

Interpretation on Fire



ANGELA MELE



LAURA FRICK

How Our Workshop Sparked a Community's Ideas for Trail Signage

Holden Village: Hard To Get To, Hard To Forget

Most clients assure me that their site is hard to understand—and to interpret—until you've spent significant time there. And this is always true, but particularly in the case of Holden Village in the state of Washington. A former family-friendly mining town featuring a bowling alley and cutting-edge medical technology, now (since the 1960s) a "remote wilderness community, rooted in the Lutheran tradition, that welcomes all people into the North Cascade Mountains," Holden Village is indeed unusual.

I've journeyed there many times by way of the requisite road trip, ferry ride, and steep climb up a mountain in a retro school bus to trade my expertise in interpretive planning for meaningful experiences and delicious bread.

Burning Questions

In August 2015 the lightning-sparked Wolverine Fire burned more than 60 acres west of Lake Chelan. Experts lit ridgetops on fire as the flames crept toward Holden, then coaxed the burn toward the edge of the village until its intensity was decreased and it could be put out.

Above: Holden Village's 1930s-era "chalets" against the backdrop of the Glacier Peak Wilderness.

Riding the bus up switchbacks to the village you see acres of blackened, dead trees. Fireweed blooms unencumbered in patches; other areas are disconcertingly spare. Visitors have many questions, and Holden's board is exploring ways to increase communications about fire in the valley.

I was invited to teach a class in summer 2022. Knowing that Holden's visitors are interested in global issues as well as current Village affairs, I saw an opportunity for community co-creation. In service of Holden's goal to increase understanding around fire, I decided that my class would consist of an interpretive planning session, resulting in stories and concepts that could inform a fire-themed interpretive trail.

The theme of Summer '22 was *jubilee*, or the concept of restored relationships—between humans, and with the Earth—leading to abundant life for all. What does jubilee have to do with fire? I understand that now, after a year of learning about wildfires, megafires, and more than 100 years of fire suppression in America.

Planning for All Possible Plans

My friend Laura Frick is the Exhibits Coordinator for the Delaware State Park system. I knew it would take lots of planning to design an efficient, fun interpretive planning workshop around a complicated topic, and there is no better planner I know. We met virtually for six months, discussing matters such as:

- Whether it was necessary to improvise an interpretive plan for the whole Village before diving into interpretation about fire?
- Would our students learn enough about fire-related topics by watching clips from Paul Hessburg's *Era of Megafires*?
- Should we use the term *big idea* or *theme*?

Sharing Ice Cream and Wisdom

August 20–27 turned out to be an interfaith week, though returning faculty assured us that every week



HANNAH LAUBER

The US Forest Service planted thousands of trees in burned areas of the valley around Holden in 2018.



CARTER SCHAEFER

A crowd greets visitors with smiles and kazoos as the bus slides into Main Street between the vintage ice cream shop and billiards hall.

is inclusive of diverse “wisdom traditions” despite the Village’s Lutheran origins. The other faculty included leaders from Jewish, Muslim, and Lutheran communities; members of the LGBTQ community; musicians and artists; and a linguistics professor. Conversation and classes covered everything from land acknowledgements to whether highbush blueberries or evergreen huckleberries are more delicious. Each day brought laughter, a few tears, and lines out the door of the old ice cream parlor for \$1 scoops each afternoon.

Community “Co-Creation” of an Interpretive Plan in Two Hours: A Case Study

I have not studied best practices in co-creation, but I’ve always advocated for gathering as much audience input as possible throughout the course of any project. I assume that like many things in our field, truly developing an interpretive experience alongside a community is a practice of trial and error, and of using your experience to empower others to use theirs. The community that came to our sessions consisted mainly of staff and



visiting teaching faculty. This turned out to be appropriate, as the insider knowledge and expertise in teaching was helpful for our situation.

Below is an outline of each daily two-hour workshop.

Site Visit & Nature Journaling: 25 Minutes

Our workshop began at the trailhead of 10-Mile-Falls, a path built into the side of a once-densely forested slope burned by Wolverine. Charred wood, opened canopy, and fireweed are everywhere. This is a likely location for future fire interpretation.

