Past Into Present
Effective Techniques for First-Person Historical Interpretation

STACY F. ROTH

The University of North Carolina Press
1998

Chapter 1: The Terminology of Living History and First-Person Interpretation

One of the challenges of describing activities related to living history is the lack of a fixed terminology. It is not uncommon to find two different writers describing first-person interpretation yet referring to vastly different presentations. This chapter establishes definitions for roleplay and related activities based on the terminology of interpreters themselves. On occasion I have coined terms for methods or techniques that lacked common description and hope that fellow interpreters will find them appropriate.

Museums communicate with visitors in many ways: through exhibits, multimedia programs, special events, brochures and books, labels, guided tours, and more recently — especially over the last thirty years — living history interpretation. Living history programming encompasses a palette of methods: demonstration, discourse, roleplay, reenactment, and theatrical performance.

Jay Anderson has defined “living history” for those of us in heritage-dependent disciplines, industries, and avocations as a simulation of life in another time for the purpose of research, interpretation, and/or play.1 In its most encompassing sense, living history can be anything that evokes a link with the past: cultivating heirloom plants, singing a song learned from grandmother, re-creating a battle or trekking through the mountains in buckskins, collecting antique cars, preparing an old recipe, hiking an old trail, attending a religious service, or

cutting the capers of a morris dance. If it touches a connective chord with the past, be it mystical or deliberate, it is history expressing itself in vital form.

What is an "interpreter"? Readers associated with museums and parks recognize the term immediately, while the rest of humanity assumes that an interpreter translates foreign languages. For the layman, an interpreter, as defined by those in our field, translates material culture and human or natural phenomena to the public — as Freeman Tilden implied — in a meaningful, provocative, and interesting way. In living history programming, presenters employ a combination of discourse, demonstration, and interaction within a historical or simulated environment. Living history interpretation is a complex art that requires a combination of skills from many areas, including — but not limited to — communication, history, practical technology, and theater. Its practitioners must possess both a broad and a specific understanding of history, material culture, and related subjects, and they must convey that information effectively to the visitor.

This book focuses on living history's most dramatic technique, first-person interpretation, and in particular its interactive mode, in which interpreters encourage audiences to converse or participate with their historical characters. Interactive first-person is found in a variety of situations; however, its most likely venues are living history museums, public reenactments and other special events, and in museum theater programs.

Living history museums and living history sites re-create past material culture, technology, and behavior. Although most stress educational purposes among their official objectives, their role extends far beyond education. People visit them for many reasons. Teachers escort their charges to them in the hope that students will learn about the past in ways that complement their classroom studies. Families seek outings that are both fun and educational. Others enjoy historical settings, wish to immerse themselves in the past, seek authentic experiences, feel nostalgic, or simply want a new experience or a diversion.

On their grandest scale, living history museums are dedicated to re-creating convincing environments, such as the Pilgrim Village at Plimoth Plantation.

These re-creations vary in scope and content from a single event in a fixed location (such as Mayflower II, where it is always the same day in March 1621 onboard the ship, no matter what the time of year outside) to a wide band of time and more than one geographic location (Old Sturbridge Village in Sturbridge, Mass., for example). Many sites tell the story of specific historical figures or events. Others focus on agriculture, technology, movements, religious or ethnic groups, or daily life in specific historical situations. Because it is both impossible and impractical to replicate thoroughly an entire world down to the last detail, most re-creations emphasize features that underscore their educational purpose and deemphasize those that are visually or socially repugnant to twentieth-century sensibilities or hazardous to health. (The impact of such choices will be discussed later.)

Living history sites are not the only type of museum to incorporate live interpretation. Traditional museums have found that museum theater or gallery drama programs add dimension to art, architecture, science, and other "static" exhibits. Museum theater encompasses dramatic pieces, plays, storytelling programs, monologues, dialogues, and interactive roleplaying as performed in gallery spaces, auditoriums, and other environments. The Science Museum of Minnesota (which launched its own theater department in 1984), the Canadian Museum of Civilization (in Hull, Quebec), and the Science Museum of London are pioneers of the movement, which began in the 1970s. Many other museums have since followed suit. Museum theater is a significant trend within museology, requiring examination far broader in scope than space permits here. Only those programs that stress interactive first-person interpretation will be addressed in these pages.

