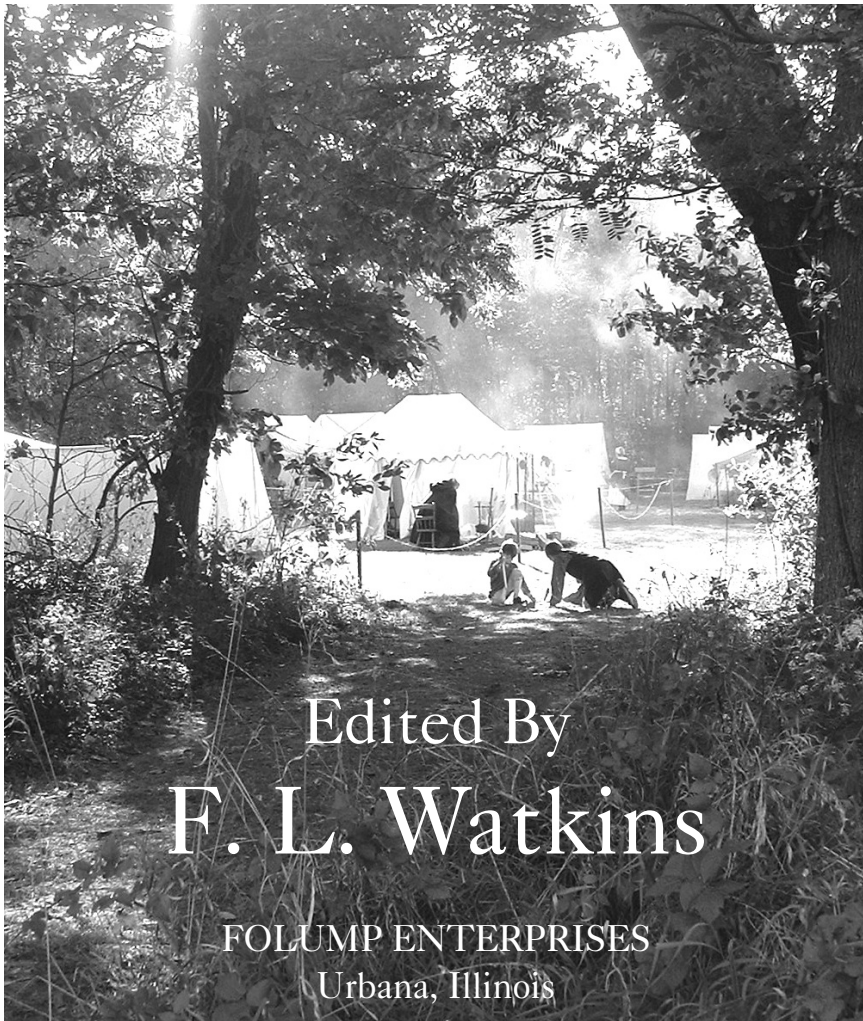


# *The Reenactor's Encyclopedia*

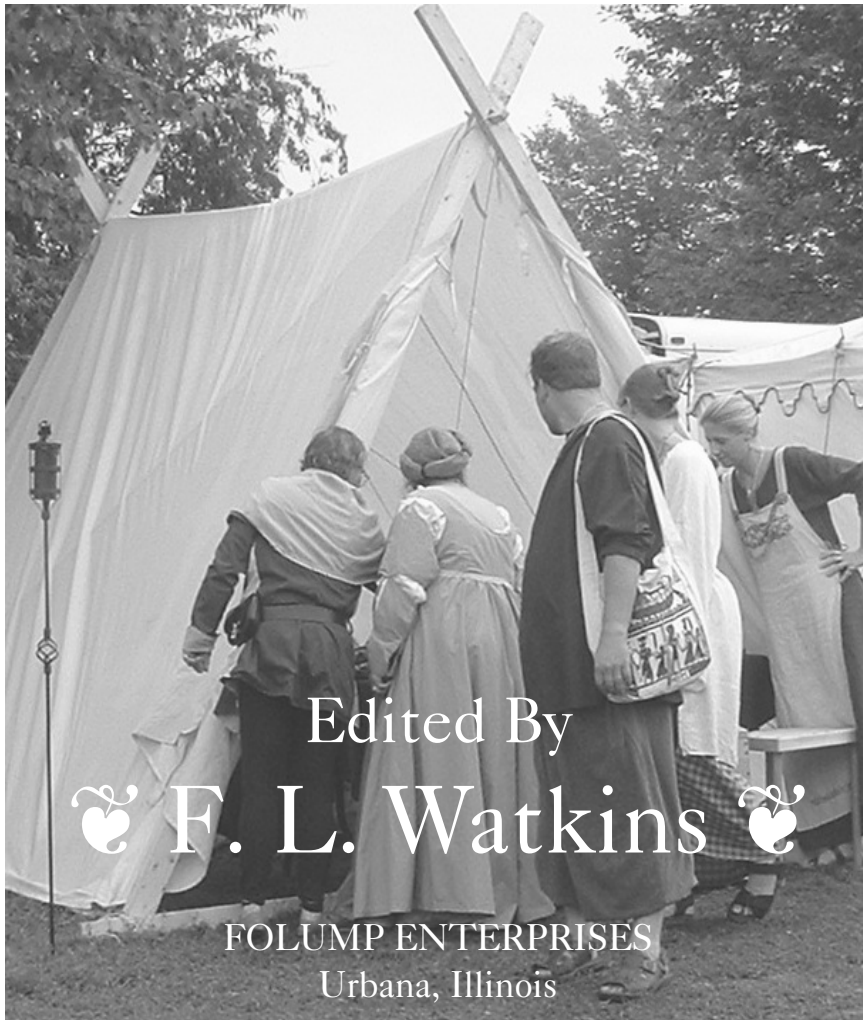
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Edited By  
**F. L. Watkins**

FOLUMP ENTERPRISES  
Urbana, Illinois

# The Reenactor's Encyclopedia



*Dedication,—*

Donlyn, Mike, Tom and George  
Cheers!

NOTE: If you are looking for fair, unbiased writing, look elsewhere. If you are looking for your point of view, you might well have to look elsewhere. The viewpoints expressed in this book are unabashedly and unashamedly those of the author.

With thanks to Carolyn Steele

## THE REENACTOR'S ENCYCLOPEDIA

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# INTRODUCTION

## It's a Kind of Magic

*You don't hate history, you hate the way it was taught to you in high school. But history is about people, and there is nothing more fascinating to people than other people, and living in a different time, in different circumstances—Stephen E. Ambrose, To America*

Modern living history and I were born about the same time, and we grew up together. The late fifties and the early sixties saw the birth of Civil War reenacting—it was the time of the Civil War Centennial, and the public was enchanted by the sham battles, even if they were only a few “soldiers” in gray and blue dress coats, firing b-b guns at each other. In a few years, renaissance pleasure fairs sought to re-create a vision of medieval and renaissance times, and many museums began to see the value of costumed interpreters. It was not a new phenomenon, since Colonial Williamsburg and several museums in Europe had long used costumed interpreters.

When I saw living history, I was enchanted. I had been transported to a different, magical world. When I later became involved with the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), it was only incidental. I would probably have been at home with the Civil War reenactors, the Revolutionary War reenactors or even the English Civil War reenactors. But I met the Scadians before any reenactor. And I was hooked.

Even today, the chance to walk in costume among others in costume and to see things as they were in the past is magical. Living history is an illusion of the past. Unlike the cinema and the theater, that illusion is one that you cannot only see and hear but also smell, touch and sometimes taste. I still feel a certain welling deep in the pit of my stomach when I walk in the illusion, even though the illusion is usually flawed. Living history is too often an enchantment that is flawed: Farby costumes, an obvious telephone wire, an overflying plane, a chance comment about a computer...*something*. But occasionally, the clothing is perfect, the site is pristine, the nose is filled with campfire smoke and the isolation from modern day is complete. The result is magical. For a second, H. G. Wells' time machine has worked, and I am in a different time. These brief, fleeting moments are the reasons for living history; at least, these moments are why living history continues to fascinate and to fulfill me. I continue to be in love with the very concept of living history.

This book has come about from a desire to continue, to maintain and to improve the hobby. Hopefully, it will answer a few questions that newcomers—or even some veteran reenactors—might have. And hopefully, it will provide people with something to think about. For it is only through taking none of the magic for granted that living history can be improved.

## ACCEPTANCE OF LIVING HISTORY

The very existence of living history is not without controversy within both academic and non-academic circles. Because reenacting in its various incarnations is not even today an integral part of contemporary culture, it attracts criticism from any number of sides. The mass media finds historical reenactment to be a source of humor; academics decry its accuracy; PETA complains about the use of leather and furs; the National Park Service and others remember the lack of safety standards in reenactment from a half a century ago. Even fellow reenactors often attack other reenactors for being too inauthentic, for being too authentic, for being enamored of a particular era or for having a differing interpretations of primary documentation.

Before one becomes involved in living history, one should be aware of the way that the media, academia and other spectators portray and perceives reenactors. This portrayal is going to affect the way that you will be treated and perceived by your fellow workers, by your friends and even by your family, both nuclear and extended. In a response to an article on “Unusual Hobbies,” a non-reenactor noted that “As an outsider, my impression was that they [living history] all shared the same basic features: Bitter infighting...[and] feuding....Strangely, I never felt moved to join.”<sup>1</sup>

Public reaction has been shaped, of course, by media perception. Over the past quarter century, portrayals of reenactors and reenactments have become so familiar and so ingrained in the culture that the popular media can make fun of it as easily as any other “unusual” hobby. Not including news accounts and documentaries such as the various History Channel efforts and PBS's *Patriots Day* (2004), reenactors have also been featured in historical motion pictures such as *Glory* (1989), *Tombstone* (1993) and *The Patriot* (2000). Film makers regularly use reenactors, their equipment and their knowledge to economize, and the reenactors are both lauded and condemned by persons in the film industry. A usual early view of reenactors is seen in the 1992 cartoon strip, *Walnut Cove* 19 July, 1992), which ran a sequence that made fun of the protagonist, who dresses like an ACW reenactor. A similar attitude is shown as late a decade later, with episodes of such popular television shows such as *South Park* (14 November, 1999) *Third Rock from the Sun* (8 May 2001) and *King of the Hill* (24 February 2002), and that take pains to portray reenactors in a less than favorable light. *Sweet Liberty* (1986), *Knightriders* (1981) and *The Battle for Shaker Heights* (2003) presents reenactors as lovable eccentrics. Thomas Dyja's *Meet John Trow* (2002) walks a thin line between showing reenactment as a balm for modern problems and as a pit of madness. Probably because of the close relation between the SCA and the science-fiction community, there have been quite a few science fiction books, such as Christopher Stasheff's *Escape Velocity* (1984) and Jerry Pournelle's *Exiles to Glory* (1993), that allude in

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1. <http://www.crookedtimber.org/archives/001688.html>, Belle Waring, “Unusual Hobbies,” accessed 4 May 2004.

passing to the SCA, and Mary Monica Pulver, herself a long-time participant in the SCA, wrote a series of mysteries—starting with *Murder at the War* (1987), set at the SCA’s “Pennsic War”—that featured a Scadian protagonist.

Many presentations treat reenactors as naive and immersed in fantasy, and the events themselves are regarded as eccentric and perhaps exotic. Reenactors are, in fact, often treated in the same way as mass media portrays members of other fringe subcultures such as comic book collectors, science-fiction fans and—interesting enough—academics. There might be an underlying sweetness in many of these representations, but there is also the persistent affirmation that reenacting is immature and playing games, something that reasonable folk will grow out of.

It is worth noting that media portrays an obsession with some other pursuits, such as sports, to be reasonable and not eccentric. It is uncertain in this case whether reality inspired or was inspired by this interpretation. Karen Johnson, a longtime participant in SCA, notes that living history is

*unsatisfactory to my family because the hobby impinges, as they see it, on family time. We often arrive late or leave early because we’ve made SCA-related plans. They feel shorted and resent it....we’re talking about folks who practically venerate the Browns, and adore the Indians. The idea is that because [sports] tickets are come across so rarely, one can, in good conscience, skip a family event.*<sup>2</sup>

Public acceptance and non-acceptance of participation in living history varies considerably, from hostility (“This hobby of yours is a waste of time, you need to grow up and stop playing games of ‘let’s pretend’ ”<sup>3</sup>) to benign amusement and interest (“Why do people do this? I can see the appeal, to an extent.”<sup>4</sup>) to outright endorsement (“I strongly encourage anyone interested in...history to seek out a living history experience.”<sup>5</sup>).

The matter of academic acceptance is just as divided. Although Jay Anderson, who wrote *Time Machines*—the seminal academic overview on all aspects of living history—notes that living history is “one of our generation’s contributions to the field of history (and ultimately to society),”<sup>6</sup> and Dan Carlsson, the chief archaeologist for Gotland University’s Frojel Excavation, has noted that “But it would be misleading to think that the accuracy and the level of authenticity amongst these groups or persons is low, just depending on the fact that they are laymen.”<sup>7</sup>

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2. *Ibid.*

3. Karen Johnson correspondence, 6 May 2004.

4. <http://www.crookedtimber.org/archives/001688.html>, Belle Waring, “Unusual Hobbies,” accessed 4 May 2004.

5. <http://historymedren.about.com/library/weekly/aa110397.htm>, Melissa Snell, “The Middle Ages in Our Century,” accessed 26 November 2003.

6. Jay Anderson, *Living History Sourcebook*, p. 446.

7. [http://www.frojel.com/\\_index.html](http://www.frojel.com/_index.html), Dan Carlsson, “Reconstructing Our Past,” accessed 6 May 2004.

This is countered by the views of other academics. David Glassberg has questioned the treatise of *Time Machines*, and David Lowenthal wondered whether living history was “inflicting modern aesthetics, tastes, and comfort on it.”<sup>8</sup> Amateur military reenacting has been called morbid and misleading, turning history into popular entertainment, and Linda Levstik, noting in 1982 the limitations and drawbacks in living history programs (many that have been remedied in the years since), wrote that “The gap between what ‘living history’ claims for itself and what it delivers, especially in its educative role, is enormous.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet, despite these limitations, interpretations and perceptions, living history is increasing both in popularity and legitimacy. More and more, living history is learning from past mistakes and overcoming past limitations. More and more, academics and non-academic are becoming more accepting and tolerant of living history, finding virtue even in limited living history with low overall accuracy standards. In 1985, Jay Anderson noted that living history was the hobby or the future and prophesied that it would double in a decade. But in 1995, “If the proliferation of reenactor periodicals, vendors of reproduction clothing and equipment, and computer forums that have appeared over the past decade are evidence of a trend numbers have more than doubled.”<sup>10</sup> The trend has continued ever since.

Living history is most certainly not part of the mainstream, but it appears to be on its way.

## AGE OF REENACTORS

There are reenactors who are literally babes in arms, while there are others who as old as seventy or eighty. All are welcome. Just as some activities were, in the past, restricted to those of a certain age, so some reenacting activities are today inappropriate for some ages. Some activities have been designed specifically for younger reenactors, while others are restricted to persons over a certain age. Sometimes, an umbrella or an event sponsor imposes the restriction. Occasionally, a unit or other group within an umbrella will make more restrictive requirements. Sometimes it is the family rules of the parent of a young reenactor.

Generally, when someone below the age of 18 participates, some kind of parental involvement and supervision is also required, although a guardian may be appointed in many cases. In such cases, written parental permission should be given for legal reasons. This should include parental permission for medical care in case the child is injured.

