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# The Play's the Thing: Combining Cognitive Reenactment with Civic Engagement to Create Effective Living History Site Learning

Alex Harwell  
*Seton Hall University*

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**The Play's the Thing: Combining Cognitive Reenactment with Civic Engagement to  
Create Effective Living History Site Learning**

**Alex Harwell**

**Janet Marstine, Ph.D., Advisor**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of**

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## **Abstract**

Living history is a very interesting yet volatile topic within the museum field. Since its conception, living history techniques have evolved to include the visitor in ways that ordinary museums have historically been unable to do. Second person interpretation is one such advancement and can be an exciting opportunity for the visitor to “step back in time” and experience life as it once was. However, as this study will demonstrate, it is extremely difficult and virtually impossible to replicate historic environments and conditions, thus leaving living history sites to focus more on the present day and its connections to the past. This philosophy of creating and sustaining relevancy to contemporary issues can produce powerful results and is the main focal point within this study.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to thank all the advocates of living history and applaud their dedication to such a wonderful educational device. I would also like to extend a thank you to my parents for helping me get through my extended academic endeavors and to Susan who had to deal with me during this character building experience. Finally, I thank my advisor, Janet Marstine, who helped push me along.

## **The Play's the Thing: Combining Cognitive Reenactment and Civic Engagement to Create Effective Living History Site Learning**

“We need to re-enact the open-endedness of history...we need to re-enact historical experiences in order to understand the choices our ancestors made...we need to be open to experiences: how will they change us? How can we change our future?”<sup>1</sup>

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### **Chapter I: Introduction**

Ever since its conception, living history interpretation at historical sites has been the subject of widespread debate due in large part to its primary methodology of reenactment. Despite its seemingly straightforward objective, simulating history to provide a more interactive educational experience, the abundance of living history techniques and the manner by which they present history has facilitated intense discussions among its many practitioners and critics. At the forefront of these discussions is the argument that living history sites misrepresent history as they overemphasize nostalgia and delicately step around controversial yet significant historical material. For example, Old Sturbridge Village (Sturbridge, MA) has for years incorporated a program entitled, “Dinner in a Country Village“, in which participants cook a meal in a re-created nineteenth century kitchen using a brick bake oven among other antiquated techniques by candlelight. Participants then sit down and enjoy their meal using nineteenth century culinary customs. While this program is extremely popular with visitors (as of May 2007,

<sup>1</sup> Thelen, David. <http://www.nps.gov/nero/greatplaces/ClosingKeynote.htm>. Accessed February 2007.

all programs were sold out for the remainder of the season) its educational merit is jeopardized because of the lack of constructive dialogue between participants during and after the program concerning the historical significance of the experience as it relates to contemporary issues.

Although there are important historical issues that are often not appropriately addressed at living history sites, such as women's rights, poverty and disease, I will argue that slavery is a theme for reenactment at museums and living history sites not only because of its historical centrality, but also because, as many historians and political scientists assert, its effects still resonate in the cultural re-shaping of our nation. The influx of recent racial issues in the media only solidifies the fact that slavery should be a widely and deeply discussed topic within both national and community public forums. Reverend Al Sharpton, who recently discovered that his great-grandfather was a slave owned by the ancestors of the late pro-segregationist senator Strom Thurmond, spoke about this experience and the need for continual dialogue during a recent appearance on the news parody, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on Comedy Central:

[The situation] is a real personal wake-up call, but I hope the country learns some of what we have had as an ugly past so we can stop the continued ugliness in today's life. So, the good news is that it could bring people to a realization of what we need to correct in this country.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the North Carolina State Senate expressed its remorse for its role in the promotion of slavery in the nineteenth century as well as the segregation laws in the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> Sharpton, Al. Interview by Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. 1 March 2007.

As the issue of slavery continues to play a significant role in today's society, I believe that museums and living history sites have an obligation to provide an effective method of promoting social understanding of slavery's lingering negative effects. In order to create the necessary awareness of which Sharpton speaks, educational institutions such as museums and living history sites need to engage citizens actively and create a concrete sense of relevancy. This study will focus on an emergent technique within the living history movement known as second person interpretation, which immerses visitors within a historical time frame in an effort to create a concrete link between past and present. By placing visitors into the roles of slaves and accompanying their experiences with conversational programming, visitors can not only learn about significant historical events, but also they can create the heightened sense of relevancy necessary in generating public awareness and better understanding of contemporary issues.

Several living history sites around the country have taken the initiative and have incorporated this second person interpretive technique centered on slavery within their curriculum. Although these programs have revolutionized living history techniques and have advanced educational programming for the better, their potential for creating significant relevance is not altogether realized. For example, Conner Prairie (Fishers, IN), a living history site dedicated to interpreting mid-nineteenth century Indiana farm life, offers a unique program entitled "Follow the North Star" in which participants assume the role of a slave and literally run towards freedom while encountering menacing historic characters along the way. Participants are given an objective during the one and a half-hour program: to negotiate the land in order to reach a specific point designated as



Canada where slavery was outlawed in 1833. The experience is prefaced by an eight-minute video immersing participants into nineteenth century slave life and a debriefing session administered by a museum worker after the experience offers a chance for participants to reflect on the program as well as to ask any questions about their experience. The program has garnered several national awards for its efforts and David Thelan, noted historian, author, and professor of history at Indiana University, recognizes it as an effective proponent in facilitating civic engagement. Yet, upon closer examination, is the program effective in creating a concrete sense of relevancy? Does the brief amount of time designated for the transformation of participants into the roles of slaves fail to generate effective emotional connections to the slaves they represent and if so, does this play a factor in the success of the program? By closely examining this case study, I will argue that Conner Prairie's "Follow the North Star" program does not create the necessary emotional bonds and cognitive reenactment that produces effective civic engagement because of its emphasis on physical action as well as its failure to provide sufficient background information on nineteenth century slave life.

For the benefit of comparison, I will be focusing on an additional second person interpretive program that uses slavery as its focal point. Although its methods are different from that of Conner Prairie, in that it emphasizes cognitive reenactment rather than physical reenactment, this second living history program also falls short. The Menare Foundation (Germantown, MD) is a non-profit organization whose mission is as follows: "[to be] dedicated to the documentation, preservation, and restoration of Underground Railroad safe-houses and environments."<sup>3</sup> The organization was founded by

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.menare.org/>. Accessed March 2007.

Anthony Cohen, an African-American whose personal mission is to promote social understanding of slavery in a manner that focuses on the Underground Railroad, a part of history that, as he describes it, as, “our first Human Rights movement in America.”<sup>4</sup> The Menare Foundation recently piloted a program in November 2006 entitled “The Underground Railroad Immersion Experience” that immerses visitors in the role of slaves much like that done by Conner Prairie. Yet, despite first impressions, its methodology is strikingly different from that of Conner Prairie as participants undergo their slave experience over the course of two days, emphasizing emotions rather than actions. On the first day, participants “convert” into the role of slaves as they don nineteenth century attire, blindfolded and taken to a plantation farm assuming a role of a free African-American who was captured in the North and brought into slavery. That same afternoon, participants engage in manual labor much like that done by slaves in the 1850s. On the second day, participants discuss their experience in an informal atmosphere specifically focusing on relevance to the present. Participants reveal significant discoveries and channel the emotions felt during the experience into contemporary ideals: “On the subject of race, white participants report guilt over America’s history of slavery...as well as a helpless yearning to make things right.”<sup>5</sup> As I will outline and expand upon, the methodology of The Menare Foundation is commendable: participants experience a profound realization of controversial historical truths, ones that would not be understood without being placed in the role of slaves.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, Anthony. (Interview by Jonathan Pitts). “Living a Slave’s Life“ *Baltimore Sun* 4 February 2007. (5)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

Yet, despite these advances in living history practices, Cohen is considering eliminating the post experience dialogue session because of the sheer magnitude of “The Underground Railroad Experience”, opting to include it only with larger groups such as school field trips and business retreats. As I will further explain in this paper, the removal of such a powerful component could potentially destroy its effectiveness and ruin any chance for concrete relevance. Without the conversational session that evokes realizations concerning contemporary issues, Cohen essentially leaves participants on their own to make such important links between past and present. Akin to Conner Prairie, visitors to The Menare Foundation experience cognitive reenactment and therefore understand slavery more so than they would if using first or third person interpretation. However, without the accompanying conversational session, participants are not able to relate the historic material successfully to contemporary issues.