"Freelance" or "independent" interpreters are individuals (or groups) who contract with museums, sites, schools, and organizations on their own or through a third-party agent. Some freelancers have worked in museums; others come from theater, education, reenactment, public speaking, and other backgrounds. Many offer services for classrooms, libraries, assemblies, festivals, historic sites, promotions, and public events, doing "history for hire" wherever needed. "Reenactor" describes those for whom living history is both passion and recreation. They frequently belong to re-created military units and

other groups that organize simulation events. Their number has mushroomed over the past two decades. Writing in 1985, Jay Anderson predicted that the reenactment movement would double by 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. Although many reenactors do first-person interpretation as described in this work, the majority opt for third-person or have limited interpretive contact with the public. Some reenactors have become increasingly aware of the function of interpretation in recent years, a trend borne out by newsletter articles that include tips on approaching the public and by the legions of hobbyists who have taken to working with historic sites for special events and weekend programming. Although avocational reenactment is significant within the living history movement, it will receive only peripheral consideration here unless directly concerned with first-person interpretation.

The two major types of interactive living history interpretation are first-person and third-person. Third-person interpretation is the most common form of interpreter-visitor interaction. Using this method, interpreters, often dressed in period attire, describe, demonstrate, illustrate, and compare their subject in ways that effectively communicate its meaning to visitors. Interpreters refer to the past as the past. For instance: “I am cooking a pottage the way a housewife or servant would have prepared it in the seventeenth century. Today, we might call the same recipe ‘soup’ and simmer it in a crock pot.” The public can ask questions that pertain to the exhibit at hand or venture farther afield in conversation. Inquiries pertaining to local services and comfort needs, or questions about the interpreter’s background are considered legitimate for discussion.

Reenacting—of the battle of Trenton, for example, in this photograph—has become one of the most popular pastimes of the late twentieth century. (photo: Kate Nagy) The method featured in this book is recognized by several names among interpreters: first-person interpretation, roleplaying, and character interpretation. All refer interchangeably to the same style. “Interactive historical character interpretation” and “interactive historical roleplay (or roleplaying)” are additional synonyms, personally concocted but descriptively literal.

Incidentally, these terms are virtually unknown to the press and public, who frequently refer to character interpreters as actors, actor-historians, or guides.

In these pages "first-person" and its four synonyms refer to the presentation style encountered on a typical day at the 1627 Pilgrim Village and 1621 Mayflower II of Plimoth Plantation (Plymouth, Mass.) or 1836 Prairietown at Conner Prairie (Fishers, Ind.). I have selected the Plimoth method as the standard because of the pioneer role played by that institution in its development. Variations, of course, are many and will be discussed in turn.

In the prototypical form of interactive historical roleplay, interpreters recreate the daily activities, thoughts, and behavior of real (or composite) historical people. Presentations may be spontaneous or built around scenarios, themes, or specific events. When first-person is responsibly presented, it strives to achieve accuracy in as many facets of a historical culture as research, site constraints, and other modern conventions permit. The interpreters behave in a fashion that evokes, as closely as possible, the behavior, folkways, customs, beliefs, activities, foodways, speechways, tradeways, religions, technology, dress, deportment, and contemporary perspective of the past peoples they represent. By assuming a historical persona, the roleplayer humanizes complex information while performing tasks, activities, or scenes that are within the context of everyday life. First-person interpreters, when in role, avoid discussion of occurrences beyond their character's time. They speak from personal perspective: "I built this house last year"; "My wife and I sleep in that bed." They make conversation as opposed to speeches and monologues. Dialogue is improvised, based on historical sources. Interpretation can venture off in a variety of directions, depending on the interests of the visitor and the skill of the interpreter.

First-person interpretation, as described above, is more demanding of interpreters than third-person interpretation and is also more demanding of the public. It forces the visitor into the role of anthropologist, voyeur, outsider, time traveler, and interloper. Counterbalancing the required effort, it harbors special rewards for the inquisitive, imaginative, and willing player, akin to the thrill of achieving the higher levels of a virtual-reality game.