Persons below 21 should not be given alcohol, of course, and there are other modern age-restricted matters which must be kept in mind when younger reenactors

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8. Stacy F. Roth, *Past Into Present*, p. 23.

9. Linda S. Levstik, “Living History—Isn’t,” *History News* 37:5: 1982.

10. Roth, 11.

participate.

See also **Children** and **Teens**.

## AMENITIES & FEES

In many societies that are hired by a sponsoring organization to provide an activity at a larger event, the sponsor is often expected to provide certain perks, generally called "Amenities." These are generally foods and other supplies, as well as sanitary facilities, but they sometimes include chits good for buying supplies from area stores. These amenities are in addition to the fees that the sponsors must pay to secure the contract for the society's services, which is generally a set fee.

Some societies, particularly those who do events for themselves, often charge fees from their own members. This is often in addition to membership fees. This is especially prevalent for events that do not feature a strong umbrella.

## ARTS

The term "Arts" might be used to describe any activity that is not specifically a martial endeavor. Therefore, armoring and gun-making are arts; archery and military drill are not.

The importance of the arts for many living history programs can be immediately discerned. The term encompasses much of what was commonly done by people in the past. Living-history sites might be predominantly concerned with arts and only peripherally concerned with military aspects of life (militias, for example, or the occupation of the settlement by military forces during an external conflict). However, by the time you start talking about living-history sites and societies oriented in war and conflict—perhaps the bulk of living history societies—many persons consider the part of arts endeavors to be minimal if not negligible. Spectators and reenactors alike are often concerned more with this most dramatic and enticing aspects of living history, although this is very short sighted. Ignoring arts and their influence upon historical life can lead to a very incorrect interpretation of the past.

For a long time, many primitive arts seemed to be dying. They had been passed on from one generation to the next, and the chain was being broken. Especially since the 1960s<sup>11</sup> though, men have attempted to revive forgotten or dying crafts. In many instances, they have been successful, and you can find books filled with artisans, endeavors and how-to manuals. There are even television shows dedicated to the rediscovery of these arts: Not merely *The Woodwright's Shop*, but *Conquest* and other shows on various cable networks.

Unless the demonstration of an art is integral to the presentation of an artistic endeavor, the use of period or modern technology might be important to the artisan,

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11. Ironically, many of these arts were not associated with living history in any real manner, even though this was the time of the rise and public acceptance of living history.

but the end result is of most importance. It is up to the individual reenactors to determine whether the value of an artifact is altered by the method of its construction.

## AUTHENTICITY & ACCURACY

Properly speaking, almost no living history is concerned with authenticity. With certain exceptions, artifacts from the period—any period—are not and should not be used in the rough-and-tumble world of living history. There have been exceptions. An American Civil War reenactor once noted that authentic muskets often cost less than accurate replicas (though this is no longer the case).<sup>12</sup> Even today, there are certain objects—usually larger, more sturdy things, such as Roy Underhill's period tools—are available in such numbers and at such a cost that it is not feasible to make duplicates. Other items—such as World War II armored vehicles—are so expensive that demand for replicas will never make replicas feasible either.

However, for the most part, reenactors are not dealing with authentic items. They are dealing with accurate replicas. Therefore, the terms "authentic" and "authenticity" are confusing and should be replaced by "accurate" and "accuracy."

Accuracy can, at times, be confusing, and the person who preaches absolute accuracy must realize that historical accuracy is based upon a good many factors. If your make-up is Elizabethan without the poisonous lead or arsenic, is it accurate? If you've made a twelfth-century bench using power tools, is it accurate? If you hand-sewed a houpelon, but used polyester, is it accurate? There's not a single reenactor who will agree on all these points. In the end, you have to set up your personal set of standards. Hopefully, if you belong to an society that defines "authenticity regs," their standards will mirror your own. But if you are truly sincere, you will stick to these personal guidelines. Even if these standards are too difficult to achieve, you should still constantly attempt to attain them.

As an example, if someone comes to me inquiring about the accuracy of something, these are the standards I use:

- Whether the object looks like some other known historical object.
- Whether the object is used with other objects from a particular period.
- Whether the object is made out of appropriate materials

That's it. It could be manufactured using modern methods, or it could be done in an historically accurate manner. It could be shoddy, or it could be well made. It could be inspired by someone else's notes, or it could be extensively self-researched. Only the end result matters. Fantasy costumes would be unacceptable. A Viking camp using a World War II-era camp stove would be unacceptable. A hand-stitched tunic using bright, shiny polyester would be unacceptable (not that a polyester in

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12. Will Dennis, *Springing to the Call: How to Get Started in Civil War Reenacting*, p.2.

subdued colors that looks and behaves like natural fabric is acceptable).

Like so much else, accuracy—and the perception of it—is on a continuum, and we offer the following scale. It is inspired by Dr. Kinsey’s continuum, and it is hoped that this will help clarify points in discussion, as well as inspire personal thought and discussion. Note that as with Kinsey’s scale, the extremes are rare. Gradients are more often encountered, and a reenactor may be found at different points on the continuum at different times, or even with different subjects. Therefore, a person might be 3.5 in terms of clothing accuracy, 2.0 in terms of camping materials and 1.5 in terms of period impression.



### Accidental Authenticity

There is little if any regard for authenticity; what you wear and use is simply different enough from what is normally used—be it a simple tunic, a fantasy loincloth, an out-of-period suit or even an unusual assemblage of modern clothes—that there can be no confusion.

### Nominal Authenticity

The things worn and used might be accurate for period ideals, but research is sporadic, limited and often misunderstood or misdirected; research is not used as a final determiner.

### Convenient Authenticity

Research must be conveniently accessed. Not finding an example—or even finding a counter-example—will not necessarily be sufficient to discourage an item’s use. You use materials that are accurate when you can afford them or when they are readily available, but you have no reservations about using such things as a modern tent because of expense. Retro research is a big facet of this view.

### Moderate Authenticity

You will wear something that is not documented as being period if it seems reasonably authentic. You use materials common for the period, even if there is no record that they were used in quite the manner you use them.

### Rigid Authenticity

Only materials documented—at least twice—as being used in period for exactly that purpose is used for that purpose. No exceptions. When you wear, use or display an object, you can point to a period archetype.

Because living history attracts people whose views of accuracy are so differing, it is

not merely impossible to make a blanket statement as to what degree of accuracy is required for a reenactor, but it is largely unnecessary. There are so many societies, with so vast a range of accuracy standards, that nearly anyone can find a society with which he feels comfortable. And if he cannot, he should keep in mind that he can always make his personal accuracy standards higher and harder than those of others around him.<sup>13</sup> Lead, in this case, by example.

## BLADED WEAPONS

Blades—swords, knives, axes, spears and so forth—are less dangerous than firearms, but not by much. You must respect any sort of bladed weapon, especially if it is sharpened.

Make certain that nearby people know when it is unsheathed. When handing a blade to someone else, do it hilt first. Do not touch a blade with your bare hand (not just a matter of safety, since your skin’s oils may damage the blade). When using the blade, as for whittling, never pull the blade toward you. If you are using the blade for live steel combat,<sup>14</sup> make certain that edges are dull or rebated. Even sheathed, a sword can be dangerous and can still trip, strike and get in the way of not merely yourself but of others nearby. When walking, sitting or dancing, make certain that you know where the sheathed blade is going so as to minimize the inconvenience and danger to others nearby.

For that matter, make certain that you are familiar with—and obey—any rules for live-steel combat in your group. If anything must be choreographed, make certain that you know the choreography. Never assume that you may amend rules because of your abilities or acquaintance with your weapon. Live-steel combat is, by its very nature, more dangerous than sham battles with gunpowder alone. Do not make it even more dangerous!

See also **Gunpowder** and **Safety Standards**.

## CHILDREN

There are many unpalatable elements in history. Yet living history is widely considered a family activity. Living history therefore often has to walk a thin line between a fair representation, a misleading interpretation and alienation of children and parents. No one said it was going to be easy!

It goes without saying that children lived in every historical era and were involved in almost every historical milieu. Even hardcore military reenactors will admit that many battles, especially near towns, involved children (and women and non-combatants as well). To exclude them from living history can be a disservice to the

13. We shall not speak of those persons who find the standards too high and exacting.

14. Some groups decry the use of the term “live steel” when describing their combat and prefer the use of the terms “rebated steel” or “blunt steel.”

impression that living history should be trying to create.

At its root, the question of introducing children into living history must be posed to each parent. Living history does not and should not present a safe, sterile, Disney version of history. A parent who wants to include children should realize that the child is going to see and hear things that might be consider inappropriate. The parents should talk to the children and make certain that the children understand that such activities are not socially acceptable today. Only when the parents are certain that their children can cope and when the parents take the responsible for exposing their children to these situations should the parents incorporate their children into living history. History is not and cannot be rated in the way that much of the media is rated. It is always going to incorporate things that might be deemed worthy of a parental advisory.

Parents who incorporate their children into living history must acknowledge that living history is not being slanted toward them and their children. They bear the same responsibilities as any other reenactor for creating an illusion of historical accuracy. Children should wear historical clothing and should participate in appropriate activities. Video games and televisions ought to be kept at home or kept on the periphery. Accurate games and toys are readily available. Their use is good for living history and—ultimately—for the child's education.

Living history can be very educational for children, and period clothes—for any period—are readily available. The event or society should not be considered a baby sitter in and of itself. If a parent wants to include children in a living-history event, it is incumbent on the parent to research, create and promote period activities that will interest and involve the children.

It goes without saying that children must be supervised until they reach an age where they can consistently be trusted not to disrupt other activities or to endanger themselves. Unfortunately, some six year olds are less disruptive than some thirteen year olds. Only parents can accurately determine the maturity of a child. However, just as a blanket admonition against child participation is facetious, so a parent should not be offended or indignant about complaints if the child does not turn out to be quite as mature as the parent expected.

If a child cannot be supervised (this does no mean by parents alone but also by other responsible participants or by paid attendants) or cannot be trusted to behave in a mature way, a parent should consider leaving them at home. If parental involvement in living history without the children is a hardship, parents should be expected to regulate their own participation.

See also **Age of Reenactors** and **Teens**.

## CHOICE OF AN ERA

Where once there was a handful of different eras to reenact—mainly the fur trade (buckskinners), American Civil War and medieval—there is today an abundance. Virtually every era has its adherents, who think that the clothing and the culture

are better than all others. As reenactors learned more about an era and tried to find new adventures, more eras opened up. ACW reenactors were no longer as entranced by that era after the centennial and got caught up in the bicentennial. When interest in the Bicentennial flagged, some people filled in the gap by getting involved with F&I or, the other way, Napoleonic and War of 1812.

Nowadays, there are a wide variety of eras from which the potential reenactor can choose. Searching the Internet can lists many societies and sites in which a potential participant might be interested, or there are sites, such as <http://www.dominion-web.com/directory/TopRecreation/LivingHistory>, which list many eras, societies and sites. Find an society which covers an era in which you are interested and especially an era which, you believe, will sustain continued interest.

Determining this era can be done in almost infinite ways. Here are a few:

- You like the era itself
- You find recreating that era fun or challenging<sup>15</sup>
- You have friends already reenacting that era
- You like the clothing of that era.
- You are interested in an important historical event from that era
- You know of ancestors' activities during that era
- There is a strong local group for that era.
- That era is associated with a local landmark or historical site in which you are interested.

The list goes on and on. There are no right or wrong, better or worse eras. It is generally permissible to become involved in more than one era either permanently or temporarily, to help figure out which era you prefer.

Although living history is supposed to be fun, that doesn't mean that it isn't hard work or that it does not involve much research. If that much work does not seem fun, there are many other ways to investigate and experience history, from academia to popular fiction, from commercial entertainment to being a spectator. Don't be miserable. Once again we stress, the most important reasons to participate in living history is to have fun.

## CINEMA, THEATER & LIVING HISTORY

Although living history seeks to entertain, it does not necessarily follow that entertainment—film, theater and to a lesser extent novels—that portrays the past is therefore living history. Norman Cantor notes that “Films are not a substitute for history books, but films can evoke the ambience and sensibility, as well as the visual locus of [a time period], not only in a supplementary reinforcing and entertaining

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15. Or conversely, finding an era too challenging to be fun can be a good reason *not* to choose that era.

way, but sometimes in a distinctly perceptive and persuasive way.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, we maintain that even the most accurate of dramatic endeavors is not living history. It engages sight and hearing, but it does not engage all the senses. We are, in fact, reluctant to grant that even a film featuring reenactors at a living-history event is living history.

Watching a cinematic productive does not make you smell, taste or feel the past the way that a living-history event does. It does not engage you the way that the event does. Although reenactors may very well take part in the film, it is not living history, no matter how enjoyable or accurate it is. Commercial films are full of compromises, and their main purpose is to entertain. They will unapologetically mislead you, changing the facts either for dramatic effect or because it just does not follow an expected stereotype, and then not tell this to the audience. Go to the cinema, then, to be entertained for a couple of hours, not to learn.

Documentaries might feature shots of living history or celluloid reenactments that involve reenactors, but they are not living history either. At their most accurate, they are secondary sources. The way that they interpret the facts should not be taken at face value; even if they incorporate primary documentation—film clips, primarily, but also artifacts, music and photographs—documentaries should not be treated as primary documentation.

Theatrical productions are generally not living history as well, but they can be. If a theatrical troupe puts on a play that was written during a period and which is presented in a period manner, it is a reenactment in and of itself. It is then living history.

## COLORS

This is the ceremony at a military re-creation or reenactment where soldiers assemble, and the “colors”—the flags—are paraded before the men. The color ceremony is based upon period methods. Most importantly, they generally bracket the public hours, and after closing colors, reenactors are sometimes not required to maintain period discipline after evening colors.

## THE COMMON, THE UNCOMMON & THE FAVORED

The purpose of living history is to give spectators a sense of what they might have normally experienced in history. This means that, for the most part, that reenactors pursue and re-create the most common facets of their period. For example, an AWI soldier with a beard would be very uncommon (I’ve seen documentation for only one bearded soldier). AWI reenactors, especially if soldiers, are advised to be clean-shaven or, at best, have only beard stubble. A bearded AWI soldier could give

spectators the wrong idea about period soldiers and beards. Other eras have their own examples of what a person would probably have worn and how he probably would have appeared.

This is not to say that everyone in the time looked, dressed and acted the same. All cultures and all times probably had some variations, but that does not mean that these variations constitute a fair vision of that culture. Think of it this way. You have probably seen an eccentric today who, for one reason or another, walks down the middle of a busy street, dressed slovenly and talking to himself. However, if you were a reenactor of 3004 reenact the early twenty-first century, you probably would prefer not to portray that individual.

On the other hand, do not censor yourself if you find documentation for a presentation that runs counter to what is commonly assumed in the reenacting community. Finding such documentation can be both amusing and educational. However, be careful when and how you present such a presentation. Sometimes, finding primary documentation for an alternative presentation for an exception can be rewarding and educational, but the big problem is that the spectators may not realize, may not be told or may not ask if the presentation is common. Seeing a seventh-century Moor wearing a polka-dot tunic, the spectator may assume that *all* seventh-century Moors wore polka dots, while only a few instances are found. Especially when you are trying to give a legitimate view of the period when you’re only presenting dozens instead of thousands, several persons wearing uncommon clothing or using uncommon equipment is very, very misleading.

