

History as Edutainment – Learning at a History Theme Park

The Wild West Theme Park “High Chaparral” in the county Småland, is one of Sweden's largest history communicating places, with more visitors annually than, for example, The Swedish History Museum in Stockholm.

The purpose of our study, whose material collection has consisted of participant observation studies during the summer of 2018, is to examine how a commercial environment, focused on mediation of history and cultural heritage, is used by schools and how school students, 10 to 12 years old, relate to history.

Some parts of the theme park are based on historical authenticity, while other parts are based on a mythological notion of the current time period in which Zorro and Lucky Luke can appear.

This meeting between school and theme park follows a broader trend where knowledge and entertainment institutions move into each other's domains. The amusement park Gröna Lund, for example, offers schools to come to the "Edutainment Day". In its advertising (<https://www.gronalund.com/en/Planera-ditt-besok/gruppbesok/edutainmentdagen/>), the theme park writes (in translation):

Experience when Newton's laws come alive! Welcome to an inspiring day at Gröna Lund where you together with your students will have the opportunity to discover how exciting physics, technology and mathematics can be in reality – in the attractions of Gröna Lund.

Our amusement park is like a large laboratory, filled with accelerating and rotating systems. Newton's laws are felt throughout the body and suddenly the textbooks of the school books are alive. Here you can measure, observe, count and take part of natural science principles - outside the classroom.

Sweden's largest zoo, Kolmården's zoo, likewise welcomes school students to "Sweden's most enjoyable classroom!" and offers various educational programs for schools (<http://www.kolmarden.com/utbildning/utbildningsprogram/skolresor>).

High Chaparral has significantly changed the direction of its activities since 2013. From being more focused on an adult audience, families and not least children are now in focus. “Tequila shot-races” in the Mexican section, bike meets and other features that were more targeted to an adult audience have been replaced by clearer family-oriented features. The ambition is to become a travel destination for families with children more clearly. The work has paid off. Recently, the park was voted for the fourth year in a row by just families with children as the best theme park in the Nordic region. In the magazine *Entreprenör* (2017-03-17), one of the brothers who runs the park today, Emil Erlandsson, commented on the changes:

The first questions the gang at High Chaparral posed was "For whom are we and why?", "What do we want?" and "What can we and what can we not compete with?". The answers

were that High Chaparral should be available for families with children who should have a fun experience and become part of the adventure.

– We want to be the world's best Wild West theme park for families with children. What we can compete with is our distinctive character with the Western theme and that we invite the visitors to be involved in the experience. You do not come here to go around in any attraction, but the children will be in the theater and rob the bank and then maybe change side when Lucky Luke pops up. It makes us unique and it should be clear in our brand, says Emil Erlandsson.

In the change process, words such as *learning* and *authenticity* appear to have guided the theme park managers. Recently, the starting point for a reorientation of the park's museum was where the concept of learning was presented as a central concept in the change. The fact that the park has tried to eliminate anachronistic elements, such as roller coasters, during the recent years' has strengthened the authenticity of a visit to the park. Or more precisely, it has strengthened *the experience* of authenticity. The park has – after requests from visitors – been looking for female role models and characters. Historical sniper Annie Oakley was already included in the park in the 2017 season and has been around since then. The sheriff/CEO at High Chaparral commented (*Jönköpings-Posten* 2018-02-12):

So she's been there for real?

– Yes, it wasn't really that important, but it's easier to build a story for us then. But we will still have created something own of it. [...]

– We think it is important to play and have fun while learning something new.

Emil Erlandsson has (*Entreprenör*, 2017-03-17) emphasized that High Chaparral should primarily be seen as a theme park. Implied, visitors are primarily there to enjoy themselves. It is nevertheless clear that in some respects the park emphasizes concepts such as *learning* and *authenticity*. In other respects, the claims are toned down. Different views and nuances of approaches exist in parallel at both representatives of the park and at the visitors. In the park, the Dalton brothers (from the Lucky Luke cartoon) come together with authentic elements. The park probably attracts mainly visitors who are primarily looking for a pure amusement experience, but in our background material we have examples of American tourists who more explicitly sought out the park to “learn about America's history”.

In this context, our study is being conducted; at the intersection of theme parks and learning, in the borderland between reality and fiction. The study problematizes the concepts of learning and authenticity in these contexts. What *types of learning* are involved and which *understandings of the concept of “authenticity”* are dominating?

Particularly interesting in the study are schools that visit the facility within the framework of school activities. In that sense, two institutions – schools and theme parks – meet, which gives us an entrance to study how education, learning and entertainment are combined in this meeting.