First-person interpretation can be absolutely spontaneous or built around deliberate themes and concepts. It can incorporate single or multiple scenarios, blocks of preconceived dialogue and activity that develop a chain of ideas; highlight a given subject within the larger interpretive setting; provide additional structure to a free-form presentation; or re-create actual (or typical) events. For instance, Plimoth Plantation frequently punctuates its daily interpretation with prearranged scenario activity. During a three-day period each October, the usual interpretation is overlaid with the re-creation of a trade visit by Dutch dignitaries, which includes mini-events: an opening salutation with greeting speeches and a militia demonstration, a feast, and a trade session with the local natives.

Portions of a scenario dialogue, such as marriage vows during a re-created wedding, may be scripted, while other activities and remarks are improvised, albeit in an anticipated sequence. In a trial scene, for example (a common feature at many living history museums), the "judge" is familiar with historical laws and court procedures. The action unfolds according to common historical custom, directed by the judge and court officers. Those portraying the lawyers, litigants, and witnesses know how one another will support or defend their arguments. Visitors, perhaps, may be recruited to play the jury and are encouraged to question key characters before drawing a verdict.

There are many variations on first-person as described above, developed to meet the special needs of other programs and their unique situations. They are classed below as "mixed interpretive medium," "role acting," the "my time/your time approach," "ghost interpretation," and "museum theater.

" A "mixed interpretive medium" approach uses first- and third-person methods in concert. In such a program, a third-person interpreter might prepare visitors for the first-person experience by providing historical background, answering questions that postdate the scope of the presentation, and/or interacting with the roleplayers. One example, "red T-shirting," is a guided first-person technique developed by the freelance Historical Reenactment Workshop for their programs at various heritage sites in the United Kingdom. The team's third-

person interpreters — dressed in distinctive red T-shirts — greet visitors, explain the first-person concept, provide suggestions on how to interact with the roleplayers, and strategically station themselves to interject explanations and become intermediaries as needed.Another example is the placement of "contextualists," at selected Colonial Williamsburg (Williamsburg, Va.) programs. They introduce upcoming scenes, explain the significance of key issues, and hold a wrap-up session at the end. At Old Sturbridge Village similar content bracketing is conducted by a selected roleplayer who steps temporarily out of character for the task.

There are many creative possibilities for mixed interpretation. At Colonial Williamsburg, random visitors are chosen to play "reporters" at a twentieth-century-style press conference with Thomas Jefferson. They stand in a press box, are supplied with written questions, are prompted to jump up and down with excitement, and are called on in turn by a twentieth-century "moderator." Jefferson, portrayed by interpreter Bill Barker, answers the questions based on actual writings. Following the reporters, the floor is open to all spectators.

Some programs invite visitors to take improvisational roles. This succeeds best with participants who have studied in advance and are well prepared with background readings and role portfolios. Old Sturbridge Village and Plimoth Plantation have run especially successful programs in this area, Sturbridge with junior high and high school students and Plimoth with college classes. Roleplay has long been a popular educational method in classrooms. Many educators enthusiastically declare that role-taking stimulates learning, develops empathy, personalizes historical research, and encourages students to link cause, effect, and partisanship with given issues. To attest to this, I vividly recall portraying a Confederate slave owner in a simulated fifth-grade debate on the abolition of slavery. The process of understanding an alternative outlook widened my perspective on conflict and its causes.

"Role acting," a term coined by Margaret Piatt when she directed living history presentations at Maryland's London Towne Publik House, is an amalgamation of first- and third-person techniques. The method encourages characterization yet sanctions a step out of role when a third-person response seems more

effective. At Old Sturbridge Village, where Piatt was more recently assistant director of museum education, role acting is the preferred style of first-person interpretation because it lets the interpreters employ some of the histrionics of standard first-person while addressing a wider range of visitors' questions.

According to its practitioners, role acting reduces the alienating effects of first-person for visitors who fail to catch on and accommodates questions that are outside the scope of historical characters. Aficionados of Plimoth-style first-person are frustrated by role acting interpreters who flip-flop in and out of character during the same conversation. A dilemma is created when one visitor's out-of-period question distracts from the momentum of a compelling story or absorbing characterization. Is it wise to break the continuity for everyone else in the group? Whether or not the average visitor is disturbed by such shifts is a matter worth pursuing by evaluators.

