missions Trail revealed fascinating stories about individual features and relationships among sites along the corridor.

- ✓ For some seven centuries, people living and working in the area of Salinas, New

Mexico, have adapted to both the limits of local resources and diverse influences from outside sources.

- ✓ Different cultural traditions and technological tools have resulted in settlement patterns leading to coexistence and clashes over time.
- ✓ The region has supported a long history of communities that rely heavily on local land and water resources to support agriculture, ranching, forestry, and other uses. They have significantly modified the landscape, shaping the surrounding environment to meet their needs.
- ✓ People have brought to the region diverse social and cultural traditions and beliefs, which have persisted and evolved in a relatively remote area. These themes allow interpreters to work with an endless variety of topics (needlepoint to bean farming, Native American architecture to rodeo) and use very different approaches that suit their settings.

“Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact.”

“Interpretation should capitalize on mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit.”

—Freeman Tilden

## An Example: The Process at Work

### Step Three:

#### Set Interpretive Goals

The Corridor Management Plan proposes a more specific set of objectives for the Byway's thematically-linked interpretive program. These objectives reinforce the fundamental purpose of informing and educating visitors and residents, but also direct interpretive activities to address certain management concerns of the Byway.

- ✓ Interpretive activities will strive to develop an understanding and respect for local communities and resources, and direct visitors toward less sensitive areas or events.
- ✓ To develop greater appreciation of relationships within the region and to encourage longer visits, interpretive activities should create a cohesive identity by focusing on the unifying themes, explicitly linking related sites, and using consistent graphic design elements.
- ✓ Interpretation will be delivered by a number of only loosely associated entities.
- ✓ To promote efficiency and coordination, the Byway will strive to build on existing resources in ways that are compatible with current facilities and activities, and accessible to broad audiences.

### Step Four:

#### Identify Opportunities

Based on the proposed themes, objectives, and existing programs, the Corridor Management Plan outlines a number of future interpretive opportunities that can be pursued. Many of the options—visitor contact stations, publications, signs and exhibits, and audiovisual programs—are viable for almost any byway.

While the plan includes some discussion of how these strategies can build on existing facilities and activities, the listing of potential opportunities is not the end of interpretive planning.

To carry forward real projects, partners



will answer yet more specific questions: Which audiences to serve? What observable benefits to anticipate? Who, when, and how to implement activities?

No single entity will carry out all, or even most, of the interpretive activities along the Salt Missions Trail. The plan offers a conceptual framework to assist communities as they identify local actions. Byway managers will need to support implementation activities in the hands of a diverse cast of characters.

*Interpretive activities should create a cohesive identity for the byway.*

# Lessons Learned

## Planning and Implementation Can Work Simultaneously

Salt Missions Trail planners and managers decided that rather than attempt to define a long list of interpretive actions, the Corridor Management Plan will serve as a point of departure for implementation.

This builds interest and agreement at a conceptual level (goals and themes), promotes flexibility and creativity at a local level, and allows for implementation even while planning continues. The potential disadvantage is that no one will follow up with subsequent planning.

To combat this, partners will share the Salt Missions Trail Corridor Plan in a number of settings for discussion and definition of specific projects. This and other follow-up strategies to organize and motivate partners will be essential for on-the-ground results.

