

National Park Service Director's Order #6 Interpretation and Education

Interpretation and Education Reference Manual 6 (June 1, 2009) Chapter #8: Living History

Introduction

Living History is a general term encompassing a variety of interpretive techniques in which the interpreter uses period reproduction clothing and objects to interpret and present impressions of the people, events, and practices of the past. The interpreter attempts to impart knowledge and engage the interest and imagination of the visitor by simulating as accurately as possible historical appearances, manners, occupations, and attitudes. Living history programs are not an attempt to literally recreate the past. They are an interpretive technique designed to stimulate the visitor's intellectual and emotional involvement with the resource through the creation of well-documented, historically accurate impressions of historical events and people. The goal of living history interpretive programs is to facilitate visitor's understanding of the meanings and significance of the park.

The presence of the clothing and impressions alone does not make the program interpretive. Living history programs must also meet standards for the type (talk, guided activity, demonstration) of interpretive program.

Living History programs fall into two general categories:

1st Person (or Role-Playing) Living History Programs

In these programs, the interpreter assumes the role, character and appearance of either a particular or a generic historical figure. In encounters with visitors, the interpreter acts and speaks as though they were actually that character. This technique is particularly effective when trying to convey an understanding of the feelings, emotions, or attitudes of persons from the past. Interpreters conducting 1st person living history programs must project a historically accurate impression in terms of historical knowledge, physical appearance, clothing, objects used, speech patterns, attitudes, etc.

Note: These programs are referred to as 1st person living history programs because the interpreter uses first person personal pronouns such as "I" and "we" when speaking to the visitors; (e.g., "I was really pleased when I saw how much those soldiers enjoyed my cooking.")

3rd Person Living History Programs

In these programs, the interpreter uses period reproduction clothing and objects, but does not attempt to assume an historical persona. The interpreter retains their personality throughout the program and interacts with the visitor as they normally would.

Interpreters in 3rd person living history programs wear historically accurate reproduction clothing and strive to project a historically accurate appearance. Because they are not attempting

to portray actual persons from the past, their personal appearance need not exactly reflect the appearance of historical personages.

Note: These programs are referred to as 3rd person living history programs because the interpreter uses third person personal pronouns such as "they," "he" or "she" when presenting the interpretive message to the visitor; (e.g., "This is the path he took to the field every day.")

Guidelines for Living History Programs

Personal Services Interpretation Guidelines should be applied to living history programs as follows:

Relationship to Park Themes

Programs must illustrate and interpret one or more of the park themes as defined in the park's Comprehensive Interpretive Plan (CIP). Generic living history programs with no direct tie to the park's interpretive themes such as candle dipping demonstrations at a site where candles were not used are not appropriate. The park's CIP establishes the park's interpretive themes. Only those programs that contribute to the visitor's understanding of the park's interpretive themes should be offered.

Use of Appropriate Techniques

The choice of interpretive technique to be used in a program must be the result of a planning process based on the interpretive message to be conveyed and staff abilities. The results of this process should be documented in the program's ISP (Individual Service Plan) in the park's Comprehensive Interpretive Plan. The ISP should clearly describe why living history is the best technique to use to convey the desired interpretive message to the visitor.

There is sometimes a tendency when considering the use of living history to choose the interpretive technique first, and then to search for an interpretive theme that can be illustrated. The interpretive technique must always serve the interpretive message. Boosting visitation figures or gratifying the role-playing desires of park staff or volunteers are not appropriate reasons to choose this technique.

Staff Competencies

Individuals using living history techniques, whether NPS staff, volunteers, concessioners, paid performers, outside groups, etc., must be able to demonstrate the appropriate interpretive skills in order to effectively present living history programs. First person living history is a demanding technique that requires the interpreter to develop and use competencies such as character development and role-playing in addition to the competencies for interpretive talks or demonstrations identified in the Interpretive Development Program. The standards for these competencies and any additional ones which might be needed, such as craft or weapons skills, are determined by the park and must be clearly defined in each program's Individual Service Plan (ISP).

Research Base

Interpretive and educational programs will be based on current scholarship and research...

Management Policies, 7.5.4

Living history programs must have a reputable research base for the information conveyed in the program and for the character(s) to be portrayed, the clothing and objects to be used, and the validity of the overall impression. Parks must supply up to date, theme-related, site-specific research to non-NPS groups and individuals engaged in living history programs in the park and require that they incorporate this information into their programs. Presentations including imaginary characters or scenarios based on speculation are not acceptable. Imaginary characters and scenarios supported by reliable documentation are appropriate.

