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Interpreting Mr. Sam at Home: Is it Enough, Or Why Can't It Be All About Mr Sam?

BY CARLYN COPELAND HAMMONS

For more than twenty years, one book has served as the staple publication for anyone thinking about establishing a museum: *Starting Right: A Basic Guide to Museum Planning* is used by organizations such as the American Association of Museums, the Texas Association of Museums, and the Texas Historical Commission. They all recommend it as one of the first resources for community groups to study before moving forward with any museum plans. In clear and candid language, the author succinctly details what a museum is, what responsibilities the new founders will face, and in what order the planning steps should be completed.

For almost eighteen years, *Starting Right* helped guide substantial numbers of museums to a solid beginning. An updated edition appeared in 2004 that addressed current museum trends and issues. While some of these updates—including the role of technology and new professional standards—were quite predictable, a new chapter posed some important questions and a word of caution: It counsels—think twice before you begin a project to open a house museum.¹

Such advice and the questions it suggests are notable. How many house museums already exist within a few hours' drive of the proposed location? How many show and say the same thing every time you visit? Have you visited one more than once? How many of these house museums are open half-days, on weekends only, or just by appointment?

How many are suffering from deferred maintenance to the point that even the casual observer can see it? Can a new museum—and should it even want to—compete with them for money, visitors, staff, and volunteers?

The author's point is simple: "The last half-century has seen many wonderful building museums develop; it has also seen many decline into a kind of limbo from which they never really prosper nor fully die."² The challenges facing museums today are great. It is not realistic

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to function in the same old way and expect success—or even to stay in business at all.

Concerned parties have considered the challenges, not only individuals and groups who have contemplated beginning a house museum, but museum professionals and historic preservationists, as well. They have asked the hard questions not only to those with plans for future house museums, but also to those *six to eight* thousand existing institutions across America. Professional organizational studies continue to show that house museums across the country struggle with sustainability, and many now face a critical situation because they are seemingly out of touch with the needs of changing communities and perennially underfunded.³ Even the president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation finally asked, “Are there too many house museums?”⁴

It is beyond the scope and purpose of this short article to investigate fully the predicament facing the house museums of our country, but it is important that any discussion that concerns the operation and programs of a historic house museum be prefaced with at least some mention of the current professional climate. There are approximately 502 small history museums in Texas. One hundred and fifty of them reside in historic houses.⁵ The need to stand out and offer something unique is paramount. The prospective visitor needs to have a reason to choose to stop at one house museum over any of a host of others. A good example to analyze and measure is a small museum, such as Bonham’s Sam Rayburn House.

The easy and most obvious operational attraction, of course, is “Mr. Sam.” No other house museum can claim distinction as the Rayburn family “Home Place”—it is one of a kind. Few politicians can claim a career as distinctive as the one Sam Rayburn enjoyed. He, also, was one of a kind. Sam Rayburn held elective office for 55 years, including 48 consecutive years in the U.S. House of Representatives, and 17 as Speaker of the House.⁶ Today, many historians consider him as one of the greatest U.S. statesmen ever. When he was not in the House in Washington, Rayburn was at home in Bonham, Texas.

On the surface, these might sound like enough interesting facts to sustain strong interest in a house museum dedicated to Mr. Sam. Upon closer examination, one discovers that even a unique figure such as Rayburn in this one-of-a-kind setting cannot exempt the museum from

the difficulties facing all historic house museums. Shared difficulties, such as financial health, good maintenance plans, and accurate preservation, are all present for house museums, but one of the most challenging—and the one we will focus on here—is interpretation and its increased importance to museum exhibits and material culture.

Interpretative methodology has changed significantly in recent years. Successful museums must constantly evaluate and improve interpretive techniques and programs in order to keep up with changing and evolving populations and audiences. Age, migration patterns, education, economics, and belief systems—not to mention changing cultural values—are all factors that change and shape the way people understand the past.⁷ As audiences evolve, and as their expectations of historic resources change, so too must the ways in which museums interpret resources.

The challenge is compounded by the fact that it must all happen in a virtually unchanging exhibit environment. Most objects on display in a typical historic house museum rarely change or move. The Sam Rayburn House Museum looks nearly the same as it did when it first opened thirty years earlier. The house is designed to capture a moment in time—1961, the year of Mr. Sam's death—thus it will continue to look the same thirty, sixty, ninety years in the future. This is the very essence of historic house museums. It is also the reason so many fall into the trap of the standard, object-based interpretation, and why interpretive programs, such as tours, often remain unchanged for decades.⁸

There was a time that such a presentation was enough. After all, this is very recent history—Mr. Sam died less than fifty years ago, and the house opened as a museum just over a decade after his death. In its earliest years, and to some extent today, many of Rayburn's contemporaries were still around. These people knew, admired, and respected him. He represented their interests and they appreciated what he did for them; farm to market roads, rural electricity, and the jobs in war-time industries meant a lot for these people. In some respects, many were in awe of Rayburn. After all, he was the second most powerful man in the U.S. government, and he lived in their backyard.