While this is especially a problem if you are doing a first-person impression for an audience, you should not assume that it is not problematical under other circumstances. A reenactor is at all times an educator and must keep that fact in mind. You might be primarily having fun, but you are going to be seen and regarded by others—both spectator and fellow participant—and you do not want to mislead them. When they look at you and at your kit, you want them to see a typical person from that time you reenact!

## CROSS-TIMING & TIMELINES

Many times, living-history is divided into insular and individual areas. A person playing AWI has little idea of what someone doing Vietnam or Roman is doing. Someone doing medieval might demand indignantly what AWI reenactment has to do with her. When an ACW reenactor writes an article about reenacting, it is often concerned only with Civil War reenacting as if no other era exists. Yet, all these disciplines are interconnected to a surprising degree. Situations experienced by one aspect of living history are often experienced by others as well, and a free exchange of ideas is often beneficial to everyone. Otherwise, each might end up reinventing the wheel.

Regular communication between various living-history groups can be fun and is not as difficult as many might think. With only minor modifications, kit for the

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16. Norman F. Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, p. 567.



fourteenth century can be used for people portraying the seventeenth century. In fact, technology did not change very much between the Middle Ages and the early nineteenth century. However, in the nineteenth century, technology changed much more quickly. While a reenactor playing in the fourteenth century might well use the same style of tent as he would use in the eighteenth, he could not do the same with a tent used in the AWI and the ACW. Details of clothing, uniforms, armor and weapons sometimes changed more often than many other physical aspects of the culture. A little research might well allow a reenactor to play easily in more than one era.

Timeline events—generally events open to the public in which different camps portray different eras of history—give reenactors from different eras the opportunity to mingle, to talk “shop” and to get to know people portraying another time. Interaction between different eras can help everyone to put things into perspective and see how the eras are similar and how they are different. They help expand the realm of living-history knowledge and are a great advantage to everyone.

## EDUCATION VS. ENTERTAINMENT

Some people have derided living history as being theater and nothing more than entertainment. They note that you can often obtain as much education in play, film or television series. This is usually untrue, but that is scarcely the point.

*“Entertainment,” by the way, does not automatically demean the presentation of history. While the word can conjure up a Hollywood revue, it also means “an activity that holds attention”—certainly a goal of good interpretation.<sup>17</sup>*

For years, educators have tried to make education entertaining. A student is more likely to learn when he is, at least, not bored by the educational process. Living history is imminently able to combine entertainment with education, and many people who were bored with scholastic history—dates, facts and figures most commonly—have admitted being taught by living history, even when they were initially unaware of any educational efforts.

## EXPENSE

Getting involved as a reenactor is expensive. There are no two ways around it. You are going to have to obtain historical clothing, as well as other items of your kit. Generally, that will include firearms or blades of some sort (and sometimes both). Even non-military reenactors and, often, women will have a weapon of some sort. Often, kit will include a tent, either modern or period (most living history events will have both a modern and an historical camp), bedding and other camping

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17. Roth, p. 122.

supplies. In addition, there are membership fees that are usually involved, the expense of getting to an event, the cost of food (unless it is provided), site fees (if charged) and so forth.

On the other hand, living history is not considerably more expensive than any other hobby. If you take up golf or skiing, for example, you will have to obtain special clothes, the necessary equipment, pay your way to a site and generally have to pay a site fee. While the expense is one consideration—some groups are much less expensive to belong to than another, and accuracy is generally expensive in and of it itself—don’t let this factor scare you away from living history. Living history—like almost any other hobby—has many other features that will make its expense a secondary consideration.

## FLAGS & SYMBOLS

Many historically valid symbols had far different meanings than they have today. A swastika was for many cultures a symbol of good luck, until it was adopted and perverted by Adolf Hitler. The Confederate battle flag has a racist connotation to many persons and has been adopted for that very reason by some white supremacist societies. The very term “militia” which was once used to describe an amateur volunteer military company, has become mired in a modern definition that brands militias as violent reactionary nutcases.

If you want to use such a controversial symbol—and let us hope it is not because you are a neo-Nazi or a White supremacist—then you must accept that you are going to get, at the very least, questions about its use. Sometimes, you can even get ignorant violence. You are going to have to explain the symbol’s presence. You will have to put it into period not contemporary perspective, and you should have an answer already prepared that you expect to give. Even when you try to avoid controversial subjects, you might find yourself unable both to avoid them and to present what you feel is a valid impression of the past. Some reenactors refer to this as “the shock of authenticity.”

In one sense, if you want to foster the illusion of another time, this breaks the illusion. It draws onlookers, almost kicking and screaming, back to modern sensibilities. On the other hand, if you want to educate the observers, it gives you an ideal opportunity to talk about the different perspective between “now” and “then.” Your approach to the matter will be dependent to a great deal upon your approach to living history.

## FOOD & COOKING

“Nothing evokes history better than bad food.” So says common wisdom, and it is correct if too simplistic and blunt. For some people, food is a very important part of the past, and the unfamiliar and very familiar foods of the past represent a prominent part of re-creating the past. Unusual tastes and presentations help to reinforce a feeling of being in a different time.

Cuisine changed radically in the seventeenth century, partially but not totally because of the availability of new foods from the Americas. Modern cuisine came about at that time. Earlier food and recipes might properly be considered ethnic food and an acquired taste.

Fortunately, most foods that were used in historical food preparation are still commonly available, although a cook would do well to study the use of and availability of foodstuffs in their periods. In addition, recipes (which sometimes must be expanded by persons familiar with historical cooking styles and methods) are readily available for foods at least as far back as ancient Rome.

Only a very accomplished historical cook, however, will take historical foodstuff and prepare it without the benefit of an historical recipe. The result might be exotic, but there is no guarantee that it is even remotely period!

Modern sanitation methods should be followed no matter how non-period. Modern preparation methods and, perhaps techniques, may also be used, but many cooks prefer to prepare period foods over period heat sources and in as period a manner as they can attain.

See also **Safety Standards**.

## FOUNDING A GROUP

Sometimes, there is no group available that reenacts what you personally want to reenact. You can make compromises or find a substitute, but you can also found a new group. The advantage of this is that this new group can be exactly what you want. The disadvantage is that, starting from scratch, there is far more work that you personally have to do. You will have to assume the responsibilities of leadership, you will have to do additional research, you will have to handle the bureaucratic details. Will it all be worth it? That is something that only you can tell.

Before you begin organizing a new group, you have to decide whether you should. There are plenty of good reasons to start a group. No group covers what you are interested in. There is no group nearby covering an era in which you are interested. The accuracy standards for an existing group are unsatisfactory for you. You want to re-create a unit that is not re-created elsewhere.

When you have chosen what you wish to re-create—an era, a specific unit in an era, etc.—you need to gather a few like-minded persons (if you haven't already). Determine necessary details at this time, including the accuracy standards and whether the group is going to sponsor private shows or public events. If you are trying to become a part of an umbrella society, make certain that everything you write is in accordance with its overall rules. Even if you are not trying to incorporate your group, write down a charter detailing the mission statement, the form of government, the accuracy standards and anything else that is important to you. Consider assembling a manual with this information, with sources and other advice, that be shared with current and potential members.

Choose a name, whether it is the name of the unit or something else. Although

it's even possible to have more than one name—for example, the First American is the Queen's Own Rangers—a single name should be used for advertising purposes, just to make things simple for non-members.

Determine what will be group property and how it will be paid for. Will you have a fee for any event for the public and how much will you charge? Will there be membership fees? Remember that you are going to need insurance, purchased either through an umbrella society or for your group specifically. Most sites nowadays will not even rent to a group without adequate liability insurance, but they don't really care how you pay for it.

Get a treasurer. An accountable and trustworthy treasurer.

Determine how big you want the group to become. There is such a thing as too much success. These already-established limitations will help you decide what kind of recruiting is desired. If you want or need additional members, consider where to advertise or to recruit.

Advertise. Whether you are trying to drum up new members, new business or both, letting folk know about you is only good sense. A good tool is a tri-fold handout which sums up your society and which can be handed out to people who are interested in joining the society, to people at events and to potential sponsors and clients. Publish a newsletter, either a hard copy (best for handing out to interested persons), email, web or a combination of all these. If possible, set up a web page. All these should be kept as simple and attractive as possible. These are not occasions for a member to show his expertise, but to present the group to the public!

Keep records! I cannot stress this too much. Maintain membership files. Do not have too many chiefs and not enough Indians. Do not enter this with the idea that you and your pals are going to have plenty of rank, awards and titles to go around.

Finally, know your stuff. Have a good kit but, what is more important, do not mislead new members. If you are asked something you do not know, admit your ignorance but then try to find the answer.

Good luck!

See also **Joining**.

## FURNITURE

What people from another time found comfortable might not be comfortable for modern man. It follows that accurate furniture and a reenactor's comfort are not necessarily the same. A serious reenactor tries to find the most accurate if not the most comfortable place to sit. Modern sports chairs definitely do not convey the sensations and the experience of the time. Many other chairs that are considered period and that are, indeed, primitive but sometimes not period, are accepted. This is furniture without historic archetypes, such as the chair formed by combining two boards in an X, but which have achieved the level of acceptability to at least part of the living-history community.

Period chairs and stools are not hard to find or to document. Do not try to retro-document your chairs. Do not try to hide or disguise non-period chairs; they will look like nothing more than a lawn chair with a blanket over it. Do not even bring bales of hay to sit on; the bales are probably not period. Even stumps or logs were probably used only in a limited way; studies show that persons of the past sat on the ground or, more difficult for modern man, squatted. Chairs and stools were primarily used by persons of wealth or of high rank.

If you have to use an inappropriate chair for health reasons, we do not want to discourage you. Too much. But research the furniture that is appropriate for your impression, and try to use those styles. Not only will this help your encampment or surroundings look more accurate, but the sensation will be more period as well.

See also **Modern Conveniences** and **Reenactorisms**.

## GENDER ISSUES IN REENACTING

Men's historical roles were, for the most part, not merely vaster than women's but more rewarding. Is it any wonder, then, that many women would prefer the role of a soldier on the field than the role of the lady cooking back in camp?

This fact seems no more relevant than a legless reenactor wishing for legs to some hardcore reenactors. They note that instances where women portray men are relatively few and vastly over-sampled in living history. They note that few females are realistic in male roles and note that many women dress in military drag but keep on their make-up.

It is difficult, though, to justify the exclusion of females simply because there are few historic examples. There is a long, varied and rich history of women in men's roles throughout history (and a smaller but still varied history of cross-dressing men, for example the infamous Mrs. Johnson in Custer's command). Many eras portrayed in living history were before physical examinations for the military, so there was no immediate way to determine gender. Some were discovered for various reasons (usually related to pregnancy, wounds or illness), but many were not discovered until far later (after death in a veterans' home). It is fair to suppose that there were far more females in uniform than we know.

On the other hand, one has to admit that the reason females were able to portray males so well was because they portrayed males. Female reenactors trying to assume masculine roles should keep this in mind. They should eschew female hairstyles, cosmetics, jewelry and effeminate gestures (ironically, effeminate gestures by a male is far less of a problem). If a female wants a male persona, she should make certain that her true gender is not recognizable at ten feet.

See also **Physical Appearance in Reenacting**

## GROUPS

There are several main types of living-history societies, and we would like to note

a few of them below:

### Umbrella Societies

Many eras of living history have large societies which coordinate the activities of affiliated, smaller societies. This is known as an umbrella organization, since it opens an umbrella over these units. In many cases, the smaller groups—often military units—are independent societies which existed prior to and outside the umbrella, although events sanctioned by the umbrella use the umbrella's rules.

### Branches

Although these generally have different names than their parent society, these are generally regional subdivisions of the umbrella society. These subdivisions may then have additional regional subdivision; there may be none at all, even in the society itself, so there are no branches per sé. For the most part, these subdivisions are not independent societies, although they maintain some autonomy.

### Units

These are generally subdivisions for military societies. Most often, they are re-created historical units, and they take their names from the units they wish to re-create. These are independent societies and are not generally regional. They generally re-create a certain and short term of historical existence—for example, the NAWTA, an AWI umbrella, demands that its member units re-create a month during the AWI. Members of the units might take the characters of actual historical members of the unit or be representational representatives of these members.

## GUNPOWDER

Always respect gunpowder, whether it is black powder, Pyrodex or smokeless powder. Some forms of gunpowder—e.g., black powder—is more volatile and dangerous, but no form of gunpowder is ever a toy! Anyone who wants to carry a firearm onto the field or to use it at a live shoot or just to carry a firearm should have undergone a firearms safety course. Historical arms are not necessarily the same as modern firearms. They might not have the same rate of fire. They might have different methods of ignition. But the basic principles of gun safety apply to all firearms. If you are unfamiliar with standard gun safety, consult a document such as Dixie Gun Works' Muzzleloading Cautions and Commandments:

1. Use only blackpowder or replica black powder in muzzleloaders.
2. Treat every gun as if it were loaded.
3. Be sure of your target before firing.
4. Be sure your gun is in firing condition before you pull the trigger.
5. Treat a misfire or failure to fire with extreme caution.
6. Make sure your gun is unloaded before you store it and store the gun, powder and caps separately.
7. Protect your eyes and ears while shooting.

8. *Never smoke while loading, shooting or handling black powder or replica black powder.*
9. *Never drink alcoholic beverages before or while shooting.*
10. *Use common sense at all times.*<sup>18</sup>

Persons using cannon are directed to *The Artilleryman Magazine's* "Safety Rules and Procedures for Shooting Muzzleloading Artillery."<sup>19</sup> Better yet enroll in a gun safety course sponsored by a group such as the NMLRA or the NRA. Even if you think you are familiar with gunpowder safety, it doesn't hurt to enroll or even to enroll again.

Do not aim your firearm at anyone else. Not even if you are using blanks. Not even if your firearm is—you believe—unloaded. During a battle scenario, aim above the opponents. During a live shoot, make certain that no one is on the field.

If you are going onto the field, make certain that you are firing blanks. Even so, do not assume, as Jon-Erik Hexum did, that blanks are harmless. Do not fire too near anyone else, and use flash guards on flintlocks to protect you and your neighbor from an errant spark.

If you are participating in a live shoot, do not carry a loaded firearm around. Load in the projectile only when you are on the shooting range, and make certain that there is a backdrop and that is no one behind the target.

When firing artillery, do not fire if anyone gets within fifty meters (this distance might differ from society to society). Once, during a cannon fire, there was a low-hanging tree branch in the cone of fire. By the end of the scenario, that branch was blasted and wilted; imagine what would have happened if it was a person or a living creature.

Even when the gunpowder is not being used, it can be dangerous. When storing loose gunpowder, keep it in a safe place in a secure container, away from fire and sparks. Powder boxes should be sturdy and secure, with safety chains and spark-resistant curtaining around the lid. Keeping it under lock and key is not too extreme, and keeping it in a restricted area is only logical. When using powder to make charges, loads and so forth, make certain that you have enough room. In addition to keeping it away from open or contained flames, make certain that the area is free of static electricity and other sparks. You should, of course, not smoke anywhere around any gunpowder.

See also **Bladed Weapons** and **Safety Standards**.

## HISTORICAL CLOTHING

The old adage says clothes make the man. This is certainly true when it comes to

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18. <http://www.dixiegunworks.com/faq.php>, Dixie Gun Works, "Frequently Asked Questions," accessed 3 March 2004.