### Principles from Interpreting Our Heritage

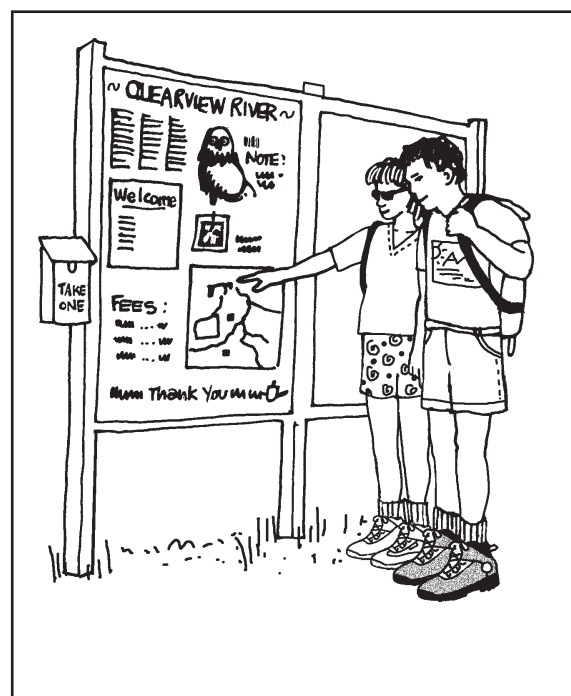
Freeman Tilden offered six principles for interpretation:

1. Interpretation must *relate* to the personality or experience of the visitor.
2. Interpretation is *revelation* based on information.
3. It is an *art*, and is made up of many arts.
4. The chief aim is *provocation*, not just instruction.
5. It should present *the whole*, not just a part.
6. Interpretation for children is *fundamentally different* than that for adults; it is not just diluted.

- ✓ Involve interpreters and educators early and often. In planning for the Salt Missions Trail, a series of community meetings provided valuable information about intrinsic qualities of the Byway, identified issues of concern, and generated leads for opportunities to pursue.

In retrospect, additional input from interpreters and educators would have made the interpretive planning easier and better. They could have helped to identify feasible priorities and critical opportunities earlier in the process, especially because they will carry out a number of the proposed activities.

- ✓ Consider interpretation in unlikely places. Can a diner placemat be a byway brochure? Can cashiers become your first line of accurate information?
- ✓ Consider far-reaching results of interpretation. Can great interpretation promote longer stays? Can interpretive messages slow down visitors and mitigate traffic hazards, or promote pedestrian or bicycle alternatives?



Information stations should relate to the experience of the visitor, and they should tell the whole story.

## Something for Everyone

Stakeholders along the Byway have identified a broad range of problems and opportunities that are most important to them. While there is a tendency to see interpretation as helping only visitors, some activities can benefit residents directly. The Salt Missions Trail is working to produce a video about the Byway in which elderly residents describe the region's history and traditions. It has been proposed that the interviews be conducted by young residents. This may provide spin-off benefits by providing employment and skills development for local youth, as well as strengthening their appreciation of their own communities.

### Additional Resources

*Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets*, Sam H. Ham, North America Press, 1992.

*Nature Watch: A Resource For Enhancing Wildlife Viewing Areas*, Wendy E. Hudson, ed., Falcon Press, 1992.

*On Interpretation: Sociology for Interpreters of Natural and Cultural History*, Gary E. Machlis and Donald R. Field, Oregon State University Press, 1992.

*Interpreting Our Heritage*, Freeman Tilden, University of North Carolina Press, 1977.

*Signs, Trails, and Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People and Places*, Suzanne Trapp, Michael Gross, and Ron Zimmerman, University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point Foundation Press, 1994.

"Demarketing as a New Communication Tool," published in *Trends: Interpretation as Communication*, Edited by James D. Absher, Ph.D., U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Recreation and Park Association, Washington, D.C. Volume 34, Number 4, 1997.

*The Interpreters Guidebook: Techniques for Programs and Presentations*, Kathleen Regnier, Michael Gross and Ron Zimmerman, University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point Foundation Press, 1994.

Contact the National Scenic Byways Clearinghouse for these and other resources (see below).

### About this Series

The National Scenic Byways Program of the Federal Highway Administration and the Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program of the National Park Service collaborated to research, write, and produce **Lessons from the Road**. The series was written in 1998.

For information on resources mentioned in this series, contact the National Scenic Byways Clearinghouse: 1-800-4-BYWAYS (1-800-429-9297), press 2, or visit our website at [www.byways.org](http://www.byways.org).

The Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program works beyond national

park boundaries to bring conservation assistance to communities, serving as a catalyst for tangible results.

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