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## The River and the Ranger: The Crafting and Background of an Interpretive Program

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The River and the Ranger:  
The Crafting and Background of an Interpretive Program

An Undergraduate Honors Creative Project  
Submitted in Partial fulfillment of  
University Honors Program Requirements  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

by  
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## **Abstract**

The central part of this creative project was the development and presentation of an interpretive program delivered in conjunction with employment at the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway. To supplement this place-specific program, a second program was developed retaining similar themes to the first, but designed to be presented in Lincoln. A brief history of the National Park Service as well as the fundamentals of interpretation were researched and elaborated upon to provide both a base and background for presentation of the interpretive programs. The project includes both self-assessment of the programs and research, as well as remarks, suggestions, and opinions of those who attended the program, including job supervisors. The result of this project was an increased appreciation and respect for interpretation, as well as the betterment of the Riverway and its visitors through the establishment of a program which will continue to be shared.

**Key Words:** National Park Service, Interpretation, Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Sigurd Olson

## The River and the Ranger: The Crafting and Background of an Interpretive Program

### Introduction

The St. Croix River is an unpretentious meander of water that spills into the Mississippi after snaking the border between Minnesota and Wisconsin for 125 miles. Its flow contains the stories of voyageurs, loggers, Native Americans, and explorers, not to mention ancient fish, endangered mussels, and a cacophony of insects and animals on its shores. The wild and scenic personality of the St. Croix earned it the protection of the National Park Service in the mid-twentieth century, and the love both visitors and locals have for the river has only grown since then.

The St. Croix earned a special place in my heart, as well, as it was there I served my first summer as a ranger for the National Park Service. It was this summer in the Northwoods that gave birth to my creative project. The nucleus of this project is the ranger program I developed and presented on a paddle of the river open to all visitors of the park. To better appreciate the history and process of my program, however, this creative project starts at the very beginning. Opening with a brief history of the National Park Service establishes a basis for understanding the longevity and impact of the conservation ideals within America. These ideals are supplemented by interpretation, a concept whose history is tied closely with the Park Service's. After establishing the facts, my own history with national parks is explored, as the stage is set to introduce my initial program and my edited second iteration. These programs, however, would not be inspired or alive without an idea that has been called America's best.

## History of the National Park Service

There are few icons that represent the enduring spirit of America more than the bison and sequoia that form the arrowhead badge of the National Park Service. Heralded as America's best idea, each park preserves what Americans of the past want Americans of the future to love, learn from, and be astonished by. The National Park Service hosted a year of festivities and remembrances in 2016, a celebration of its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. However, unlike most stories, the Park Service's does not begin with its birth. Nor can this tale even start in 1872, with the founding of Yellowstone, the first national park. The history of America's parks dates back to a time when the west was still in its infancy, when a plan for the land that revolutionaries and soldiers fought over had barely yet been considered. When the idea did begin to manifest itself in explorers and adorers of the new (to Europeans) land, it was less an idea of the mind and more an idea of the soul.

If credit for the formation of the national park system must be given, it may be tentatively bestowed on unassuming painter George Caitlin. A fascination with Indians held the eastern-born Caitlin from a young age, and that wonder fueled him through several western expeditions, visiting areas where very few Europeans had ever traveled. Caitlin was the first to paint Native Americans in their natural territory (Eisler), and the venture had a lasting impact on him. He believed westward expansion would crush the Indians' way of life, and dreamed of preservation of this raw beauty "by some great protecting policy of government ... in a magnificent park... A nation's park, containing man and beast, in all the wild[ness] and freshness of their nature's beauty!" (*Shaping the System* 10).

Though the musings of an underappreciated artist did not spark acts, or Acts, of protection, the sentiment Caitlin's idea carried was echoed by men across the country that was

growing into its adolescent years. Dispositions encouraged by Romanticism spurred well-known artists, authors, and naturalists to speak out in the defense of the remarkable landscapes the country was presenting its new explorers (*The History of the NPS*). Though westward expansion is usually hallmarked by a merciless squeezing of the land for all resources it can offer, these men offered a different view: preservation for the sake of beauty. Exploration was revealing lands and resources that merited more than being exploited.

The first of these areas to garner the interest of preservationists was the Yosemite Valley in central California. Glacial vistas, granite intrusions, and towering sequoias gave men pause as they marched through the land, and soon the remarkable area came to the attention of a senator in the freshly-minted state. He determined the land must be protected, not for any endeavor of development, but solely for the beauty it possessed (*The History of the NPS*). Therefore, in the midst of a war threatening to tear his country in two, Abraham Lincoln took the time to sign into effect the Yosemite Grant, declaring that the scenic wonder “shall be held for public use, resort and recreation; [and] shall be inalienable for all time” (*Shaping the System*). Thus, on June 30, 1864, the unprecedented action of setting aside land to be protected by the government for the mere sake of enjoyment by all was enacted, establishing the vague supports of a system that would eventually grow to include over 400 sites, from sea to shining sea.

However, it is obvious but necessary to point out that Yosemite was not the first national park. Though Lincoln’s signature surrendered the land to government control, it was the state of California, not a federal institution, which oversaw the valley (*History of the NPS*). Several years later, almost halfway across the country, General Henry Washburn set out to survey the land that would become Yellowstone, after astonishing reports by local prospectors of unearthly features. A thorough crew, including photographers and painters that captured the surreal visage

of the place for folks back east, submitted reports of a beautiful place, one that necessitated protection. With hearty backing from the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, whose new line would benefit greatly from an interesting spectacle for easterners to come visit, the Yellowstone Act was placed on the desk of the president. The law Ulysses S. Grant signed was almost identical to the Yosemite Act, however, March 1, 1872, marks the founding of the first national park, where Yosemite's signing date had not (*Shaping the System*). The land protected under the Yellowstone Act was within Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho, none of which were yet states, and therefore had neither the resources nor authority to receive jurisdiction of the park. With no choice but to assign control to the federal government, the world's first national park was born.