19. You may send for the pamphlet free of charge from *The Artilleryman*, Monarch Hill Rd., RT #1, Box 36, Tunbridge, VT 05077.

living history. A reenactor is defined by his clothing. It indicates his era, his culture, sometimes even his social stature. "[O]ld time clothing and gear are helpful, no, necessary, to the real atmosphere of living history."<sup>20</sup> Although some people think that doing a period task in modern clothes is living history, I doubt it. To my mind, the presence of the period clothing is what separates living history from experimental archaeology. Experimental archaeology and living history may sometimes be the same, but that is not necessarily true.

In one sense, the historic clothing that a reenactor wears is a costume. It attempts to evoke another time. It is not fancy dress. What a reenactor wears is clothing. It should not feel as if it is anything but clothing. The clothing may look right, but it is not necessarily correctly constructed, of the proper fabric, or even comfortable to wear."<sup>21</sup>

The difference between a good piece of historical clothing and a poor piece is that you can look at a good piece and tell what era and culture it exemplifies. Sometimes, you can even point out the source—most often, a period illustration or an existing sample. It is not essential that your historic clothing be elaborate as long as it is accurate for the period, ethnic group, social class and geographic region it attempts to portray. New members are often given a lot of leniency, but "Get yourself a very simple set of clothing so you won't stand out like a sore thumb."<sup>22</sup>

There is only one way that you can acquire good historic clothing: Research. We will assume that you already know the era, the culture and the social class that you seek to re-create. You need to do research for your historic clothing and to do it before you decide on anything much about it. It is far easier to build something—in this case, sew clothing—according to research rather than to attempt to retro-research and to justify something that is already done.

There are five qualities which a reenactor finds to be essential when he gathers together historic clothing:

### It is constructed in the same manner as an archetype

The archetype might be a written description, a period pattern (not a modern rendition unless it has been rigorously documented), an existing artifact, a photograph or a period illustration (sketches or paintings should be taken with a pinch of salt, since they might be stylized, drawn by someone ignorant of proper tailoring or done years after the period it portrays).

### It is made out of accurate fibers

Artificial fabrics are inappropriate for most of history. Instead, such natural fabrics as wool, fur, leather, linen, silk and cotton are much more appropriate. The clothing should be constructed of a fabric that was known and common for

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20. Pat Tearney, "The Clothing," *The Book of Buckskinning*, p. 98.

21. Cathy Johnson, *Who Was I? Creating a Living History Persona*, p. 12.

22. J. W. "Doc" Carlson, "How to Get Started," *The Book of Buckskinning*, p. 28.

its time and culture. Also keep in mind that some fabrics were expensive, and others were common. Either could denote a social class. You do not want to construct a fifteenth-century peasant tunic from silk; you would not want to construct a houppelon from too little or too coarse a fabric.

### **It is made of accurate colors.**

Certain colors have always been easier to achieve because of how dyes were made in a period. Surprising and bright colors were possible, but they were rare, expensive and often transient. Common clothes would not be dyed in this manner. The cost of the dyes as well as the class of the clothing must be kept in mind, and implausible combinations should be avoided.

### **It fits in a period manner**

Historic clothing which is designed according to modern tastes is often incorrect. Modern sensibilities might urge you to cut clothing so that it feels more familiar; that is not accurate, though.

### **It is manufactured in a period style.**

This means that sewing is done according to period styles. Note that machine stitching differs from hand stitching and should be restricted to seams that do not show. There are stitches and styles that were not used in certain periods. Construction methods should be researched as rigorously as are patterns and other details of construction.

The more that these qualities are true, the closer the clothing is to being accurate. Do not forget that you will also need accessories. Period accessories can often make—or ruin—historical clothing.

Do not base the clothing on commonly known “facts” without also finding actual researched facts that support the same interpretation. If you can document something—an accessory or a piece of clothing—that contradicts commonly supposed stereotypes, do not shy away from it. Look upon it as an opportunity to educate. You should be ready to share your research and to prove that what seems to be farby is not farby at all.

You will never complete a set of clothing. You will always be changing it—improving it—in some way as your knowledge increases.

A reenactor can influence the illusion of another time in few ways. His clothing is the one important thing over which he has total control. So far as it is practical, he should make certain that his clothing is as accurate as possible.

See also **The Illusion of Another Time.**

## **HISTORY OF LIVING HISTORY**

Living history is probably as close to a time machine as we will ever see. The concept of living history—if not that exact phrase—goes far back into history. Even

farther back than when people actually conceived of older civilizations as being different from their own, we had people who tried to re-create the past. After that difference was realized, recreating the past continued to be important.

In the eighteenth century and early nineteenth, medieval culture—so long disparaged—was rediscovered. Perhaps as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, efforts were made to recreate the culture of a simpler time. From the mid-eighteenth century on, there were attempts at medieval reenactments, pageants and tournaments, done according to contemporary sensibilities. In all aspects of life, including popular fiction and concepts of honor and chivalry, “The Gothic Revival and the Romantic Movement affected people all over the world.”<sup>23</sup> The Eglinton Tournament—the ill-fated “Last Tournament”—became a symbolic venture and was later credited as the progenitor of the SCA, even though it was neither the first nor the last nor even the most successful of the re-created tournaments of the two centuries.

During the Victorian era, in Europe, open-air museums began to feature scenarios of the past. These were mostly static and actually re-creations in these sites were generally paltry and limited to such areas as folk dancing. In America, the United States Centennial saw the re-creation of AWI uniforms and medieval tournaments. During this time, Victorian interpretation of the past created versions of the past that look eccentric today, but it was all done in great solemnity and created incorrect perceptions—horned Viking helmets, for example—that have never been entirely eliminated despite great efforts in the time since.

In the early twentieth century, open-air historic sites such as Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg inaugurated the use of costumed interpreters in the States. Following on their success, other sites, such as Old Sturbridge Village and Plimouth Plantation, were developed and started to use costumed interpreters. These living-history villages and sites gradually built toward more accurate interpretations, and there are many such sites that are in existence today.

The living-history hobby, which had started as medieval recreation, began to develop more in the first third of the twentieth century. Although we will concentrate on developments in the United States, Europe and other areas were not inactive, and they formed groups that reenacted a number of eras, including medieval and both English and American Civil Wars.

In the States, black powder shooters formed clubs which later became the National Muzzle-Loading Rifle Association (NMLRA). As time went on, members of the NMLRA divided according to three main concerns. In the first, there were the shooters, who did not care about historic clothing. In the second, there were the buckskinners, who combined a romantic version of frontiersmen with an interest in black-powder shooting. And in the third, there were the historians whose main

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23. Ian Anstruther, *The Knight and the Umbrella: An Account of the Eglinton Tournament 1839*, p. xiii

interest was in the ACW. These latter folk, in the 1950s, began to wear ACW uniforms (or rough equivalents) and formed the North–South Skirmish Society. Their numbers grew during the ACW centennial, and ACW reenacting has remained popular ever since.

In the early 1960s, as ACW reenacting grew, California saw the first renaissance fairs, in which medieval reenacting was revived. In 1966, members of science-fiction fandom in the San Francisco Bay area formed the SCA, a medievalist group that soon spread across the United States and into the rest of the world and was mistakenly seen in many areas as a reenactment society.

As the ACW Centennial ended, many Civil War reenactors looked for other avenues of reenacting. The United States Bicentennial was approaching, and many ACW reenactors now reenacted the AWI.

At the close of the Bicentennial, many other eras were opened to living history, from the Seven Years War (French and Indian War in the States) to II. Later, both Vietnam War and Korean War reenactors also organized. Non-military living-history also became more popular, and reenactors played in cultures not related to war or military endeavors. Many reenactors played in more than one era, and craftsmen, artists and collectors of historical militaria have also long been members of the community.

Nowadays, living history is a familiar sight and no more an object of jest than many other aspects of modern life. Reenactors are regularly seen in books, comics, television and music. Despite reservations by academia and other historians, “The use of living history as an enjoyable recreational activity that is also a learning experience will continue....Folks who are doing living history know why they are doing it. It provides comradeship, travel, a channel for intellectual curiosity, family fun, camping out and opportunity to play-act...”<sup>24</sup> It is no longer seen as quite the unusual pastime it once was, and reenactors can now participate in almost any era of history and in any way they would like. Perhaps it is not “the” hobby for the future, as some reenactors claim, but it is a vital, entertaining and educational diversion for people from all walks of life.

## HOBBY, LIFESTYLE OR PROFESSION

For the most part, living history is a hobby. Reenactors are doing it out of a love of reenacting. Some hardcore reenactors, however, feel that the term “hobby” is somehow demeaning. They get indignant when someone insults their hobby by referring to it as a hobby. For them, living history is something more. It becomes an almost sacred pursuit, a chance to educate better than our educational system does, a lifestyle. But the thing is that however you use semantics, no matter how you try

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24. Jay Anderson, “Living history,” *A Living History Reader Volume One: Museums*, p. 10.

to make it sound more than what it is, living history is at its heart a hobby.

There are exceptions. A few reenactors are professionals. Anyone who gets paid for his reenacting is a professional. Therefore, professional reenactors are the employees at living-history sites. They are the reenactors who interpret at lectures in schools. They are the vendors. But even those people are doing it because of a love of living history. Most could probably make more money working at the local McDonalds.

## THE ILLUSION OF ANOTHER TIME

If living history is a fantasy—and it is—then the modern world is its worst enemy. Conversely, without the modern world, much of living history loses its purpose.

There are so few ways that a reenactor can influence the verisimilitude of a living-event site. He cannot get rid of power lines, and he cannot banish telephone poles. Even if he can set the site away from passing automobiles, he cannot influence the sound of the autos. And then there is the matter of overflying airliners. Certainly he cannot influence spectators and what they say or wear. Sometimes, he cannot even affect what is worn, said or done by his fellow reenactors. So it becomes just that much more important that he do what he can to improve his own impression.

He can ignore the disturbing reminders of the modern world. He can take pains not to draw attention to anachronistic sights or sounds; in fact, as far as he is able, he should try to draw attention away from that. If a fellow reenactor or a spectator starts to talk about a modern matter unrelated to the re-creation, he can avoid the conversation or change the subject. The most persistent enemy is, in fact, a reenactor’s knowledge. He cannot help thinking about the modern age, making comparisons and suppositions that are based on modern culture and ingrained knowledge. This can be the most difficult modern intrusion to guard against, but there are many other shortcomings that a reenactor can successfully battle.

Above all else, he can make certain that his clothing and his kit are accurate and do not distract from the illusion. By not using his cell phone or his pager, he avoids one more link to the present. He helps in one more way to construct his fantasy world.

The modern world intrudes often, and it intrudes ruthlessly. But the reenactor still tries to find a site that is pristine and pure, one that summons up the illusion of another time. That illusion may be fleeting, and that illusion may not be easily attained, and that illusion may be fragile, but for most reenactors, that illusion is the reason that they dress in wool in 90-degree heat and do all the other silly things that are living history.

See also **Historic Clothing**.

## IMPRESSION

An impression is the historical character that an individual portrays in living history. In the words of Stacy Roth, an impression is “the envelope in which the

interpretive message is delivered.”<sup>25</sup> An impression might be an historical character (a documentary impression) if the group in which you reenact allows or requires that, or it may be a totally fictitious character (representative impression) that might have lived in the past. Any serious reenactor will have at least a rudimentary impression, which will help determine that person’s clothing, hairstyle and behavior. A good impression is multi-faceted and three-dimensional, encompassing all aspects of life. “It’s much easier to identify with a specific person...than to understand history on the basis of generalities. There is no generic human; never has been.”<sup>26</sup> Obviously, a reenactor will start out with a more generic impression, but he will have every opportunity to flesh that out with specifics.

Separating your impression from your modern identity, or your impression’s interests from your own can sometimes be difficult. In fact, the closer your impression is to your modern identity, the easier it may be to create a comfortable, well-rounded impression. On the other hand, some reenactors have found that their impressions helped to shape their modern identities.

This is all a personal choice, and we will not deal with it here. Instead, we will talk about finding the details and information that you need to create a well-rounded impression. Before you do this, you have to have the basic impression, which consists of three pieces of information:

### A Name

You need to have a period-correct name. This might be the name of a real historical person or a name that has been created from scratch. If the latter, make certain that it obeys all the naming practices of your chosen time and culture.

### A Time Period

This is the era in which your impression operates. It can be as specific as you want or as broad as a century. You have to decide whether your impression’s “present” moves with you as you age (that is, that you have a fixed birth date for your impression) or you have a fixed present (that is, that you have a movable birth date, so that you are different ages in the “present”). For example, the NorthWest Territory Alliance asks that all members portray a specific month during the AWI and adjust impression histories accordingly.

### A Culture

By this, we mean a nationality or an ethnicity. This was very important in many historic areas to determine your clothing, your faith and much more.

This is the basic, generic human, and it is only a point at which to begin. After you have chosen these basics, you can flesh out your impression by finding answers to the following questions:

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25. Roth, p. 57.

26. Cathy Johnson, *Living History: Drawing on the Past*, p. vii.

- What are your family and other relationships?
- What is your social status (which determines many things, including educational level)
- What are your religious views, your political beliefs and other, associated perspectives?<sup>27</sup>
- What is your occupation?
- What are your hobbies and pastimes?

And so on.

A number of books are available that list questions to help draft an impression. However, answering these questions must be more than play-acting or improvisational theater. The answers must be based in actual historical facts and research. You should approach these answers the same way you would any other question in living history, which means that you will research the answers. Hopefully, you will find this research—and all other research you do in living history—to be fun and rewarding.

Take notes, of course, listing down sources and stories. Some people encourage you to find two or three primary sources for anything in your impression. When you have determined your rudimentary impression, read primary and secondary accounts of the appropriate era, noting what would be appropriate or likely. Concentrate on social history and not general history; it will tell you more. Your impression will hopefully not exist in a vacuum. The decisions you make should be based on historical precedence. This means that although there is creativity involved in your creation of an impression, there are also limits: This is disciplined creativity. Think of it like assembling a blank jigsaw puzzle; you can draw anything you like on it, but it must be assembled correctly.

For all intents and purposes, we are talking about practical archaeology. Knowing who your king or president or other leader was and what wars were fought are only tangential to your impression (even if you have a military impression). However, knowing what your impression would eat, what your impression would wear and so forth will be more intimately involved with your impression.

Assembling your research and determining how you want to present it is not the end of the project, but it is an essential part of the process. Here are a few suggestions of things that you can do with your impression:

- Write down facts and pertinent information in a notebook, perhaps with footnotes and a bibliography
- Use it to guide you in picking articles of your kit.
- Write a biography
- Write a novel or short story (but be certain it does not read like cheap pulp fantasy)

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27. Called a “worldview” at Plimoth Plantation; see Roth, p. 57.

- Write poetry, a saga, an epic romance, a diary, etc.
- Do first-person impressions

Do not assume that having a third-person impression means that a detailed impression is useless. We have already noted how it is helpful. On the other hand, having a well-rounded impression will certainly help in first-person portrayals.

In first-person impressions, you will pretend that you actually live in period. You must respond the way that a person of the period would react, and you obviously do not know anything after that date. Do not force persons into this unless it is obvious or expected, as when living-history sites required their costumed interpreters to use first-person. If you do not wish to play the game, do not expect to get the person to break his character. Especially, do not take this as a challenge to force that person to break his character.

Although you may have an exhaustive biography for your impression, it should only be a guide for first person portrayals. Do not expect to approach a person and reel off your life story. If someone today were to do that, you would probably consider him a boor, and this is no different. The biography is only a tool.