Looking at models of civic engagement that fall outside of the genre of living history sites and museums can help us to think in new ways about the potential of second person interpretation. I will show that techniques of civic engagement have the potential to frame reenactment for visitors/participants in a way that helps them internalize important learning experiences. For this section, I will be examining the success of the 2004 Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project administered by Appalshop, a multi-media disciplinary arts and education center in Eastern Kentucky. The project was a three-day reenactment of the 1968 tour of Eastern Kentucky by Robert F. Kennedy in his bid for the presidency. Audience members attended reenactments of Kennedy’s speeches and were encouraged by organizers to participate by asking questions and dressing as if they themselves were in the 1960s. A series of public conversations and activities

accompanied the reenactment as it compared the politics and current events from 1968 to 2004. A description of the project by Americans for the Arts explains, “audience members were not only able to reflect on their past, but better analyze their current situations (in their communities, local, or national governments).”<sup>6</sup> By participating in the re-created programs, visitors were able to regard past events as relevant to their modern lives.

In addition, I will also be using a popular program entitled “Mormon Youth Handcart Trek Reenactments” sponsored by The Mormon Church. This program offers a three-day living history excursion for teenagers of the Mormon faith and re-creates an ill-fated 1856 journey by members of the Mormon Handcart Company in which countless members died. Participants dress in period costume and pull a handcart for fifteen miles during which they engage in several re-created historical events. Although physical reenactment is a large part of the educational process, adult leaders engage participants after each historical event in a debriefing session that reveals significant discoveries such as a renewed outlook on history, personal epiphanies on faith and more importantly, valuable connections to contemporary issues.

The success of these examples that fall outside of the historical site and museum genre delivers powerful evidence that cognitive reenactment, when coupled with conversational programming, can provide a stronger educational program, one that influences participants to create a profound sense of relevancy. Furthermore, in both instances, participants developed a sense of civic activism, a more active derivative of civic engagement. For example, participants in the Robert F. Kennedy Performance

<sup>6</sup> <[http://www.americansforthearts.org/animatingdemocracy/labs/lab\\_081.asp](http://www.americansforthearts.org/animatingdemocracy/labs/lab_081.asp)> Accessed February 2007.

Project have since teamed up to further educational initiatives focused on the Eastern Kentucky region. Thus, if historical sites and museums were to adopt similar practices and to incorporate such changes within their current curriculums, the ensuing result could be very powerful and ultimately alter the effectiveness of living history sites and history museums in general. The combination of cognitive reenactment and civic engagement produces a powerful learning experience.

Although there have been copious amounts of research published on living history, specifically on first and third person interpretation, very few scholars have focused on the emerging phenomenon of second person interpretive techniques. Scott Magelssen, an assistant professor of theatre arts at Augustana College in Illinois, seems to be the current consultant on this technique as he has recently published several articles and has produced a book on the subject entitled, *Living History Museums: Undoing History Through Performance*. However, Magelssen's work is inundated with theater performance commentaries and focuses mainly on the technical performance of the interpretation itself, integrating intricacies of Augustus Boal and his *Theater of the Oppressed*. While this is an important and interesting perspective, my study addresses second person interpretation on a different theoretical plane, calling on sources that fall outside of the historical site and museum genre. Through my research I have found that living history sites and historical museums alike can learn from outside sources, therefore breaking the mold of stagnant living history and museum practices.

## Chapter II: Defining Modes of Interpretation

To introduce second-person interpretation sufficiently, I must first examine its evolution from preexisting forms. Stephen Eddy Snow gives an interesting account of the history of interpretation by focusing on the transformation that took place during the late 1960s at Plimouth Plantation, a living history site dedicated to representing seventeenth century colonial life. As a former interpreter at Plimouth Plantation and a current critic and author on the subject, Snow gives a unique perspective on the organization's primitive modes of interpretation, describing the guides and hostesses who responded to visitors' inquiries: "They were dressed in Pilgrim costumes—stereotypical polyester versions with starched white collars and cuffs and the historically incorrect but traditional buckled shoes and hats..."<sup>7</sup> The misinformed guides would then answer questions from the visitor about the re-created scene onto which they were looking. Oftentimes, living history sites set up a hodge-podge of re-created objects within a reconstructed building, staged with decapitated and limbless uniformed mannequins. The guides at Plimouth Plantation recited the information that was given to them by curators and very rarely ventured off script. Snow includes the account of Carolyn Travers, a fellow interpreter at Plimouth Plantation in the 1960s: "the house in which you are standing represents the home of Governor William Bradford, who was the second governor of the Old Colony, and if I may direct your attention to the tableau on your left..."<sup>8</sup> The effect was extremely passive and offered no possibility for visitor interaction, unless you count the proverbial "stepping back in time" that is so abundant on living history sites' advertisements. Staff

<sup>7</sup> Snow, Stephen Eddy. *Performing the Pilgrims: A Study of Ethnohistorical Role-Playing at Plimouth Plantation*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993. (30)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

referred to this method as the “old-style” of interpretation; however, it can be compared easily to modern third-person interpretation.

### **Third Person Interpretation**

Costumed guides and recited monologues make contemporary third-person interpretation similar to Plimouth Plantation’s “old-style”. Yet, the majority of sites that employ this method today use somewhat different techniques. Heritage Network Atlantic, a professional development association of museums in Canada, defines third-person interpretation as a method by which “interpreters dress in period appropriate clothing, but do not pretend they are living in the past. Third person interpreters speak to visitors from a modern point of view.”<sup>9</sup> The method is extremely popular and can be witnessed at many of today’s living history sites such as Colonial Williamsburg and Old Sturbridge Village (Sturbridge, MA) among others, for example.

As mentioned before, third-person interpretation is not unlike that of a historic house tour with visitors crowding around a single interpreter and passively listening to what happened in a specific room. In regards to living history sites, however, third-person interpreters usually conduct this method in craft stations. In other words, visitors walk into a craft shop set in the appropriate time period while costumed interpreters demonstrate a specific trade. Blacksmithing, printing, and cobbling are among the more popular trades, but a wide range of examples can exist. Typically, visitors are restrained from venturing into the performance area by a barricade decorated with informative panels that explain further details of the specific craft. Consequently, the visitor becomes merely an observer and exists in a passive state of learning. The act of performing a

<sup>9</sup> [www.heritagenetworkatlantic.ca/living\\_history.htm](http://www.heritagenetworkatlantic.ca/living_history.htm). Accessed January 2007.

specific trade forces visitors to concentrate on the action necessary in completing the task rather than how the action fits into the larger picture of history. James Deetz, Assistant Director at Plymouth Plantation during the 1970s illustrated the technique's shortcomings, "citing that the existential futility and meaninglessness of repetitive demonstrations...was bad for staff morale"<sup>10</sup> Although he or she can relate the past to the present via the techniques of the interpreter thus creating a mild sense of relevancy, more than likely the visitor leaves the site with little thought to the modern world, except for maybe a silent "thank you" to the powers that be that allowed him or her to exist in a world full of modern conveniences.