This firstborn child found its governmental protection under the Department of the Interior (*History of the NPS*), who was to defend this national treasure's natural resources and "curiosities" from "wanton destruction...for purposes of merchandise or profit" (*Yellowstone National Park Protection Act*). However, the act was mum on how exactly such protection was to be carried out. After the founding of the park, Congress thought of Yellowstone very little in the subsequent years, denying appeals for money submitted to them religiously by the Secretary of the Interior, and the superintendent of the park (Hampton). The government would not allocate funds to improve the park until more interest was shown in it by the American people, but travelers would not come until basic improvements such as roads and inns were there to draw them in. While this fruitless cycle spiraled, the animals and resources of Yellowstone that inspired its status as a park were being poached and taken by utilitarians who did not care for the idea of aesthetics when there was money to be made on the land (*History of the NPS*). Attacks continued on all sides, as the few tourists who found their way to the curious wilderness wanted

their piece of the uniqueness and would mercilessly climb the cones of geysers, chop themselves a souvenir, or carve their name into the trees and rocks throughout the park (Hampton).

After more than a decade of unfulfilling leadership and no satisfactory policies, Yellowstone found an unlikely hero: the Department of War. Lacking the funding and authority to control the rampant degradation of resources, control of the Park was given to Troop M of the United States Cavalry (Hampton). With actual jurisdiction, soldiers were able to reign in the vandals, devastatingly overeager tourists, and those vying for personal gain from the land. Poachers were removed from Yellowstone to protect animal populations, and the wonders sightseers came to witness were successfully guarded against the sightseers themselves (Hampton). Other protected areas that had popped up across the country were having the same problem, and in many cases the military was able to establish a semblance of order in those parks as well. Military guardianship of Yellowstone was such a stunning success, several toyed with the idea of placing the parks permanently under their charge, even facetiously expressing that forestry should be added to the West Point curriculum (Johnson). The iconic flat hat worn by rangers of National Park Service was established as part of the uniform in honor of the cavalry men that saved the national parks and ensured a future for the groundbreaking idea (NPS History Collection).

Successful as the military occupation of the parks was, it was only ever a temporary solution. Criteria for more nationally protected places, such as monuments, seashores, and battlefields, were established. In 1906, the avid supporter of environmental pursuits, President Teddy Roosevelt, signed the Antiquities Act, giving all presidents the power to independently proclaim areas of scientific or historic importance to be national monuments (*History of the*



*NPS*). With the influx of such monuments in Roosevelt's term, and subsequently, it became clear a singular guiding entity was required to manage the growing wonders of America.

By the mid-1910s, various branches of the United States government had amassed quite the collection of significant places to be enjoyed by all. However, the method of that enjoyment – and the protection for the sake of enjoyment – varied between sites as much as historical and geographic features did. Conservation fought against preservation within the sites, as groups of men who both deeply cared for nature debated the merits of using the land's resources for the greatest good, or maintaining the wilderness as it was (*Shaping the System*). Seeing the need to marry the two camps of thought for the benefit of the parks as a whole was Chicago businessman Stephen Mather. As no predecessors had been able to wrangle conflicting goals of the national parks, Mather headed to Washington to see what he could do (*Shaping the System*).

Appealing with stories, pictures, and arguments that connected with people on all sides of the issue, Mather lobbied his way to an Act. The allure of the financial and educational benefits to a large tourism industry was one of Mather's dominant focuses that got him further than anyone had before to a cohesive agency. August 25, 1916, is the true birthday of the National Park Service, signed into existence by President Woodrow Wilson through the Organic Act of 1916 (Lee). Along with establishing a structure of leadership for the service, the Act also established its purpose, namely promoting and regulating the parks so they may remain "...unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations" (*The Organic Act of 1916*).

Though this brief history is vital to understanding and appreciating the National Park Service more fully, the true power of each park, preserve, and monument comes from the connections between habitat and human that are happening today. The potency of national parks today is children proudly showing their Junior Ranger badges pinned to their chests and sharing

how they learned that trees can smell like butterscotch! It is fathers discovering the inextricable relationship between the deer they have hunted their whole lives and previously diminished wolf populations. It is mothers seeing themselves reflected in the mural of the Native American woman feeding her children out of clay bowls. The power of the parks is forging a relationship between the natural world and those viewing it. It is giving meaning and emotion to places and history. The power of the parks is interpretation.

### Basics of Interpretation

There is good reason the national parks are called America's best idea. Each wholly unique location brings visitors from all walks of life closer to the beauty and power of nature, to enjoy these lands that belong to them. In the late years of the nineteenth century, however, those who ran the parks began to realize the eager tourists that came to visit had no idea what they were looking at. The landscapes and life within them were alien to the visitors, which meant they could never appreciate them to the full. Furthermore, this also meant that since they didn't understand it, they didn't care as much about taking care of it.

Both to help adventurers appreciate their time in the parks, and to make their job of protecting the resources easier, some soldiers stationed in the parks began offering education to visitors. They were joined in some parks by other environmentalists and locals of the area, all of whom began leading tours and offering explanations for the land, history, and life that the parks protected. From the start, this was more than education. It was about making the facts real to those hearing them, to be "more inspirational than informational," as Rocky Mountain National Park nature guide Enos Mills explained. Mills went on to explore what he thought made a good

nature guide, written in works that would lay the basis for what would come to be known as interpretation.

Though interpretation as a word means to explain the meaning of something, the common context it is usually framed with in surrounds translating between languages. Perhaps the first person to use the word “interpretation” in the way Enos Mills, park guides of old, and the current National Park Service think of it, was John Muir. Muir is perhaps the most famous of all preservationists, known for his dedication to protecting the Yosemite Valley. In 1896, Muir wrote, “I’ll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm and the avalanche. I’ll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can” (Muir). With that, the crux of the matter was established; the goal of helping others who are journeying out into nature should be moving their hearts closer to the world.

