

## **INTERPRETIVE METHODS: First or Third Person**

The use of both first and third person interpretation can be used for your portrayal, depending on the event and/or your inclination. First person characters can be composite characters put together from primary source materials OR an actual historical character (be careful with this, as an actual person requires lots of research and practice to get it right – it may also limit the events you might attend as that character). Third person characters dress in period clothing but have “modern” conversations with the public.

Both first and third person interpreters should work to engage the public in period activities and conversation.

## **INTERPRETATION TECHNIQUES/DEFINITIONS**

### **1ST PERSON:**

The interpreter interprets by saying, “I do...” Using this technique, the interpreter role-plays a character, real or contrived, from a different time period. This interpreter actually does the same daily chores and activities of that era. This requires that interpreters know a great deal about that society and their values. It also means that while the interpreter actually demonstrates aspects of life he/she, while in character, must relate what is being done without “breaking character.” The visitor learns by seeing and conversing with a historical character; the details of the setting become a major aspect of creating the attitude to facilitate and maximize the learning experience. Senses used: sight, sound, touch, and smell.

### **2ND PERSON:**

The interpreter interprets by letting the visitor do, and by saying, “You would have done...” This technique is designed for the visiting public to participate, to take part in doing historic processes under your instructional supervision. The interpreters are members of modern society. The visitor learns by hearing and doing, with proper guidance. Senses used: sight, sound, smell, and touch.

### **3RD PERSON:**

The interpreter interprets by saying; “They did...” With this technique, the interpreter is a member of 21st-century society and explains history and historical concepts to the visitors. Dialogue is created between you and the public, but interpreters can be themselves as they answer and need not pose answers in a 19th-century framework. The demonstration of a historical process – if the public is not taking part – falls under this technique. The visitor learns by seeing and by verbal interaction with the interpreter. Senses used: sight, sound, and sometimes smell.

### **First Person Interpretation:**

Creating your Character and wardrobe from the bottom up!

Creating a first person character is not inexpensive! Be aware of the investment – time and money – that needs to be made. It is best to commit yourself and start out to be as accurate as possible when first developing the character. Accuracy curtails bad habits, avoids the waste of funds, and will always give the best impression for

the visitor and fellow reenactors. Think about the underpinnings needed for men, women and children. You should be clothing the character from the skin out. Not only for the correct look, but also for the way it will make the person feel. When dressing children, keep in mind to use fabrics that can be easily laundered, but are period correct, as children have a tendency to do what comes naturally – getting dirty and mussed.

Pay attention to shoes, eyewear, tools, fabric patterns and colors. Somewhere someone started a rumor that in past centuries they didn't have more than 3 colors to a fabric. Look at period artwork. Visit museums with clothing in their collections. There were a wide variety of colors, patterns and textures in period clothes. Because we see images of the past century in black and white due to photographic methods, realize that colors photograph differently. There are a number of fabric stores and sutlers that are carrying period appropriate fabric. Some of them sell "swatch books" for you to see and feel their wares. Invest in them; they will be your best friends. See "The Mystery of Wet Plate Photographs and Color: Further Investigations" at [http://www.raggedsoldier.com/color\\_article.html](http://www.raggedsoldier.com/color_article.html)

### **Actual or Composite Characters?**

The choice must be made to either be a real character or a composite. This choice is actually pretty simple. While actual characters may leave behind a path that is easy to follow it may also be narrow and not serve the purpose needed. Composite characters provide a wide path utilizing and pulling from the experiences of actual characters woven into a story within historically accurate parameters.

How can you make a created, composite, living history character be historically accurate? After doing research and gathering lots of facts and data, ask yourself the following questions:

**Age** – the age of a person tends to affect behavior, language, fashion, and perhaps values, morals and beliefs. Especially, it affects knowledge.

Would a 20-year-old character be discussing in depth events that happened before they were born?

Would an 80-year-old woman change her clothing fashion to what is current fashion of 18-year-old girls?

Are middle-aged people more likely to use slang and phrases of current high school and college students, or slang words from the time their age group and contemporaries were in high school?

