

Changing How Minnesota History Is Told: A Program Evaluation for Historic Murphy's Landing

by Jamie Peterson

Historic Murphy's Landing (HML) is an 88-acre living history museum owned and operated by Three Rivers Park District that depicts life in the Minnesota River Valley during the 1800s. Costumed interpretive staff at HML recreate history by sharing stories of the hardships settlers endured and guiding visitors through a village populated by historic buildings originally constructed in the 1800s (Figure 1). Field trips for school and childcare groups fuse the academic study of U.S. and Minnesota history with real experiences of life in the 1800s for children of all ages. These field trips provide an opportunity for teachers to complement their history curriculum and spark interest among children in learning history.

During the winter and spring of 2005, HML created new programs for children's groups that focused on four main areas of Minnesota and U.S. history: Children and Family Life, Fur Trade, Immigrant Journeys, and Village Trades. Each program included historical content that museum interpreters relayed to students through a combination of lecture, discussion, role-playing, songs, and hands-on activities. In addition, each program provided an opportunity for students to complete a craft project symbolic of some element of the program in which they participated.

Before the spring 2005 season of children's programming began, Kathy Dummer, site supervisor at HML, sought help from CURA's Community Assistantship Program (CAP) to find an outside evaluator for the programs. I was hired as a research assistant through CAP in June of that year to conduct a participant-oriented evaluation. The primary goals of the evaluation were to assess program implementation, understand how children experienced HML, examine how well HML programs met teachers' and chaperones' expectations, and offer recommendations to improve the programs. This



Photo courtesy of Jamie Peterson

A school group participating in the Immigrant Journeys program at Historic Murphy's Landing takes part in a demonstration of how a log cabin was built in the 1800s.

article discusses both the evaluation process and the recommendations that resulted from the project.

After several initial meetings with staff, I formulated an evaluation plan that included a variety of activities, such as reviewing lesson plans and promotional materials, observing programs, talking with children and chaperones/teachers, developing and piloting evaluations for children and chaperones/teachers, and revising and administering the evaluations. The plan also included several formal and informal meetings with site supervisor Kathy Dummer, her assistant, and HML interpreters.

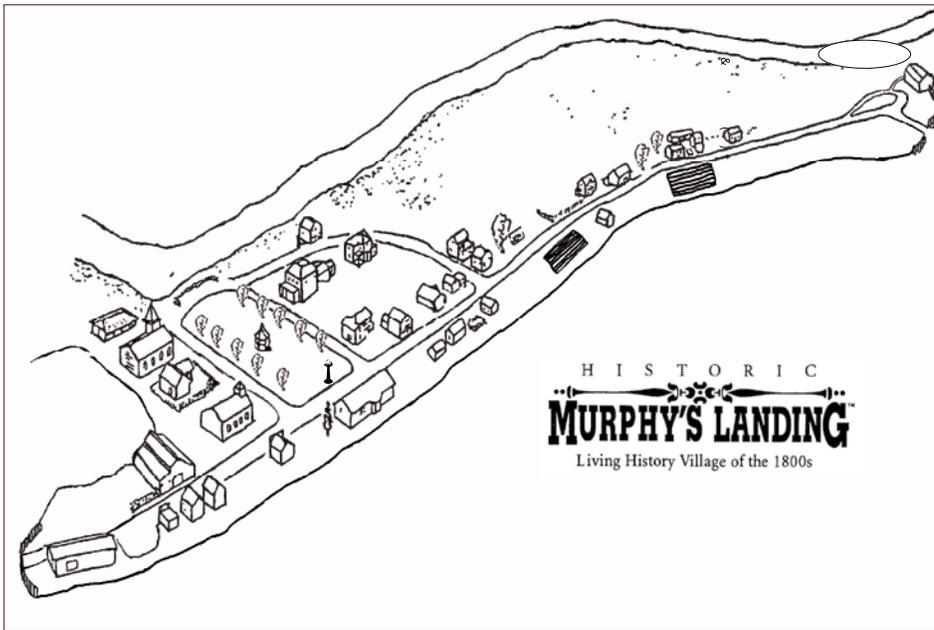
In undertaking the program evaluation, one of HML's goals was to increase the number of visitors and expand its programming, and staff requested preliminary results midway through the summer to more promptly improve their programming. Consequently, the

evaluation proceeded in a more applied fashion, instead of adhering strictly to the schedule of a typical evaluation program, in which programs are held constant throughout the evaluation process. Based on preliminary results, staff discussed issues raised by the evaluations and interpreters broke into smaller groups to focus on a specific program, brainstorm solutions to these issues, and propose changes. If a solution to an issue was deemed feasible, the change was implemented right away. With this flexible evaluation approach, staff at HML were able to respond to evaluation results immediately, thereby improving the museum's programs and increasing the likelihood that visitors would have a positive experience and recommend HML to others.

After completing the summer evaluation process, I developed additional recommendations for improvements to

Figure 1. A Sketch Map of Historic Murphy's Landing

Map courtesy of Historic Murphy's Landing, Three Rivers Park District



HML programs. However, the summer evaluation reflected only the experiences of children visiting as part of childcare groups, not the experiences of children visiting with school groups. Because these groups have different expectations and because the programs offered during summer differ in some respects from those offered throughout the rest of the year, HML decided to continue the evaluation process into the fall.