If an actual historical individual is to be portrayed in a 1st person program, the interpreter should employ that individual's actual documented words as much as possible. Interpreters should not usurp a known individual's character and identity to the point that they presume that they can "speak for" that character on a wide range of topics. Impersonation of known historical characters will be limited to programs where very strong documentation exists to show that the character being presented by the interpreter actually held the views being expressed by the impersonator.

Program Evaluation

All living history programs should be evaluated in a formal, written review at least annually. The ISP should serve as the basis for the evaluation. The goal of the evaluation is to determine whether the program is an effective interpretive program. Living history programs should be periodically audited to appraise the presenter's knowledge base, interpretive skills, and historical impression based on the standards described in the ISP. Programs with serious deficiencies in any of these areas should not be offered until the deficiencies have been corrected. Be careful not to limit the evaluation to a critique of the accuracy of the interpreter's appearance only. Although important, authenticity of clothing and appearance do not indicate the quality of the impression or how well the interpreter has presented the park's compelling stories and themes. An effective living history program must successfully combine accuracy of appearance and information with interpretive skills.

Interpretive Context

"Facts," examples, and anecdotes used in both 1st and 3rd person programs must not be used out of context to communicate personal or contemporary social and/or political beliefs. The reactions of historic people to past ideas and events must be presented within the context of the ideas and perceptions of their time.

Interpretive Personnel

The NPS must be scrupulously evenhanded in evaluating the competency and suitability of living history interpreters. The same written standards of required knowledge base, interpretation/communications skills, and accuracy of historical appearance must be applied with equal rigor to all groups and individuals. All potential living history interpreters must demonstrate that they possess competency in these areas before they may present programs to the public. This includes permanent NPS staff, seasonal staff, volunteers, "reenactment" groups, and paid performers.

NPS Employees

A park may not select employees on the basis of race, creed, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, national origin or disability. Interpreters must be hired on the basis of their knowledge of the park themes and resources and their interpretive skills.

When developing an interpretive program the interpretive message and the individual skills and knowledge of the available staff will determine which interpretive technique should be used in a program. A park manager cannot decide to hire only white males, for example, because the manager wants to present a living history program illustrating the life of the Confederate soldier. An individual's ability to effectively convey the interpretive message, in this case the life of a soldier, is the determining factor of one's qualifications for the job, not whether or not one looks like a Civil War soldier.

While it may sometimes be the preferred technique to use in conveying a particular message, living history is never the only effective technique available. In the example above, if the most qualified applicant happens to be a white male with good living history skills, it might be reasonable for him to present the message using living history techniques. If the most qualified applicant were a black female however, the park may not bypass her in order to hire a male because they want to present a living history impression of a Confederate Soldier. As a qualified interpreter with knowledge of the subject, she would be able to convey the desired message to the public just as effectively with a different living history impression, or by using techniques other than living history. If an interpreter is fully qualified in terms of knowledge base and interpretation skills, they are capable of presenting the desired interpretive message effectively using another technique.

Non-NPS Volunteers and Paid Performers

No individual or group may be precluded from consideration for a program based on their race, creed, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, national origin or disability.

It is entirely possible that someone whose everyday appearance does not match the required historical appearance standard for the program may be able to assume a completely convincing and historically accurate appearance through the use of period clothing, acting skill, etc.

When describing the living history impressions to be portrayed in the program's ISP or an agreement with a non-NPS group or individual, do not limit anyone's opportunity to audition for the program by using restrictive terms to describe eligible participants. Any qualifying restrictions should be related to the character being portrayed, not the person doing the portraying. For example, an agreement with a non-NPS group should call for 4 individuals to portray a middle-aged (45-55) Quaker woman of 1755, a 25-35 year old British army private of 1755, and two French Canadian coureurs de bois of any age, c. 1755. The agreement should not predetermine who can effectively portray the desired roles by calling for a middle-aged woman aged 45-55 to play a Quaker woman of 1755, a 25-35 year old man to portray British army private of 1755, and 2 men of any age to portray French-Canadian coureurs de bois of 1755. See Agreements below.

Resource Impact

The National Park Service was created to preserve the natural and cultural resources of the parks for this and future generations. Consumptive use of original objects or resources in interpretive demonstrations is inconsistent with that mandate. As stated in section 7.5.7 of *Management Policies*, no original NPS museum weapons will be used in demonstrations. The Regional Director must approve any consumptive use of other NPS museum items. (See section 4.2.7, Director's Orders 24) NPS employees should refrain from using personally owned original items in living history presentations.