Although this is the typical third-person interpretation, variations of the method exist that incorporate aspects of second-person interpretation. For instance, during a recent trip to Colonial Williamsburg in the summer of 2006, I participated in a tour entitled, "The Other Half Tour" which focused exclusively on African Americans and their roles within colonial society in 1770. The guide conducted the one-hour tour without costume and, for the most part, addressed us in the third person. However, at several moments during the tour, our guide pulled audience members from the group and asked if they would pretend as if they were African American slaves and created hypothetical situations for the visitors to answer. Furthermore, at the conclusion of the tour, the guide asked the group if they had been slaves, which side would they take upon the onset of the Revolutionary War, the Colonists or the British? On one hand, if visitors sided with the British, they had to fight in the army; on the other hand, if they were to take sides with the Colonists, they would remain slaves. As our tour guide stepped back,

<sup>10</sup> Magelssen, Scott. "This Is A Drama. You Are Characters: The Tourist as Fugitive Slave in Conner Prairie's 'Follow the North Star.'" *Theatre Topics* 16.1 (2006) 23.



our group split in half and each briefly defended their contrasting viewpoints. The whole process lasted approximately ten minutes and, before we knew it, we were melting away into greater Colonial Williamsburg amidst a throng of tri-cornered hats.

In this instance, third-person interpretation demonstrates its flexibility in providing the visitor with an opportunity to create a more interactive and educational experience. I felt as if the scenario opened the mindset for the visitor to discuss historical events and time periods in a safe environment without the condescending eye of the ever present and omniscient interpreter. The experience allowed visitors to assert their own opinions on the historical material. Yet, does this variation of third-person interpretation generate the necessary relevance to contemporary issues within the visitor? Does the barrier between past and present still exist? Although the technique encourages visitors to become participants within a controversial historical time frame, the program's inability to immerse the visitor completely, in addition to the brief amount of time designated to interaction and discussion, limits its possibilities as an effective tool in provoking effective civic engagement.

### **First Person Interpretation**

Visitor participation is an essential ingredient in creating relevance. However, if this component is misused, it has the unfortunate effect of producing mixed results. Living history sites that incorporate first-person interpretation need to pay continual close attention as to how it affects their visitors, as it basically forces them to interact with interpreters in a historical time frame. Heritage Atlantic Network again provides a common definition and is as follows: "interpreters portray a person from the past (either a real or composite character)...[and] refer to the past in the present tense and avoid

breaking character.”<sup>11</sup> Although there are different variations of this presentation such as the “my time/your time“ technique in which interpreters acknowledge the existence of the visitor’s modern time period while comparing it to their ‘own’ time period, and “ghost interpretation“ in which interpreters confront their visitors in the present, I will be referring only to the standard form mentioned above.<sup>12</sup> In extreme cases, found at Plimouth Plantation, for example, interpreters speak to the visitor in the historic dialect and refuse to acknowledge any questions that have modern day implications. Snow gives us a perfect example of this technique as he notes, “one of the questions visitors frequently ask upon entering a re-created Pilgrim house is: ‘Where’s your television?’ One inventive actor/historian used to respond ‘Oh, indeed, our elders oftentimes ‘tells a vision.’ Is that what you mean, sir?’”<sup>13</sup> To a visitor unaccustomed to such a technique, the effect can be frustrating and extremely cumbersome. However, if a visitor decides to ‘play along’ with the interpreters, even if unintentionally, it can be a rewarding educational experience. Snow also gives a clear example of how first-person interpreters can include a visitor without their knowledge of doing so. In the following scenario, a woman visitor tries to record an interpreter who is playing the role of Jonathan Brewster, the son of the famous colonist William Brewster:

#### Woman Visitor

(putting a long antenna-like, professional field microphone near Jonathan’s head in order to record this conversation)

I hope you’ve no objection to my using this.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Accessed January 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Roth, Stacy F. *Past into Present: Effective Techniques for First-Person Historical Interpretation*. Chapel Hill: UP of North Carolina, 1998. (14-15)

<sup>13</sup> Snow, Stephen Eddy Snow. *Performing the Pilgrims: A Study of Ethnohistorical Role-Playing at Plimouth Plantation*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993. (192)

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Jonathan Brewster

Well, I was just wonderin' if this were a sign of some sort...you're welcome to carry whatever you like hereabouts. Unless it's a cross... We'll not tolerate that.

Woman Visitor

Why?

Jonathan Brewster

That's a...sort of superstition and we do not allow that here.

Woman Visitor

---

... What's wrong with the cross?

---

Jonathan Brewster

It's some issues which have come up with the Church of England folks—they don't see the cross anywhere in our meeting house and they say we must put one up before they would go to worship there. There's nothing in the scripture that says you should in anyway worship before the cross. They're making too much of it. That's where it seems to be a sign of danger of it.<sup>14</sup>

Here, a seemingly innocuous action by the visitor provokes the interpreter into a diatribe on the religious belief system of early colonists. Although some visitors find this method educational and amusing, many do not, leaving critics to disagree on its overall effectiveness.

In her work, *Past into Present: Effective Techniques for First-Person Historical Interpretation*, Stacy Roth takes a positive approach to the subject as she illustrates the method's emphasis on visitor participation: "[Visitors] are presented with a less pedantic version of the 'facts' as they roam at will and ask questions, fitting together pieces of the puzzle."<sup>15</sup> While this may be true, the technique places a heavy reliance on the visitor's choice to participate. In other words, if the visitor is unwilling to participate or is

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Roth, Stacy F. *Past into Present: Effective Techniques for First-Person Historical Interpretation*. Chapel Hill: UP of North Carolina, 1998. (27)

confused about a particular issue, the experience can fail miserably, thus leaving visitors on their own to make critical connections. After speaking with several visitors on a recent trip to Old Sturbridge Village where third person interpretation is the primary method, I discovered that many of their experiences with first person interpretation at sites such as Colonial Williamsburg coincided were filled with feelings of frustration and disparagement.

The National Park Service recognizes these characteristics within first-person interpretation and habitually discourages against its use. For example, The Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Draft Living History Program Guidelines specifically opposes performing in the first-person while publicly supporting its counterpart:

First person interpretation is discouraged. In the vast majority of cases, third person interpretation is the most comfortable and effective form of interpretation for the visitor...First person scenarios and vignettes may be used only with the permission of the park staff. In such instances, a third person introduction or conclusion is required to help visitors understand the context of the impression.<sup>16</sup>

This excerpt introduces an interesting alternative to first-person interpretation at historic sites and is practiced by a unique historical educational charity located in Britain. The History Reenactment Workshop routinely offers interpretative services at historical houses in Britain and accompanies its first-person interpreters with third-person guides dressed in distinctive red tee shirts. In this instance, third-person interpreters can offer

<sup>16</sup> Day, Melinda and John King. *Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Draft Living History Program Guidelines*. (3)

assistance to visitors who need further explanation of the historical reenactment or who wish to understand how it was contrived through research.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this alternative method, however, there is still little room for associating the historical events and time periods with modern day circumstances. In both the standard and hybrid first-person interpretational form mentioned above, visitors are participants only in a physical state of being and neglect the incorporation of deeper emotional connections. I believe sites that immerse their visitors not only physically, but also emotionally within a simulated historical time frame, in a method best described as second person interpretation, are able to create for their visitors a better understanding of past emotions and thoughts, therefore creating empathy and an easier transition from past to present. As a result, visitors are able to become aware of similar contemporary issues. Once this awareness is established, participants are then primed for a constructive and fruitful discussion that, with extended effort, can revolutionize existing social dilemmas.

### **Second Person Interpretation**

Modes of interpretation function, in some cases, like foreign language class instruction, the interpreters at living history sites are the teachers and visitors are their pupils. The foreign language, in this case, is that of history. Third person interpretation is comparable to both teacher and student speaking their native tongues while learning about the foreign language. While pupils are lectured on the foreign grammatical usages and colloquialisms, they are not experiencing it for themselves, thus creating a significant learning barrier. In first person interpretation, only the teacher speaks in the foreign

<sup>17</sup> Robertshaw, Andrew. *"A Dry Shell of the Past": Living History and the Interpretation of Historic Houses*. Association for Heritage Interpretation. The History Reenactment Workshop (3)

language while the students, on the other hand, continue in their native tongue. Although the students hear the language, they do not participate themselves and are unable to create the pivotal link between the two languages. Second person interpretation allows both the teacher and her pupils to communicate collectively in the foreign language, thus creating the immersion technique that continues to be the prevailing methodology in modern foreign language classrooms.

