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Gerstäcker’s Arkansas:
An Experiment in Museum-Scholar Cooperation

Alison B. Sanchez
and
S. Charles Bolton

“Gerstäcker’s Arkansas: From Wilderness to Society” is the title of a long-term exhibit that opened at the Arkansas Museum of Science and History in Little Rock in April 1988. It originated when Dr. Alison B. Sanchez, the museum director and cultural anthropologist, became dissatisfied with the existing local history exhibit and turned to Dr. S. Charles Bolton, an American historian at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, for help in finding a new and better theme. Over lunch in the Spring of 1985, we developed the concept of an exhibit based on the primary-source writings of a German traveler in Arkansas. Our collaboration, together with other museum professionals and scholars, provides a case study in cooperation between the museum and the academy. The exhibit itself, the product of many minds, many skills, and a significant amount of philanthropy, offers, we feel, some important insights and suggestions as to how history can be presented successfully within museum walls.

“Gerstäcker’s Arkansas” grew out of the belief that its predecessor, the Early Arkansas Gallery, was not doing enough to communicate what life was like in the past, in what Peter Laslett called “the world we have lost.”1 The artifacts—a bed, a loom, some firearms, and a variety of agricultural implements—stood or lay in silent testimony to their own existence, but explained little of the human beings that had used them or the culture of which both artifacts and humans were part. Children and adults paraded by, interested by some objects and amused by others, but never challenged to see them as part of a historical context that was different from the present yet linked to it.

By themselves, artifacts can create a comfortable but false sense of security in the people who view them. An isolated loom allows a museum patron to imagine a neatly attired pioneer lady working happily in a cozy cabin, secure in the love of her husband, a sturdy yeoman, and their healthy, upwardly mobile children. Absent from this reverie are oppressive heat, bitter cold, floods, droughts, mosquitoes, horse flies, crudeness, sickness, violence, material deprivation, and loneliness—to name only a few of the less pleasant aspects of pioneer life. The unreality of many exhibits suggests that museums would do well to remember the dictum of Robert Darnton: “We constantly need to be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past, to be administered doses of culture shock.”

G. Ellis Burcau suggests that the best way museums can teach about the past is through “retrospective anthropology,” attempting to uncover the lives and thoughts of ordinary people.2 Similarly, Darnton believes that archival materials should be interpreted anthropologically. Cultures, he says, are embedded in the documents they left behind.3 Obviously, the anthropological technique of participant observation is impossible to apply historically, but some of the anthropological preoccupation with holistic studies and unfamiliar world views can be successfully incorporated into historical research and museum exhibits. To reconstruct the past in this manner, we must uncover the way ordinary people lived and thought. Museums, as the repositories of material culture remains from bygone eras, are ideal places to expand this sort of understanding.

Developing an exhibit and associated programming to communicate a portion of life in the past is difficult to do without the aid of academic scholars and other professionals who normally work outside the museum environment. Too many museum exhibits, particularly in small and medium-sized museums, are created by researchers with little academic training who are chiefly concerned with the display of artifacts that happen to be in the
collection of their institution. Thomas Schlereth criticizes museum exhibits in general as historical “shrines,” which oversimplify, distort, romanticize, and homogenize the past. Part of the problem, he believes, is that exhibits normally escape professional criticism. They are “celebrations” rather than “ceremonies” that largely ignore issues and interpretations of current historical scholarship. This need not be the case. Most cities and towns have universities and colleges nearby, making scholarly input within the reach of the small museum. The National Endowment for the Humanities and state humanities councils also provide incentives in the form of grants to encourage projects involving humanities scholars.

Of course, getting scholars involved will not cure everything that ails museum exhibits. There is much more to the problem of creating museum exhibits that will really educate people about the past. Scholars are potentially useful in museums because they can focus on concepts rather than cluttering people’s minds with meaningless facts. But these scholars are all accustomed to working with words rather than with material culture. According to Rudolph Weingartner, “a heap of objects, however well collected,” has no meaning apart from discourse, but pure discourse removed from objects has no legitimate place in museums. Another problem is that academic scholars are unaccustomed to thinking about their fields from the perspective of the average museum visitor. And, as Freeman Tilden writes, “any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.”