Being in his house and seeing his things was enough for most visitors and allowed them to forge personal connections with him. *This is Mr. Sam's hat. I remember when he wore it in the town parade. Here is where he sat and visited with presidents, senators, etc. I remember*

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*when President Truman came to the house; I shook hands with him right here in this spot.*⁹ They brought their children and grandchildren to the house so they could share memories. Previously, facilitating that trip down memory lane—and the resulting sense of nostalgia—was enough.

Declining numbers of visitors persuaded professionals that new practices were in order. As the population ages the people who personally remember Rayburn are vanishing; and audiences must now be educated about who he was, what he did, and why it was so important. But even that's not enough. People want more. Museums are moving away from the "great man" interpretation of history. Retaining the interest of visitors through the exploits and artifacts of a famous or wealthy head of household is no longer enough to sustain a historical museum. Such a one-sided interpretation occurs at the expense of the site's other features, activities, purposes, and relationships, and jeopardizes not only the museum's own credibility, but also its broad public appeal.¹⁰

As our audience becomes more diverse, museums must strive to entertain and attract them. Rather than focusing on information specific to the site, museums are finding it necessary to expand their interpretations to include multi-layered content that represents themes beyond the site boundaries, ones that extend to larger historical contexts.¹¹ One way to achieve such a goal is to identify the multiplicities that exist in any household and incorporate various perspectives in the interpretation.¹²

In the case of the Sam Rayburn House Museum, this can be accomplished by including the perspectives of other people with connections to the Rayburn Home Place, which can include any of the various family members who occupied the house through the years, the household employees—including cooks, groundskeepers, and farm hands—as well as the perspectives of Rayburn's constituents.

Throughout its history the house meant something different to each person. For Mr. Sam, it was a quasi-respite from his work in Washington, a place to connect with the people of his district. For members of his immediate and extended family, it was a home, a place of residence. For others it was a place to work, and for still others it was a place of personal connection to politics, a place to seek assistance for a political need. Exploring different perspectives provides the opportunity to build multi-layered and thematic interpretation, which in turn places the Rayburn household in a larger historical context. The museum is thus able to interpret many different aspects of the cultural,

political, and social history of early-to mid-20th century North Texas—including the role of politics in rural life, race relations, women's roles, agricultural trends, and daily domestic life.

Every tour of the house includes a stop in the kitchen. When visitors see the Crosley freezer and the Chambers gas range, they understand that Rayburn enjoyed modern conveniences. However, did he really spend much time in the kitchen? Are stories from his perspective really the best ones for the kitchen to tell? Perhaps better told are the stories of the household cook who is naturally more intimately connected to the kitchen.

Thus, the House interprets through the eyes of Bobbie Phillips, a local African American woman who served as the Rayburn family cook for many years. Such an approach provides the opportunity to look beyond the physical evidence of the technological advances of food preparation, which gives the visitor the opportunity, and the museum the chance, to explore larger social and political issues. What other occupational opportunities did minority women like Bobbie have at this time? How is this kitchen, with its modern appliances, different from one she probably had at home? How would she and her family have benefited from some of Rayburn's more significant political accomplishments, such as bringing electricity and farm-to-market roads to rural areas? How much did her menu selection depend on the agricultural activities at the farm? What was her relationship with the Rayburn women of the house? How must it have felt to work in the home of the second most powerful man in the U.S. government, and yet not be a welcomed participant in the political process because of her color?

Opportunities for expanded interpretation are numerous. If the facility highlights the role that the house and its other occupants played in politics, it then broadens the interest for visitors. Rayburn's relationship with his rural constituency resulted in his career longevity and success. For example, how did early and mid-20th century rural politics affect the role that the Rayburn family members played in the Speaker's numerous campaigns? What about the social and domestic roles of North Texas women during the first half of the 20th century? Several Rayburn women lived in the house at various points during their lives—some were married, others widowed, and some never married at all. Another key point of examination can be the steady

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stream of constituents that visited with Mr. Sam in the sitting room of his house and asked for his help on all sorts of matters? What were the issues that concerned them most? Any number of the tangible objects already on display in the house can act as a springboard for some of these intangible themes.