As the park service transitioned into a cohesive agency, there remained many individualistic differences between parks that were not so quick or simple to standardize. Among these was how visitor education and interpretation were handled (Knudsen 108). Though many parks had wonderful interpretive programs, there was no basic philosophy underlying the system, connecting each site to a common goal.

Here, in the early 1950s, enters Freeman Tilden. A lifelong journalist, novelist, and amateur naturalist, Tilden was nearing the end of his career when he decided he wanted to do more than just entertain folks (Tilden 6). With a desire to make a difference through his writing, Tilden appealed to the director of the National Park Service to use him as he needed, so long as it was impactful work. After several years of producing vital and lauded books over various topics, Tilden wanted to explore something that truly captivated him: interpretation (Tilden 8).

The park service director at the time, Conrad Wirth, had his own drive to bring

interpretation to the forefront of every national park site, professing “protection through appreciation, appreciation through understanding, and understanding through interpretation” (Tilden 8). Invigorated, Tilden set off across the country, visiting parks and taking in the programs and interpretation currently in practice. Building on his own knowledge as well as that of Muir, Mills, and other greats, Tilden produced what would become known as the bible of interpretation (Tilden 10), *Interpreting our Heritage*.

Within this witty, informational, inspiring, and empowering handbook, Tilden lays out the definition of interpretation that he had gathered, which would end up becoming one of many. Tilden surmised, “[interpretation is] “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, or by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (Tilden 17). Further elaborating on this nebulous concept are six basic principles Tilden believed should be automatic and subconscious for interpreters when practicing their art. Above all, interpretation is far more than information; it is provocation.

Throughout its life, the NPS has recommitted itself several times to the mission of interpretation, through new standards, new studies, and new books. These teachings have made positive interpretation achievable for even the youngest of new rangers, elaborating upon the basics that Muir, Mills, and Tilden elocuted. However formative to the new century of the Park Service and beneficial to interpreters these supporting documents may be, I will not delve into them. Freeman Tilden and his interpretation of our heritage is all we need, as it is through his words that this young, new ranger wrote her way to her first interpretive program.

## My Personal Connections

Somewhere deep in the belly of the photo album cupboard in my parents' house is a picture of me only a few weeks after my second birthday. My Winnie the Pooh shirt and curly pigtails are fearlessly leading my family down the Kaibab trail, closer to the Colorado River snaking along the deepest part of the Grand Canyon below. Though we made it nowhere close to the meandering water – a hazard of having four children under the age of 8 – my brothers and I accomplished something my parents tell us we were far prouder of – earning our third Junior Ranger badge of the trip.

Such was the cycle of my childhood. Two weeks every summer found my family loading up the van with sleeping bags, our tent, and endless snacks, off somewhere in the far reaches of the country to visit national parks, forests, and any other oddities we found in between. Rangers and volunteers at each of these places brought the spectacular history and nature around me to life, gifting it to me in ways that made my curious and young mind fall in love every time. As I grew, my understanding slowly followed suit. New parks and revisited parks alike offered information that built and expanded the schemas I had created as a child. Each new piece, each new connection to the land and life around me, fit in the mental map of the environment I was drawing. By the time I was in high school, I began realizing that it was more than just cool rangers that helped me connect to the parks I loved so much. What they did was an artform, and I desperately wanted to learn it.

Through my childhood I have come to revere, almost worship, the flat hat worn by park service rangers. It wasn't until the summer after my high school graduation, though, that I realized my true dream job was to wear one of my own. I asked every ranger I came across that year how they earned the arrowhead patch and sequoia acorn belt of their uniform. I spent

months of my first year of college deciding on a major, because my environmental education minor was what I truly cared about. It was through one of my classes for this minor that I was first introduced to interpretation. I felt like a bit of a schmuck; a self-proclaimed lover of national parks, oblivious to the guiding philosophy of the whole system. Better late than never, however, as I was wholly enraptured by the principles of interpretation. Making the subject relevant to those witnessing it, fostering connections, the purpose of tangibles and intangibles: all of it made complete sense to me. My major at the time was English education, and these interpretation basics seemed to be the manifestation of exactly what I wanted my classroom to accomplish.

The summer after this class found me needing my knowledge of interpretation more than ever, as I peaked rather young in life, achieving my dream job at only 20 years old. I cried when I was presented with my National Park Ranger badge for the first time, seeing in its metal shine the countless plastic Junior Ranger badges I had worn before it. My co-workers applauded when I slid my flat hat on for the first time. The first two weeks of my tenure at the Saint Croix National Scenic Riverway in Wisconsin were filled with an education in wildflowers, river landings, and logging history. I was stationed out of a small visitor center on a tributary of the Saint Croix, the Namekagon, a river that inspired the protection of wild and scenic rivers all across the country.

Throughout the summer, I had extensive training through online courses and hands-on practices to study the art of interpretation. My co-workers who had been with the park service for many years presented their interpretation programs as examples for my fellow intern and I. These presentations also served to help us understand the difference between education and interpretation, as well to see in action the nuts and bolts of a good interpretive program.

After half a summer of observing and assisting with interpretive programs in the visitor center, on hikes, and during paddles on the river, the other intern and I approached our boss with a proposition that both frightened and excited us: we wanted to craft our own interpretive programs. He easily agreed, and we were given free rein to develop a program over absolutely anything within the bounds of the Riverway's purpose, to be presented during a public paddle. I was thrilled; I was nervous; I had absolutely no idea what to write about.

### Initial Program

After a run through the thick trees of the Northwoods each morning, I would sit down with my morning cup of coffee, my purple highlighter, and *Interpreting our Heritage*. This pre-work ritual continued for the brief time it took me to fly through Tilden's masterpiece. Every chapter presented a concept that was new to me, but just felt so *right*, that it felt as though I had known it forever. I began to take a different approach in my interactions with visitors and in my brainstorming for my interpretive program. Of all the definitions of interpretation that I studied, both within Tilden's book and from outside sources, the idea that guided my own program the most was a phrase Tilden described as an admonition: "interpretation should capitalize mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit" (Tilden 33).

