

INTERPRETIVE TOURS

A TRIAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE



With wonderful assistance from area organizations, BRASS attempted to initiate tours during the summer that interpreted our architecture, mining, history, agriculture, and natural resources. We had high hopes. We thought we could demonstrate the popularity of these types of tours; stimulate like entrepreneurial efforts by documenting the process and economic cost/return; and draw tourists to lodge in, eat in, and explore the NY Champlain Valley.

When the funding proposals were submitted to the Rural New York program and to the Lake Champlain Citizens Action Committee, we had every reason to be hopeful. We knew we could design exciting and informative tours, and we had extremely knowledgeable tour leaders. We believed we could accommodate many tourists without clogging roads with private cars. Amtrak had promised a bicycle car on their Adirondack train, and a Lake Placid business was to open a bicycle and canoe/kayak rental business in Essex. The Town of Willsboro donated to BRASS a remaindered van for tour use. Ten area B&Bs and Inns said they would shuttle tourists from train station to their establishments as well as to the tour points. Tourists coming by train would receive a 10% discount on tours.

Evelyn's Bakery in Elizabethtown was going to prepare tasty lunches for many of the tours, with breads made from Westport's organic wheat, as well as produce purchased at the local Farmer's Market. We rounded up pretty picnic baskets, cloths, silverware and coolers. The County's Visitors Bureau would take care of reservations, and would link a promotional web site that we would design to their Lake Placid site. Attractive brochures, newspaper articles, and the web site would market the tour offerings in the area, in the state, and throughout the country.

We coordinated a Red Cross Training course for tour guides leading back-country treks.

We had all the bases covered, we had funding, and we were following our principles: safe, informative, exciting and varied tours about our natural/cultural/historic resources; small groups so tourists got maximum attention and benefits; use of local B&Bs, inns, and farm products; and little impact on our roads and environment.



We were naive. Only 4 of the 20 offered tours had enough reservations to be realized, with a total of 48 persons participating. What went wrong?

Well, there were transportation difficulties: Amtrak never added a bike car, no bike and boat rental facility was realized in Essex, and the remaindered van was too expensive to repair and get licensed. Tourists faced cumbersome details: they had to reserve for a tour, and then try to get lodging. (Only a half-dozen lodgings belong to the County's central reservation service.) We had very little time from grant award to tours, only 2 months to develop and coordinate the tours, and to create and disseminate promotional materials.

The primary problem, however, was marketing. Because we offered varied tours, we couldn't target distribution of the brochures. We would have had to print, obtain mailing lists, and mail many more than the 3,000 distributed in order to get to know groups interested in architecture, military and industrial history, hiking, cycling, wetlands, river ecology, butterflies, pottery, printing, nature photography, etc. which were the themes of our tours. Although the web site was attractive with its color graphics, it received only 365 "hits." It takes people a while just to find web sites, and our link was probably inappropriate. It was linked to Lake Placid because of the in-kind service from the Visitors Bureau. But, tourists who "hit" Lake Placid are no doubt those who want to be in the high peak area or near the Olympic complex, not down in the Champlain Valley. Perhaps if we had the money to link with "eco-tourism" or "heritage tourism" the results would have been vastly different.