Persona play-acting is an acquired taste for many people. Many people never develop a liking for it, and others find it difficult to do. If you are interested in devoting the time and effort needed to make the process work, you will, no doubt, find persons willing to play along with you. But do not expect everyone to play, and do not be offended when a disinterested person refuses to participate. And be certain to balance the theater with education. Anything you portray should be based in historical facts and knowledge, although the actor should be creative and innovative within those limitations.

In many cases, an impression—no matter how detailed or how rough—will not be completed. Neither is history. Facts do not change, but they are sometimes added to or taken from. Interpretations of them certainly do change. Do not assume that the process of assembling everything into a continuous impression history is finished. Always be ready to incorporate new knowledge, or even to change your old interpretation entirely!

Obviously, a detailed impression is not in most cases required, although it helps you narrow down your field of interest. Whether a person creates and assumes an impression, then, depends on that person. As Cathy Johnson notes in her handbook on creating an impression, “Not everyone who is interested in living history wants to create a persona...especially when just starting out...But the real truth, for most of us, is that having a persona is an opportunity to play, no matters how serious about it we may be.”<sup>28</sup>

Keep in mind that you are not creating a history of the period; you are creating the history of someone who lived in that period. If the idea of doing research and working up a viable persona and history does not appeal to you, obviously you

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28. Cathy Johnson, *Who Was I? Creating a Living History Persona*, p. 1.

should not be pressured into doing so unless your group requires it (and you agreed to that requirement before joining). However, if the idea does appeal to you, the creation of a persona is likely to enhance the pleasure of your participation in living history.

Only you can decide whether to create a more detailed impression. All that is certain, in fact, is that your impression—and the creation of it—should be both useful and fun. If it is not, then it is worthless!

## INSURANCE & WAIVERS

We live in a litigious society, and living history is not a safe pursuit. It incorporates fire, the outdoors, edged and gunpowder weapons and much else that is hard to manage or to be made perfectly safe. For that reason, many sites are reluctant to have living history events take place in areas under their jurisdiction. It is nearly impossible to rent or to contract with a site if you have no insurance. Even sites with their own insurance, often want the security that the group's own insurance brings.

We are speaking of liability insurance here, but personal insurance should also be a concern. Some policies provide personal insurance, but most liability policies do not. Individual reenactors are well advised to seek personal coverage to, from and at living-history events.

Insurance for living history may come from an umbrella society, or from a coordinating organization. If it does not, then see about finding coverage for your unit, either on a continuing or on a one-event basis. Most insurance firms do not like to do this, and premiums can be high even when you find a company willing to provide this insurance coverage. But it is highly recommended. Even if your group has no major assets that can attract lawsuits, insurance will protect the individual officers and other members, whose assets may be at risk.

A few living-history groups ask that all participants—especially combatants and soldiers—sign a waiver of their rights. In the United States, though, you cannot sign away your rights. The waiver does not preclude your right to sue. It does however, indicate that you were told that the activity might be dangerous and that you are taking responsibility for playing and that you will hold only yourself responsible if something goes wrong. In effect, the waiver has taken away your right to win the suit.

## INTERNET & THE WEB

The Internet has been a boon for historians. There is a vast store of information available, even if one must be more careful than ever before in sifting through this information. There are many web pages that can offer resources for reenactors, and it is easy to find useful information—often primary documentation, since concerted efforts have been made to publish such files on the World Wide Web. You can find things as diverse as Icelandic sagas, colonial American newspapers and medieval



English tax rolls on the Internet! For information on using the web for research, you might consult *Web Research: Selecting, Evaluating, and Citing* by Susan B. Barnes or *The Research Paper and the World Wide Web (2nd Edition)* by Dawn Rodrigues and Raymond J. Rodrigues. A nice guide to the web on the web is the Web Research Guide, which can be accessed from the Classzone home page, <http://www.classzone.com>.

It should come as no surprise that you can also easily find information on living history on the Web. Most societies—both large and small—will have a web page with information on their societies. These can usually be found by a simple search on the name of the society, if you know it, or on such key phrases as REENACTING or LIVING+HISTORY and the era in which you are interested.

These pages often have many features of interest to reenactors. These might be vocabularies, photos of reenactors and reenactments or essays on various facets of reenacting. Do not hesitate to access a site which publishes an essay on living history, even if the era does not interest you. Many of the articles are universal if only a few changes are made in terminology. Take full advantage of the opportunities that are given you, and do not hesitate to benefit from the experiences and thoughts of another.

The web is never still. Sites often blink in and out of existence or change addresses. When you find a site of great value, it is often not enough to bookmark it or to share the address with friends. Copy the page immediately, so that you can access the information later if it becomes unreachable. As with any other research, make certain that you can follow the paper (electron?) trail. Mark down the URL (some people say that you should note the date you accessed the web page as well), and note the authors. Publication on the web is much the same as any other publication. You can make copies for your own use, but do not widely or commercially distribute the page without the permission of the author.

Because web pages change so frequently, we have not made an extensive listing of links (except in Appendix C). However, a simple search on Google or another service will often bring you an overwhelming number of useful sites.

## JOINING

The reasons for getting involved in living history differ from person to person. Erik Cohen identified five reasons that spectators come to living-history sites and events, and they are easily adaptable to the reenactors themselves:

- Recreational: seek amusement and physical satisfaction*
- Diversionary: want escape for daily boredom*
- Experiential: appreciated others' lifestyles*
- Experimental: desire to sample alternative lifestyles...*
- Existential: search for intense inner meaning<sup>29</sup>*

29. Roth, p. 78.

To this we might add Educational: desire to learn.

For the most part, joining a living-history society is not difficult. Most groups are looking for new members; and those that are not will usually be happy to direct you toward a group that is. If you cannot find a group which is active in your area and which interests you, you can always start your own. Most umbrella societies and even individual units will be happy to help and guide you. Mike Arnt has written an article concerning the procedure involved when starting a new living-history group. Although the essay is oriented more toward people wanting to start a military unit, Amt has a lot of good advice for any reenactor, such as “When just getting started, it is probably a good idea to get your own kit more or less complete before recruiting for new members.”<sup>30</sup>

When joining an already existing society, potential members should ask a few questions. Most societies will be glad to answer these questions.

### **Are there other members in the area?**

Local members can provide support and guidance. They can facilitate your introduction into the era and into living history.

### **Does the society cover a preferred era?**

If you have an especial interest in the American Civil War, it makes little sense to become involved in a medievalist society.

### **Does the society feature the activities or pursuits preferred?**

If you want to do battlefield re-creation, you probably won't have many opportunities to do this at a living-history farm.

### **How accurate must you be?**

What are the authenticity regulations and how closely are they enforced? What amount of leniency is shown to newer members who haven't gotten their kit entirely ready?

### **Who are the members?**

This society will usually become a second family, and you will want to feel comfortable. Yes, this question indicates bias, but it also expresses reality.

### **Is there an open membership?**

Are new members recruited from off the street and from among anyone who expresses a sincere interest, or are members invited in some manner to join? Sometimes, the society does both. Many times, membership in an umbrella society is open to anyone, but units under that umbrella are more selective about membership.

### **What are the requirements of membership?**

30. [http://www.reenactor.net/main\\_htmls/start\\_lhgroup.html](http://www.reenactor.net/main_htmls/start_lhgroup.html), Mike Amt, “Advice on Starting a Living History Group.” (Nd), accessed 15 October, 2003.

This not only includes what kind of period clothing you need to have. It also refers to what is expected of you in many other ways. How often must you show up to events? In what activities are you expected to participate? Will you be expected to help cook or clean in the camp? What weapons, tents and other equipment will you be expected to provide for yourself?

### **How much does membership cost?**

Most societies have a fee for membership, and many make these fees mandatory for participation. Often, units under an umbrella will have an additional fee for unit membership that is separate from that for membership in the umbrella society.

### **How much does it cost to join the society?**

Many societies will lend you clothing and other kit when you first join, but you are expected to provide your own as soon as possible. What do you need to buy, and how much will all this cost? Ask about clothing, accessories, weapons, tents and so forth. Find out the best places to buy the items, whether previously used material can be found and the average and maximum money you might be expected to spend.

### **How much time is expected to be devoted to the hobby?**

This is not merely how many events you are expected to attend as a member of the society. Find out about work parties, meetings and other activities which will require your attendance.

### **When and where are the events held?**

Most societies have a fairly restricted area where they participate, but sometimes inordinate travel is required.

## **LANGUAGE**

From a combination of primary documentation and experimental archaeology, a reenactor can tell how things looked, how things smelled, how things felt and how things tasted. All these can be duplicated. However, as far as language is concerned, a reenactor will not know for certain how the language sounded in history. An historical accent can be extrapolated from a number of sources but until recorded sound was available in the late nineteenth century, it can only be guessed.

The farther back you go into history, the less certain that guesswork will be. The evolution of accents probably did not change much from 1860 until sound recordings began. However, accents used in the 1770s remain controversial: reconstructing eighteenth-century accents is “an intricate, time-consuming, and expensive task....Character interpreters ‘can sound like eighteenth-century Virginians with confidence...but they need a very good ear and must be students of

language.’”<sup>31</sup> By the time you are dealing with medieval accents, the supposition is great indeed. Even well-researched accents—such as those demanded by interpreters at certain living-history sites—remain supposition. When reenactors attempt to simulate accents, they are generally woefully inept. Their research is inadequate and their execution is often ludicrous. Few people today can master the conjugations of Middle English or even distinguish between *thee* and *thou*. If you are uncomfortable with such affectations of speech, it will show. If you are truly unfamiliar with the forms, you will appear foolish if not unintelligible.

If more than one culture is represented in the living-history society—as opposed to timelines, where different eras are set up in camps next to each other—you would be trapped in a veritable Tower of Babel if the language is done correctly. Since the linguistic abilities of most people are less than adequate, the results sound like a poor *Mighty Thor* comic book. These efforts are sometimes referred to derisively as “talking forsoothly.”

Stick to more formal speech and avoid contemporary slang. Sprinkle in colloquial period phrases, which can be readily supplied by such works as *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* by Francis Grose. But don’t worry that you have to take a course in Chaucerian English (or worse, Old Norse) before anyone will speak to you at an event. Period language and accents are seldom required for participation except at special sites and only after much training. Concentrate more upon those features of your reenactment that can be definitely proven.

## **LIQUOR & DRUGS**

Why yes, alcohol was commonly consumed in most historical periods. In fact, in some eras, alcohol was consumed instead of water. Therefore, there are plenty of historical reasons for the consumption of alcohol in living history. Period forms of alcohol is often still available and can be found with some research. However, this is one of those cases when historical accuracy is not of primary importance. Reenactors tend to drink simply because they like drinking. There are no more alcoholics involved in living history than there are in the general population, and most drinking is done in a controlled, public manner.

A “wet” site is a site that allows alcohol. A “damp” site is one that allows beer and wine but not hard liquor. A “discretely” wet or damp site means that any alcohol should be kept to a minimum and not displayed in public, especially in original containers. When a site is “dry,” it means exactly that: Do not attempt to bring in any alcohol (often the regulations restricting the use of a site will forbid alcohol, and the discovery of the use of any alcohol by the attending members can jeopardize the future use of the site).

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31. James Breig, “Speaking with Colonial Inflections,” *Colonial Williamsburg*, vol. XXV, Number 3, Autumn 2003, p. 81.

When alcohol is allowed, keep three things in mind:

1. Do not overindulge;
2. Do not drink and then drive (or do anything else dangerous, such as fight, throw axes or shoot guns); and
3. If you are underage, do not drink at all.

The last thing that living history needs is for the police to associate reenacting with the illegal consumption and the abuse of alcohol.

Well, almost the last thing. Illegal drugs are strictly forbidden at living-history events. Do not bring them to events (can you imagine the news stories if a routine police search uncovered some illegal drugs stashed amidst some swords and muskets?). This concern is multiplied if you are crossing an international border.

Do not use drugs at an event. If you do and are discovered, at the least you will be asked to refrain; at the worst, you will be removed from the event or arrested. If you see someone using drugs at an event, ask him to stop; if he refuses, see your commander.

## LIVING HISTORY

The unfortunate title of Hillary Clinton's recent autobiography might confuse people, but it is no worse than what other people mean when they say "living history." On the one hand, people often have a rather restricted definition of living history and require that it meet certain standards of accuracy, but as the term has achieved a sort of mainstream acceptance, the term has been used and misused in a wide variety of situations. A mainstream magazine might refer to a man who studies old newspapers as being involved in living history.

As a term, "living history" was coined by Paul Becker in 1931. In an address to the American Historical Society, he first used the term to describe vibrant history. Over the next few decades, the meaning of the term changed into the meaning it now carries. In the 1960s, the term "living history" was used by the National Park Service in the sense we now use the term. This practice culminated in the Park Service's 1970 publication, *Keep It Alive! Tips on Living History Demonstration* by William Kay. In 1984, the term was used in the first academic treatment of the phenomenon, Jay Anderson's *Time Machines: the World of Living History*. Though now dated, Anderson's volume remains one of the best treatments of the subject.

For the purposes of this volume, we will be using Anderson's definition: "Living history can be defined as an attempt by people to simulate life in another time, Generally, the other time is the past."<sup>32</sup> Usually, one or more participants dress in period clothing and perform a period activity. Living history is based in historic reality and is not merely a costume party. Clothing, activities, artifacts and culture are based upon actual historical archetypes.

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32. Jay Anderson, "Living History," *A Living History Reader Volume One: Museums*, p. 3.

Living history, despite being used for many years by museums and recreational societies, is slow to attain acceptance from the academic world. A major problem is that some groups have attempted to re-create, for example, the cultures of Norman's Gor, Tolkien's Middle Earth and Howard's Hyperborean Age. Even though this might accurately re-create cultures from the novels, these cultures are not historical. The groups, while commonly perceived as living history, are not. Their re-creations are not living history. Many LARPs attempt to re-create fantastic situations—such as vampires or werewolves—and, despite attempts to re-create a specific historical era, are not living history.

Some groups, such as Dagorhir and Darkon, are minimally historic but primarily fantasy-oriented. Dagorhir brags on its web page that it is "dark age Europe meets Tolkien's Middle Earth in a safe & action-packed national live action battle game,"<sup>33</sup> while Darkon notes that it is "a fully integrated...Magic Combat System."<sup>34</sup> Often, the society deals with little beyond the combat. Foam-fighting groups such as these and others are not living history, even though they appear to be closely related to the casual observer.

Many commercial endeavors—for example, renaissance fairs and theme restaurants such as Medieval Times—are not fantasy oriented, even though they rely on this caveat when patrons complain about internal accuracy. These are, for the most part, only marginally living history and are more akin to entertainment or drama for the spectators.

## MEDIA ATTENTION

When it comes to media attention, there is a great dichotomy in living history. On the one hand, publicity is always appreciated and desired. On the other hand, many journalists seem to take delight in making reenactors look foolish and eccentric. Be especially care when talking to a representative of the press, and make certain that you do not do anything farby in public while in costume. This includes smoking, eating modern foods off Styrofoam plates or behaving in an inappropriate manner. Sad to say, these are situations that some journalists lie in wait to capture! Try to keep more colorful members from talking to the press, unless you like inappropriate quotes. It is [probably best for a unit or event to have a special media liaison so that incorrect representations are not made!