What was I curious about? If interpretation began in wonderment, so should my program begin with something *I* wondered. With this always at the back of my mind, subsequent chapters in *Interpreting our Heritage* began to speak to me. In one, Tilden professes the potency of the story, of capturing peoples' imaginations. One of the final chapters implores the reader to never forget the most important aspect of all interpretation is love, of both the subject and the audience.

This whirlpool of curiosity, stories, and love swirled in my head as I moved onto my next morning read, *Listening Point* by Sigurd Olson. Now, I knew the spine of *Listening Point* very well, as it sat in a prominent place on my dad's bookshelf growing up. Though I'd heard stories from the book, I'd never read its entirety, as dad didn't like the aging pages to be handled too harshly. The worn book was one of my dad's favorite possessions, and he referred to the author by a familial "Sig" whenever he spoke of him. Sigurd Olson was an environmentalist and author of the north, well-known for being a champion for the importance of wild places. The place where *Listening Point* is based, an area that Sig lived and spent a great deal of time, was a wilderness area in northern Minnesota, the Boundary Waters. It was when my dad worked as a guide in the Boundary Waters during his summers in college that he discovered Sig's works, and where, after hearing stories from his friends who were lucky enough to meet Sig themselves, he grew to truly respect him.

I had not thought about Sigurd Olson in many years before I headed up to the Namekagon at the start of my summer. However, within the first two weeks of my job, I heard his name mentioned more than I ever had before. As it were, Sigurd Olson spent a portion of his young years along the banks of the Namekagon, and was even buried on a hill overlooking the water, along one of my favorite stretches of river. It was an odd twist of fate that, of all the jobs I applied for that summer, I ended up at a place that was connected to the man who inspired my father's love of the outdoors, which in turn inspired mine.

Inspired by all this inspiration, I decided to finally read *Listening Point* all the way through. I soon discovered all I had been missing, as it was a beautiful narrative of prose that settled in one's soul like poetry. The deep connection I felt to the wilderness Olson was describing brought tears to my eyes on several occasions. It was one of these moments of



emotion that it abruptly hit me: I had my interpretive program. I always received questioning glances when I told visitors and co-workers my major was English education; it didn't quite match their notion of what a park ranger was. Thinking back to Tilden's curiosity, stories, and love, I realized what fit the bill for me was books. And, I was halfway through the perfect and seemingly fated book for the project.

I dug more into Sig's legacy, researching what made him famous besides his words. It didn't take me long to discover I had him to thank for many of the best moments of my life. Sig fought, almost always successfully, to keep wild places wild, preventing development and logging from taking hold of the Boundary Waters and other wilderness areas. He was integral in the drafting and eventual signing of the Wilderness Act of 1964, the bill that championed the legal protection of wild places across the country. I soon discovered that, in addition to the Wilderness Act, Sig testified for the protection of rivers under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, a testimony that was specifically drawn from his relationship with the Namekagon.

The pieces seemed to be falling into place as though they were part of a puzzle, designed to fit together. I now knew I wanted my program to center around Sig and his ideas, so I dug into researching. On quiet afternoons in the Visitor Center I would let one site take me to another, and another, until I had a patchwork of ideas all connected to one another in surprising ways. As I spent time reflecting over the material I was amassing, the goal of my program began writing itself. The common theme of all Sig's writings, especially *Listening Point*, was the importance of a connection to wilderness. Though the flat hat was definitely a perk, helping others connect with nature was the guiding reason I wanted to work for the park service. After recognizing these two truths, it seemed the obvious next step to make this program, given while kayaking on a river, about the importance of connection to water, specifically wild rivers.

One of the basic tenets of interpretation is the use of tangibles and intangibles. Tangibles are the physical components of a program – things visitors can touch, see, and corporally experience. Good interpretation is the use of tangibles to help visitors understand the intangibles that the physical objects or landscapes connect to: ideas, emotions, and values. For example, a forest may physically be just a beautiful connection of trees, but intangibly it represents solitude, deforestation, and the cycle of life. For my program, I wanted to use my tangibles to help the visitors move from familiar and easy things into a deeper pondering of intangible ideas.

To do this I designed my program to begin with a sharing of personal experiences with rivers – both mine and those of the paddlers. This was a simple starting point with ideas that were familiar to everyone. I also wanted my paddlers to see that, even though they may not realize it, each one of us has a connection to rivers. From that personal concept, I moved to one that may not be as familiar to some paddlers, but was the main tangible aspect of my program: the Namekagon. I used the federally protected river to launch into the even broader concept of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, as the Namekagon was part of the first group of rivers guarded under the Act. I used the personal stories of Sigurd Olson and Gaylord Nelson, the senator who presented the Act, to anchor the wide-reaching idea of the Act and give my paddlers a link.

After diving into the importance of protecting the wilderness of wild rivers, I moved on to the river part of wild rivers. Rather unintentionally, I had come across several articles, books, and studies on the psychological importance of water to humans. As someone who grew up next to two rivers, spent my summers kayaking lakes and visiting the ocean, and spring breaks on weeklong canoe trips, I had always felt a bone-deep peace and rightness being near water. It made perfect sense to me to discover that there was a physical reaction in our brains to being near water. The whole concept neatly pulled together everything I had thus far been striving to

accomplish with my program: the importance of rivers, keeping them wild, and of spending time near their waters. As my culminating quote expresses, “Thousands have lived without love, not one without water.”