Age may also affect occupation and habits.

Is an older person more likely to perform a chore or craft using familiar techniques and materials, or to be a cutting edge person constantly adapting to new technology?

Generally, the older people get, the more secure they feel with established fashions, language and social behavior.

Generally, people in their teens and early twenties are more likely to invent or use new fashions, language and social behavior.

Generally, people are more likely to adopt fashion, language and behavior of their contemporaries, rather than older or younger age groups.

Gender

Does your character have an occupation, education and social status appropriate to your gender?

Social roles, laws, ratios of men to women, attitudes, life styles, and experiences of men and women vary greatly in different decades and geographical regions.

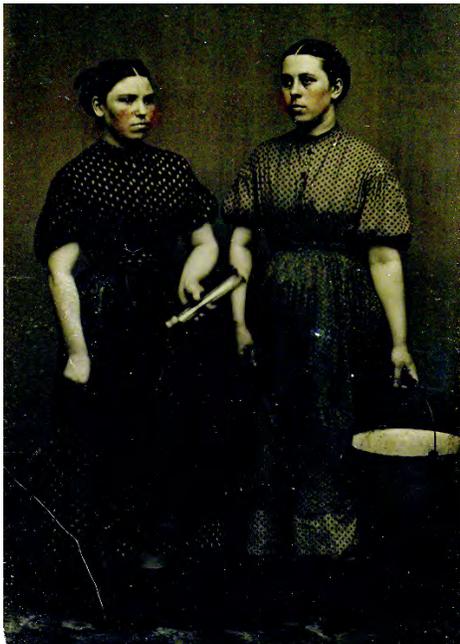
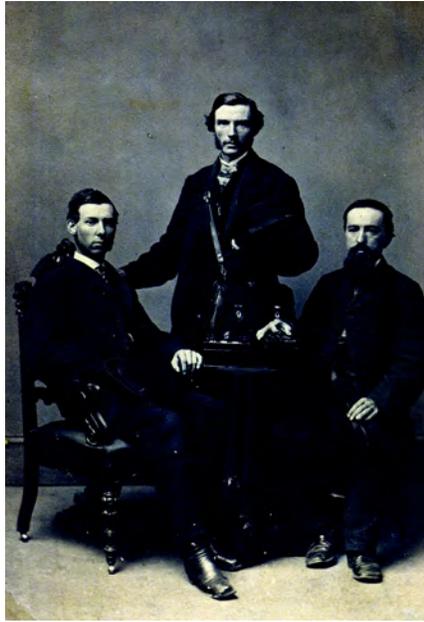
### **Economic Status**

If your character is wealthy, middle class, working class or destitute, it will affect their experiences, their opportunities, their language and fashion, and other lifestyle details such as their occupation, social relations and social behavior.

Economic status is something that can be readily conveyed through appearance.

- A wealthy "character" is more likely to have fashionable clothing of expensive fabric; to represent good health from availability of nutritious foods and medical care; to have props that represent recent technology, expensive craftsmanship and frivolous interests.
- Middle class and working class characters would represent more practical versions of fashion, made of more readily available materials, and tools and possessions of a more affordable quality.
- Poor characters would more likely have older style fashions, reworked or hand-me-down clothes and mended clothing, tools and possessions. Their appearance would indicate less time available for elaborate grooming and hairstyles, and their activities would include simple meals with less variety of foods, longer workdays, and inexpensive, simple and infrequent entertainment.

Economic status may also affect business and social relations. When interpreting history, this is a very important issue.



## Occupation

A person's job, trade, or occupation would affect their knowledge, their lifestyle and traditions, their fashion and appearance, and their beliefs and social behavior.

- Servants and farm hands would dress in work clothes or fashions generally accepted as uniforms for their positions, and would have daily routines focused on chores.
- Businessmen might dress more formally, and mingle socially with a greater variety of people
- Some occupations required practical clothing, such as the protective aprons of blacksmiths and furniture makers, or the daily "work dress" of a hired girl or newspaper worker.
- A housewife with servants might not own any work clothes for herself.

