

Making Living History Live

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Hello, my name is Kyle Yoho. I am the Education Director at The Castle Historic House Museum in Marietta, OH and today we'll be discussing "Making Living History Live." My goal with this session, as is reflected in the program description, is to engage all of you in discussion and activities to help us critically think about if living history might be appropriate for educational goals with your historic site/org and what interpretive style of living history would be best...

What's in store...

- Identify Living History
- Define Interpretation
- Three Methods Of Living History Interpretation
- Activity Time!
- Considerations
- Activity Time... Again!
- Questions



This is a preview of what we'll be discussing in this session. As mentioned, we've got a few activities we'll be dividing into groups for two critical thinking exercises. I will note that if you're not keen on group activities, you are welcome to sit it out. No pressure.

About Me

- B.A. in History, Marietta College 2012
- M.A. in Public History, Wright State University 2014
- Involved with museums for 15 yrs.
- OLHA 2014 & 2017 Outstanding Achievement Awards in Public Programming
- Education Director, The Castle 2015
- Adjunct Professor, Museum Studies, Marietta College 2017
- Board Member, Ohio Local History Alliance 2018
- Member, Association for Living History, Farms, and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM) 2018



Before we get started, I'll just mention a few things about myself regarding my cred to discuss this with you today. I've been involved in living history interpretation for 15 years, getting started, like most do, in Civil War reenacting when I was young. Since I was 16, I've planned my own living history events and in 2014 won an OLHA award for the CW living history series I planned in 2011 – 2013. As the Education Director with The Castle, I've expanded their programming to include a few living history based programs which have been very successful.



Here's a few pics of the genres of living history I've branched out to...

What is “Living History”?

- “the attempt to simulate life in another time used for the purpose of interpretation, research, or play”
 - - Jay Anderson, *Time Machines*



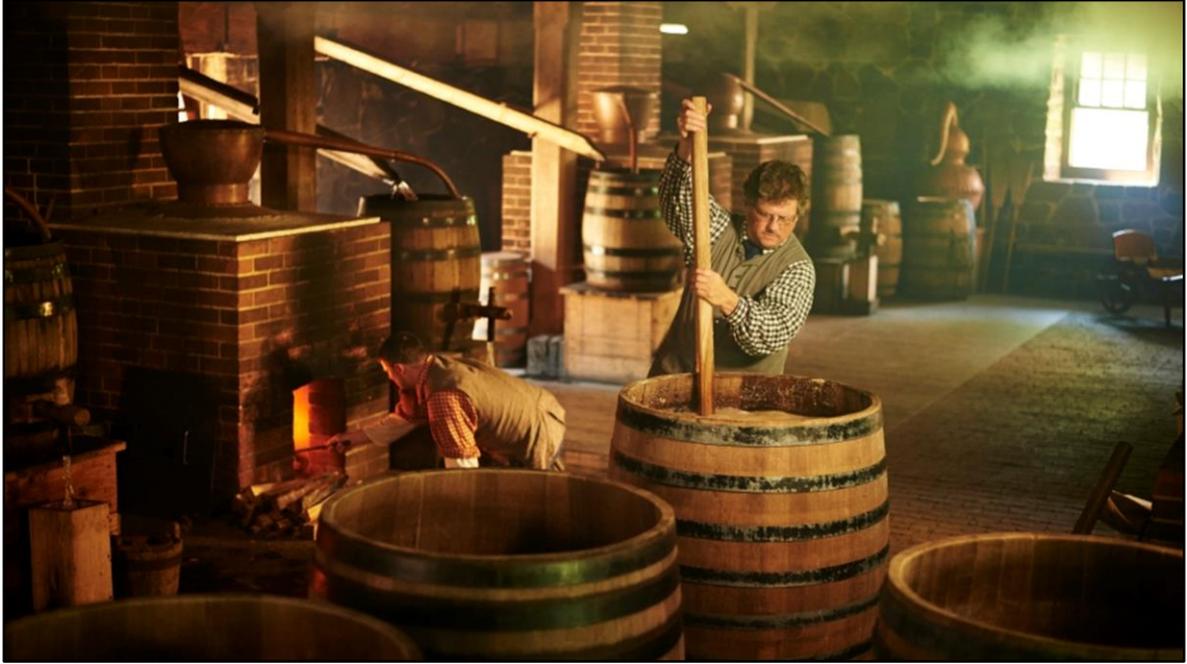
First, we want to start off on the right foot by defining what is living history. The commonly referenced definition for living history by renowned author on living history Jay Anderson says....