The day of my presentation, the culmination of half of my summer’s work, was rather anticlimactic. Following the theme of many of our ranger-guided activities at such a small visitor center, not many people showed up. In total, I had two paddlers besides myself. One was my fellow summer ranger. The other, the chief ranger from Headquarters. Though the public showing was less than enthusiastic, I had a wonderful experience with my first interpretive program. My audience knew exactly how to respond, and the small group meant I was able to facilitate a rather meaningful (to myself, at least) discussion of the personal power of wild rivers. Overall, I was very satisfied with the end result, and I was beaming when the chief ranger bought me an ice cream cone after our paddle as a sign of a job well done. Though I knew I had many summers of wearing the flat hat before me yet before I could truly begin to master the art of interpretation, it was invigorating to have taken the first stroke of my paddle in the right direction.

### Initial Program

Interpretive Paddle Program – *Wandering on Water*

Ranger Amy Heusinkvelt

St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, Namekagon District

**Theme:** Conservation, Human Highway and Home

**Objectives:** Paddlers will be able to:

- Relate their experience on this paddle with other/all rivers
- Appreciate the reliance of humans upon rivers
- Recognize the need for conservation of wild rivers
- Understand the power of humans' connection to water

**Goal:** Foster each individual's connection to the river and develop a deeper understanding of why wild rivers are important to humans.

**Tangibles:** The river, water, old bridge structure, Sigurd Olson's grave

**Intangibles:** Connection, wilderness, preservation, water

**Universals:** Connection to a place, protection of what is special

### Structure

- a. Welcome Paddlers
  - Introduce myself, Ranger Jeff
- b. Have Paddlers introduce themselves
  - Where are you from? Have you been on the Namekagon before?
- c. Your Experience with Rivers
- d. My Experience with Rivers, Watersheds
- e. Paddling safety talk
- f. Read quote by Sigurd Olson
- g. Start paddling
- h. Stop in Seely at Sigurd Olson's grave
- i. Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Sigurd Olson's Role, History of the Act
- j. Walk back down to water
- k. Impact of the Act Today
- l. Finish paddle to Larsen Landing
- m. Wrap It All Up
- n. Thank paddlers for attending, invited them to Visitor Center and on other programs

### Program

#### **Your Experience with Rivers**

- Think of a river that was near to where you grew up, or one that was a big part of your childhood.

- What did/does it mean to you? What memories do you have of it? How has it impacted you?

### **My Experience with Rivers**

- I grew up near the confluence of two rivers, the Loup and Platte. I spent summers there swimming, building, and exploring, and winters walking along the banks watching the ice. Whenever my family would travel growing up, or now when I visit from college, I know I am home the moment I cross my rivers. I spent the two days I had at home before moving up here at the river, just being with it as it healed after the floods of spring.
- During my spring breaks, I spent a week in a canoe with my dad. These paddles during college rejuvenated me in ways I didn't even know I needed, after being in the city for 7 months. Life on the water both calmed me and put everything in perspective. When you're in a canoe loaded to the gunnels floating down a chilly river with far too high of a rock-to-water ratio, the only thing that matters is avoiding the rocks and reading the rapids. The only focus is not capsizing, a very basic need to survive, and it makes all other worries and responsibilities seem superfluous. A river state of mind is the best state of mind.

### **Watersheds**

- Rivers are much more than just passages of water. Physically, they encompass the whole of their river shed. Where we currently stand, what happens everywhere from Minong to Cable, or anywhere in the watershed, ends up in the Namekagon.
- Culturally, the river carries the whole of the river shed as well. From the beginning, humans have been inextricably linked to rivers. When our ancestors first morphed from nomadic hunters and gatherers to farmers who remained rooted around one area, their civilizations were on the banks of rivers.
- As humanity extended its reach on the land over the centuries, the breaking of new ground was inevitably aided by rivers' ability to move. They moved people, machines, logs, animals. Lewis and Clarke's expedition was brought to fruition by rivers. We owe not only the settlement, but the development, of our country to rivers.
- Over recent history, rivers have evolved for humans, changing from moving highways necessary to civilization and livelihood, to places of recreation and solace.

### **Quote from Sigurd Olson**

- As we begin our paddle, let this quote guide your time on the water. Don't think too much, just let the river take you where it wants you to go.
- *"...this was one of the times when the lake evoked a spell, when it mirrored not only the shores but the spirit as well. Through some strange alchemy that water possess...we absorb its calm, its mystery or violence as though we were a part of it. Millennia of*

*living along seacoasts, lakes, and rivers, beside ponds and springs and waterholes have had their influence. Man's history is woven into waterways, for not only did he live beside them, but he used them as highways for hunting, exploration, and trade. Water assured his welfare, its absence meant migration or death, its constancy nourished his spirit. A mountain, a desert, or a great forest might serve his need of strength, but water reflects his inner needs. Its all-enveloping quality, its complete diffusion into the surrounding environment, the fact it is never twice quite the same and each approach to it is a new adventure, give it a meaning all its own. Here a man can find himself and all his varied changing moods. No wonder the Psalmist said: 'He leadeth me beside still waters, he restoreth my soul'" (Olson 36). "...for water reflects not only clouds and trees and cliffs, but all the infinite variations of mind and spirit we bring to it" (Olson 43).*

### **Wild and Scenic Rivers Act**

- The stretch of river we just experienced was brought to you in part by a name you might recognize: Gaylord Nelson. You probably know him as the father of Earth Day, or as a former governor and senator of Wisconsin. However, Gaylord Nelson also grew up canoeing this very river, and throughout his boyhood shenanigans and adult paddles, he realized that every person needed this, needed a connection to the natural world around them. He recognized if that were to happen, the Namekagon - and all rivers that people came home to - would need to be preserved, not just conserved. They needed to be protected not for the sake of those currently living with them, but for those that would come after, those that would need to discover the connection themselves.

