

Heritage Farm Museum & Village

2014 Way Back Weekends (and Beyond)

Prepared by WPR Consulting

For Heritage Farm Museum and Village, 2014 was a big year – perhaps the biggest during its more than 20-year history.

In terms of physical growth, Heritage Farm added a new Visitors Center, Pottery Cabin, Bread Oven, Artisan Center, Doll Exhibit, daily café and updates in the Barn.

Heritage Farm also took big steps to continue its marketing efforts by contracting with WPR Consulting – led by Bill Rosenberger, who had provided regular coverage to Heritage Farm as a reporter with The Herald-Dispatch from 2007 to 2013.

Those efforts have included the establishment of a high school volunteer program, launch of Twitter, development of a social media and public relations internship and upgrades to the website – including the addition of SmugMug for photos.

WPR Consulting also has assisted in getting out regular press releases and the expansion of media attention.

Throughout the year, Rosenberger has been at every Way Back Weekend taking photos, coordinating high school volunteers or assisting in the execution of events.

It also has provided time to make expansive observations of Way Back Weekends and school visits. What follows are summaries of those observations and recommendations to continue improving the experience for visitors at Heritage Farm.

- **Signage:** This may not seem like a big deal, but it is listed first because it is perhaps the easiest to address while also having a big impact for visitors moving through the Farm.

The first recommendation is to invest in permanent – and mobile – signage for the Children’s Museum, Petting Zoo, Reserved (for Apple Butter and the Church), Open and others. This eliminates the need to create signs or replace weathered cardboard signs, and can help direct visitors to the areas of the Farm that are open and on display or being highlighted for different Way Back Weekends.



The second recommendation is to invest in permanent, stationary signs that can be placed in certain areas to serve as directional markers.

These signs should resemble wooden street signs, such that would have been found in towns in the 1800s.



- **Experience:** Heritage Farm's mission is to be a place where history comes alive every day. That is definitely true from Heritage Farm's perspective, but would visitors say the same thing?

The real question is what does that look like? Is it yes because Charlie the Blacksmith has the fire burning hot and is engaging with visitors; is it yes because visitors see glass blowing; it is yes because they take a wagon ride? And, is it yes for every visitor in every demographic?

The recommendations to enhance the visitors' experience come in several forms. First, there tends to be a lot of wasted space on Way Back Weekends that could be utilized for hands-on activities – in such areas as the Blacksmith Field and the field next to the train

playground. Going forward, this also can include the covered area behind the Transportation Museum and the Apple Butter yard when it's not rented.

There are a variety of activities that can be added to enhance a Way Back Weekend, with some having the ability to serve as a stand-alone weekend event, such as geocaching or a history treasure hunt. Some would require additional volunteers, while others can simply be designed based on already-existing partnerships with artisans or local historical organizations (Huntington Museum of Art, Collis P. Huntington Historical Railroad Society).

The second recommendation is to seek out additional volunteers to serve as re-enactors dressed in period costumes simply meandering throughout the Farm, as you'd see in Williamsburg or Disney World. They engage with visitors and children and can direct folks to different activities, displays and exhibits. This took shape in 2014 with Major, who captures that essence as the sheriff and traveling salesman. Dan the Pioneer Man also provides that, but he tends to be in the Conway Cabin, which doesn't get the exposure it deserves and will be addressed shortly.



- **Conway Cabin:** The Conway Cabin is a treasure for the Farm but located in one the least-traveled locations. Signage is a big key to improving this, but the pathway there can also stand for improvement – the November Way Back Weekend showed that with the impact of the wet weather on the grass. In addition, there is debris and construction material near the front of the cabin, which can indicate the area is not open or still under construction.

- **Sound System:** This is one recommendation that could change the entire atmosphere of a Way Back Weekend. Not only would a Farm-wide sound system allow for announcements to be heard by all visitors, but music can be projected throughout the Farm.



This could be most effective for the Music Festival, which was one of the highlights of the 2014 Way Back Weekend. The music performances were so engaging and lively; it deserved to be heard by all. It adds to the ambiance of any festival, whether the

music is live and being broadcasted throughout the Museum or played from a computer program.

- **School Visits:** This is the Farm's major source for visitors from all around the region. Some schools are even forgoing the Pumpkin Festival education days for trips to Heritage Farm.



Heritage Farm should look to further capitalize on this by expanding school tour dates into November and December. This would require some structural changes to the school tours, which would exclude the petting zoo and possibly wagon rides but could instead include more artisan interaction in the new artisan

center. It also would require an indoor lunch venue, which could include children sitting in the church pews or upstairs at Heritage Hall.

- **Christmas Village:** Although we weren't able to pull off the Christmas Village for 2014, we were able to find out how much it would cost and the type of marketing plan needed to pull it off. However, if this project gets the green light, a full marketing and fundraising plan can be put into full effect by February 2015.
- **Educational Enhancements:** There were two pieces of the 2013 proposal that have been discussed but ever put into action: Restoration program and Appalachian History Project/Social Studies Fair.

The restoration program could involve students in the different career and technical education programs in Cabell and Wayne counties. To get the program started, it is recommended to host CTE directors and relevant instructors for a Saturday tour and luncheon, where further discussions can take place.

The Appalachian History Project can be a stand-alone contest for the spring festival or simply a celebration of the spring Social Studies Fair. The latter would likely be the best course of action and only require space for students to set up.

It also is important to reach out to Marshall University and its student groups, many of which have philanthropic requirements and could become a partner for Heritage Farm.

It is envisioned that interested Marshall students can take part in the 2015 Day of Service with the already-established high school program.