As you can see, Anderson cites three “purposes” for living history... we’ll discuss the method of “interpretation,” and some “research”, but not “play” which can be defined as hobbyists... aka reenacting

Next, let’s take a look at living history taking place within the museum/ historic site setting...



Look familiar? This is what probably most of us think of when we imagine the term “living history.” This is you could say is a spectacle within a living history village. (Colonial Williamsburg)



This is what we could label as demonstration. This is the distillery at George Washington's Mount Vernon.



While most living history holds educational value, this you might call a “hands-on, educational” experience. (Conner Prairie.)



This you might call “museum theatre.” A single, or group of interpreters, engaged in a dialogue. (Museum of the American Revolution)



A style recently developed, and gaining popularity, has been these sorts of guerilla street theatre events. Some even take the form of a flash mob in ways. This can be very impactful. (We Are Here)



This photo helps illustrate my personal favorite method. While a demonstration or a sort of scripted scenario plays out, a second party helps contextualize what is occurring to the public. (Fort Ti)

What is Interpretation?

- “An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”
- Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*



Before we launch into discussing the different methods of living history interpretation, it is important to understand what we mean when we use the “I” word. According to the giant, Freeman Tilden...

Living history ticks all these boxes...

3 Methods of Interpretation

- 1st person
 - Costumed interpreter that maintains the role of an individual from a specific time in history, or furthermore a place or event in history.
 - *Won't break character*



There are three methods of 1h interpretation prevalent in the field.

One of those being first person...

In this case, the interpreter is portraying a precise historical character. They primarily use possessive language when talking with the public and they won't break character. You might think of Colonial Williamsburg or Plimoth Plantation.



3 Methods of Interpretation

- 3rd person
 - While demonstrators may be costumed, they do not maintain character or will break character to answer questions or relay information to the public.
 - *Most popular method.*

Third person is the most popular method because... Many historical villages and interpreters utilize this method because it is not as restricting as 1st person, and thus is, arguably, more educational and engaging for the public.



3 Methods of Interpretation

- 2nd person
 - *Relatively new method*
 - The visitors, along with the staff, become involved as a part of the living history experience usually through direct hands-on or participatory activities.
 - Ex: “Follow the North Star” - Conner Prairie

Less common is 2nd person where...

Examples of this include the “Follow the North Star” program at Conner Prairie where guests take on the role of slaves escaping on the underground railroad where they encounter slave catchers and conductors (professional interpreters) and have to make decisions along the way that put them in a similar state of mind and emotions to escaping slaves.

Next, we’ll watch a few videos to hone our ability to identify 1st, 3rd, and 2nd person.



**Is this 1st, 3rd,
or 2nd person?**

Was it effective?



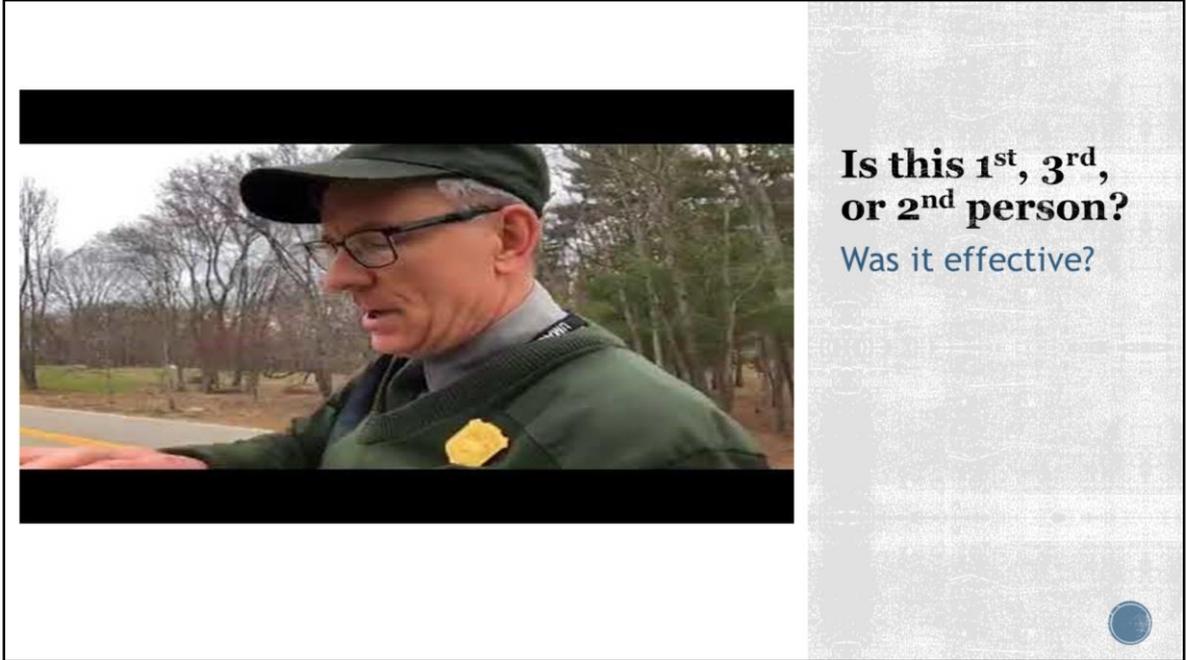


**Is this 1st, 3rd,
or 2nd person?**

Was it effective?