### **Sigurd Olson's Role**

- Sigurd Olson played a role not only in bringing about this protection, but in exemplifying the impact such protection could have in the lives of those who benefited from it. He was integral in the passing of The Wilderness Act, which came a few years before the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.
  - Sigurd was camping with a friend once, on a month-long hiking trip. The friend commented that we create sanctuaries for deer and fish and birds and all sorts of animals, but what we really need to do is create sanctuaries for men. Sigurd recognized that the white men of the past who inhabited the wilderness went into it for a very differential purpose. In this area especially, the river and its lands were tapped for the trees, the animals, the water, and anything else that could be used. As Sigurd put it, "no one could have imagined a day might come when trees had other values than lumber."
    - *"I remember Justice Douglas on our Camp; O Canal hike of ten years ago when we walked one hundred eighty miles from Cumberland to*

Washington. He and I were on a radio program one night when he said, “We establish sanctuaries for deer and ducks and fish and all sorts of creatures, but what we really need to do is establish sanctuaries for men” (Olson Speech)

- “But we forget that then men thought of the wilderness as something to be eliminated and that forests existed only to be cut. No one had ever heard of recreational values or the conservation of natural resources. The pine stands were thought inexhaustible, and no one could have imagined a day might come when trees had other values than lumber” (Olson 108).

- Though this destruction of the places we now find solace and beauty in may be regrettable, truly it adds to the present allure of such places - places like the Namekagon. Sigurd speaks of this river in a speech he gave concerning the - at the time, potential - Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. “Rivers were the first highways of America - first the Indians, then the French and American fur traders, finally the loggers and the settlers. Rivers are woven into our lives.” Every wild river encapsulates within its waters the story of its ages, tales of both the natural world and humans’ collisions within it. Beavers were felling trees, sturgeon spawning, and eagles building nests far before humans were there to witness it. When we are in one, we find both ourselves and those that floated before us. “The old Namekagon epitomizes the interest and the love of people for all wild rivers.”

- “These trips have given me a feeling for wild rivers, a sense of their importance. Rivers were the first highways of America—first the Indians, then the French and American fur traders, finally the loggers and the settlers. Rivers are woven into our lives. Many here today can trace river travel in the history of their families” (Olson Speech)

- The old Namekagon epitomizes the interest and the love of people for all wild rivers. Here was the same silence I had known as a boy (Olson speech)

## **History of the Act**

- The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was created by Congress in 1968 to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations. Everyone from the child catching minnows in the shallows of the river to the president of the United States recognized that the catch basins of our water, life, and culture merited and necessitated particular protection.

- The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act protects the free flowing nature of rivers under its care, but other jurisdictions such as the National Park Service, National Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and others can also offer more protection. The St. Croix system, including the Namekagon, was one of the original eight rivers protected.
- More than just protecting the rivers for people and future generations that currently love the water, the Act dared all, even those who would otherwise never thought to dip a paddle into a river, to get out and experience for themselves why these areas deserved the signature of the president.

### **Impact of the Act Today**

- Less than ¼ of 1% of rivers in the United States are protected (209 rivers in 40 states and Puerto Rico), and 20% of rivers have been modified by dams and other human impacts.
- The Act, and all protection of wild areas, conserves the animals and habitat that exist there for the sake of themselves, human use aside. However, the benefits we humans can reap are undeniable.
- Our brains are on a constant mission to process and make sense of all that is going on around us. In this day and age, we are too often bombarded with action, and our brains exist in a state of constant overload where they are unable to normalize the background. When we are near water, whether than be the ocean, a river, a lake, or even a pool, our surroundings are largely predictable, meaning our brains can relax. Though it is still on high-alert for things out of the ordinary – as it is at all times – when something does pique our attention, like a fish jumping or a bird flying, it becomes a novel break in the background, which hits our lulled brains with a spurt of dopamine. The tendency of bodies of water to be in constant motion yet remain the same triggers a different state of mind in our brain. Both attentive and relaxed, our brains find their highest capacity for creativity and problem solving. By the water.

### **Wrap It All Up**

- “Thousands have lived without love, not one without water” said poet W.H. Auden. We need water not only for the basest essentials of living, but also to keep us whole and happy. One of the ways we can offer ourselves this solace found in water is through Wild and Scenic rivers, and through the protection of all wild places. This river, the very water you just paddled, is what fostered ideas of preservation and stewardship that have now made a global impact. Here it was decided that *anyone* could be a conservationist, and indeed that everyone *should*.

### **The Gist of It**

- “Thousands have lived without love, not one without water.” - W. H. Auden
- Human existence has relied upon water from the start, both as a race and as individuals.



- Every one of us has personal experiences with rivers.
- Rivers used to be necessary for expansion and livelihood, but they can now be places of recreation and solace.
- Some important people recognized the importance of wild rivers and worked to legally preserve them.
- Water - wild rivers, in this case - provide rest for our brains.

## Second Iteration of Program

When I first decided to explore my interpretive program further for this Honors Thesis, I was thrilled to be revisiting my summer's work. I was saddened that I had only been able to fully present my program once, so diving back into the water and perhaps sharing my stories again was enticing. That excitement waned slightly, however, when I took my first good look at the program. I realized very quickly that any program I could present here in Lincoln would have to be far more different than my program for the Namekagon than I had originally anticipated.

The trickiest part of my initial re-development was that I did not have the same tangibles. When my original program revolved so completely around the Namekagon's waters and history, not being on the banks really negated the whole power of my original presentation. With no river within easy proximity to campus, let alone one that is wild and scenic, I began to scout for alternatives. I considered presenting on the new fourth floor of Morrill Hall, building off of their Platte River display. However, I realized pretty quickly that if I wanted to retain any of the spirit of my original program, it needed to be outside, near a body of water, preferably a moving one.

Once I had set my base parameters, it did not take me long to settle on Salt Creek. It is a waterway that students cross over, or are nearby, every single day, but one they probably rarely notice. Though it may not seem like much to look at, I spent a fair amount of time running the trail next to it when I lived on campus, and I had fallen in love with its heart. I initially thought I could sneakily just substitute Salt Creek in for the Namekagon in my program, but that was never going to be successful, for a couple of reasons. First, the more research I did, the more I found Salt Creek had a delightful and heartbreaking history. I found myself wanting to share even just a small part of that story with other people who also may overlook it every day. The

same instinct of curiosity and love that led me to my first interpretive program were leading me in this one as well.