Occupation also determined social status:

- Servants weren't guests at balls and parties.
- A factory owner and his wife might not have dinner with a factory foreman and his wife.
- Some types of slang, typical physical injuries, and daily routines are associated with specific occupations. (A farmer is more likely than a lawyer to rise at dawn, use the phrase "work from sun up to sun down" and have a bad back.)

Certain occupations may also exclude a character's interests or knowledge.

Would it be logical to have a seamstress discussing the economics process of the community and the nation?

### **Geographical location**

The areas where individuals spent their childhood and developmental years, and the area where they currently live, can have a great affect on language, ideas, fashion and lifestyle.

### **Props/Clothing/Lifestyle**

In the past, some particular questions would pertain to availability of goods, transportation and occupation in different regions.

- Does it make sense to have a character interpreting Ohio history outfitted with a prop suitable to a New England whaler?
- Would a historical character who had recently emigrated from Sweden to Ohio instantly adopt typical mid-western clothing?
- Would a character in a very rural part of Ohio have a home outfitted with the latest furniture, tools and books?
- Does your character represent traits that are distinctive for their regional background and current location?
- Can you definitely identify your character as urban versus rural?

### **Date**

The specific time period being depicted in a characterization will have great affect on available technology, communication, transportation, and political events and social trends that affect the character. Most obvious is to be sure you do not include events, inventions, or people that do not exist in the time period.

Also, be aware of the availability and rapidity of available transportation and communication.

- How quickly could your character receive a letter from across the country?
- How long did it take to travel 50 miles?
- More importantly, are the attitudes and behavior of the character consistent with the decade being portrayed?

In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, the majority of Americans were not environmentalists; wife beating and alcoholism were prevalent; there was no federal income tax; and the abolition of slavery and state rights were major issues. So, is it logical for your character to be drinking carrot juice, discussing marriage counseling, talking about saving trees, reducing military spending, or national health care issues? In other words leave your 21st century persona in the 21st century when you enter the past! The only place for a soapbox is in the General Mercantile or your pantry!

### **What would you know?**

Your historical character would probably know basic information –

- The approximate population of the United States
- Who was president, and how many states existed
- If your character is wearing clothing that is 20 years out of fashion, why? Is there a logical explanation?
- Is your character set in Ohio quoting a book published two weeks earlier in New York?
- Is your character in touch with the times?

### **Events**

Is your character appropriate to the event being depicted?

- Is it appropriate to have a woman in a ball gown at a Civil War battle?
- Does it make sense to have a lawyer at a quilting bee?
- Is your character wearing a top hat and formal coat to discuss how to butcher a steer?

The specific event will affect appearance and fashion, ratios of ages and gender, manners and topics of conversation.

### **Eccentricities**

Is your character reflecting typical circumstances?

Characters who are great inventors, innovative social reformers, bold explorers, or daring soldiers need to be in proportion to characters that depict the standard and typical lifestyle of the times.

Eccentrics need to be presented with care, so as not to present a warped depiction of history.

An eccentric character must be balanced with a solid understanding of times, and a purpose.

Too often eccentric characters reflect the interests and egos of modern day reenactors, rather than a sincere interest to understand and educate about the

culture, circumstances and contributions of people who really lived in another place and time.

Even if depicting a middle class housewife might not seem as interesting as depicting a frontier woman doctor at first glance, good research and a thoughtful presentation can make the seemingly mundane character more interesting, relevant, and accurate to you and your audience.

**Religion** -affects:

Beliefs

Motives and behaviors

Customs

Holidays

Language and conversational references

In some cases, religion could dictate appearance.

Religion may also affect an individual's status in society. Some religions are minorities, and through history, suffered discrimination from other religious and social groups.

**Ethnicity** -affects:

Behavior

Customs

Language

Possible costume and appearance

Social status

Special care must be taken to understand sub-groups within ethnic groups: there is no "generic" American Indian, no "generic" Asian; a "Russian" might be any one of several cultural groups within that geographical region.

In the 19th Century in particular, ethnic identification had great affect on social status and legal status in America.