## MEDICAL CONCERNS

A reenactor should not allow a concern for accuracy to overshadow medical necessity. A reenactor should treat dental problems, even if the end result is not accurate; the reenactor should take appropriate medicine and avoid situations that imperil his comfort and, at times, his life.

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33. <http://www.dagorhir.com/>, "Dagorhir Home Page," accessed 15 October, 2003..

34. <http://www.darkon.org/whtsdrkn.html>, "Darkon Home Page," accessed 15 October, 2003..

Make certain that all necessary medicines are brought to the event, even if these medicines are not period. Disguising modern prescription containers as period apothecary containers is in order if you—or your society or your sponsors—are truly concerned about the presence of a non-period container in the period camp.

When it comes to more obvious prosthetics, including but not limited to wheelchairs and orthopedic shoes, the most hardcore would demand that only period prosthetics be used. More moderate reenactors insist that modern prosthetics be used to get into camp and then afterwards hidden. A few assert that period accuracy should be subordinate to medical concerns. If this matter does relate to you, do not hesitate to ask the policies of the society you want to join.

## MEMBERSHIP

We are speaking here of card-carrying, dues-paying official membership in a group. It is valid to speak of a participant as a member, though this can be confusing and misleading, and we will not use that definition in this article.

Every society incurs costs that are quite different from those of the individual member. Whether these are for the renting of sites and property, for insurance, for publications, for amenities or for bureaucratic needs, they are a constant. Costs should be supported by members as well as from external contributions or fees. Buckskinning rendezvous, renaissance fairs and similar events have proven that external financing is available. For the most part, though, such fees do not pay all the group's operating expenses, and it is short-sighted to think they will unless very stringent plans are made. Membership fees should take this into account, but subsidization of group activities is not the only reason to have membership.

A second and quite separate reason is that it proves a person's dedication to the group. Anyone can show up to an event, pay a fee, put on a costume and take part in activities. Without constant support, either financial or physical, the society's continuing efforts may be seriously jeopardized or even impossible. It is above all else, courteous to become a member and to help support the group continuously and appreciably.

Many societies, therefore, make membership mandatory. Without paid membership, a person may not participate or may only participate for a few times to see whether membership is desirable.

## MILITARY EMPHASIS

In one sense, it should be expected that there is such an emphasis on military endeavors in living history. For much of history, history itself has been defined by conflict. And it is far more glamorous to shoot a musket or to swing a sword than to spin flax into linen.

There have been some people who view these military units as glorifying war. While there are certainly reenactors for whom this is true, it would be unfair to say that anyone who does a military impression is a militarist any more than someone who reads military history is necessarily a militarist. They might also want to do

military history because of its importance in history in general, because the uniforms are attractive, because drilling together provides a focus for their living-history career or because they like playing military games. In fact, many reenactors were never even members of the armed forces. In this instance, especially since so many military reenactors reenact the AWI and the ACW, it is fair to state that many persons consider their re-creation as honoring ancestors, patriots and military heroes, both renowned and not.

At the same time, it is even less true that military living history groups are paramilitary or militia societies, even though they might use "militia" in their names. Just as Nazi reenactors take special pains to prove that they are not "real" Nazis, so should militias seek to dissociate themselves from the paramilitary, racist militias of today.

## MODERN CONVENIENCES

This is often summed up in the phrase, "If they'da had it, they'da used it." It is a cheap way out of doing research or submitting to an uncomfortable historical regimen. By modern conveniences, we are referring to such things as sleeping bags, modern tents, coolers, camp chairs, cell phones and any other physical intrusions into the illusion created by living history.

It is one thing to have modern conveniences with you in camp and quite another to openly display and use them. If you bring a cooler and keep it hidden in your tent, there is nothing for anyone to yell at you about (unless your unit is very hardcore and forbids such niceties). However, if the cooler can be seen through the doors of your tent, or if it can be seen beneath the walls, then you should obviously find another way to hide the cooler or to discard it.

There are even modern conveniences, such as coolers, which are built into boxes and which look accurate. If the appearance of a box can be justified, then a desire to look inside it cannot. There is no reason why it cannot be hidden in plain sight!

If the group to which you belong allows modern conveniences or some modern conveniences, the choice of using these conveniences must be your own. You have to decide how it will affect your play in living history. If your goal is to be as realistic as possible and to seek knowledge from the experience, then you simply have to bite the bullet. It is a matter of, as many hardcore reenactors note, of doing something right if you are going to do it all. Some might be able to justify some or many compromises, but justification is not the same thing as being right.

See also **Furniture**.

## MUSIC

Music has probably existed in all cultures in all times from as far back as the stone age, although musical notation has existed only since the Middle Ages, and recorded music of course dates from the latter part of the nineteenth century. A pipe was discovered with remains of a Neanderthal man, and horns, drums and other instruments have been displayed in cave paintings, Bible stories and Egyptian

hieroglyphs. Singing—even if we can only guess at how it sounded—is also ancient. The term “music” comes from the Greek term “muse,” and Euterpe, the “Giver of Pleasure,” was the muse of music. The first study of music as an art came in the fifth century BCE.

Music—in all its forms, from martial to ecclesiastical, from instrumental to vocal—helps to define and to delineate an era. Much of what we think of as historical is based on the music and other sounds of an era. A medieval song played on medieval musical instruments help conjure up the image of the Middle Ages, and music from many other eras—the baroque, for example, or the swing era—does the same for those eras. The inappropriate use of out-of-period music can be so jarring and anachronistic that it can be amusing—see, for example, the rock music used in *A Knight's Tale*.

It should be evident then that music can be an integral part of living history. Whether it is a drummer or a piper—or a full dance band—it can help the illusion that the reenactors have sought to present and to maintain. Whether it is used to help define that illusion, or it is used as a pastime, the use of music—preferably live, using period scores and period instruments, but also pre-recorded if it can be presented in a naturalistic manner—should be neither avoided nor minimized. It is certainly a cheaper way to imply the past than period architecture or even much furniture.

Closely related to music is dance, although dance was not known in all cultures. Do not assume that many folk dances—or for that matter, folk music or even folk costume—are actually historically accurate or appropriate for your particular period. As with everything else in living history, only research and documentation can tell you whether the dance was an historical original or a folk dance from the twentieth century.

## PERIOD

As a term, “period” generally refers to an historical period. It has the added definition of an item, artifact or behavior that is representative of a certain period. For example, a flintlock “Brown Bess” (the standard British military musket) is period for the eighteenth century; it is not period for fourteenth century reenactors.

It should be readily seen that by itself, the adjective “period” is mainly worthless. A person who decries something as “not period” or claims that something is “period” has credibility only when the term is placed in relationship to a specific historical period.

## PETS

Just as all eras included the presence of children, so did all eras include animals, although they were often working animals rather than what we would today regard as pets. If you want to bring a pet to a living-history event you should make certain of three things.

The first is that the pet is of a period breed.

The second is that the event’s site welcomes animals (or at least that sort of animal you want to bring)

The third is that the pet will be well behaved. Not well behaved most of the time; any pet which cannot behave 100 percent of the time, under all circumstances, should not be brought to any living-history event. The owner is responsible for the pet’s actions, period. Under normal circumstances, it is best if pets remain at home.

Helper animals are, of course, different matters entirely. A helper animal is not, strictly speaking, a pet and not governed by the restrictions noted above. They are, almost without exception, not merely allowed but encouraged. They have also, almost without exception, trained to behave properly.

## PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

There seems to be a universal and natural desire to make a permanent record of an event as exciting and colorful as a living-history event. Not merely spectators but participants fall victim to this desire. Unfortunately, photography and video are totally inaccurate for most reenactors. One has to accept this.

Developed in the 1820s, photography was not widespread until the second third of the nineteenth century. Photographic knowledge was hard to come by, and the cameras were large, delicate and unwieldy. Exposures were long. While cameras were common by the time of the ACW, they were generally used in camps to take photographs of the soldiers or on battlefields after the battle. For the most part, photographs of actual battle were uncommon until technology had become more versatile by the end of the nineteenth century.

Accurate historic photography can and has been demonstrated at living-history events, but it is generally as difficult as if was during the nineteenth century, and few photographers have either the skill, the knowledge, the equipment or the patience to do it accurately.

Photography, however, may be generally accepted—especially without a distracting flash—at many living-history events even among participants. If you are a participant, make certain that photography is permissible. Be certain of any restrictions, and remain as inconspicuous as possible. Keep your camera disguised—perhaps hidden in a haversack—and remember that you might very well be ruining the scene both for other participants and for any spectators. If possible, do not shoot photographs during public hours, if there are any, and position yourself away from the action being photographed. It is best to disguise the camera, perhaps in a piece of accurate kit, or to content yourself with acting as spectator.

Some of the most imaginative uses of cameras actually come from societies that do not perform for the public. There is not as great a fear of breaking the spell for the spectators, and often brilliant uses of the camera—such as the helmet-cam or the basket-hilt-cam—allow photographs to be taken in the heat of battle.

## PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IN REENACTING

Living history is an illusion. However, how far does the fantasy go? For many hardcore reenactors, the fantasy does not go very far indeed. Although they can readily suspend their senses of disbelief to imagine the past in the present, they cannot suspend their disbelief long enough to approve of, for example, an Asian portraying a Viking, a white man as a Maori warrior or a female as an AWI soldier.

You have to decide what is most important to you in living history. If it is making things look exactly right, then it vastly reduces the roles that people—or, presumably, you—may take in living history. If it is to allow anyone to participate, then the total fantasy may be flawed. Obviously, there are limitations; one would never want a person in a wheelchair to lead a charge on the battlefield, for example. But between the two extremes of absolute accuracy and politically correct egalitarianism, one can find many compromises and adjustments. After all, would you, as a hardcore, prefer a skinny Caucasian wearing a blue double-knit jacket and carrying a modern hunter's rifle to an ACW event, or an Asian wearing accurate uniform and carrying a proper rifle? Obviously, a skinny white man in an accurate uniform and carrying a proper rifle, would be best. But which of these two alternatives are preferable? Which one is telling the spectator more about the ACW?

This is only the tip of the iceberg. There are things which you can change, and there are things which you cannot. We have spoken of gender and race. Visible tattoos or piercings might be inappropriate, but they should not bother if they're never seen (or appropriate). The weight of soldiers might be a matter of concern for incorrectness. Fillings and other dental care might be apparent and totally inappropriate. These cannot be easily changed. On the other hand, there is much that can be changed. Hairstyles can be redone or disguised. Facial hair cannot be hidden with wigs, though, and might be totally incorrect. If a reenactor is serious about his reenacting, he should be willing to disguise or at least minimize these anachronisms.

See also **Gender Issues in Reenacting**

## POLITICS & PERSONALITIES

It is unfortunate, but in most if not all aspects of living history—which seems to attract strong personalities—conflicts arise. These conflicts—whether because of ideological differences, personal differences, power plays or sheer bitchiness—are generally known as “politics.” The irony is that politics are actually means for resolving differences, not perpetuating or acerbating them.

Some political debates are actually cordial and constructive. Most are divisive and counterproductive. Political disputes should be avoided whenever possible. If they do arise, they should be contained and terminated as quickly and as painlessly as possible.

Neutrality is a precarious but necessary position. By neutrality, we mean not to ignore the situation and to try to avoid all controversy—in itself a dangerous

maneuver—but to confront feuding parties directly and to attempt to provoke a resolution of some sort.

## POLITICS, MODERN

Living History has yet to elect any national political candidates, and the reason is not merely the number of reenactors. The reason is primarily that participants in living history encompass such a wide political strata. Living history involves both liberals and conservatives. There are members who are neo-fascists well as members who are anarchists. All they have in common is an interest in and an affection for the past.

Because of this disparity in modern political thought among the members of many societies, most discourage any discussion of modern political beliefs. In a word, it has no importance to reenacting.

## PUBLIC HOURS

These are the hours during which the public is allowed on the site. These are sometimes the only times when period discipline is maintained, and the participants must wear period clothing and act in a period manner, though this is often at the discretion of the sponsoring group. Even at times when period discipline is not required, it may be maintained or enforced by certain units, groups or individuals.

## QUESTIONS

Do not be afraid to ask questions. No one will be offended by honest curiosity. Every reenactor—no matter how wild and grizzled—was once standing in your shoes, and most remember their early difficulties and curiosities. And besides, almost every reenactor loves to tell stories about himself and other reenactors.

Think of it this way: It is less humiliating to ask a question than to recover from a gaffe made in ignorance.

## RANK & TITLES

Some societies have intricate systems whereby members can purchase titles. Some maintain that they are given because of past accomplishments and services, sort of like Boy Scout awards, except that their award is decided arbitrarily by a specific person or group of people. Still others are given rank and titles based on the number of men under their command and are voted on by the men themselves. A few have no titles at all except for a medallion commemorating a certain time of participation. If rank and title are important to you, you should check how it is attained—if it is at all—within the group you are considering joining.

For the most part, all societies have a single thing in common. When you first join the society, you have no or nominal rank. Rank and title are attained only later. Do not join a group and expect to style yourself as a general, a knight or anything similar.

## REALISM, REVISIONISM & OFFENSE

History is not absolute. Sometimes, even the facts change, as new facts come to life and as older “facts” are discredited. All history, some say, is revisionist, and every generation—at least—looks at the same facts and interprets them different according to contemporary knowledge and prejudice. Much of what we have been taught in school has been misinterpreted and was once the revisionist history that modern conservatives decry. In fact, some spectators might be offended by new interpretations that contradict cherished myths from childhood, so a reenactor can sometimes feel as if he is being attacked by a two-edged broadsword. However, there are a few things that cannot and must not be debated or reinterpreted to put it in a better, more (currently) acceptable light. There is no doubt: History is messy. As Roth notes in *Past Into Present*:

*And what is the premise of twentieth-century visitors stepping into the past?...It is an artificial—yet familiar—contrivance, one that people have dreamed about for ages and pursued through books, films, and other media. But alas! Should our fantasies come true, we would discover that people of most historic communities would fear and suspect us, imprison and interrogate us, perhaps even put us to death. This sets up a dichotomy...*<sup>35</sup>

Obviously, portraying the more shocking and sensationalistic elements of the past will do as much to alienate spectators and participants as does the idea of historical theme parks which attempt to sanitize and to simplify history into the blandness of a 1950s sitcom. A balance must be found that does not ignore the unpleasant parts of the past but does not, at the same time, shove them out to predominate everyone's attention. An occasional shock—a court martial, a plague victim, even religious persecution—can be tastefully presented, but it should not become overwhelming. In that sense, most living history experiences are selective, in that they do not jump up and scream obscenities at th spectators.

However, some societies take this selectivity to an extreme. Some ignore religious history, while there are groups of religious-oriented reenactors who try to create an antiseptic, bowdlerized version of history. Such selective re-creation of history ignores plague and pestilence, prejudice and prostitution, and the end result is certainly no more correct than the view promulgated by the often-criticized school system.. Despite best efforts to avoid offense, societies that ignore aspects of the past err in the other direction. While they strive not to shock or to offend some contemporary persons, they succeed in offending persons who want a realistic view of history. Saying that it is “history as it should have been,” as some fantasy LARPs with an historical illusion have often claimed, is not history at all, but such a warped view of the past that does more to mislead people than some prejudiced efforts to reshape the past according to personal notions (for example, the people who swear

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35. Roth, p. 67.

the Jewish Holocaust was fictional). The agenda is much more subtle, is not so easily discerned and is therefore all the more dangerous.