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Second person interpretation can be an extremely effective tool in learning environments as it promotes the fundamental philosophy of learning by doing. Roger C. Schank, founder of the Institute for the Learning Sciences at Northwestern University, illustrates the usefulness of the technique by documenting an example of one of his undergraduate students, David Geller. Here, Geller denounces the common practice of lecturing in the classroom and instead promotes an active participatory learning experience, one that he experienced at a local hospital. Geller's experience closely resembles second person interpretation, as he is an active participant within his designated learning environment:

I learned not only about medicine and emergency treatment... but I also learned about life. I learned about people, their fears, their beliefs, and their pain. I learned how to deal with people and how to talk to them, not as individuals on the street, but rather as the disoriented and extremely frightened people they often are during an emergency.<sup>18</sup>

By actively participating in the specific environment, Geller's capacity of learning exists on two distinct levels: first, he learns about concrete medical procedures that he can later replicate physically, secondly and more importantly, he experiences emotional

<sup>18</sup> Geller, David. Compiled by Roger C. Shanck. Taken from the Engines for Education website, <http://www.engines4ed.org/hyperbook/nodes/NODE-121-pg.html>. Accessed 26 March 2007.

connections and empathy to the patients that allowed him to understand comprehensively what they are going through as emergency room attendees. In the same manner, emergent methods of second person interpretation at living history sites utilize the physical experience in a secondary technique in order to meet the primary objective of generating emotional bonds and empathy to the historical culture they are simulating.

Traditionally, however, second person interpretation has been somewhat limiting in its methodology due to its emphasis on physical reenactment. In its most simplistic form, living history sites allow visitors to re-enact a specific historical activity using re-created objects. For example, visitors can try their hand at candle dipping, playing period games or butter churning. More advanced methods put participants in the actual historical environment as witnessed at Alcatraz, the notorious island-prison, where participants are invited to experience one minute in a locked and darkened cell. Administrators see such activities as opportunities for visitors to become more interactive in the simulated historical time frame, more so than they would if they were using first or third person interpretation. While this may be true, many sites have allowed such activities to transform into “edutainment“, the current buzzword that combines both education and entertainment. To illustrate this occurrence, I provide a website advertisement from Howell Living History Farm (Titusville, NJ) as it promote its annual Ice Harvesting event: “Visitors help farmers cut, chop and shave ice, fill an ice house, and make ice cream from 10:00am to 4:00pm. Visitors also join the harvest crew on the frozen pond and take a turn using an ‘ice saw’”<sup>19</sup> Although they encourage visitors to experience an interactive and memorable historical experience, such programs place an unnecessary

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.howellfarm.org/calendar/ice\\_harvest/ice\\_harvest.htm](http://www.howellfarm.org/calendar/ice_harvest/ice_harvest.htm). Accessed March 2007.

emphasis on physical reenactment and subsequent entertainment, making it virtually impossible to forego the comparison to the militaristic reenactments epitomized by the thousands of Civil War re-enactors who adorn battlefields each year.

John Brewer, professor of history at California Institute of Technology, demonstrates the notion of neglecting emotional connections and empathy in favor of physical action in his characterization of militaristic reenactments: “Re-enactors typically fight battles, rehearse rituals, etc... They are about doing things, not thinking things.”<sup>20</sup> If you have ever witnessed or have been a part of one of these martial reenactments, it is easy to understand Brewer’s logic of the emphasis of physical performance and tangible objects. Participants seem to be in constant competition with one another over authentic representation and frequently disregard the educational purpose of the reenactment altogether. Jay Anderson, the contemporary living history authority and author of *The Living History Sourcebook*, among other notable works, gives a humorous example of such trivialization:

...at a reenactment of a battle on World War II’s Eastern Front, the competition got pretty rough—not between the Germans and the Russians, but between the authentics and the super-authentics. The latter group included a West Point professor who awed his associates by producing, at the appropriate moment, a packet of Nazi toilet paper.<sup>21</sup>

While it may serve as an amusing anecdote, this example demonstrates the growing tendencies of not only independent re-enactors, but also of traditional second person interpretative programs at living history sites in the aforementioned forms of candle

<sup>20</sup> Brewer, John. “Reenactment and Neo-Realism“ The Australian National University. [www.anu.edu/hrc/research\\_platforms/Re-Enactment/papers/html](http://www.anu.edu/hrc/research_platforms/Re-Enactment/papers/html). (4)

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, Jay. *The Living History Sourcebook*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1985. (339)



dipping and butter churning. Yet, instead of following this stagnant physical-based ethos, several living history sites are implementing a philosophy that is best characterized by the twentieth century British philosopher and historian, R.G. Collingwood. By incorporating techniques that personifies his radical theory, such programs are beginning to emphasize historical thought over historical physical performance.

Fundamentally, R.G. Collingwood describes the act of studying history as educating oneself on the history of thought. In other words, one cannot simply comprehend history by focusing on important facts and figures alone, but rather by focusing on the preliminary thoughts that provoked such important fact and figures to occur.<sup>22</sup> Reenactment, according to Collingwood, is the key to understanding such historical thoughts: “But how does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it can be done: by re-thinking them in his own mind.”<sup>23</sup> While this may be a difficult concept to grasp at first attempt, it describes nothing more than the logical steps taken by a detective in a typical murder case, following the thought process of the proposed murderer in order to discover the ultimate truth. Robert Bain and Jeffrey Mirel, in their article entitled “Re-enacting the Past: Using R.G. Collingwood at the Secondary Level”, adamantly stress this technique’s importance and, simultaneously, even if unintentionally, further Collingwood’s viewpoint towards second person living history practice: “We dehumanize the past whenever we ignore the thought processes that led to these actions...For Collingwood, to do the job right means totally immersing yourself in the past and asking questions that are relevant to those

<sup>22</sup> Collingwood, R.G. *Autobiography*, 110. Taken from Robert Bain and Jeffrey Mirel, “Re-enacting the Past: Using R.G. Collingwood at the Secondary Level.” *History Teacher*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (May, 1982), pp. 332.

<sup>23</sup> Collingwood, R.G. *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946. (215)

times.”<sup>24</sup> Living history sites that attempt to utilize this technique, such as Conner Prairie and The Menare Foundation, do so by allowing participants not only to relive physical characteristics of the past, but also to create emotional connections and empathy towards the simulated historic culture.

By inviting participants to assume the role of a historic culture through this immersion technique, visitors are able to fill in the gaps of minority representation that has plagued living history sites since their creation. Take for example, Colonial Williamsburg: few African American interpreters exist at the site itself, despite the fact that 50 percent of Williamsburg’s population in 1770 was African American.<sup>25</sup> A member of Colonial Williamsburg’s African American Interpretation and Presentation department describes the effect:

You can talk about that black 50 percent of the population all you want, but remember, these visitors are in a museum where what they see tells the story. Until they see that half the people in costume on the street are black, it’s not going to sink in how many blacks there were here in 1770.<sup>26</sup>

Colonial Williamsburg’s 1999 “Enslaving Virginia” program, which simulated a 1775 environment as seen through the eyes of enslaved African-Americans, sought to challenge such historical discrepancies. This program allowed visitors to assume briefly the role of slaves and encounter actual emotions via realistic interpreters with realistic weapons. White interpreters would rapidly descend upon a group of role-playing visitors congregating around a tree, an act deemed illegal in the latter years of the eighteenth

<sup>24</sup> Bain, Robert and Jeffrey Mirel. “Re-Enacting the Past: Using R.G. Collingwood at the Secondary Level.” *History Teacher*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (May, 1982), pp. 336.