Secondly, I realized I was going to have to shift the entire point of my project. Initially it explored the importance of rivers, and of keeping them wild. However, the meat of that point came from attendees actually being able to paddle, and spend time, on a wild river. Even if I were to plop a canoe in Salt Creek, it wouldn't quite have the same effect as the wild waters of the Northwoods. Unwilling to compromise, I began brainstorming how I could keep the spirit of my presentation alive while shifting the focus. I did some introspective thinking, puzzling through what *I* wanted to know, so I could share that with my audience. I always loved the few minutes I spent by Salt Creek when I would run the path beside it; it took me back to playing along the Loup River growing up, and of paddling other rivers throughout my childhood. I realized the message I wanted to send was that wild places *can* be found in Lincoln, and they *should* be found. I began morphing my original program with that framework in mind.

It is difficult to say how successful I was. There was so much history of Salt Creek that I wanted to share, that I fear I may have strayed from interpretation into education with this second iteration of my program. However, I still believe my main point of protecting wild rivers was (hopefully) driven home.

## Second Iteration of Program

Interpretive Program – *Why We Should Wander*

Amy Heusinkvelt

Location: Salt Creek

**Theme:** Conservation, Human Highway and Home

**Objectives:** Attendees will be able to:

- Relate their experience here with other/all rivers
- Appreciate the reliance of humans upon rivers
- Recognize that all rivers and wild places are connected
- Understand the power of humans' connection to water

**Goal:** Foster each individual's connection to wilderness and wild rivers, imparting why wilderness is important, and how to find it in Lincoln.

**Tangibles:** The creek, birds/bird nests, vegetation

**Intangibles:** Connection, wilderness, preservation, water

**Universals:** Connection to a place, protection of what is special

## Program

### **Background**

- This program was originally designed to be presented on a paddle of a National Wild and Scenic River. Standing beside the meager flow of water here in the middle of the city of Lincoln, the Salt Creek may not strike you as having any national importance, or look wild, or scenic, or even like a river for that matter. However, it plays a role in our ecosystem, and indeed the ecosystem of the entire state. In a larger way, this little stream is connected to every river that flows across the globe, and has the power to connect us to those rivers as well.

### **Your Experience with Rivers**

- Think of a river that was near to where you grew up, or one that was a big part of your childhood.
  - What did/does it mean to you? What memories do you have of it? How has it impacted you?

### **My Experience with Rivers**

- I grew up near the confluence of two rivers, the Loup and Platte. I spent summers there swimming, building, and exploring, and winters walking along the banks watching the ice. Whenever my family would travel growing up, or now when I visit from college, I know I am home the moment I cross my rivers. I spent the two days I had at home before moving up here at the river, just being with it as it healed after the floods of spring.

- During my spring breaks, I spent a week in a canoe with my dad. These paddles during college rejuvenated me in ways I didn't even know I needed, after being in the city for 7 months. Life on the water both calmed me and put everything in perspective. When you're in a canoe loaded to the gunnels floating down a chilly river with far too high of a rock-to-water ratio, the only thing that matters is avoiding the rocks and reading the rapids. The only focus is not capsizing, a very basic need to survive, and it makes all other worries and responsibilities seem superfluous. A river state of mind is the best state of mind.

### **How to find wild rivers**

- However, that state of mind is tricky to find in the midst of the hustle and bustle of college life. I no longer have the luxury of setting out in a kayak for 5 hours, taking in the wilderness. But snippets of the wild can be found, especially in the water. When I lived in the Village, I used to run this path just to be close to the creek. I'd run it past dark even when I knew there were dodgy characters about, just because it felt so good to see the glassy water, if only for a little while.

### **Quote from Sigurd Olson**

- In the spirit of striving to find that wild water here in Lincoln, I am going to read you a quote from a book by Sigurd Olson, someone you've probably never heard of, but will soon hear lots of. As you listen, make note of what comes to mind with Sig's words, whether that is a memory, a recent experience, or even a scene from a movie.
- *"...this was one of the times when the lake evoked a spell, when it mirrored not only the shores but the spirit as well. Through some strange alchemy that water possess...we absorb its calm, its mystery or violence as though we were a part of it. Millennia of living along seacoasts, lakes, and rivers, beside ponds and springs and waterholes have had their influence. Man's history is woven into waterways, for not only did he live beside them, but he used them as highways for hunting, exploration, and trade. Water assured his welfare, its absence meant migration or death, its constancy nourished his spirit. A mountain, a desert, or a great forest might serve his need of strength, but water reflects his inner needs. Its all-enveloping quality, its complete diffusion into the surrounding environment, the fact it is never twice quite the same and each approach to it is a new adventure, give it a meaning all its own. Here a man can find himself and all his varied changing moods. No wonder the Psalmist said: 'He leadeth me beside still waters, he restoreth my soul'" (Olson 36). "...for water reflects not only clouds and trees and cliffs, but all the infinite variations of mind and spirit we bring to it" (Olson 43).*

### **Watersheds**

- Rivers are much more than just passages of water, and Salt Creek is so much more than a polluted trickle of water. Physically, they encompass the whole of their river shed.

- Culturally, the river carries the whole of the river shed as well. From the beginning, humans have been inextricably linked to rivers. When our ancestors first morphed from nomadic hunters and gatherers to farmers who remained rooted around one area, their civilizations were on the banks of rivers.
- As humanity extended its reach on the land over the centuries, the breaking of new ground was inevitably aided by rivers' ability to move. They moved people, machines, logs, animals. Lewis and Clark's expedition was brought to fruition by rivers. We owe not only the settlement, but the development, of our country to rivers.
- Over recent history, rivers have evolved for humans, changing from moving highways necessary to civilization and livelihood, to places of recreation and solace.