## RECREATION VS. RE-CREATION

Living History is only a goddam hobby. Living history is away of life. This is an old paraphrasing of phrases used by science-fiction fandom, and it fairly well sums up the dichotomy in living history.

Some people enter it as a lark, to get away from modern-day troubles, to use archaic weapons or to dress in unusual clothes (costume would not be an inappropriate term in this case, for they are approaching living history as a fancy-dress ball).

Others approach living history as a sacred trust and often take it and its accuracy more seriously than they do their regular jobs. They eschew the use of the term “The Hobby,” opting instead for more “serious” terms such as “The Sacred Trust,” “The Avocation” or “The Lifestyle.”

Most reenactors try for something in between, trying to balance the recreational aspects with the re-creational aspects. There are societies which cater to either extreme and, of course, to everything in between. Do not feel intimidated by one group's exacting accuracy standards or appalled by another group's lack of the same. There are enough living history-groups extant that you can find one whose standards are amendable to your own. Certainly, you will not feel comfortable everywhere, but you will no doubt find a place where you do feel comfortable.

See also **Joining**.

## RE-CREATIONS

A prominent feature of living history is re-creation. Anyone involved in living history is attempting to re-create at least aspects of the physical culture and usually to re-create period attitudes, culture and knowledge.

## REENACTING GROUPIES

There are a few people who like living-history events but who are not reenactors. They are content to be spectators and to appreciate the hobby from the outside. If you are such a person, do not feel that you are required to spend the time and do the effort to become an active reenactor just because you enjoy reenactment. Many groups do shows regularly; without a conscientious and interested clientele, they would lose much of their purpose. Enjoy yourself!

See also **Spectators**.

## REENACTMENTS

Not all living-history events are reenactments. Any event that takes a generic look at history and that does not focus on a specific event is not a reenactment.

Therefore, a replay of the Battle of Cowpens is a reenactment. An event which demonstrates military tactics during the AWI is not a reenactment.

## REENACTOR

Some people might consider it an anomaly to refer to participants in living history as “Reenactors,” even if many living history activities are not reenactments. However, we prefer to think of every person as his or her own reenactment. The reenactor is responsible for the requirements and authenticity regulations of the sponsoring society or the event, but a reenactor should not feel limited to these regulations. A reenactor should be as accurate in all areas as knowledge and safety allow.

Some persons use the term “living historian” instead of reenactor. While we appreciate the intent, we are hesitant to use this term. We find it can be a trifle confusing. For example, to us, a living historian is Simon Schama instead of Bruce Catton.

## REENACTORISMS

Originally a “reenactorism” was merely an incorrect modern interpretation of period drill. However, it is now used often to refer to anything that is generally accepted for use in reenacting without any adequate research. For example, some LARPer’s belts often use rings instead of buckles and lie—or mistakenly believe—that these are accurate, and continental military units often use dining flies. In both instances, these are incorrect and have no documentation but are commonly believed to be correct and are widely used. These reenactorisms are, for the most part, misinformation.

Whether reenactors are obsessed with, interested in or mainly disinterested by historical accuracy, hopefully no one goes out of their way to disseminate misinformation or disinformation. Unfortunately, this has not stopped its spread. These reenactorisms are often accepted and promulgated, although there has lately been an effort among more hardcore reenactors to eliminate them.

## RELIGION

Religion can be a touchy matter in living history. Although religion was an integral part of the past—during many eras, all culture centered around religion—there is a hesitation on many reenactors’ part to feature religion or religious differences. Living history is areligious in many ways. Although members are free to portray priests, ministers, nuns or druids, they generally are not expected, discouraged or forbidden to proselyte, to hold religious services or to force their beliefs on others.

Even when religious presentations are allowed, the reenactors involved must be careful. Many people take their religious beliefs seriously, and they see any presentation of that religion that is not totally serious to be belittling their

religious beliefs. Religion is too easy to burlesque, and sincere believers are often quick to take offense at any real or imagined slight. Religious beliefs should not be ridiculed, no matter how odd they might seem to you. In the same way, your own religious beliefs—or lack thereof—should not be forced onto someone else.

Living history is a form of drama, and religion should be used in living history as drama, to help people understand the culture you are attempting to re-create. It can be among the most difficult of all re-creations, but it can also be among the richest.

## ROPELINE

In some groups which predominantly perform for spectators, they seek to make their camps a little more accurate and safer from theft by erecting ropelines. The public is not allowed behind these ropelines. These ropelines also declare a clear demarcation between past and present. Only period equipment is generally visible behind the line, and any visitors must be wearing appropriate period clothing.

The public is often addressed by reenactors from just within the ropeline. This is sometimes referred to as “working the ropeline.”

## SAFETY STANDARDS

Hopefully, even the most hardcore reenactor, who wants a living-history event to be as accurate as it can be, will acknowledge that safety standards should come before accuracy. At least one group routinely affirms this. Theod, a Dark Ages living-history group, sums it up on its web page, where it asserts: “Finally our last compromise is that of safety. This is foremost in our thoughts about all our displays.”<sup>36</sup> And ACW reenactors are warned that “No one should be allowed on the field of a reenactment without the proper training. Accidents will occur but reenactments must take steps right down to the individual soldier to make it a safe hobby.”<sup>37</sup>

Standard matters of safety are the same for living history as for elsewhere. Especially when exerting themselves while wearing heavy woolen clothing, reenactors have to beware of heatstroke. If fire pits are used, fire safety must be followed. Care should be taken that food is not spoiled, that potables are not tainted and that pests—such as insects, snakes or even poison ivy—are avoided. However, there are additional safety issues that come into play with living history, because many living-history activities are not entirely safe, and care must be taken to minimize or eliminate dangers.

Some aspects of safety that are unique to living history are very apparent. Using rebated steel weapons, wooden substitute and gunpowder blanks are standard for any combat situation (though not live fire). Someone should not be allowed to carry

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36. <http://www.theod.org.uk/living.php>, “Theod Home Page,” accessed 15 October, 2003.  
37. W, C. Smith III, “Reenacting the War Between the States,” *The Civil War Reenactors’ Encyclopedia*, p. 19.



a bladed weapon or a firearm if that person does not know or use blade etiquette and gun safety. That is a good reason for practice and to batter this knowledge and care into the reenactors' minds before they are let onto the field. But even the reenactors who do not set foot upon the field must learn, first of all, before even accuracy, to respect and not abuse the weapons. For the most part, these weapons cannot be made safe in and of themselves; they must be treated in a safe manner.

Other safety standards are maintained by the different societies that take full advantage of modern knowledge about safety and medical care.

See also **Bladed Weapons** and **Gunpowder**.

## SEX

Because most living-history events involve people who are in a casual, relaxed atmosphere, there is a greater than usual amounts of casual sex. Any sexual activity between or among consenting adults should be no one's business but those involved.

A person should not get into living history, though, just assuming that sex is imminent. Both men and women flirt; however, it should not be assumed that everyone is just waiting to pop into bed. Many reenactors who are otherwise monogamous find it fun to flirt with other persons throughout the day; however, any attempt by a newcomer, unfamiliar with flirting games, to pursue them into more private arenas could result in embarrassing disagreements—not merely from the person but sometimes from a significant other (who may or may not be a reenactor as well).

In general, be circumspect about sexual matters until you get to know people a little better. If you are rejected or your attentions fall on deaf ears, do not press it. Casual flirting is often just that. If it is not, you can be assured that the other will make his or her intentions known. A person who is boorish or sexually aggressive will rapidly become *persona non grata* in the living-history community. Modern sexual courtesies and laws are as in effect for living history as they are elsewhere in modern life, no matter how at odds they are with period practices.

In this era of AIDS and other sexually communicated diseases, it is not merely courteous but essential to practice safer sex. There are many publications available on safer sex, which can be consulted by interested persons.

Finally, even if you are willing, even if the other person is willing, even if you are prepared to practice safe sex, please make certain that everyone involved is of legal age. It is best to eliminate the possibility of embarrassment and legal concerns beforehand.

## SHAM BATTLES

The highpoint of many a military re-creation is the battle. To some people, it might be little more than a giant game of Cowboys and Indians. Superficially, there is a great deal of similarity. Weapons are used, but they are nonlethal and do not fire bullets. You

pretend to die or to kill or both. But there, the similarity ends.

Sham battles are serious things. They can be used to inform the audience of tactics of the period reenacted; they can be used to help the participants understand the conditions of war in a specific era. Sham battles are tools that may be used by reenactors to educate the audience. Of course, the fact that they are fun and entertaining for everyone involved—both spectators and participants—is merely an added benefit.

## SOURCES & RESEARCH

The best single determinant of the sincerity of a reenactor is his or her trust in research. It is easy to get things close to a period archetype or to choose something that is more convenient or comfortable than accurate.

Most reenactors use the same three levels of accuracy that academics use and that most students were taught as early as high school. There is an additional level that is unique to living history. These levels are:

**Primary Documentation**—Documentation which comes from the era and which might consist of verbal or written accounts, artifacts or illustrations. Note that many people do not accept memoirs written long after the fact to be primary, and some think that man-made illustrations—not photographs—are not primary either. Chances are that fiction written during the time is not entirely primary either. Many historians, both academia and reenactor, consider primary documentation to be the only documentation allowable.

**Secondary Documentation**—Documentation which interprets primary documentation. They might be literary or visual. As noted before, period drawings of a period artifact are usually considered a secondary sources, as is something that was written in old age by a participant. Secondary documentation can be valuable for allowing you to put primary documentation into its proper place for consideration or to guide you to pertinent primary documentation. Sometimes, secondary documentation will be the only documentation you have for certain items.

**Tertiary Documentation**—Documentation which is an interpretation of an interpretation. These include overviews. Although errors can be introduced by tertiary sources, many are useful for determining the approach and thrust of research.

**Experimental Documentation**—Documentation which is derived from first-hand use of period tools and other artifacts. While this is hardly proof that an object was used in that matter, it guarantees a better understanding of how the object was used. But as Dan Carlsson, the head archaeologist at the Frojel Dig in Gotland, notes:

*The normal archaeologist looks at the rusty artifact and draws conclusions, very seldom he tries to verify his thesis by making practical experiments. But that is exactly what all these*

*re-enactment groups are doing*<sup>38</sup>

A good rule of thumb is that when using archaeological experimentation, one expositional fact can be justified, but more than one without primary documentation to support the supposition is not allowed.

Documentation is almost never cut and dried, no matter whether it is primary or not:

*Written evidence is the most straightforward. It is also the most subjective. Whenever you are reading an account of something keep in mind that the person writing it may not have had a complete understanding of the event. Accounts...can be misleading.*<sup>39</sup>

Other times, secondary documentation can sometimes be the best you can find. For example, pictorial evidence of clothing must often be used when reconstructing historical clothing, simply because “very few pieces of clothing survive and no examples from the common classes.”<sup>40</sup> In eras that did not adopt naturalism, this can be especially difficult and controversial.

Is this painstaking difficulty worth it? Only you can say. However, while it might be permissible to have lax standards of accuracy, it is not a good idea to be confused about them. It is one thing to note that you will be satisfied with secondary sources or to admit that you have nothing better. It is another thing entirely to attest that secondary sources are primary.

## SPECTACLES

Spectacles were invented in the late thirteenth century and were almost the only technological innovation that was universally embraced wholeheartedly. These were magnifying spectacles and used by scholars to correct far-sightedness. Lenses to correct near-sightedness were developed in the fourteenth century. Both types of lenses were only combined as bifocals by Benjamin Franklin in the eighteenth century.

By the start of the fourteenth century, spectacles were seen as intellectual accessories. Scholars wore frames without lenses to appear more scholarly, and paintings of people as unlikely as the Apostles were given spectacles to appear more erudite. Some people even thought that spectacles would award them the spontaneous ability to read and write.

Obviously, the spectacles available today are very different from the spectacles available in historical period, and reenactors who need spectacles should research appropriate styles. Various historically accurate frames are available, and many optometrists are more than willing to make lenses for these frames. In fact, when I

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38. <http://www.frojel.com/Documents/Document06.html>, Dan Carlson, “Reconstructing Our Past,” accessed 6 March 2004.

39. Mark and Jennie Gist, *The Cavalier Compendium*, p. 3.

40. *Ibid.*

asked the local Pearle Vision about lenses for some eighteenth-century spectacle replicas, they showed me lenses they had just done for an ACW reenactor.

Contact lenses are also worn by many reenactors, especially by those who reenact an era before spectacles were invented or who are dismayed by the overrepresentation of spectacles in the hobby. A few reenactors prefer to go without corrective lenses even if they need them. The inability to see helps them maintain their impressions. David Friedman—who portrays an early period Moor—notes that “Doing without glasses when I am in persona is not merely a matter of being authentic — it is also a striking way of reminding myself that I am in a different world. Fuzzier. As an adult, Cariadoc has never seen the stars clearly, and cannot recognize a friend across the length of a hall.”<sup>41</sup>

The use of magnifying lenses was known by many ancient people, and it has recently been suggested that Vikings used magnifying lenses as monocles, but there is no primary evidence of that.

Most living-history groups have regulations concerning spectacles and permit only period styles. Some societies do not control their appearance, and the result is a comical anachronism. If you choose to wear spectacles, make certain that they are in an appropriate style. If you decide to forego spectacles because the character you portray would not have worn spectacles, then please do everyone else a favor. If you are engaged in an activity—for example, carrying a musket—where your vision is so limited that it might endanger the well-being of you or of others, then be so kind as to curb either your hardcore accuracy or your participation!

## SPECTATORS

Most living-history sites are designed, in one way or another, for spectators, sometimes referred to as MoPs (Members of the Public). Costumed interpreters generally interact with the public, using either first- or third-person interpretation. Many first-person interpreters may hesitate to be out of character, and the spectators often gleefully attempt to force them to ruin their interpretations by speaking in a manner that is out of period. Other interpreters may use the third-person interpretation, and some mingle or even change from one to another.

Some living-history groups, such as AWI and ACW, do most events for the public. In all cases, the reenactors attempt to mix entertainment with education, and they might mix both first- and third-person impressions.

There is a curious love-hate relationship with spectators among many reenactors who primarily demonstrate and entertain the public. While on the one hand, the reenactors feel that they are doing living history to educate these spectators, they are still condescending toward what they consider foolish questions and want to get minimize contact with and avoid these spectators.

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41. <http://www.pbm.com/~lindah1/carjadoc/littlethings.html>, David Friedman, “The Little Things,” *Miscellany* (1992), accessed 15 October, 2003..

## SPORT FIGHTING

Rebated steel looks more accurate than boffer or stick fighting, but it has to be choreographed or restricted in some way. Fencing is not always choreographed, but it has its own restrictions if it is not and, as a result, looks less accurate. Firearms are more dramatic, but there is no way that two armed persons—let alone two armed armies—can face each other with loaded weapons. Paintball combat does not generally look particularly accurate, and who wants their uniforms marred with paint anyway?

Combat with rebated weapons obviously requires extensive practice and rules, and a person wanting to participate cannot usually just walk onto the field. Shots must be modified and, at times, restricted; in areas where there are fewer rules, participants are not so rigidly controlled by law and expect injure—sometimes even serious injury—is accepted.

If you want to run around with blank weapons, you can do that almost anywhere. If you want to fence, there are many local clubs at various levels. If you want to choreograph swordplay, you can become active in local theater productions among other things. If you want to do live firings, there are many competitions, or you can even do it in your back yard if you have the resources.

But if you want to compete in unchoreographed medieval combat, there is just one major place you can go.