A cousin of role acting is "first-hand interpretation" (author's term), a style common to craftspeople and foodways demonstrators who explain their activities in the present tense — referring to themselves as "master of the shop," for example — but do not assume character roles and answer the gamut of possible visitor inquiries as would a third-person interpreter. Because little characterization is involved, this method will not be a focus of this study. Tom Sanders of Fort Snelling (Minn.) developed the "my time/your time approach" as a way for first-person interpreters to answer out-of-period questions without breaking completely out of character. My time/your time characters display prescience. They claim to be from the past, but acknowledge the visitors' time period and make post- and pre-period comparisons. The interpreter may make statements such as, "In your time, you watch television for entertainment. In my time we entertain ourselves with songs and stories. Television didn't become popular until the 1950s." Sanders emphasizes that this method works well with young children, senior citizens, foreign visitors, and people who dislike the roleplay premise.

Other interpreters from Fort Snelling have enthusiastically embraced the technique. In certain situations the my time/your time method is a feasible alternative, especially with young children or other audiences cited by Sanders.

However, I suspect that teen and adult visitors may feel patronized by it. As with role acting, it poses a problem when most of the audience appears to be enjoying a realistic character and one person asks a “modern” question. “Jumping the Broom.” Visitors enjoy the re-creation of a rustic wedding at Carter’s Grove slave quarters. (courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation) Bonnie Williams, curator of the Wylie House (Bloomington, Ind.), has experimented with another variant, “ghost interpretation,” inspired by Sanders’s my time/your time approach, but with an additional twist. In ghost interpretation, the historical character confronts his or her visitors in the present. Williams developed this method to compensate for Wylie House’s small staff and its many anachronistic features, such as electric outlets and a security system. She thought, too, that standard first-person made visitors too uncomfortable and could not reflect the change over time that seemed so integral to the site. Her character, Elizabeth Wylie, greets guests herself at the door and escorts them into the parlor. Miss Wylie, drawing on her “memories” and employing the descriptive arts of a storyteller, recalls the charm of a garden that has since been buried by pavement. She tosses off a query about the burglar alarm without ducking: “I asked Mrs. Williams and she told me it was a burglar alarm! I told her that when I was a girl, our ‘burglar alarm’ was the dog.”

Williams’s presentation charmed me. Another interpreter, Eric Olsen of Morristown National Historical Park (Morristown, N.J.), portrays Revolutionary War soldier Joseph Plumb Martin as a ghost. Olsen, too, relies on storytelling. But can the ghost technique lend itself to other styles and settings or be used with multiple interpreters? Would too many ghosts counteract its effectiveness? Only experimentation will tell.

Vignettes and monologues that are more akin to traditional theater or public speaking than the above methods also fall under the banner of first-person. Such presentations are often preceded by an introduction and/or followed by a question-and-answer session with the participants, either in or out of character. Examples include a play about the incidents that influenced Benedict Arnold to change his allegiance, performed at Morristown National Historical Park;Plimoth Plantation’s “Cursed Tenets,” a dramatization of Puritan/Quaker antagonisms in the 1660s; and a “jumping the broom” wedding ceremony at

Carter's Grove. Independent interpreters, such as Sarah Grant Reid, Robert L. Spaeth, and William Kashatus,21 use monologue as a vehicle for one-man or one-woman shows, evoking the popularity of Hal Holbrook's Mark Twain Tonight! Reid refers to herself as a "character speaker," reflecting her own emphasis on the techniques of public speaking rather than acting.

"One-person shows" and staged scenes are effective because they convey historical information in an enjoyable format familiar to audiences. They allow viewers to assume a more passive role than interactive interpretation and enable the portrayal of characters, time periods, events, or situations that are not a regular part of a site's standard interpretive programming. Their self-containment can be transplanted to settings not conducive to elaborate recreated environments. However, because public interaction during playlets and monologues is limited, its inclusion here will be limited to examples where active verbal participation by the audience is a factor. Although several first-person approaches were defined in the preceding pages, this work targets techniques described earlier as the prototypical style of interactive historical roleplay, drawing occasionally on the others. Please assume that I am discussing that form unless I specifically refer to variations. This book is not a defense of first-person but an exploration of an interpretive vehicle now standard at historic sites and other venues as an engaging way to present history. Like any other method, it has its benefits and its drawbacks. By capitalizing on what it does best and examining its shortcomings as "communication challenges," this work identifies techniques devised by skilled interpreters to maximize its effectiveness as a catalyst for encouraging audiences to explore the past.