In an ideal world, museums would stimulate people to understand history and culture by extending their experience through the presentation of artifacts. But, as James Deetz points out, artifacts do not speak for themselves. Museum curators construct contexts for their objects, which either encourage further inquiry on the part of the visitor or impede it. Schlereth says museums are improving in this regard, but too often they arrange history in rigid chronological sequences, which leave out social conflicts and the lives of ordinary people. Whole segments of society have gone ignored as a result. Also, museum exhibits too often give the mistaken impression that everything is known about a subject rather than acknowledging that there are gaps in existing knowledge. Museum exhibits too infrequently indicate that it is possible to see the same phenomenon in different ways. Rarely are young visitors encouraged to believe that they might be able to develop a better interpretation for an artifact on display than the one presented.

Even though the Smithsonian’s first secretary, James Henry, claimed that museum exhibits were only good for “amusing the public,”16 the collection and interpretation of artifacts in exhibits continues to be the very essence of museology. New ideas about the importance of material culture as a primary source for research may eventually help to upgrade the value of museum exhibits nationwide. Still, Chandler Screven finds that traditional museum exhibits have almost no educational effect on their visitors.11 Also, Wilcomb Washburn warns that mere large attendance does not mean that an exhibit is effective in an educational sense.12 Others criticize trivial, gimmicky exhibits whose only goal is amusement.13

The authors believe that the increasing emphasis on social history in museums and outdoor historical sites across the country may allow these agencies to fulfill their promise as institutions of learning. At Plimoth Plantation, for example, twentieth century visitors experience a surprisingly unfamiliar, thought-provoking cognitive dissonance. Seeing Pilgrim-like homes and gardens in a natural setting and interacting with people who dress, talk, and think like Pilgrims, the visitor to this living museum has a remarkably close encounter with “the world we have lost.” This is quite the opposite of the effect wrought by traditional museum exhibits with their standardized presentations.

Thus it was that “Gerstäcker’s Arkansas” came into being. Unhappy with traditional historical exhibits and enthusiastic about the potential of social history in the museum, the authors sat down to create an exhibit that would recreate the culture of pioneer Arkansas. We decided to present early Arkansas history through the eyes of Friedrich Gerstäcker, a German hunter and traveler who sojourned in Arkansas from 1838 to 1842, because this personal approach would provide a focus for the exhibit, give patrons a figure with whom to identify, and allow a discussion of how historical sources relate to historical reality.

Gerstäcker came to the United States in 1837 to search for adventure and good hunting and found both of them in Arkansas. Only two years a state when the young German arrived, Arkansas was a rude frontier where planters and farmers were producing an agricultural abundance, but hunting remained an important economic activity, and outlawry was common. For Gerstäcker, Arkansas was most important as a wilderness abounding in game, but he also was a careful observer of the
society that was coming into being. His account, published with the English title *Wild Sports in the Far West*, describes the settlers that he met, provides detailed descriptions of their material conditions, and tells us something of their world view and aspirations. It is a lively, sometimes ethnocentric account, presenting strong opinions about the positive attributes of Arkansas' forests, the arduous nature of farming as contrasted with hunting, the values and customs of Americans, and the author's distrust of the city.

Gerstäcker is a major source for early Arkansas history, but like all sources his usefulness is limited. He did not go to Fayetteville, an important center of settlement; a disproportionate number of his acquaintances were German; he had little interest in politics; and he disliked the capital of Little Rock and wrote almost nothing of it. Moreover, his perspective on Arkansas is conditioned by his own cultural experience in Germany, a factor that is not always easy to evaluate. Finally, Gerstäcker would later become a writer of fiction, a fact that raises questions about the truthfulness of his account. Despite these problems, an examination of the *Wild Sports* text within the context of our current knowledge of early Arkansas suggested that Gerstäcker's account was accurate, at least in the main. We decided that it was a good source for historians and would be a sound basis for a museum exhibit.