## TEENS

On the one hand, teenagers should be mature enough to participate in living history without incident, and resourceful and experienced enough—sometimes with parental guidance or suggestion—to find suitable period activities. Parents should not hesitate to involve their teenagers in living history.

This refers only to a teenager who is actually interested in living history. Forcing a teenager to participate can be unfair to the teenager and to the society. Teenagers are no longer children, after all.

The use of the term, “teenager,” can be slightly misleading. A child does not become a teenager only at the age of 13, any more than a teenager will automatically become an adult (except in the legal sense) only at the age of 18. A ten-year-old can be much more mature and more of a teenager than a sixteen-year-old. Only parents—with the input and advice of other interested and involved adults—can determine the child’s level of maturity.

See also **Age of Reenactors** and **Children**.

## TERMINOLOGY & JARGON

Living history has developed its own terminology and jargon. There are two reasons for this development, and these reasons are both bad and good.

The bad reason is that reenactors are in a community, and the use of a jargon

familiar only within that community will make members of the community draw closer together. It is a case of “us” versus “them.” It helps members of the community feel more important and more invested. By sharing a terminology, the reenactors feel that they are integral, involved members of a large community.

On the other hand, terminology has been developed from convenience. Whether it has been borrowed or invented, these are generally terms that must define a shared facet of reenacting. It is more convenient to say a word, and have everyone know exactly to what you are referring, than it is to say the complete phrase. It is a human tendency to invent and to perpetuate vested terminology.

Therefore, you will most probably use jargon in your reenacting career. Do not feel upset at yourself or your perceived failings if you do not understand a term. Ask a more experienced reenactor if a term confuses you.

Chances are that your using jargon makes developing the fantasy that much easier. On the other hand, do not use jargon to alienate or feel superior to non-reenactors. If you use the jargon merely for that reason, you have every reason to feel bad. The purpose of living history is to educate and to entertain, not to alienate!

## TOBACCO

Any living history, except Native American, that takes place before the sixteenth century should discourage the use of tobacco outright. For later periods, the smoker should take care that the tobacco product used was known and used by that time. For the most part, that means that smoking should be confined to pipes and, to a lesser extent, cigars; cigarettes were a late development (but ubiquitous by the time of World War II).

Even so, smoking should be kept to a minimum indoor or in closed spaces. Many people—reenactors as well as spectators—are irritated by or allergic to tobacco smoke. Be careful and courteous when smoking.

A person suffering a “nicotine fit” can seek refuge outdoors at an indoor site or in a special “farb area” if cigarettes are used. Smoking should be restricted to special smoking areas if they are provided. If anyone objects to your smoking in common areas, either extinguish your smoking material or move to another place. Be certain to extinguish your smoking materials completely, and be considerate of others and their property. That consideration will be appreciated.

## VENDORS & SUPPLIERS

Even persons who attempt to re-create the renaissance are often not renaissance men, at least in the modern concept. Although many reenactors prefer and attempt to make much of their own kit, it is usually impossible to make it all personally. Sometimes, even friends cannot help that much.

When the hobby started and for many years afterwards, there were no sources for much of the paraphernalia needed. You had to make do without, to alter an existing

artifact or to make your own. That is no longer true. Artisans and craftsmen have discovered that there is a market for their efforts. It is now possible to buy clothing off the rack, to commission armor and to have accomplished cobblers make accurate and well-designed footwear (for many years this was the final frontier for accuracy).

There is, in fact, an embarrassment of riches to be found at living-history events. Unfortunately, much is not accurate for a period or for the buyer's impression. Many reenactors, shopping among the vendors, may buy items that they cannot use in their impression. If the reenactor's goal is to purchase something that can be put over the fireplace or to be given as a gift, then that is okay. If the goal is to find items that are suitable for your kit, you need to be careful.

It is the responsibility of the vendor to make certain their wares are accurate, to provide documentation if needed, to note inaccuracies and to not misrepresent their goods. It is not the vendor's responsibility to guide and shepherd the client. Bring along a member of your unit if necessary, someone who can tell you what is appropriate to buy and what is not. They will at least have a list of what is required and should be more than happy to help you in any way they can.

It is impossible, if they are actually selling merchandise, for merchants to be authentic. From the start, the money is inaccurate; hardly any vendor would accept slash silver, hardly any customers carry around gold ducats. In addition, there are the various difficulties required when interfacing with the modern world. Spectacles, charge card hook-ups, electric or propane lights, even sometimes the actual merchandise are all necessary elements of selling. Since it should be assumed that the goal of a living history merchant is to make money, accuracy becomes secondary. Vendors obviously should not be given a prominent spot in any living history event. Even blanket traders are not really accurate.

On the other hand, this fact should not be regarded as a *carte blanche* for total inaccuracy. Insofar as it is appropriate, a reenactor acting as a vendor should sell in an appropriate structure, sit upon an appropriate chair and display wares in a period manner. A vendor should not sit beneath a nylon dining fly in a plastic lawn chair selling Star Wars collectibles on Lucite shelves.

On the other hand, a person portraying a period vendor, mock-selling appropriate merchandise to participants rather than to spectators—but in full view and hearing of the spectators—would present an interesting and educational scenario.

## WHERE CAN YOU BE A REENACTOR?

Obviously, you can be a reenactor anywhere (and will be, if you decide to be a reenactor). Whether in or out of historic clothing, you will find yourself looking at things, behaving and talking differently than you did before you were a reenactor. However, we assume that this question is more, "Where can I go dressed as a reenactor and do reenactor things." In answer, there are six major places where you can be a reenactor:

- You can join a living history group, often a military unit
- You can go to an event sponsored and hosted by a living-history group
- You can be a costumed interpreter at a living-history site
- You can do displays and programs for schools and civic societies
- You can be color for films and documentaries.
- You can go to commercial living-history sites, such as renaissance fairs and wild west towns

These are not necessarily separate, and one can be a reenactor in more than one place.

Please note that often living-history sites do not appreciate or will not admit reenactors who are dressed unless previous arrangements have been made. Costumed spectators are, however, often given discounted entrance at less accurate sites such as renaissance fairs.

## WHY BECOME AN REENACTOR?

And the basic answer is that you don't have to become one. You can become, for lack of a better term, a reenactor groupie. You can attend many living-history events as a spectator and be entertained and educated without going through the trouble and expense of being kitted out. However, you cannot join in the family of fellow reenactors, and you cannot experience the best parts of being a reenactor. As a guide for ACW reenactors notes:

*At its worse, Civil War Reenacting can be just about the most uncomfortable activity imaginable. Yet thousands of us keep coming back, year after year, travelling hundreds of miles, just to escape the 20th century for a few days. It must be worth it.<sup>42</sup>*

Let's assume that reenacting is worth it. That you do want to go through the trouble and effort of becoming a reenactor. Why is it worth it?

That isn't an easy question to answer, because people come to living history for vastly different reasons, but all of them are valid. There is no right reason that is better than all others. Reenactors are from all walks of life and from all cultural and educational backgrounds. A reenactor might be an atheist, a pagan or a Catholic priest. A reenactor might be active in science-fiction fandom, in a veteran's organization, as a candidate for a PhD in Early American literature or as all three. A reenactor might be a card-carrying Communist or a solid Republican. Reenactors range in age from, literally, a babe in his mother's arms to someone in his 70s or 80s. A reenactor might devote a few hours to living-history research or activities each month, or he might seem to live in the past.

There is no single activity in living history which seems to draw all members. Some join because of an interest in history. Some join because of interest in a

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42. Dennis, p. vi.

particular art or activity. Some join because they like to dress up. Quite a few join just to carry a weapon and to use it in some way. A few join out of a desire to educate and to entertain other people. For many people, there is a feeling of camaraderie or even family (whether they join with their families or not). There are some people who do reenacting to honor their ancestors and forebears. For example, an ACW reenactor notes that, "In re-enacting the Civil War we honor the lives, sacrifices, and even the deaths of the men, women and children that lived these troubled years on both sides of the struggle."<sup>43</sup> While this is, no doubt, sincere, it is hardly the sole reason that people get into living history. The farther back in time the era reenacted is, the less likely that the reenactor will have a familial and personal affiliation with the era.

In view of this, a better question might be: Who doesn't join living history? Conformists, who are afraid of what family and friends will say of them or their activities, don't join reenacting. Persons with neither ethics nor a sense of honor do not remain members for very long. As a rule, persons who take themselves too seriously do not join living history, nor do persons with no senses of humor. And above all else, persons with no sense of romance and adventure do not join living history. Perhaps it is this sense of romance, adventure and chivalry that all reenactors share in common. They want something a little different, a little more romantic than they can find in modern life. They might not want to live in the past, but they would like to visit for a while. Or, better yet, they want to improve the present just a little bit by reviving and preserving the best of the past.

Reenactors are a vast family, and often reenactors will find friends or even loved ones among the reenactors. Many people remain active in living history because of friends they have found in the group. Many reenactors who were not interested in history when they joined will find that their historical interests have grown. They come to realize that history is interesting and that when they were disinterested during the history classes in high school, it was not the discipline itself that they found wanting but rather the way in which it was taught.

## APPENDIX ONE

# A Glossary of Jargon

*Everyone new to a group...has to learn its code, in language and in behavior, as part of the initiation process. This is how we enter and become part of a discourse community.*

—Lynn Bloom & Edward M. White, *Inquiry: A Cross-Curricular Reader*

- ACW**—Acronym for American Civil War, sometimes known by the more PC or southern reenactor as the War Between the States.
- AWI**—Acronym for American War of Independence.
- Aunt Martha**—Term used by Viking Reenactors to describe an inexplicable and unuseable item from a grave find, short for "Aunt Martha gave us this. We don't know what it is but we can't throw it out—lets give it to Sven. After all he's dead and we have to give something..." Also known as *Damn Thing* (short for "the damn thing doesn't work—lets give it to Sven. After all he's dead and we have to give something...")
- Authenticity Police**—Someone who is intent on complaining about the details of an artifact, especially clothing, without offering a viable alternative. This is also known as *snarking*. Also known as *Authenticity Nazi* or a *Snark*.
- Battle Scenario**—A mock battle, generally one that is at least minimally choreographed and whose victors have been planned
- Blanket Trader**—A vendor who does not have regular booth or tent from which to sell but instead spreads his wares on the ground, generally on a blanket.
- BIRD**—A phrase used by some ACW reenactors to answer why they're so concerned about general and specific accuracy in their impressions. It is an acronym for *Because It's Right, Dammit!*
- Boffer**—Foam swords and other weapons used in some medieval—especially underage—combat.
- Brown Bess**—The standard musket used by the British and many other armies during the eighteenth century and beyond. It was a browned flintlock musket. Differing theories are presented for the name. One is that the musket design itself originated during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Another was that the musket was as old as Queen Elizabeth.
- Burning Powder**—Firing blanks.
- Busting Caps**—Firing blanks.
- CAS**—Acronym for Cowboy Action Shoot. Competition shooting done with live rounds.
- Cowboy**—A reenactor whose main intent is to shoot guns.

43. <http://www.geocities.com/Yosemite/forest>, accessed 15 October 2003.

- Crafter**—A vendor at a renaissance fair.
- ECW**—Acronym for English Civil War. Sometimes known by the more PC reenactor as the British Civil War.
- F&I War**—French and Indian War. Also known as the Seven Years War.
- Farb**—A reenactor who is inauthentic, or an adjective to describe an item that is inaccurate. Originally coined by ACW reenactors, it has since become almost universally known and used in living history. Although its origins are obscure, a favored hypothesis is that it comes from the phrase “Far be it for me to complain about your kit, but...”
- Flatlanders**—For buckskinners, a non-buckskinner.
- Fuzzies**—A term applied by military reenactors to buckskinners.
- First Person**—An impression in which a reenactor portrays himself as an actual historical character. He will know no more than the person of that time would know, responding to visitor’s questions as if they were about contemporary affairs. Obviously, he does know the results of current actions.
- Garb**—Term used by some reenactors for historical clothing, eschewing the term costume. Although they feel this term is more dignified than “costume,” many serious reenactors will not use this out-of-period term to avoid being thought as a farb.
- Hardcore**—A reenactor who goes to extremes in terms of accuracy. Also used by vendors to describe a vendor who is open late.
- Impression**—The historical character that a reenactor portrays. The impression can be an actual historical character (a primary interpretation) or a fictional character who might have lived during the time but who did not (representative interpretation). See **First-Person** and **Third-Person** for definitions of these two types of impressions. An impression is sometimes also referred to as *persona*.
- Interpreter**—A reenactor from an historic site. Also known as *Costumed Interpreter*.
- Kit**—The possessions of a reenactor that might have been owned by his impression. A kit may be dictated by military regulations or merely be objects that a person of a particular time might have owned. Battle kit is a term often used to describe a fighter’s uniform, armor and arms.
- John Wayne**—A reenactor whose impression is larger than life, especially someone interested only in extraordinary battlefield performance.
- LARP**—An acronym for Live Action Role Playing.LARPs are very similar to some aspects of living history but are differentiated by being generally fantasy societies. Some reenactors are also involved in LARPs, but most LARPs have nothing to do with living history. The term is often used by more accurate reenactors to derisively describe any society whose standards are inferior in historical accuracy to their own.
- MoP**—Member of the Public, a term used for a spectator at the living-history event.
- My Time/Your Time**—A first-person impression that knows about the present. Generally, the impression is explained, if at all, as either a time traveler or a

- ghost. It is sometimes used to refer to third-person impressions as well, as when a reenactor says, “I am portraying a Tenth-Century Viking...”
- Naked**—Contrary to what you might believe, this refers only to the fact that someone is not wearing historical clothing.
- OOP**—Acronym for something Out of Period (whatever the period might be). Sometimes elaborated on as GOOP (Greatly [or Grossly] Out of Period).
- Period**—I) an abstract term referring to historically authentic dress, mannerisms, etc.; II) being in the style of an historical period.
- Persona**—see **Impression**
- Ramada Ranger**—A reenactor, generally a buckskinner, who stays at modern facilities during a living-history event.
- Rebated Steel Combat**—The term refers to choreographed combat using actual swords and other hand weapons. Blades are rebated, meaning that instead of sharp edges there is a two or three millimeter bluntness on the edges and often a metal ball on the top of spears. Sometimes known as Live Steel by persons who do not quite understand and have a paranoid fear of steel combat.
- Rennie**—A person who likes to attend renaissance fairs.
- Retro Research**—Creating an artifact without doing research and then trying to find documentation that will justify it.
- Second-Person**—A term sometimes used for the third-person “my time/your time” approach to interpretation.
- Sword Jock**—a reenactor who is interested in combat to the exclusion of any art or other activity (except possibly eating meat at a feast).
- Sutler**—a vendor of historical merchandise in much of military living history. Taken from the term applied to merchants who were licensed by the armies.
- Tactical**—A battle in which the action and result has not been determined beforehand.
- Ten-Foot Rule**—An approach to accuracy that insists that if something looks accurate at ten feet, it does not need to be more accurate.
- Third Person**—An impression or interpretation that is omniscient. The reenactor knows what the final results of a situation will be, and he does not attempt to pretend to be a person of another time.
- Touron**—a disparaging buckskinner term for visitors, combining “tourist” and “moron.”
- Trader**—A vendor in buckskinning.
- Trekker**—A reenactor, mainly a buckskinner but sometimes an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century military reenactor who is chiefly interested in period walks or “treks” where only period gear is used, unassociated on the main with other events.

## APPENDIX TWO

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