<sup>25</sup> Gable, Eric; Richard Handler and Anna Lawson. “On the Uses of Relativism: Fact, Conjecture, and Black and White Histories at Colonial Williamsburg”. *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Nov 1992) pp.795

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 794.

century. While interpreters barked orders and snarled demands, participants quickly began generating true emotions which, in turn, sparked a connection to contemporary issues. Pam Redmond, an African-American visitor who participated in the program, made the connection almost immediately: “That’s still illegal..Five blacks on a corner right now—that’s grounds for arrest in most places, or at least investigation.”<sup>27</sup> Although the program utilized physical reenactment via the white interpreters, its usage was minimal and practiced only by staff members, even allowing participants to remain in their own twentieth-century attire. The emphasis on cognitive reenactment, or the psychological replacing of the mind, in place of physical reenactment allowed visitors to make valuable connections to the present while learning about the past. Although physical reenactment plays a substantial role in producing visitor relevance, it is cognitive reenactment that serves as the primary vehicle in making such connections and in generating productive discourse on issues such as modern day race relations. The combination of physical and mental reenactment produces maximum participation within the visitor, something void in both first and third person interpretation.

It is within this maximum visitor participation that civic engagement emerges. In the following chapter, I will expand upon civic engagement and describe its components as it relates to museum learning. I will offer examples that are presently used within the museum field and ultimately introduce the question as to whether or not civic engagement is possible within the field of living history using second person interpretation.

<sup>27</sup> Eggen, Dan. “A Taste of Slavery Has Tourists Up in Arms; Williamsburg’s New Skits Elicit Raw Emotions.” *Washington Post*, 7 July 1999.

### Chapter III: Defining Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is a difficult word to define as it has many variations and takes several forms. The American Psychological Association defines civic engagement as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern... [Civic engagement] can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy.”<sup>28</sup> Running the risk of redundancy, civic engagement describes nothing more than an actively engaged and involved citizen. This being said, it is important to consider the techniques that provoke active citizen involvement. At the forefront of these techniques is constructive dialogue between two parties.

Dialogue is an extremely important component in understanding complex and emotional issues put forth by living history sites and museums in general as it enables participants to hear multiple perspectives, thus diversifying the participant’s established notions on the subject at hand in an atmosphere of objectivity.<sup>29</sup> Daniel Yankelovich, contemporary sociologist, reiterates this belief in his work, *Magic of Dialogue*, and discusses this medium’s effectiveness in providing a deeper understanding on divisive issues:

[Dialogue] attempts... to even out inequalities in levels of information about the issue, experience in public forums, and real or perceived positions of power or authority. It encourages empathy by inviting multiple perspectives to the table and supporting their expression, thus facilitating a greater understanding of others’

<sup>28</sup> Carpini, Michael Delli. Director, Public Policy, The Pew Charitable Trust. <<http://www.apa.org/ed/slce/civicengagement.html>> Accessed 16 May 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Yankelovich, Daniel. *Magic of Dialogue*. (Schaffer, Barbara Bacon. *Giving Voice: A Role for Museums in Civic Dialogue*, 2002.) 2.

viewpoints. Through these and other means, it seeks to build a climate of trust and safety.<sup>30</sup>

Yankelovich describes what several progressive historical museums have already discovered by implementing this conversational technique known as civic dialogue within their regularly scheduled curriculum. It is within these conversational sessions that new ideas are born as well as old ideas proliferated.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum (New York City, NY) has taken on the initiative as the forerunner in this genre and routinely offers a post-tour civic dialogue program entitled *Kitchen Conversations*. The program is designed to educate visitors not only on the historical aspects of immigration, tenement housing and its associated deplorable living characteristics, but also on its relevance to current issues such as overcrowding, welfare issues and modern day residential building codes. After a tour of the tenement complex, docents lead visitors into a tenement kitchen complete with mismatched chairs and gently coax visitors into an open conversation beginning with their own personal experiences. By addressing and discussing these pivotal issues firsthand, the museum raises significant awareness and provides the first step in resolving such issues. According to the Institute for International Mediation and Conflict Resolution, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the use of peaceful conflict resolution techniques, the result is exceedingly effective as visitors, “gain new perspectives on contemporary questions by looking at how they were answered in the past.”<sup>31</sup> The program is the brain-child of current director Ruth Abram and was developed out of a unique experiment in which the museum invited members of the

<sup>30</sup> Schaffer, Barbara Bacon. *Giving Voice: A Role for Museums in Civic Dialogue*, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.iimcr.org/assets/images/uploads/Lower%20East%20Side.pdf>. Accessed February 2007.

garment industry and human rights activists to participate collectively in the program in order to demonstrate the site's relevance to modern day immigration issues as well as to sweatshops in other parts of the world. Liz Seveenکو, vice-president of interpretation, describes the program's technique and its associated effectiveness:

First, by discussing current issues in the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we created a sense of distance that allowed certain conversations to happen that would have been too difficult otherwise. Second...we brought difficult abstract issues down to a human level, a scale on which they could be productively discussed. Third, we brought people together in an emotional setting for dialogue...shifting people out of their normal, rigid, stances and allowing them to look at these issues in a new light.<sup>32</sup>

The connection between past and present was and is currently astonishing and as a testament to the program's effectiveness, many organizations within the garment industry have encouraged their staff members to attend in order to alleviate similar historical atrocities.

Using a similar technique but in a different environment, The Wing Luke Asian Museum (Seattle, WA) recently unveiled its *New Dialogue Initiative*, designed to "proactively initiate dialogues around key issues and...[to] bring new levels of understanding through unique and creative presentations."<sup>33</sup> The program is dedicated to promoting community awareness by providing underrepresented voices for Asian-Pacific Americans using the museum's space and collections as its facilitator. A recent exhibition entitled *Women and Violence* (April 22, 2005 through September 4, 2005) demonstrated this notion as it focused on the issue of violence towards women in the Asian-Pacific

<sup>32</sup> Seveenکو, Liz. *The Power of Place: How Historic Sites Can Engage Citizens in Human Rights Issues*. Minneapolis: The Center for Victims of Torture, 2004. (8-9)

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.wingluke.org/dialogue.htm> Accessed February 2007.

American community. A description of the exhibition provided by the Washington State Human Rights Commission is as follows: “Addressing historical and root causes, types of violence and abuse, and community response and action, this exhibition was created to present the issues objectively and provide a space for dialogue and feedback.”<sup>34</sup>

Supplementary discussion groups on the violence and abuse of women were held in the museum throughout the duration of the exhibition, allowing visitors to become active participants in the museum and in the community campaign against domestic violence.

Thus, The Wing Luke Asian Museum is different from The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in subject and technique, however, the goals are identical: to create awareness on a particular human rights issue through visitor participation using dialogue as its catalyst. By examining these two examples of contemporary history museums, we begin to see that it is possible to engage visitors on a more advanced level of participation. In fact, the average visitor seems to be pushing for a more interactive experience and appears tired of the passivity of linear exhibitions with bloated wall texts associated with conventional museums. Thus, the question becomes, if this civic engagement is possible within the museum realm, can it work within the field of living history using second-person interpretation as its catalyst?

In order for second person interpretive living history programs to be successful in promoting civic engagement, they must be cautious in their techniques. In the summer of 1994, Colonial Williamsburg (Williamsburg, VA) simulated a 1770 slave auction, incorporating several African-American interpreters as they were sold into slavery. This short scene forced visitors to experience the harsh realities of colonial life as they

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.hum.wa.gov/RelatedNews/womenandviolence.htm>. Accessed March 2007.

meandered through the tranquil town setting. Although there were some positive reviews of the experience, the majority of evaluations tended to denounce the act as insensitive, describing it as a, “trivialization and degradation of African American history.”<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, acts of protest led by members of the NAACP and members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference forced administrators to pull the program from its curriculum. While it certainly provoked community awareness and engagement, Colonial Williamsburg failed to engage their visitors in positive civic engagement, neglecting to use post experience exploratory and constructive discussions that would have brought visitor concerns to attention. Additionally, this discussion would have allowed visitors to hear viewpoints from other participants, possibly calming the situation and transforming the program from a national embarrassment to a powerful educational experience.

The Colonial Williamsburg slave auction debacle is a good example of how living history programs can have a powerful effect on its visitors, whether it is positive or negative. In the following chapter, I will describe two examples of second person interpretive living history programs that have equally powerful results. While both programs show promise in creating and sustaining civic engagement, I argue that, ultimately, they would benefit from the kind of sustained dialogue found outside the museum and living history world.