Chapter 10:
The Art of Conversation

Once visitors are hooked, interpreters can seize the opportunity to expand listeners' understanding of the interpretive story, a sense of time and place, and the intricacies of the cultural past. How does one proceed from here? This is where advance planning, subject immersion, and the ability to link thoughts

together contribute to overall effectiveness. A knowledgeable, well-prepared interpreter can lead a discussion in any number of directions — expounding on current events, folkways, lifeways, anecdotes, familyways, daily activities, processes, or history — provoking the visitor into thought and verbal parley.

Thought linking, the process of relating one topic to another, is essential for maintaining conversation. Novice roleplayers can improve their interpretation by anticipating possible links in advance. With practice, it becomes second nature. The way Jeff Scotland draws visitors into a dialogue is a good example of this technique. One cold rainy morning, a man walked into the Bradford house to warm up by the fire and remarked that the "rain must hinder what you people do all day." Jeff, as Governor Bradford, picked right up on the visitor's observation by mentioning that the foul weather gave him a chance to catch up on "civil matters," such as the colonists' contract negotiations with the Merchant Adventurers. The visitor, intrigued by the contract issue, asked questions and made comments that could concern a legal agreement in any time period, including, "How did you know you could trust the other party?" and "You took a big chance coming over here." He also expressed an interest in Bradford's opinions about the outcome of the situation. The discussion came to a close with an exchange of small talk and gracious "thank yous" for the hospitality.

I asked Jeff how he chose the topics he broached with that particular visitor. He explained that the nature of his character and chronological events in the village provide the structure for presenting information. Yet, he effortlessly linked a remark about rain into the activities that a rainy day affords one to do, which led into the discussion of Governor Bradford's workload. If the colonists' contract failed to elicit interest, Jeff could have mentioned several other things his character would do on a rainy day; if that didn't work, he would have simply switched to another subject.

Another example is an exchange observed between Stuart Bolton (Plimoth), portraying Master Edward Winslow, and a small boy who was curious about Winslow's sword. Bolton talked briefly about the physical aspects of the sword, then added, "Do you ask about the sword because you fear the Indians? You

need not fear the local Indians because they are friendly." This led the conversation onto the subject of Indians. Bolton also peppered his discourse with references to past occurrences and speculations on the near future, adding depth to his interpretation.

The seasoned interpreters at Plimoth are masters at thought linking, which enables them to converse indefinitely. In fact, on days when the site is not very crowded, some visitors sit and chat with the colonists for hours. One reason the Plimoth interpreters are so good at maintaining conversations is their training, which emphasizes a well-rounded view of the world of a seventeenth-century person, both physically and philosophically. While the ability to keep a running commentary is laudable, interpreters should not run on at a breakneck pace without giving visitors ample chance to squeeze in a question or comment. It is important to watch for physical signs that visitors want to say something: opening the mouth as if to speak, or raising the hand as if to make a point. One should not be afraid to pause slightly after a visitor asks a question, either. Having the answer on the tip of one's tongue can be a dead giveaway that an interpreter is not spontaneous. In real life we mull over answers to questions; a thoughtful pause is both a natural and beneficial way to respond to a visitor.

The ability to stimulate the visitor's intellectual involvement goes hand in hand with being a good conversationalist. There are almost as many gambits for doing this as there are interpreters. In addition to the ideas offered above, the staffs at first-person sites have demonstrated their creativity with some of the following techniques: One is the "help me resolve a dilemma" approach, favored by Chris Creelman at Old Sturbridge Village. This method encourages youngsters to exercise their problem-solving skills and gives adults a chance to offer advice. Her character discusses a personal crisis, such as deciding which of two marriage proposals to accept, then turns to visitors for suggestions. Few can resist bombarding her for more details and helping her make up her mind. David Emerson has a favorite device for stimulating visitor questions. He discloses information so that it is obvious there's more to tell. For instance, if a visitor asks about the thatch on the roof (at Plimoth), David explains how the roof was thatched, adding, "It's a much better method than the way a neighbor did it back home." He pauses, having baited the hook for the visitor to ask about

the neighbor's method. If the visitor bites, he is rewarded with an answer that stimulates yet another question. Both David and John Kemp at Plimoth are also adept at using a "fill in the blanks" technique, where the interpreter pretends to forget the name of something visitors might know, allowing them to display their own knowledge. In one example of this, David's character Stephen Hopkins dislikes "that scribbler from Stratford who writes all them plays — oh, what was his name?" It takes a great deal of restraint for any visitor who knows the answer to keep from interjecting, "You mean Shakespeare?" This kind of baiting also gives a sense of confidence and satisfaction to the respondent.