[1:30 – 2:15](#)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwylemHLHnc&t=3685s> (1:02:44 – 1:04:42)

Now, we are going to move on into our next activity

[13 mins]

Activity 1A: What Works?

- This activity is for your own self consideration.
- “I would like my site/organization to tell the story of _____
(a person, event, place) connected with our mission.
- Let’s say you want to interpret that person, event, or place using living history
- Who is your target audience?
 - Schools/youth groups
 - Families
 - Tourists
 - Museum patrons
 - Community members
 - (all the above)
- What do I want people to learn? How do I want them to feel?
- Knowing your target audience, what would be the best interpretive style (1st, 3rd, or 2nd person)? Why?



This activity is just for you to go through on your own. I’ve got this in a handout version that I’ll pass around for you to look over and take with you. Just to go over it briefly...

Ok, now let’s move on to our first group activity!

Activity 1B: What Works?

- Break into four groups
- Each group receives a different scenario
- After reading the scenario, each group should discuss the two questions posed on the sheet.
 - 1. What method of living history interpretation would work best?
 - 2. What will this style of interpretation look like in your setting?
- *You'll have 3 minutes*
- Each group will briefly discuss their scenario and the decisions they made.



Activity 1B: What Works?

Scenario 1:

Your historical society owns a small dairy barn, moved from its original location to your current campus. The barn includes many of the items needed in the cheese making process. You would like to educate your community about how dairy farming had been a major aspect of agriculture in your county.

What living history methods (1st person, 3rd person, 2nd person) could you use to create an engaging, educational interpretation of cheese making at your dairy barn?

Explain how this interpretation would take place. What are the interpreters doing and what role does the audience play (are they listening as a group, participating, passing through)?



Activity 1B: What Works?

Scenario 2:

Your museum has an exhibit on the early settlers of your town. You would like to highlight these exhibit panels to the school groups who enjoy field trips to your museum through the use of living history interpretation.

What living history methods (1st person, 3rd person, 2nd person) could you use to create an engaging, educational interpretation of the settlers of your town at museum?

Explain how this interpretation would take place. What are the interpreters doing and what role does the audience play (are they listening as a group, participating, passing through)?



Activity 1B: What Works?

Scenario 3:

Your organization is in charge of a local monument dedicated to those who served in WWII (*both* military and support branches/organizations.) As stewards for this monument, you would like to highlight this monument during the 75th anniversary commemorations of WWII. You believe a living history event at the monument might be an effective means of educating about local WWII history.

What living history methods (1st person, 3rd person, 2nd person) could you use to create an engaging, educational interpretation of your area's WWII history connected to the monument?

Explain how this interpretation would take place. What are the interpreters doing and what role does the audience play (are they listening as a group, participating, passing through)?



Activity 1B: What Works?

Scenario 4:

In 1912, the local chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union staged a march down main street demonstrating for their equal right to vote. In planning speakers and programs for an upcoming symposium to mark the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, you believe it would be interesting to highlight local suffrage leaders and this parade through the means of living history interpretation.

What living history methods (1st person, 3rd person, 2nd person) could you use to create an engaging, educational interpretation of your local women's suffrage leaders and this 1912 demonstration?

Explain how this interpretation would take place. What are the interpreters doing and what role does the audience play (are they listening as a group, participating, passing through)?





Considerations

Who's the interpreter?
Authenticity
Research & Rehearsal



[30]

Who's the interpreter?

Interpreter	Needs		
	Pay	Costuming	Vetting
Volunteers		✓	
Staff (full-time, part-time, seasonal)		✓	
Actors	✓	✓	✓
Reenactors	✓		✓
Professional Interpreters	✓✓		



The biggest consideration when it comes to establishing living history interpretation on your site is choosing who will be doing the interpretation. As you plan this out, you'll want to consider needs like pay, costuming, and vetting. Vetting is especially important, especially in the case of reenactors, because you will want to ensure that the information conveyed is unbiased and accurate and the manner in which it is delivered is appropriate for your audience.