<sup>35</sup> Eggen, Dan. “A Taste of Slavery Has Tourists Up In Arms” *Washington Post* 7 July 1999. (2)



## Chapter IV: Living History Site Case Studies

### Introduction

Both Conner Prairie and The Menare Foundation offer progressive examples of second person interpretation by allowing the visitor to assume the role of a slave while experiencing its associative dehumanizing elements. Programs focusing on slavery have been rare and have been historically met with resistance because of the continual refusal to acknowledge such a dark period in our nation's history. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, author of Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory, describes this historical denial as “social forgetting”<sup>36</sup>. According to Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, in their collective work Representations of Slavery, many sites that address slavery do so by minimizing its significance, referring to slavery in the passive voice, or simply denying its existence in, using a term the authors coined, “symbolic annihilation.”<sup>37</sup> However, the following case studies are welcome exceptions because of their desires to concentrate fully, without deception, on the brutalities and social misunderstandings that was nineteenth century slavery. As a result, Conner Prairie’s “Follow the North Star” has won several national awards for its innovative approach to history while The Menare Foundation’s “Underground Railroad Immersion Experience”, currently in its piloting phase, has captured a national audience and has received high marks from its participants as well as nationally recognized humanitarians such as Oprah Winfrey.

<sup>36</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, Iwona. Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994.

<sup>37</sup> Eichstedt, Jennifer L. and Stephen Small. Representations of Slavery. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002.

Yet despite this widespread appeal, however, the full potential of both programs is not realized. As I will demonstrate, although both programs deliver a powerful educational experience, they exist only as a means to an end. In other words, both programs display characteristics that prohibit participants from generating a complete connection from the past to the present, such as an overemphasis on physical action in the first case study and the possible elimination of the essential post experience conversational session in the second case study

### **Conner Prairie’s “Follow the North Star”**

In 1998, most living history sites were limited in their interpretative programs, only offering first and third person experiences. Programs focusing on the issue of slavery were still in their developmental stages, as witnessed four years earlier with the slave auction debacle at Colonial Williamsburg. In that particular instance, visitors were not prepared to witness such a horrible scene: African-American interpreters being sold like cattle as white interpreters dehumanized them. While it may have been a historically correct scene, many visitors were outraged and expressed their disapproval by staging protests that ultimately helped usher the program out of Colonial Williamsburg’s interpretive curriculum. Despite its cancellation, however, important revelations were made concerning the role of the interpreters who played the slaves. Christy Coleman Matthews, then chair of the African American Interpretation Department at Colonial Williamsburg and participant within the program, describes the effect: “the interpreters [found] the experience of immersing themselves in characters to be psychologically and

emotionally more draining than their regular job of historical interaction.”<sup>38</sup> By placing themselves into the roles of slaves, both physically and psychologically, the interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg were better able to understand such a dark moment in our nation’s history.

Conner Prairie, a living history site dedicated to the interpretation of nineteenth century Indiana farm life, seemingly created a similar experience to that of the Colonial Williamsburg interpreters and their powerful emotional and psychological connections to slavery when it debuted their second person interpretive program, “Follow the North Star”, in 1998. The stage for the program is the Underground Railroad, a historical network of locations throughout the northern half of the country that catered to runaway slaves in their flight towards the “free” land of Canada. Escaped slaves typically traveled at night to avoid detection and tracked their geographic location using the stationary North Star as a natural compass. Conner Prairie’s “Follow the North Star” program, with its suggestive title, replicates this aspect of history and invites visitors to assume the role of a slave, coming into contact with approximately forty staff members including, according to Conner Prairie’s website, “a belligerent transplanted Southerner, a reluctantly helpful farm wife, a slave hunter motivated by financial rewards, a Quaker family and a free black family,”<sup>39</sup> all the while negotiating a series of points throughout rough terrain under the cover of darkness and after the site’s regular closing hours.

Preliminary conditioning for this type of program is essential in creating a positive educational environment. A few weeks prior to the actual engagement of the

<sup>38</sup> Magelssen, Scott. “Making History in the Second Person: Post-touristic Considerations for Living Historical Interpretation” *Theatre Journal* 58 (2006) pg. 296.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.connerprairie.org/events/fns.aspx>. Accessed 16 April 2007.

program, Conner Prairie mails each participant a liability waiver explaining the physical dangers of the upcoming event. John Beeler, a graduate student of U.S. History at Indiana University and participant in “Follow the North Star” in November 2005, gives a description of the waiver: “the accompanying letter warned of abusive language and grueling physical conditions, including a mile walk with occasional running.”<sup>40</sup> This information is repeated once participants are at the facility on the night of the program. However, “Follow the North Star” does not officially begin until participants are seated in a large room where they watch an eight minute video that introduces the second person experience and also gives a historical reference point: “Your ancestors came to America in crowded, disease-ridden ships...you are owned by Joshua Taylor...knowing that this is a free state, you see this as your chance to escape.”<sup>41</sup> After the video, a Conner Prairie employee gives each participant a white headband to tie around his or her forehead if the program becomes too emotionally difficult. The flagging of an individual renders him or her invisible to the interpreters and, in effect, denies the participant the opportunity of experiencing the full range of emotions that is necessary in producing a successful experience.

In terms of generating a full range of emotions, “Follow the North Star” does an exceptional job. Throughout the experience, interpreters treat participants as if they were slaves, creating a believable environment of degradation and dehumanization that is associated with the institution of slavery. Scott Magelssen, Assistant Professor of Theatre

<sup>40</sup> Beeler, John. “History as Simulation: Conner Prairie’s “Follow the North Star”. [www.beelerspace.com](http://www.beelerspace.com). Accessed 17 April 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Arts at Augustana College in Rock Island, IL, and participant within the program, gives an example of the harsh treatment to illustrate its realistic qualities:

After black-market traders lined us up by gender (“bucks” and “breeders”), they made us stack and restack firewood for several minutes—there was no logic to this task, just dehumanizing work... Some of us were singled out to yell ‘stack the wood’ and ‘pile it high’ to our companions. We were threatened to be shot.<sup>42</sup>

This particular experience serves to expose the brutal circumstances that original slaves were meant to endure and also, more importantly, to quickly push participants into the role-playing position. In most cases, participants quickly succumb to its effects. Jon Anderson, *Chicago Tribune* reporter, gives his own account of how the technique affected the program’s participants, as he describes “a woman behind me, I felt her grab the tips of my fingers... I didn’t even know what she looked like, but you had to connect with somebody. It’s important.”<sup>43</sup> Kara Archer, reporter from *Nuvo*, an online newsletter that caters to the Indiana community, and participant in the program, generated her own personal epiphany during this degradation process: “in that fleeting window of emotion, I understood something awful about slavery I hadn’t understood before, despite all I’ve learned about a time in our history when people were bred like cattle.”<sup>44</sup> This mental transformation by participants illustrates cognitive reenactment at its peak and demonstrates the program’s greatest asset.