On the basis of our initial collaboration and the selection of the Gerstäcker theme, the Arkansas Museum of Science and History submitted a planning grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which was funded in June 1986. While it provided monies, NEH challenged the museum to create an exhibit that would be academically sound, humanistically relevant, and oriented towards visitors. With those guidelines in mind, the museum began a full-blown planning process.

During July, Sanchez, Bolton, Schulz, and two museum employees, Jerry Schulz, who would design and build the exhibit, and Berna Love, who would be responsible for the production of the audiovisual and education programs related to it, visited living history museums to gain ideas and experience for "Gerstäcker's Arkansas." While the programs at Old Sturbridge Village, Plimoth Plantation, and Colonial Williamsburg were on a much larger scale than what would be possible for "Gerstäcker's Arkansas," the experience was invaluable. Collectively, we travelers came to feel the importance of an exhibit that would emphasize ordinary life in the past and also one that would allow patrons "hands on" experiences to connect them with the material being presented. We became excited with the idea of trying to accomplish those things with a limited budget and a confined space.

The next step was to create a planning committee that would allow for interaction between museum personnel, academics, educators, and designers. Dr. Leslie Stewart-Abernathy, an historical archaeologist with extensive experience in the material culture of early Arkansas, joined the group; so also did Mr. Wesley Creel, director of Arkansas Museum Services, whose technical knowledge of museums and exhibits would prove invaluable. Ms. Fannia Weingartner, an American historian and museum publications editor from Chicago, was chosen for her national experience with museum exhibits, which, it was hoped, would help to produce a project that would be local without being parochial.

In the late summer and fall of 1986, the planning group met on four occasions for afternoon-long sessions. In addition to Sanchez, Bolton, Schulz, and Love, and the three new members, specialists in education, Arkansas history, Arkansas folklore, German history, and museum design participated in various sessions. These discussions, which were sometimes loud debates, focused on how to utilize the Gerstäcker theme, the museum's collections, and a minimum of words to make meaningful statements about the past and how we learn about the past. As a consensus emerged on one issue after another, smaller committees and museum staff went to work on the topic, doing the research and planning the building of the exhibit itself. Actual construction began in the spring of 1987, and the exhibit opened in April 1988.

Gerstäcker's Arkansas" begins with an audiovisual presentation that reenacts vignettes from *Wild Sports in the Far West*. The film starts in the present day with a boy complaining about the fact that his sister has brought home "another boring book on Arkansas history." But he has to do a paper and so begins to read. His voice fades, and a narrator, presenting himself as Friedrich Gerstäcker, introduces scenes acted out by a professional actor, a group of volunteer actors, and a number of living history hobbyists. Major topics include hunting and the hunting lifestyle; a social commentary on doctors and medicine; the encroachments of civilization on the wilderness; the displacement of Indians; bartering; pioneer agriculture; the contrast of German and American cultures; and "bad characters" on the frontier. The film ends in the present with the little boy closing
the book and saying “Arkansas history isn’t so boring after all.”

The exhibit itself begins with a large photographic mural of Gerstäcker in hunting garb and carrying his shotgun. Next is a “Travel Through Time” segment that contains family kitchen scenes going back from 1980 to 1840 in twenty-year generational intervals. Audience research indicated that children are drawn to scenes of homes, and we decided to use changes in family life to demonstrate the passage of time. Using data for family size and composition and research on material culture from local newspapers, we developed a family scene for each generation. In addition to being in the exhibit, the kitchen scenes are part of a Gerstäcker “lending box,” which also contains the videotape, a Gerstäcker board game, and other items teachers may use in their classrooms prior to or following a visit to the museum.

Upon reaching the 1840’s generation, the visitor learns that if his ancestors were in Arkansas in 1840, they probably would have been farmers, but might also have been travelers like Gerstäcker, plantation owners, politicians, doctors, lawyers, preachers, small farmers, merchants, or slaves. Labels also provide a brief profile of Gerstäcker as a young man and later in life. The next exhibit segment depicts Gerstäcker’s journey to America. A German map of Europe and North America in 1837 shows both the cultural and physical distances he crossed. As visitors press buttons along Gerstäcker’s route, photographic panels light up, showing images labeled with appropriate quotations from Gerstäcker. An important theme here is what the planning group thought of as the concept of “simultaneity,” namely the insight that the Germany Gerstäcker left behind in 1837 was already a very advanced society at the same time that Arkansas was a primitive settlement on the edge of the American frontier. In addition to this general impression, the images and labels convey specific information about rude and crowded conditions on steerage, the difficulty of learning English, the wonder of the immigrant facing a new continent for the first time, how Gerstäcker lost money on a business venture in New York, why railroads and waterways made Cincinnati already a bustling city, and how steamboats brought travelers to the Arkansas wilderness.