As mentioned earlier, stationing both a male and a female interpreter at a location helps to balance the presentation of men's and women's issues. Of course, such staffing is often impossible. When interpreting solo, Effie Cummings (Plimoth) is noticeably alert to the importance of pitching her presentation to both sexes without dwelling solely on the women's activities that she is constantly involved in. She will use a segue such as "I am cooking this dinner for my husband," describe something that pertains to her husband's sphere, then refocus on feminine activities. Many interpreters insisted how earnestly they desire to portray the "foreign country" aspects of the past, as well as its commonalities with the present. To Eddie Grogan it is important to illustrate both continuity and change. "Change," he said, "is much more obvious and easy to portray. Continuity gets a little more subtle." One way of indicating change is to say something that challenges preconceptions of the past or startles visitors into realizing that many views in the past were radically different from our own. The historical position of women is an overwhelmingly favorite topic. Additional topics observed to startle visitors include historical medical beliefs, referring to modern mainstream religious groups as riotous radicals and heretics, and matter-of-fact acceptance of slavery and servitude.

Grogan, who periodically portrays Prairietown's doctor, is frequently visited by young girls inspired by the television series "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman" who do not realize the enormous struggle that a woman had to face in order to practice scholarly medicine in the nineteenth century. They proudly announce that they, too, plan to be doctors when they grow up, just like Dr. Quinn.

Grogan's character eyes them suspiciously and asks them if they think they can find a doctor to apprentice them, what their husband will think about such a career, and how they are going to care for their own sick children when a patient needs them ten miles away. Interpreters realize that personifying real historical attitudes can be troublesome, particularly if visitors have not grasped the intent of first-person — but more on that later.

Continuity is far less startling, though visitors may be surprised to learn that "some things never change." A topic that has universal or modern parallels enables visitors to
connect their own experiences with the past, rather than feel at odds with it. For example, B. J. Pryor's Henley asks listeners, "Ought a representative to do what his constituents demand, or ought he to employ his own judgement and understanding? Is he to be a puppet on a string to be pulled by every Tom, Dick or Harry, or is he to do as he judges best regardless of the popularity of his decision?"

Many of the interactive techniques for encouraging conversation work best with small groups of visitors. For groups of more than eight or ten people, interpreters tend to do more monologue-style interpretation. John Kemp, discussing interpretation at Plimoth, related that a one-sided conversation is handy for speaking to larger audiences where there is less one-on-one discussion: "It carries better and makes a broader point that can be grasped by a large number of people who are milling around." A monologue (or storyteller) style permits questions from individual listeners, but the interpreter will address the answer to the entire group. Many roleplayers incorporate storytelling and short anecdotes into their interpretation, and in fact those who specialize in speaking to auditorium audiences (including Sarah Grant Reid, William Kashatus, and Bill Barker) consider storytelling an essential part of what they do. Storytelling is a very effective way to illustrate themes, illuminate abstract concepts of culture and attitude, evoke vivid images, and "make the characters seem like real human beings," whatever the size of the audience. Public speaking expert Dorothy Sarnoff has said, "Anecdotes involve your listener. When you tell one, your listener sees a real scene."

First-person interpreter B. J. Pryor agrees, employing personalized narrative whenever possible: “Any point that can be turned into an anecdote is superior to a merely abstract point. If [my character, Reverend Henley, is] asked how Baptists are regarded or how the students [at the College of William and Mary] are disciplined, I tell of an instance. These are often actual documented events. I will often narrate a conversation or argument I have had with someone; thus conveying two 18th century opinions at once.” First-person storytelling tends to be incidental — much like one recollects to friends how breakfast burned or the missed train crashed. Diary entries, letters, and newspaper articles are superb sources for creating narrative accounts. When David Emerson “remembers” how his Continental soldier character David McCaffrey survived four days without supplies by making soup boiled down from a tallow candle and shoe leather, it conjures up a much more vivid picture of the trials of a winter encampment than simply stating that many of the soldiers went hungry for days at a time. Interpreter Bill Barker, who portrays Thomas Jefferson at Colonial Williamsburg, confided that his interpretation was inspired by the natural storytellers in his family: “I remember visiting with my family down South. Many of the older relatives would talk about the Civil War as if it had just happened. These people … had a special art of painting a picture in their conversation. … That’s what I try to keep in mind all the time.” There are many books available on the mechanics of storytelling.18 Interpreter-storyteller Mike Follin of the Ohio Historical Society urges interpreters to develop their own internal visualization of historical scenes and objects, to incorporate visually loaded words, and to support verbal techniques with nonverbal behavior (such as implying the hot, tiring work of ironing by wiping the forehead). Motions, Follin suggests, can accompany verbal descriptions or substitute for them.