Unfortunately, this understanding does not always evolve successfully, as in one instance of several middle-aged men and women giggling throughout the program and

<sup>42</sup> Magelssen, Scott. “‘This Is A Drama. You are Characters’: The Tourist as Fugitive Slave in Conner Prairie’s ‘Follow the North Star’” *Theatre Topics* 16.1 (2006) pg. 26

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, Jon. “On the Run with History in Indiana.” *Chicago Tribune* 22 Feb. 2004

<sup>44</sup> Archer, Karen. “It’s Intense: Follow the North Star Challenges Participant.” [www.nuvo.net](http://www.nuvo.net), 30 October 2002.

talking back to the interpreters.<sup>45</sup> The incident was minor; however, more significant occurrences have been known to happen. For instance, Archer describes one episode involving an elderly German Baptist woman and an interpreter at Conner Prairie: “one of the interpreters leaned down and got in her face, she reached out, took the cigar out of his mouth, broke it in half and walked away. Then she picked up a piece of wood, and she hit him with a log!”<sup>46</sup> Although it is amusing, this example demonstrates two important weaknesses in the program’s effectiveness. First, it introduces the idea that although participants are given fair warning about the intricacies of the program through liability waivers and an eight-minute video explaining the participant’s second person interpretive role, the digression into the mindset of a slave is short and immediate, thus catching many off guard. Conner Prairie assumes that its participants are already knowledgeable in this specific area of American history; therefore, they do not give sufficient background information necessary in producing an effective experience. Second, these outbursts demonstrate that a supplementary educational session is necessary after each experience in order to explain its historic significance. Throughout the event, participants follow a set course and are involved in several historic episodes such as the involvement of a helpful Quaker family or a run-in with a “wolf”, or slave-catcher. Each episode is a harrowing, educational experience and participants are expected to stay in character throughout its duration. This technique leaves little time to relate the occurring events as they happen to the participant’s contemporary time frame.

<sup>45</sup> Magelssen, Scott. “ ‘This Is A Drama. You are Characters’: The Tourist as Fugitive Slave in Conner Prairie’s ‘Follow the North Star’ ” *Theatre Topics* 16.1 (2006) pg. 29

<sup>46</sup> Elder, John. “It’s Intense: Follow the North Star Challenges Participant.” Kara Archer [www.nuvo.net](http://www.nuvo.net), 30 October 2002

The aforementioned situations could possibly be averted if organizers incorporated a short conversational session immediately following each historic episode. In this manner, participants would be able to realize the historical significance, as demonstrated by Anderson and Archer, and then would have the opportunity to discuss it openly with other participants. Instead, organizers hold a debriefing session at the program's conclusion. John Beeler, participant within the program, describes the session as a question and answer period with a Conner Prairie employee, in which they pose the following questions: "How did you feel when the slave-driver forced you to kneel? Were you happy when the Quakers offered food? How did it feel when you had to leave someone behind?"<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, these questions are good indicators of a successful experience as they primarily focus on a participant's feelings within the program, not necessarily their actions. Kara Archer describes what she took away from her experience:

If there is anything that I gleaned from participation in "Follow the North Star", it would be that it brought me to the realization that I have always related to the issue of slavery as an observer. I have been moved to tears by accounts of slavery, but I always saw slaves as beings separate from me. If slavery reduced these people to the value of the work they could do and the children they could produce, my perception of them reduced them to their value as symbols of misery, strength and survival.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, although these questions generate thoughtful answers, they are directed towards the participant's own past experiences in the program and their perception of slavery in a historical sense, neglecting to provide any future-oriented

<sup>47</sup> Beeler, John. "History as Simulation: Conner Prairie's "Follow the North Star". [www.beelerspace.com](http://www.beelerspace.com). Accessed 17 April 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Archer, Kara "It's Intense:"Follow the North Star Challenges Participant." [www.nuvo.net](http://www.nuvo.net), 30 October 2002.

discussion concerning present day issues related to slavery. Thus, it is up to participants to make the pivotal connection and to continue their educational experience.

These connections are not always made. Beeler describes one such instance: “when my group entered the discussion area at the end of the program, a chaperone asked one of her high schoolers quite seriously, ‘Did you have fun?’”<sup>49</sup> Here, the chaperone evidently neglected the entire purpose of the program and subsequently, degraded its educational value by comparing it to a source of entertainment.

In fact, this misinterpretation of “Follow the North Star” is quite common. Michelle Evans, one of the program’s creators and directors, admits that many participants are not able to understand the educational significance, thus eliminating any possibility to connect the two time periods.<sup>50</sup> A quick look at the program’s outline gives significant indication of why this is the case. John Elder, lead interpreter at Conner Prairie, describes the program’s objectives and, in doing so, reveals significant issues: “It’s [the participant’s] goal to escape capture, to flee from their would-be masters, to find friends and to “Follow the North Star.”<sup>51</sup> In this sense, participants treat the experience almost as if it were a game or, using Evan’s own words, “as a historical capture-the-flag.”<sup>52</sup> This undeniable comparison to recreational sport highlights the dangers of focusing on physical reenactment to produce a concrete sense of relevancy to the participant. Without the aid of a supplementary discussion session that focuses on the

<sup>49</sup> Beeler, John. “History as Simulation: Conner Prairie’s “Follow the North Star”. [www.beelerspace.com](http://www.beelerspace.com). Accessed 17 April 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Elder, John. Taken from Kara Archer’s “It’s Intense: “Follow the North Star Challenges Participant.” [www.nuvo.net](http://www.nuvo.net), 30 October 2002.

<sup>52</sup> Evans, Michelle. Taken from John Beeler’s “History as Simulation: Conner Prairie’s “Follow the North Star”. [www.beelerspace.com](http://www.beelerspace.com). Accessed 17 April 2007.



relationship between the two time periods, “Follow the North Star” overestimates the ability of its participants and thus is not able to reach its full potential as a unique educational experience.

### **The Menare Foundation’s “Underground Railroad Immersion Experience”**

The following case study is similar to that of Conner Prairie in its objective, yet focuses more on cognitive reenactment. The Menare Foundation, according to its website, is a non-profit organization dedicated to, “the documentation, preservation, and restoration of Underground Railroad safe-houses and environments.”<sup>53</sup> Since its creation in 1996, The Menare Foundation has fervently worked to protect historical safe-houses as well as to develop educational initiatives centered on the Underground Railroad using interactive programs, lectures, publications, films, and study guides for educators and students.<sup>54</sup> Although the organization has no permanent physical structure, it is based out of Germantown, Maryland, the home of Anthony Cohen. The Menare Foundation is the brainchild of Cohen, an African-American historian whose personal relationship with his African ancestry led him to examine closely the route on which thousands of runaway slaves had traveled during the nineteenth century. Although history books and other sources of documentation gave Cohen a historical perspective, he was not satisfied and began to search for a more complete sense of understanding. Thus, in 1996, he set off on an 800 mile journey, from Maryland to Canada, in order to replicate the experiences on the Underground Railroad, following old escape routes and sleeping in old safe houses. As a result of the reenactment, Cohen felt that although he experienced what slaves must

<sup>53</sup> [www.menare.org](http://www.menare.org). Accessed 18 April 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

have gone through physically, he did not entirely replicate the accompanying emotions and began to search for a more immersive experience.

After a prolonged search, Cohen decided that he would re-enact the historic experience of Henry “Box” Brown. According to Cohen, Brown was a runaway “slave from Richmond, Va., who in March of 1849 was boxed up and shipped express to Philadelphia. He traveled for 26 hours by boat and train. After his box was turned upside down, he spent several agonizing hours on his head before being set free.”<sup>55</sup> Determined, Cohen replicated Brown’s voyage and stowed himself on a northbound Amtrak train. Despite nearly succumbing to heat exhaustion, Cohen succeeded in his mission, as he writes in his journal: “I open the trap door and rise from the box, thrusting my fists to the sky and turning my face to the sun. I think of Henry stepping from his crate onto free soil and finding himself no longer a slave. And for the first time ever, I think I understand what being free actually means.”<sup>56</sup> For Cohen, this experience was more than historical education. It was a chance to discover a true sense of who he actually was—genealogically, morally and spiritually.

The Menare Foundation’s “Underground Railroad Immersion Experience“ grew out of Cohen’s reenactment experiences and his search for simulated historic emotions. Specifically, however, it was Oprah Winfrey who advanced the idea and allowed it to come to fruition. In 1997, Winfrey had just bought the rights to Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, about a runaway slave and was going to play that role in an upcoming movie with the same title. Like many actors and actresses who want to immerse themselves into

<sup>55</sup> Cohen, Anthony. “A Walk on the Underground Railroad” *American Educator* Winter 2000-2001. [www.menare.org/Walk/UGRRArticle.htm](http://www.menare.org/Walk/UGRRArticle.htm). Accessed 18 April 2007.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

their characters in order to create a more believable onscreen performance, Winfrey wanted to do the same. After hearing about Cohen's walk to Canada and his unorthodox train traveling experience, Winfrey asked Cohen to create a totally immersive experience to give her a unique perspective into the life of a slave. Cohen obliged and created a two-day immersion experience complete with a recreated slave plantation, several determined interpreters, intense manual labor and constant mental anguish. Out of the two-day ordeal, which involved being blindfolded and moving small boulders, Winfrey managed to complete only seven hours before completely breaking down and quitting.