If we take a look at this chart...

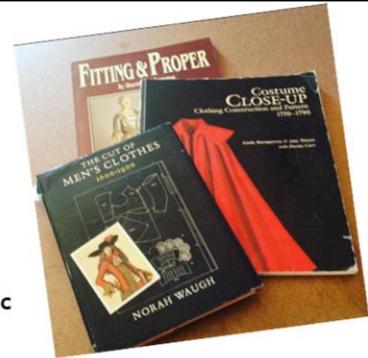
Authenticity

- Costuming & Material Culture
 - Purchasing clothing or material culture

Inauthentic
\$

Authentic
\$\$\$

- Identifying and working with suppliers
- Person
 - Representing the physical attributes of era and persona
- Demeanor & Language
 - Instruction in the proper word choice, language, decorum, and etiquette for the represented era



Your next consideration is authenticity in costuming and material culture, person, and demeanor and language. When procuring clothing and material culture, you'll need to come to some sort of organizational agreement regarding what you'll accept in terms of authenticity. When it comes to procuring goods, those that are more authentic will always be more expensive (but they are often better made.) Without getting on my soap box, I would always suggest going for the most authentic. It's so easy to tell cheap historical clothes...

You should also take into consideration if the persons representing historical characters have common physical attributes to those being represented.

Lastly, I'd mention that instructing in demeanor and language of your historical characters is a consideration that often gets overlooked. While this is strongly applicable to first person, it is also beneficial in 3rd and 2nd person scenarios. The choice of words, decorum, and etiquette are equally as important as the clothing and material culture in brining a historical era to life.

Research & Rehearsal

- Planning for the “show”
 - Research
 - Reading
 - Time
- Practice, Practice, Practice
 - Demonstration, skills, and narrative
 - Realism over Exaggeration, Empathy over Mockery
 - Basically, LH shouldn't look like a 3rd grader's school play... *to illustrate my point*



My final area of consideration, includes research and rehearsal. To execute any form of interpretation, time should be allowed for research in the planning process. In addition to specialized research, you'll want to do some reading up on the era and subject matter. Both of these will take time, which you should account for.

Before unveiling a newly developed demonstration, skill, or narrative to the public you should rehearse it to work out kinks and to plan for audience reaction. In planning and rehearsing you'll want to ensure that you are following a script based in reality, and not an overly exaggerated, clownish version of the past... Also, it is important to utilize one of the strongest reasons to do living history interpretation... creating empathy and understanding with the audience. It's a step in the wrong direction to discuss that the reason they didn't do something in the past was because they were “stupid” or mocking antiquated practices. You are there to illuminate why things happened in the past, not to demean it.

Basically, what I want to get across is that living history shouldn't look like a 3rd grader's school play... to illustrate my point....

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GT7UoqhhlWc&feature=youtu.be>

Activity 2: Work It Out

- Breaking into two groups, we are going to utilize Scenario 2 and Scenario 3 from Activity 1B. (Group 1 please join Group 2. Group 3 please join Group 4.)
- Incorporating the decisions made from the previous activity, answer the questions provided in the handout to further elaborate on this scenario's considerations.
- You have 5 minutes... tick tock!
- Next, we'll discuss your decisions...



Our last activity is to take the considerations we just discussed and apply those to 2 of our scenarios from our last group activity...

Start [37] End [47]

Sources

- Allison, David. *Living History: Effective Costumed Interpretation and Enactment at Museums and Historic Sites*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- Anderson, Jay. "Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums." In *Public History Readings*. Malabar: Krieger Publishing Company, 1992.
- Anderson, Jay. *Time Machines*. Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1984.
- Kelley, George. "First Person Interpretation. A "Nuts n' Bolts" Approach." In *The Columbia Rifles Research Compendium*, 2nd ed., Warren: Watchdog Quarterly, Inc., 2006.
- "My Clothes Are Hand Stitched, But No One Will Talk To Me." Fort Ticonderoga. April 25, 2016. <https://www.fortticonderoga.org/news/my-clothes-are-hand-stitched-but-no-one-will-talk-to-me/>
- Tilden, Freeman. *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1957.
- Weldon, Bill. "Living History: A Character Study." Colonial Williamsburg. Oct. 2, 2019. <https://www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume7/dec08/livinghistory.cfm>

(See Handout)



Before we get to any questions, I did want to mention my sources. I've provided a listing of resources for you including these on the screen for you via handout. Additionally, I've created another handout which might prove helpful for anyone considering utilizing first person, but it could also be used as a good outline for third person as well.



Questions?



Thank you!



Contact

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