Follin also emphasizes the value of eye gaze in interpretive storytelling. He advises direct eye contact when introducing a story; space visualization — looking over the heads of visitors into the distance — when describing a “memory”; and looking directly at a visitor when relating a “recalled” dialogue, as a way of putting one of the listeners into the shoes of one of the characters in the narrative. Storytelling techniques are stressed at Mystic Seaport Museum. The director of the roleplay program, Glenn Gordinier, is himself a master yarnspinner. Storytelling, says Gordinier, should convey the basic interpretive

themes of the museum. At Mystic, this is life at sea and on shore. Bettye Noyes, who plays Mrs. Reynolds, the wife of a sea captain, leans heavily on storytelling in her interpretation, especially when a large crowd is in the Sailor's Reading Room (where much of the roleplaying at Mystic takes place). Bettye's character relates tales as diverse as travels with her husband, meeting a Pacific island king and queen, neighborly gossip, the Centennial celebration, and the agony of missing her children while at sea. These stories — based on real-life incidents — truly personalized the life of a sea captain's wife for me as a visitor. Bettye effectively alternated her yarns with stretches of question-and-answer time.

There are multiple considerations and creative options for transforming factual accounts into interpretive stories. Will a story be described as something that happened to the character directly, or will it be related as a second- or third-hand incident? Or will it be retold verbatim, as is a period joke or jest? Can some facts be recited as dialogue? Should some details be left out, added, or changed for the sake of clarity or to better fit the interests of the character, the program message, or the audience? If elements need to be added, can they be added without distorting history? Are factual details used with balance in mind — enough to season the story with historical veracity without bogging down the flow (or the listeners)? Is the selection appropriate for the audience; will they identify with it? Will they recognize events and terminology? Ralph Archbold, as character speaker Benjamin Franklin, says it is important to realize what one can and cannot do with different types of audiences. An audience comprised of historical society members and another of salesmen require different strategies and levels of detail: "I don't get into dates but I do get into interesting stories and personalities. A historical society gets 'the full load,' of course, because they enjoy the minutiae, but I would lose other types of audiences with an hour-long 'history lesson.' Both markets are fun, but they are very different — and it's important to keep that in perspective." How long should a story last? Glenn Gordinier limits them to the thirty-second to three-minute range.

In truth, there is no rule of thumb. The key — as with other aspects of interpretation — is to observe the listeners. If interest seems to be wandering — if they look as if they are seeking an escape route — the story is probably too

long or not of interest to those particular visitors. A storytelling-based style — though often highly enjoyable — can inhibit verbal interaction. Perhaps visitors have questions they are anxious to ask. It's important, even at the expense of the interpreter's ego, to deal pleasantly with such a situation. Unrelated queries are a sure sign that interest is focused elsewhere. If the interpreter is regaling a group, and most of the group appears interested, an acknowledgment such as "Glad you asked, I'll get back to you in a moment," or a visual signal such as a raised hand and index finger, is a reasonable compromise. Occasionally it may be necessary to interrupt a story to answer a question, then go back to it. By keeping the presentation incidental, a pause to answer a question can seem perfectly natural. In the technique's favor, stories and anecdotes lift the burden of participation off listeners and are very effective with large groups where a lot of visitor interaction is impractical — or where props and activities are at a minimum. Its greatest benefit: a good storyteller is absolutely absorbing.

Humor is another popular technique cited by interpreters for breaking the ice and enlivening a presentation. When not overdone, it reminds visitors that people of the past also possessed a sense of fun. Studies have revealed that people who can inject humor successfully into their conversation are perceived as more likable, and this in turn enables them to have greater influence on people.