After the fall evaluation process was completed, I provided final conclusions and recommendations. The results of the evaluation provided valuable insights to staff regarding how the programs were implemented, whether visitors' experiences met their expectations, and how the programs could be improved to increase visitor satisfaction. One of the major findings was that children and chaperones who visit in the summer with childcare groups and children and teachers who visit during the academic year with school groups have very different expectations and experiences at HML. Children in childcare groups expected more entertainment and were less engaged in the historical content of the programs. Chaperones with the childcare groups had fewer classroom management skills and expected a greater focus on educating children about history. Based on my own experience working in summer daycare programs, I was aware of the pressure chaperones in such programs typically experience. Chaperones often perform a delicate balancing act, trying to meet childrens'

desires to be entertained while meeting parents' desires to educate their children. In contrast, children in school groups were less demanding of staff in terms of their expectations for entertainment and the children engaged more readily in the historical content of the programs. Teachers with school groups were more skilled in managing their children's behavior, and were less focused on children learning about history during their visit. This finding may seem counterintuitive; however, teachers seemed to view HML as either a reward for students who had already studied Minnesota history (in which case, the program was reinforcing knowledge) or as a way to pique children's interest in Minnesota history for subsequent lessons in school. The teachers did not expect HML to educate the children about history, they expected HML to make history come alive and give students a better perspective on life in the 1800s. In this respect, the programs at HML were more suited to school groups than childcare groups.

Accordingly, my recommendations included offering different programs to childcare and school groups and providing interpreters with training in classroom management skills. Many of the interpreters at HML displayed a wonderful depth of knowledge about history in the 1800s, but did not necessarily know how to teach young children or manage behavior issues. It appeared that it was assumed interpreters had, or would automatically acquire, these

skills; they were not taught or developed. One program recommendation, therefore, was to train interpreters to manage students while onsite.

Another recommendation regarding programming was to revise lesson plans to include goals and objectives. Interpreters often have their own style of recreating history for students; however, the programs were often widely inconsistent across interpreters due to variation in personal styles. By creating objectives and goals to guide the programs and lessons, interpreters would have more stringent guidelines to follow regarding program content, but they would also have some flexibility to meet those goals and objectives using their preferred interpretive style. Additional program recommendations included modifying the programs to accommodate the mixed-age groups who frequently visited during the summer. Interpreters were often challenged to work with kindergarteners and sixth graders in the same group. Therefore, I recommended program revisions such as providing "easy" and "hard" tasks for younger and older children, respectively. Also, I recommended that children in these mixed-age groups be reminded that in the 1800s, older children were often responsible for younger children, and that older children be instructed to assist younger children if they finished a task quickly. Small program changes such as these can contribute to keeping older children engaged while still involving younger children in the activities.

One significant finding from the evaluation was that roughly three-fourths of the chaperones/teachers and nearly half of the children surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with the number of buildings the group visited. Although HML has more than 40 buildings on-site, within the village square area where most programs occur, there are only about 20 buildings. Because each program is structured around specific historical content and not simply a general tour of the HML site, groups typically visit only two to three buildings during a program. If groups were to tour the entire HML site, the children would have to walk nearly two miles and the program would be more of a long walking tour than an experience of life in the 1800s. Although this information was in the pre-visit information packet that groups received, children, chaperones, and teachers

often arrived at HML expecting to tour many more buildings than they actually did. Therefore, two major recommendations were to revise programs to include visits to more buildings and to improve communication prior to arrival regarding the number of buildings a group would visit during the program.

One issue with which interpretive staff consistently struggled was finding a balance between breadth and depth of content in HML programs. If the number of buildings a group visits during a program is increased, the depth of content would need to be reduced. A creative solution was implemented this past spring to address this issue. Visitors can now attend an “open day,” held once every week. During this open day, groups may arrive early and tour the HML site independently, without participating in one of the structured programs. Groups are able to enter as many buildings as they wish and talk with interpreters in each building as long as they desire. This change is intended to address the issue of visiting “enough” buildings and covering “enough” content by letting chaperones and teachers determine how much the children see and learn.

Finally, one change to how programs are implemented arose after I observed an interpreter give an especially successful program to a childcare group. Midway through the program, the interpreter “checked-in” with the lead chaperone to ask how the program was progressing. Based on this short conversation, the interpreter was able to make slight modifications to the last half of the program to better meet the children’s and chaperone’s expectations. This midpoint check-in was included as a recommendation for all interpreters, as chaperones and teachers often made nominal requests and were pleased when they received a program more tailored to their desires, even if this involved only slight changes in the program.

As a result of the evaluation process, Kathy Dummer reports that programs



Photo courtesy of Jamie Peterson

During the Village Trades program, children practice a variety of trades typical of a nineteenth-century Minnesota town, including weaving, printing, blacksmithing, laundering, and running a general store.

at HML are now designed intentionally, based on actual feedback from visitors, instead of being designed by default, based on what staff think visitors want. In addition, interpreters now view themselves as professionals who are committed to continually revising programs to provide the best possible experience for visitors.

For more information on Historic Murphy’s Landing and its programs, visit www.threeriversparkdistrict.org/outdoor_ed/murphys_landing/.

Jamie Peterson is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota. Her research interests include evaluating educational programs, as well as how informal and formal interactions between teachers and students can influence student learning.

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