Following prompts in a nature journal, participants used their five senses, sketched their observations, and described what they'd want to learn more about with the help of interpretation.

Holden Village got to keep everyone's journals, which should prove a helpful resource for future planning.

The What, Why, and How of Interpretive Planning: 15 Minutes Back at the classroom Laura and

I introduced Freeman Tilden's principals of interpretation. We talked about common purposes of interpretation, such as clarifying how an invisible subject behaves, or helping people relate what's in front of them to bigger themes. We discussed the myriad options for media beyond signage. We also use DCG/Watershed's process of developing interpretive media through a 30 percent, 60 percent, and Final Design process.

The Fastest Subject Matter Research in the West: 20 Minutes

We found fire ecologist Paul Hessburg's documentary *The Era of Megafires* to be a perfect resource for interpreting the topics we had in mind: 1) fire and ecosystems, 2) the history of people and fire in the valley, and 3) fire management practices. We showed a selection of film clips during our workshop, providing a glimpse into the three topics listed above.

Each participant received a "resources sheet" featuring screenshots and notes from *The*

Era of Megafires plus a sidebar with facts specific to Holden Village. These basic topics and bullet-point information guided each participant's themes and stories.

Basic Interpretive Planning: 15–20 Minutes

Laura and I had come prepared with a simple interpretive plan for all of Holden Village. We felt it was important to clarify Holden's Mission, management goals, interpretive goals, a central theme, and sub-themes, under which interpretation about fire would fit.

Was this too much for our two-hour time slot? Yes and no. It helped us understand how fire interpretation fits within the grander scheme of Holden, and our visual of this hierarchical planning structure conveyed that interpretive plans can be quite comprehensive.

Everyone was given an interpretive planning worksheet, again featuring a specific topic (e.g. "human relationships with fire in this valley") that corresponded to their resources sheet. The worksheet

included prompts to help develop a theme, visitor goals, and supporting stories. Laura and I shared examples of these, then gave participants time to work with each other.

Creating Concept Sketches

The last step was to translate the interpretive plans into rough sketches for signage.

We ended the workshop by talking through everyone’s creations. Participants proudly shared vivid ideas for interpreting ecological succession, the importance of “wisdom traditions” coming together for successful land management, and the benefits of fire-caused disturbances.

Sparks of Future Plans

Laura and I combed through our participants’ journals, interpretive plans, and sketches. Here are some of our quick-and-dirty findings:

Commonalities among participants’ existing knowledge or feelings about fire:

“Destruction and renewal” were frequently listed. Ash, smoke, cycles, transformation, and words related to fear were also common.

Common things participants wanted to learn more about through an interpretive trail about fire:

Fire’s impact on the Village (how close did Wolverine get, future defense plans), species adaptations, Indigenous management, climate change.

Particularly unique, interesting, or common ideas for interpretive designs or content:

The concept of post-fire transition in the forest for the audience of “people going through life transitions”

Idea for an interactive device (like a video game or pinball machine) that teaches the benefits of prescribed burning to kids

Bringing Jubilee Back Home

So, what do wildfires and fire interpretation have to do with jubilee? I reflect on this back home in central Washington, beneath skies hazy with smoke from the fires that sprout up around the state in mid-September.

- Jubilee, or “abundant life for all,” can occur in western forests with thoughtful use of prescribed burning and other forest

management activities. As tribes have known for thousands of years, forests need regular bursts of disturbances to maintain their mosaic of varied structures.

- As noted by a pastor who has devoted his career to bringing people of different faiths together, good forest management happens as relationships between communities are restored.
- Some relationships—between people, and with landscapes—can perhaps be restored by communicating in the best way we know how: with empathy, clarity, and humor. Imagine an interpretive trail that evokes so much when we see a prescribed burn lighting up the landscape!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Angela is an interpretive planner and illustrator for DCG/Watershed. Laura is the Exhibits Coordinator for Delaware State Parks. Both earned MFA’s from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and have backgrounds in museums.

