

## Reenactments and Living History A View from the Stage

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**W**hat's the point of living history and reenactments? After all, they are a modern simulation of past events, either a dramatic event like battles, voyages, treks, marches—or everyday life such as cooking, farming, schooling, building. Like the computer modeling of sunken ships and tornadoes, reenactments are imperfect substitutes for the real things, intended to give our modern world an inkling of the forces at work, and to help us understand the past's contributions to the present.

Let's be clear, too. We are not talking about graduate programs for historians—we're talking about teasers and eye openers, hooks and grabbers to make the past come alive. Some might see this as more entertainment than history. If you know your stuff, it's both. Looked at this way, this is the public's history, not just historians'.

Often citizen enthusiasts are the keepers of the lore, the story tellers. We take our places because we feel a special connection, we have a touch, a deep insight into what history means to us. This is not about foolishness or fanaticism, but devotion and inspiration.

Supporters of national historic trails got into reenactments and living history almost without meaning to. After all, ordinary people worked very hard for these trails—routes too long and disjointed for conventional parks. The national historic trails are extensions of historic sites pushed out into events that defy the usual idea of a compact park or reserve. These trails commemorate travels that changed our nation and world: explorations, migrations, routes of flight and despair, traces of fear, of hope and anticipation.

For an organization formed to promote a trail as a national trail, reenactment and living history are natural, part of the scene almost without planning or forethought. When the people who formed the Overmountain Victory Trail Association (OVTA) started, they first walked the route to dramatize it. Bill Stronach and the late Rip Collins of North Carolina, Harry Smith and the late Tom Gray of Tennessee, wanted to attract the attention of people living along the route today, for their ancestors created the original on their successful march to the Battle of King's Mountain in 1780.

The original timetable of the March (starting in late September in Elizabethton, TN, to walk two weeks over the mountains and piedmont to Kings Mountain in early October) reenacted for the nation's 1976 Bicentennial seemed a simple way to start. Period dress seemed logical to set the proper mood. A reenactment was started. To convince the public of the Trail's importance, talking about its history inevitably followed. Living history was added to the equation. OVTA arrived at its structure without any plan other than commemoration.

After the nation's birthday in 1976 and the March's 200th anniversary in 1980, the way was no longer so clear for OVTA. The national historic trail designation ensured continuing national notice and limited public access. What to do next?

Alma Gray, widow of Tom Gray and the group's 1990 Grand Marshal, once remarked that OVTA by 1990 had accomplished more than the modest goals her husband envisioned in 1975 when the march reenactments began. In the earliest days, living history was mostly one-on-one, an individual passing on thoughts on the history and its importance to another individual or a small group.

The 1992 Grand Marshal Hank Weaver expanded the scope of living history in 1988 when he developed a format for presentations to school and public groups. Reenactors agreed in advance to talk on set topics in a set order. They would cover both the history of the events and the people. The program would end with a demonstration of the flintlock rifle, an inclusion enjoyed by the public and reenactors alike.

The annual reenactment and living history program of the Overmountain Victory Trail Association has successfully visited schools and communities again and again, talking to about 50,000 students and adults in the last 15 years. Teachers keep asking them back; the public keeps asking them back.

How do you capture a glory road? You follow it! How do you understand history? You try to reproduce it!

Here's a picture: The entire high school student body in the auditorium at the North Carolina School for the Deaf at Morganton, North Carolina, right at the midpoint of the Overmountain Victory

National Historic Trail. Every student's hands are raised in the sign language expression for applause as the half-dozen men and women dressed in approximations of 1780 frontier clothes finish their presentation. Faces in the audience and on the stage are full of smiles and hope.

The real secret to successful living history is people telling a good story. The number one thing a reenactor needs is a passion for the subject. From that desire to tell a given story comes a commitment to study and study and never stop studying. Yes, knowledge is necessary. One should look for people able to tell a story. They don't have to be Mark Twain, but they must understand how to begin, tell the story, and end with a flair. Let's be honest, the cliché of the "dull expert" is true. Remember, we're not going to teach people facts—we're going to make them want to learn facts. We want to give them a vibrant taste of history. We want them to want to know more!

Seek honesty and humility, for history is not just one story. You can bet there will be contrarians in your audience. There will also be people there who really know more than you do, and are willing to share it. Involve people who are passionate but not obnoxious. The audience deserves the presenters' respect, too.

What about scripts? They are good for pageants and dramas, but wears thin quickly when repeated or when prolonged interaction takes place.

A mix of performers is good. After all, audiences are almost always mixed. This isn't political correctness, either, but practicality. After all, how many of us socially and economically share the lifestyle of George Washington or Thomas Jefferson? We can, however, relate to the farmer, the housewife, the inn keeper, the ordinary man, woman, and child.

What about authenticity? There's no easy answer. One doubting teacher remarked that living history put "odd ideas" in children's heads. No doubt. You can't understand life at the time of the American Revolution in 30 minutes. But you can inspire a life-long interest if the listeners' appetites are whetted.

Absolute accuracy is always the goal. However, corners get snipped. What about accuracy in dress? The same holds true. Are only home spun garments acceptable? Do we insist on actual clothes from 19th-century Oregon for Oregon Trail events? Can uniforms made in 1862 even be found today for Civil War reenactments?

To foster accuracy, briefly state how your dress and tools, your techniques, differ from the historic period being portrayed. Why not admit when you're guessing and don't know? After all, if

we're not reading from letters and diaries, we're not really using authentic words of the period.

Safety must be our first thought. We need simple rules, evenly and consistently applied. The National Park Service, of course, has rules and procedures for the hazards of every implement from flintlocks to washing boilers and combines. The best protection is having serious people who will spend time making their presentations safe and then thinking "safety first, safety always."

Here's a picture we want to avoid: a third grader terrified at the procession of flintlocks carried into his school. His fears were eased, however, when we talked about the measures we took for safety and how we meant him no harm. But some schools do not allow weapons—even for historic demonstrations.

In closing, an inspiration: Page McClelland, 1991 OVTA Grand Marshall, and a group from OVTA visited a high school history class. One girl in the class sparked the responses of the other students, leading discussions, delightful in her enthusiasm. As the group left, the teacher surprised Page by explaining that this child was not a class leader, but usually a foundering student. She had taken fire in a few minutes of living history.

That is living history at its best!

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