### **Salt Creek**

- Though a large channel of commerce, this unassuming little creek is remarkable in its own way. Salt Creek, and the Lincoln Saltdogs, for that matter, was named for its saline nature, given by the salt flats that it runs through. It was due in part to this uniquely salty landscape that the capital city was built here.
- All rivers and streams you pass by, drive over, or even float on have histories that you probably don't even consider when you see them. (Like in Frozen II, water has memory). As I said earlier, rivers have a cultural watershed, and Salt Creek is no different. Today, Salt Creek has been canaled through the entire city of Lincoln and beyond, eradicating its meander and much of its personality. This was done, recently, to prevent flooding, but historically because the Creek is used as a pathway for Lincoln's treated sewage. This job means that when the Creek joins with the Platte River it is, for all intents and purposes, dead.
- But, it was not always this way. Listen to this quote from 1861 describing the Creek, and try to picture it being that way now.
- *"As we viewed the land upon which now stands this great busy city, we had the exciting pleasure of seeing for the first time a large drove of beautiful antelope, cantering across the prairie about where the government square is (9<sup>th</sup> and O streets). We forded Salt Creek, just by the junction of Oak Creek, and what a struggle we had in making our way through the tall sunflowers between the ford and the basin. There was something enchanting about the scene that met our eyes. The fresh breeze sweeping over the salt basins reminded us of the morning breezes at the ocean beach."*
- Salt Creek was once a wild place, and it still carries that memory with it.

### **Wild and Scenic Rivers Act**

- Across the country, people began recognizing that wild places and wild rivers needed protected. They offered something everyone needed, a connection to the natural world around them. For this to happen, the rivers that people explored and came home to would need to be preserved, not just conserved. They needed to be protected not for the sake of

those currently living with them, but for those that would come after, those that would need to discover the connection themselves.

- Now, I'm not saying that the Salt Creek should have been federally protected as a wild place, but we humans pretty well stripped it of any chance it had. Before the area was settled, and even in the early days of Lancaster, the area was a vibrant habitat with numerous wetlands. However, those vital ecosystems soon began being filled in with trash and construction debris. While Capital Beach Lake was maintained because it offered recreation and use for human inhabitants, the nearby wetlands were destroyed because they offered no such tangible benefits for man.

### **Sigurd Olson's Role**

- However, the idea that wild places cannot benefit humans is laughable. Wetlands in and of themselves offer absolutely vital ecosystem services, but that is not what this program is about. It is not about what we can get from wild rivers, but instead what they can give us.
- Remember Sigurd Olson, from the quote at the beginning? He's back. Scenes like the one in Lincoln were taking place all across the country, on a much larger scale, and people began realizing wild places needed to be protected.
- Sigurd Olson played a role not only in bringing about this protection, but in exemplifying the impact such protection could have in the lives of those who benefited from it. He was integral in the passing of The Wilderness Act, which came a few years before the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.
  - Sigurd was camping with a friend once, on a month-long hiking trip. The friend commented that we create sanctuaries for deer and fish and birds and all sorts of animals, but what we really need to do is create sanctuaries for men. Sigurd recognized that the white men of the past who inhabited the wilderness went into it for a very differential purpose. In this area especially, the river and its lands were tapped for the trees, the animals, the water, and anything else that could be used. As Sigurd put it, "no one could have imagined a day might come when trees had other values than lumber."

### **History of the Act**

- The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was created by Congress in 1968 to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations. Everyone from the child catching minnows in the shallows of the river to the president of the United States recognized that the catch basins of our water, life, and culture merited and necessitated particular protection.

- The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act protects the free flowing nature of rivers under its care, but other jurisdictions such as the National Park Service, National Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and others can also offer more protection. The St. Croix system, including the Namekagon, was one of the original eight rivers protected. Stretches of two rivers in Nebraska are protected by the Act, the Niobrara and the Missouri.
- More than just protecting the rivers for people and future generations that currently love the water, the Act dared all, even those who would otherwise never thought to dip a paddle into a river, to get out and experience for themselves why these areas deserved the signature of the president.

### **Impact of the Act Today**

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- Our brains are on a constant mission to process and make sense of all that is going on around us. In this day and age, we are too often bombarded with action, and our brains exist in a state of constant overload where they are unable to normalize the background. When we are near water, whether than be the ocean, a river, a lake, or even a pool, our surroundings are largely predictable, meaning our brains can relax. Though it is still on high-alert for things out of the ordinary – as it is at all times – when something does pique our attention, like a fish jumping or a bird flying, it becomes a novel break in the background, which hits our lulled brains with a spurt of dopamine. The tendency of bodies of water to be in constant motion yet remain the same triggers a different state of mind in our brain. Both attentive and relaxed, our brains find their highest capacity for creativity and problem solving. By the water.

### **Wrap It All Up**

- “Thousands have lived without love, not one without water” said poet W.H. Auden. We need water not only for the basest essentials of living, but also to keep us whole and happy. One of the ways we can offer ourselves this solace found in water is through Wild and Scenic rivers, and through the protection of all wild places. Even if that wild place is a cement lined creek in the middle of a college town, the water remembers wild, and has the power to remind our souls of the same feeling inside us.



## Conclusion

In all the 'firsts' of my summer with the National Park Service, crafting my own interpretive program was by far the most poignant in my formation as a ranger. The intersection of my passions to serve and learn, married with the ability to make a lasting impact on future visitors to the Riverway, ensured that my interpretive program was both a learning experience for me and a chance to improve others' experiences. The transfer of these skills in the writing of a similar program for the Lincoln area pushed me to apply and expand upon the skills I'd developed, but this time in a wholly independent endeavor, without the guidance of leaders intimately familiar with the topic and practice of interpretation. This, combined with a more nuanced understanding of the Park Service's history and relationship with interpretation, has armed me with knowledge and experiences that will indubitably serve me well as I enter my second summer as a park ranger.

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