

First-Person Impressions

There are two major types of living history interpretation: first-person and third-person. When we describe the past as the past, we are using third-person interpretation. Third-person interpretation uses phrases such as “they did”, “they would have”, and “they used”. First-person interpretation recreates the daily activities, thoughts, and behavior of a person who would have lived in the past. First-person interpreters use phrases such as “I do”, “I will” and “I use” while educating the public. The interpreters behave in a fashion that evokes, as closely as possible, the behavior, folkways, customs, beliefs, activities, speech, religion, technology, dress, deportment and contemporary perspectives of the people they represent. First-person interpreters make conversation rather than speeches and monologues; dialogue is improvised based on historical sources.

Developing Your Impression

Developing a first-person impression requires research. You will need an understanding of the world of the mid-1800s—what your persona would and would not know, what they would experience and understand, their beliefs and attitudes. You must develop a worldview, an understanding of your persona’s past as well as his/her present.

When you develop a first-person impression, draw on your own personality and background. Consider your own ethnic identification, education, upbringing, values, and social standing. Modify your present day occupation and hobbies to fit the 19th century. Being in first person does not mean acting a part. Using yourself as a template for your impression will allow you to react naturally and spontaneously to situations, the public, and other participants while in first person at events. Once you have developed a biography, share it with others; especially if they should know you well (family, comrades, etc.).

Talking Like You Mean It

Presenting your impression will rely greatly on your language and how you speak. You may look the part, but your whole impression can be torn away if you don’t sound right. However, don’t try imitating an accent you don’t have or cannot imitate well or speaking a language in which you are not fluent. Not only will you quite possibly end up sounding phony, but also you may insult people who have an accent or speak the language.

If you are portraying a person from the south and you don’t have a Southern accent, address why in your biography. For instance, perhaps you emigrated just prior to the war and still have your native regional accent, you’re visiting friends or relatives, or you were educated in a different region. If your impression is of a particular ethnicity and calls for an immigrant accent, perhaps you came to America as a child or you are a first generation American and have only a small trace of a foreign accent if any.

The vocabulary you use is also another area on which you should concentrate. Begin eliminating modernisms from your vocabulary and research period vocabulary. Diaries, letters and speeches from the time are the best way to pick up on how people spoke.

Immersion Events and First Person

The following information is from a message on the Citizens of the Civil War Yahoo! group.

There are several different ways to do first person. The military most typically performs something called 'task oriented' first person, which is basically letting your first person be activity driven. However, this does not work too well with civilians. For example, how often do we drive down the road in the 21st century talking about driving down the road? Or how often do we wash dishes while talking about how we wash dishes?

The second way is character driven first person. Here the character is the catalyst of conversation instead of the activity. This doesn't mean that we don't do period activities, but it means that when we wash dishes we might be reflecting back on something that happened yesterday, a month ago, ten years ago, etc. Just like we do in our modern world. And those who are close to us may be able to remember that same incident and add their memories on top. It requires a more substantial knowledge of the 19th century civilian. It requires a person to learn a bit about their character's childhood (which might have been in the 1820s), right up to the time being portrayed, perhaps July 3rd, 1863, but no further.

This is why when we talk about immersion events we talk about the need to develop characters with deep backgrounds, because we need to be able to talk about a wide range of things as we go about doing stuff. We are our characters for the duration of the event (though we are always mindful of 21st century health and safety). We have no backstage; there is no traditional "down-time" (i.e. after hours or shopping), etc. We develop backgrounds, but they're only up to the start of the event. Once the event begins (unless there is a specific scenario that we're required to do for the organizers) we are living the day as it comes, just like we live our 21st century lives as they unfold. We have no idea what's going to be said, or how we'll react.

There is no script -- just pure free-flowing first person action and interaction.