Outside groups and individuals who wish to use non-NPS original weapons must submit their request in writing using the procedure found in the Museum Handbook. Park managers should carefully consider the use of non-NPS original items by volunteers in light of the Service's mission.

Safety

Living history programs must be safe for both presenter and visitor as well as historically accurate. If a program or demonstration cannot be presented in a thoroughly safe manner without seriously compromising its historical accuracy, it should not be done as a living history program. The same program should instead be presented using a more appropriate technique. It would be inappropriate to have a 1st person interpreter demonstrating the use of a buzz saw while wearing plastic safety goggles, and unsafe for them to conduct the demonstration without proper personal protective equipment. It would be entirely appropriate for an interpreter in NPS uniform to demonstrate the saw while wearing the necessary safety equipment. See Appendix for safety guidelines on the use of black powder during living history programs.

Program Flexibility

A park must be prepared to use techniques other than living history to convey the park message if the available staff or volunteers are unable to meet the standards established for the programs. Parks should not lower their standards in order to continue living history programs. Other interpretive techniques must then be used to convey the interpretive message.

Parks may not compromise its written standards or historical accuracy. If the program cannot be presented in a thoroughly professional manner and cannot meet the standards for historical accuracy and appearance as defined in the ISP, the program will not be conducted. In some cases, this will mean that the park must substitute a 3rd person program for a 1st person presentation. In others, it may mean that some interpreters present a program in period clothing while others give the same program in uniform. In certain instances it will mean that the park must refrain from using any living history techniques until qualified staff or volunteers are available. The ability to convey the interpretive message effectively accurately and honestly must guide management decisions in this regard.

No park should ever rely on only one method of personal services interpretation. No single method of interpretation, whether guided walks or living history, will work for all visitors. The park has a responsibility to design an overall park interpretive program that employs an appropriate mix of techniques and approaches in order to reach as many visitors as possible. Just as visitors have varying levels of knowledge and interest, so too do interpreters and volunteers possess varying degrees of skill and talent. Not every interpreter will have the qualifications to

employ living history techniques. The park must remain flexible in its programming and be prepared to offer the interpretive story through a variety of approaches dependant on the responses of the visitors and the skills of the available interpreters. Remember -- decide on interpretive themes first -- evaluate the skills of available staff and volunteers secondly -- and then decide which interpretive techniques can most effectively get those themes across to the visitor given the available interpretive talent.

Cost Effectiveness

Living history programs are powerful and effective interpretive techniques, but they are very expensive to conduct. Managers should be certain that they are an effective use of the park's interpretive dollar. Even if a particular living history program is very effective, if it only reaches 25 visitors a week and costs \$2.00 per visitor hour to conduct, it might be more appropriate for the park to present the same interpretive message to 150 visitors a week using another similarly effective technique that only requires \$.60 per visitor hour.

Planning

Each program, whether presented by park staff, volunteers, or a paid performer, will be described in a written Individual Service Plan (ISP). In addition to describing the program's relationship to the park themes, the program's objectives, and it's research base, ISPs for living history programs should describe standards for historical appearance, period clothing and objects to be used; degree of interaction with the visitor, and the characters to be portrayed. These ISPs should be detailed enough to serve as an evaluation tool to determine if the program is effective.

An interpreter's impression must meet the standard defined in the program's ISP. If it cannot, then the program should not be given using living history techniques. Another suitable interpretive approach must be used to convey the interpretive message.

Agreements

All non-NPS groups or individuals presenting living history programs in a park must sign a written agreement. This agreement may be an Agreement for Individual Voluntary Services (10-85), an Agreement for Sponsored Voluntary Services (10-86), a General Agreement, or a contract. This agreement will clearly describe the responsibilities of both the NPS and the interpreter(s) during their time in the park, and the standards for knowledge base, interpretive skills, and appearance that must be met. The agreement will also cover other appropriate issues as are required in DO-7, RM-7 and DO-20. See DO-7, RM-7, DO-20 and the NPS Agreements Handbook for additional information about agreements.

Although all interested parties must be given an opportunity to be considered for a program, this does not mean that everyone who wishes to present a living history program in the park should be allowed to do so. The responsibility for determining which programs will be offered, and which groups and individuals meet the ISP standards lies with the park manager. The park must not abdicate this responsibility by allowing outside groups to dictate the types of programs they will present. Providing interpretive services in a national park is an activity open only to those who can meet NPS program goals and standards as defined in the CIP and ISP.