Leading into the next area are two maps of Arkansas, one showing Arkansas Territory, created in 1819, and the other showing the new state, which entered the union in 1836. A label discusses the rapid growth of the Arkansas population in the 1830s and the burgeoning agricultural economy. It points out that Arkansas was a frontier, a partially settled region, rather than a wilderness, when Gerstäcker arrived.

The next room invites visitors to share Gerstäcker’s experience along a “game trail” in the frontier world of Arkansas. Examinations of everything Gerstäcker carried to survive are shown in a case against the left wall. Gerstäcker’s own words tell of his “rather woeful looking socks” and a zither, his “greatest encumbrance.” The embroidered belt and hunting shirt, like the ones he bought in Arkansas from Choctaw Indians, show his willingness to adapt to his new environment.

In addition to equipment, successful hunters must know about their quarry and its environment. A forest diorama contains realistic foliage, animal sounds, and hidden creatures for visitors to try to identify. Labels provide hunting anecdotes and describe the abundance of game and how it was often wasted. An animal track identification game with imprints of animal tracks has braille labels for the vision-impaired. Dangers in the forest, a snake and poison ivy, are shown along with labels explaining the characteristics of each. A larger, simulated danger lurks ahead in the rock bluff to the right of the forest. Small children can crawl back into a cave, touch a replica of a hibernating bear, and hear the sound of baby bears sucking. Telephone here provide an exciting bear hunt tale told by our actor, speaking Gerstäcker’s words with a heavy German accent. Visitors learn that a bear is not dangerous when hibernating unless its young are present, after which they trip a photoelectric eye which causes a fierce growl from a very large taxidermied female bear.

Upon leaving the bear cave, visitors enter a settler’s farm and house. When Gerstäcker’s hunting was unsuccessful, he was grateful to sojourn with settlers looking for new frontier people such as his friend, Slowtrap, whose farm is depicted here with its cornfield, cabin, and implements. Farmers and hunters often faced similar problems, a point made by the large bear trap shown here. Visitors can try their hand using the slow tom corn grinder located outside the cabin. Like the farm and the cabin interior, the interior of the log house is based on Gerstäcker’s description of Slowtrap’s home. A visitor-activated audio tape describes the cabin in Gerstäcker’s words and praises the ingenuity and strenuous exertions of the American pioneer.

At Slowtrap’s log home, visitors can also sit down and play a board game entitled “A Year of Hunting with F. Gerstäcker,” which also may be purchased in the museum’s store. The object of the game is to survive through the seasons. It
demonstrates the difficulties of being a wanderer like Gerstäcker and the need to rely on settled people for food, shelter, and companionship. Each season has its own requirements, particular obstacles, and opportunities. To make it through in the time allowed requires some strategy and luck. If a player fails to meet a season’s requirements in terms of collecting game and wild foods and conserving money, he/she may not continue life as an adventurer/hunter into the next season, and might be better suited to another occupation.

The last room of the exhibit examines Gerstäcker’s adventures from many different perspectives. “What Gerstäcker Missed/How We Learn About The Past” shows things that Gerstäcker ignored or had no chance to see. It includes first-hand accounts by other travelers and residents of Arkansas that give a sense of how other observers saw the state and its people. A variety of documents—voting records, probate records, letters, newspaper articles—provide other evidence. The goal of the exhibit is to show Gerstäcker’s limitations as a source and, by extension, the problems inherent in any historical source taken by itself. Visitors learn that to gain a better understanding of the past, it is necessary to take different accounts, documents, and artifacts and form them into a coherent whole.