Humor is fostered by incongruity — an unexpected conflict or inconsistency between two ideas, or an unexpected resolution to a train of thought. Appreciation (or dislike) of a particular jest or comment depends on the reference point of the listener. Humor can backfire, even if it is "period-correct." Some people find humor in topics that are no longer politically or socially appropriate, such as eighteenth-century opinions on the "nature of women" or nineteenth-century antagonisms toward immigrant groups. Others do not. Interpreters will need their keenest perception skills to gauge the tolerance level of their listeners. Intended or not, if a jest targets a victim with whom listeners identify, the result could be alienation and loss of credibility. If hostility or shock is not a response that one wishes to risk, stick to safe humor, such as an anecdote in which the teller is the butt of the joke. For many interpreters, humor is a vehicle for attracting and keeping visitor attention. Says

Lisa Simon Walbridge: “If you can get the visitors to smile, you have them hooked.” Glenn Gordinier, who induces unrestrained laughter with some of his own sailor tales, warns interpreters to avoid the “stand-up comedy act.” The authors of The Interpreter’s Guidebook also advise the subtle touch: “A humorous story or anecdote should arrive unannounced.

It should drift in and out of the plot as unobtrusively as Clark Kent, not as flamboyantly as Superman.” There are occasions, however, when broad humor is appropriate and welcomed. Some situations or characters naturally invite amusement. Interpreters portraying street performers, puppeteers, fops, and head-reading phrenologists, for instance, are expected to jump on every opportunity to milk laughs from visitors. Eddie Grogan frequently draws laughter (at himself) when one of his 1836 characters pronounces with certainty that “Henry Clay will be the next president.” Grogan notes that this statement in itself is not humorous but a good example of something his character might say. The humor occurs if the listener knows that Martin Van Buren ultimately won the election, or at least that Henry Clay was never president. The statement becomes funny because the character’s opinion is at odds with what really happened and because of Grogan’s self-assuredness. If the statement is out of the visitor’s point of reference, nothing is really lost — it is simply time to talk more about who Henry Clay “is” — or switch the subject.

Claire Gregoire is pleased that the Old Sturbridge Village staff have been working more humor into their presentations. To Claire, humor debunks the stereotype of the pious New Englander. “We want to show that people [in 1830s New England] had a sense of humor, they did like to be entertained, and that life was not all work and no play.” When interpreters revive the works of local contemporary writers and present them in context in the village — in settings such as public readings — visitors can get a sense of the type of humor that Jacksonian-American New Englanders enjoyed. Claire finds that there are some problems inherent in presenting such material. Many references are unfamiliar to twentieth-century visitors, so the meaning of some jests — particularly political ones — go completely over most heads. On the other hand, items that relate to human situations, such as love, jealousy, or foolish behavior, are very well received and understood. Interpreters at Old Sturbridge Village use letters,

diaries, and pieces of prose, as well as the musings of writers, as sources for humorous incidents.

Situational humor can also be effective. One of Tom Kelleher's (Old Sturbridge Village) many characters is a self-conscious Irish laborer who does such inappropriate things as barging into ladies' tea parties. Tom, who has portrayed everything from traveling salesmen to ministers, observes from experience that visitors feel more at ease around "lower class" characters rather than pompous ones. Characters such as his poor laborer, he adds, "tend to provide comic relief almost like the more buffoonish characters in Shakespearian plays." The Plimoth interpreters, who speak in seventeen period dialects from Great Britain, often have a jolly time joking with visitors from England. Those who are particularly proficient at their adopted speech "crank it up" and take advantage of related humor. Stuart Bolton entertained one group of visitors who revealed that they hailed from Hertfordshire even though they spoke Received Standard English. Bolton mentioned surprisedly to one, "You don't sound like a man that comes from those parts. You've spent some time in London." He added that "his own dialect" had been modified while living in London and thought it was a shame how rural folks must modify their speech when in London so as not to be thought bumpkins. The visitors laughed in sympathy, as attitudes concerning fashionable speech continue to be reflected in such prejudices.

Some interpreters favor what Moira Turnan Hannon calls "the guerrilla approach." The guerrilla interpreter surprises visitors with the more unusual or offbeat aspects of an era, like the character at Plimoth who stood in the street and discussed visitors' personality characteristics based on the humoral theory. "A guerrilla interpreter will be the one who tells you an herbal cure for hemorrhoids," adds Moira.