Audiences must be able to relate to Mr. Sam and see him as human. Certainly, any facility devoted to him must acknowledge Rayburn's successes and the events and characteristics that made him unique, but it must also "stop short of inculcating an incapacitating awe"¹³ and reveal his failures, his fears, and his weaknesses in an effort to impart a full, well-textured narrative of the man's life. One brief example of how the museum has begun such a task is the inclusion in the interpretive tour of a discussion of Rayburn's very brief marriage and subsequent divorce¹⁴. Many of his constituents never even knew of the marriage at all, and social and political rules of the time dictated that it remain quiet.

There are, of course, many wonderful opportunities to reach out and make a meaningful experience for visitors. All good interpretation rests on a solid foundation of research that is a costly and time-consuming activity. A responsible museum must commit itself to detailed research.¹⁵ People expect to learn something when they visit historic house museums, and museums must commit to accuracy and honesty lest they risk their credibility.

Museums—and especially historic house museums—are now under scrutiny and must constantly demonstrate that they are meaningful, relevant, and sustainable to an increasingly diverse and evolving audience. The Sam Rayburn House Museum works continuously to introduce new interpretation to the site's programs, using the site-specific resources to tell broader, more inclusive stories that place the house, its objects, and its occupants into larger historical contexts.¹⁶ We should not be afraid to ask new questions about the old stories and old objects even though challenging established views can be risky. We have to look at the objects in the house and tease out new stories that can lead to newer, more integrated, more comprehensive interpretations.¹⁷

History is never constant. Our view and understanding of the past evolves with each new generation, and museums must keep up with change. Only time can tell what the Sam Rayburn House Museum will interpret in twenty to thirty years, but one thing is for certain—it can't be all about Mr. Sam. That just isn't enough.

(Endnotes)

¹ Gerald George, *Starting Right: A Basic Guide to Museum Planning*, (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2004), Chapter 5, 56-59, is titled "And if You are Planning a Historic House Museum?" The paragraph that follows is a condensed and paraphrased version of the author's questions posed in that chapter.

² Gerald George, *Starting Right*, 58.

³ The most notable of these is the 1988 survey of historic sites commissioned by the NTHP and the 2002 conference "Rethinking the Historic House Museum for the 21st Century" cosponsored by the NTHP and AASLH. The findings are summarized in Gerald George, "Historic Property Museums: What Are They Preserving?" *Forum Journal* 3, no. 1 (Summer 1989); Gerald George, "Historic House Malaise: A Conference Considers What's Wrong," *Forum Journal* 16, no. 3 (Spring 2002); Richard Moe, "Are There Too Many House Museums?" *Forum Journal* 16, no. 3 (Spring 2002); and Carol Stapp and Kenneth Turino, "Does America Need Another House Museum?" *History News* 59, no. 3 (Summer 2004).

⁴ Richard Moe, "Are There Too Many House Museums?"

⁵ Figures based on 2001 survey conducted by the Museum Services Program, History Programs Division, Texas Historical Commission.

⁶ Texas Historical Commission, "Life and Politics," www.thc.state.tx.us/samrayhouse/srhlife.html.

⁷ Patrick H. Butler III, "Past, Present, and Future: The Place of the House Museum in the Community," in *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, ed. Jessica Foy Donnelly, (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2002), 36.

⁸ Jessica Foy Donnelly, *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2002), 1-5.

⁹ These are not provided as exact quotes or attributed to any particular visitor; they simply represent the types of memories shared by visitors.

¹⁰ Jessica Foy Donnelly, *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, 1.

¹¹ George McDaniel, "At Historic Houses and Buildings: Connecting Past, Present, and Future," in *Public History: Essays from the Field*, eds. James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger Publishing Co., 1999), 244-45.

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¹² George McDaniel, "At Historic Houses and Buildings: Connecting Past, Present, and Future," 245.

¹³ Mike Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," in *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Public Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 27.

¹⁴ The tangible objects that lead to this revelation is the set of wedding china on display in the dining room, just one of many sets of china in the Rayburn home.

¹⁵ George McDaniel, "At Historic Houses and Buildings: Connecting Past, Present, and Future," 241-44.

¹⁶ The National Endowment for the Humanities awarded an Interpreting America's Historic Places Consultation Grant to the Sam Rayburn House Museum in early 2007. That grant allowed for research activities as well as a roundtable forum and workshop with a team of Rayburn scholars.

¹⁷ Rex M. Ellis, "Interpreting the Whole House," in *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2002), 68.