These documents, plus the material culture artifacts, store inventories, newspaper articles, and visual images from Little Rock in the next exhibit segment illustrate the existence of a more refined urban lifestyle that coexisted with the crude rural society Gerstäcker preferred. The visitor is made aware that the museum’s building, other major familiar structures, and an array of fine dishes, glassware, furniture, clocks, and toys were in existence in 1840 Arkansas. Archaeological evidence adds yet another dimension with concrete evidence of the availability in Little Rock of luxuries such as imported wines.

By listening to the phones in one corner of the room, visitors learn how professionals from different academic disciplines understand the significance of Gerstäcker. A cultural anthropologist is particularly interested in the often reluctant choices people are forced to make to intensify production and adopt a more sedentary existence. The historian approaches the Gerstäcker journal as a source that documents the transformation of a primitive and violent frontier society into an organized and productive culture. The archaeologist’s point of reference is agricultural history and the material culture brought into the frontier to make new life-styles possible. Finally, a German historian focused upon Gerstäcker as a product of the specific cultural tradition of nineteenth-century Germany.

Expanding on this analysis, visitors can try their own interpretive skills through an exhibit segment featuring a painting entitled the “Arkansas Traveler.” This well-known painting portrays a meeting, also illustrated by story and song, between an urban Arkansas traveler on horseback and a clever but standoffish squatter playing a fiddle and sitting outside a ramshackle cabin. It is the subject of considerable cultural pride in Arkansas, where it is presented to visitors as a symbol of the state. The painting and story can also be interpreted as unflattering to the state’s image. Visitors are asked to share their perceptions about the painting in a “suggestion box.” Following this, some of Gerstäcker’s observations of the people of Arkansas are offered. Visitors are then asked what they would want a visitor to Arkansas today to notice and write about and also place those answers in the “suggestion box.”

To improve the flow of traffic, “Gerstäcker’s Arkansas” was designed so that visitors can enter from either end and make intellectual sense of what they find. At one of the entrance/exits, a computer game asks visitors if they have been through the exhibit or not and to test their knowledge of Arkansas history. This computer game was designed to evaluate the reaction of visitors to the exhibit. Preliminary evidence to date indicates that they are responding positively.

An outpouring of community support began as soon as the first article describing “Gerstäcker’s Arkansas” appeared in the paper. Living history hobbyists, local history enthusiasts, and area academics were anxious to become involved. Small donations from not-so-wealthy patrons flowed into the museum to help make this project into a reality. Letters praising the exhibit and criticizing sensitive parts have been received for this exhibit alone. Local newspapers and magazines have done several feature stories. The exhibit has received an Award of Commendation from the American Association for State and Local History. It was also featured in the November/December 1988 issue of the National Endowment for the Humanities’ magazine Humanities and will appear in Southern Living in March, 1989. In addition, James W. Miller, a German historian at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock who became interested in Gerstäcker as a result of working on the exhibit, has translated several of Gerstäcker’s Arkansas stories and sketches and will publish them shortly.
Something that we would do differently next time is to pay more attention to technical research and the building of prototypes. We mistakenly assumed, for example, that real leaves could be preserved by some chemical treatment. Hiring a conservator, as is suggested by NEH, would have allowed us to understand the drawbacks of using organic materials in exhibits at an early stage. Instead, staff ended up transforming the museum into an eighteen hour-a-day leaf factory for a month prior to the exhibit opening, something that nobody ever wants to do again.

In sum, “Gerstäcker’s Arkansas” is a small exhibit that deals with a limited segment of state and local history. Nonetheless, it conveys a meaningful sense of what life was like in early Arkansas and does so in a context to which museum visitors can easily relate. It provides a variety of activities and experiences, which make it attractive to both young and old. The exhibit also grapples intelligently with the problem of how we know about the past and how we make sense out of what we know.

The exhibit’s success seems to be the result of its emphasis on social history and its use of Gerstäcker as a subject. It also owes much to the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the planning model recommended by that organization. In particular, the authors feel that this exhibit testifies to the usefulness of sharing ideas and skills between the museum community and academic scholars.