Despite cutting the program short, Winfrey acknowledged that the experience affected her deeply, touching upon a personal past that had long been forgotten. Upon her departure from the recreated plantation, Cohen asked if there was anything she would like to keep as a memento of her experience. At first, Winfrey had wanted the scarf with which she was blindfolded as a part of the program; however, after a couple of days, she refused to take it, commenting that her painful memories were enough.<sup>57</sup> For Winfrey, this experience allowed for a personal confrontation with her genealogical past, something she was told about, but never fully understood. Once she returned to her television series in 1998, Winfrey changed the format of her show to include her "Angel Network" that, according to its website, "mak[es] grants to organizations and operating projects in underserved communities that provide educational initiatives as well as assist[s] people in fulfilling basic human needs and regaining dignity."<sup>58</sup> In addition, she created a segment on her show entitled, *Remembering Your Spirit*, which focuses on self-reflection and improvement. Importantly, Winfrey acknowledges that her experiences on

<sup>57</sup> Cohen, Anthony. Personal Telephone Interview. 9 March 2007.

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.oprahangelnetwork.org/oan/About>. Accessed 19 April 2007.

the recreated slave plantation served as the catalyst in producing this civic contribution. As a result, Cohen saw extreme potential in this experiment and began planning a similar program that would cater to more participants and would create a similar concrete link between the past and the present.

The Menare Foundation piloted its program, entitled the “Underground Railroad Immersion Experience“ in November of 2006 with ten participants, ages 27 to 63. The program was similar to that of Winfrey’s; however, Cohen decided to tone down the physical components in order to concentrate more on generating more active emotions from the participants. Unlike Conner Prairie’s “Follow the North Star” program, in which the “conversion“ into slavery consisted only of an eight-minute video, the Menare Foundation’s tactics were much more cohesive and developed: participants were woken up at dawn at a retreat center several miles from the program’s location, given recreated nineteenth-century attire, blindfolded and provided a detailed explanation as to how they came to be slaves in their present situation. According to The Menare Foundation, each participant was a Northern free African-American who had never experienced slavery. Essentially, they were kidnapped and brought to a plantation to become slaves. In this manner, participants could see slavery from an outsider’s perspective, much like the slaves whom they are representing, had done. Although this method caters to the program’s participants, it also defines actual historical events. An 1836 Anti-Slavery almanac chronicles such an experience: “Peter John Lee, a free colored man of Westchester Co., N.Y., was kidnapped...and hurried away from his wife and children into slavery. One went up to shake hands with him, while the others were ready to use the gag and chain. . . . This is not a rare case. Many northern freeman have been enslaved, in

some cases under color of law.”<sup>59</sup> This method of conversion gives each participant a believable and intricate experience. Yet, more importantly, this technique removes the issue of a participant’s race and unifies all of them in a common bond.

While participants were blindfolded, they were taken to a recreated plantation and were immediately immersed into slave life. Jonathon Pitts, a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* and participant within the program, describes the first few moments of the immersion experience:

When you got out of the van, you held hands with the other slaves, feeling your way into the heart of some wooded area. They sat you down. You waited in the stillness... Two big hands gripped your face, tilted your head back, and felt your bone structure... Then the rules came, in [a] bellowing voice. “When you hear that bell in the morning, get yo’self up! Don’t let me come after you!” ... “You work from first sun to first dark, and when I blow the horn, you go in, not a moment sooner.”<sup>60</sup>

Participants soon found out that they would be working in the fields all day, partaking in chores similar to what original plantation slaves would have done: collecting firewood or cultivating the fields, for example. However, Cohen made certain that manual labor was not perceived as the main component of the experience. As an “invisible” overseer, Cohen remained at a distance, but would routinely give interpreters ideas to test the mental states of the participants. Pitts divulges information that explains Cohen’s technique: “when Andrea Kent, the actress playing Missus, tells [Cohen] that Howard Freney, a sixty-something black man, seems ‘very obedient,’ Cohen orders him chained to a tree.”<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h1554.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Pitts, Jonathon. “Living a Slave’s Life“ *Baltimore Sun* 4 February 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

As the title of the experience suggests, participants also engaged in an activity that simulated their escape into freedom. For Jonathon Pitts and his group, this simulation consisted of being led into the cellar of the main house, blindfolded once again and asked a series of questions about escaping. However, in an interview conducted for the *Baltimore Sun*, Cohen describes his ideal escape simulation, one that may or may not be completely logistical: “Depending on the size of the group, sometimes we [would] use bloodhounds on the journey out... So, people are actually traveling upstream in a creek at night being pursued by bloodhounds... A participant might sleep...in a cave as they’re challenged and pushed to their physical, mental and emotional limits to make it to freedom.”<sup>62</sup> Cohen places importance on the escape because it serves as a main component in the overall effectiveness of the program in its relationship to the present. In the same interview, Cohen eloquently stresses the importance of the experience and places significant emphasis on freedom: “ultimately, the experience is a metaphor for the quest for freedom, the quest for personal achievement [and] overcoming adversity.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, Cohen sees this experience as a bridge linking the past to the present, demonstrating the program’s ability to open the eyes of its participants in order to make important parallels to the issues that dominate their contemporary lives.

To ensure that participants receive this valuable lesson, Cohen incorporates an intense conversational workshop on the day following the experience. In the case of the piloted program, each participant reexamined his or her emotions throughout the program and was able to reflect on its impact. Several participants expressed a new perspective on

<sup>62</sup> Cohen, Anthony. Interview conducted by *Baltimore Sun*. 31 January 2007. [www.baltimoresun.com](http://www.baltimoresun.com). Accessed 19 April 2007.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

history, as Pitts describes the testimony of Gary Anderson, an African-American postal worker: “I always felt that we should have fought back more...or that more of us should have tried to escape.”<sup>64</sup> Several other participants made a connection between the constraints of slavery and the constraints of their modern lives. Pitts, again, offers a few examples illustrating this association: “One woman says she has always been terrified of giving up control, and it constricts her...Another man says he has wanted to leave his job for years but hasn’t done so, for fear of the uncertainty it would bring.”<sup>65</sup> This parallel between past and present is what Cohen seeks most. Much like Oprah Winfrey and her post-experience civic contributions, Cohen wanted the experience to strike a chord and to allow the participant to understand his or her own history in order to advance society. Cohen makes this sentiment clear in the *Baltimore Sun* interview: “We hope that people will go through the immersion and then go back to the world that they came from and challenge it and take it on in different ways.”<sup>66</sup> Although most participants cannot replicate the efforts of Winfrey, the experience empowers them to alter their own lives in a way that they see fit.

Cohen’s ultimate goal of altering a participant’s viewpoint on the essentials of freedom is admirable, linking both historical education and personal reflection; however, it seems as if there could be a greater good that comes out of such powerful reactions. For example, the program seems to neglect current situations around the world that have similar characteristics to nineteenth century slavery such as child labor and the presence

<sup>64</sup> Pitts, Jonathon. “Living a Slave’s Life” *Baltimore Sun* 4 February 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Cohen, Anthony. Interview conducted by *Baltimore Sun*. 31 January 2007. [www.baltimoresun.com](http://www.baltimoresun.com). Accessed 19 April 2007.

of sweatshops in developing countries. It seems as if Cohen relies too heavily on the participant to transform his or her inner self-reflective emotions to a more tangible civic contribution demonstrated by Oprah Winfrey. Most participants do not have the same luxuries as Winfrey; however, a possible alternative could be to link the immersion program with nonprofit organizations dedicated to similar interests such as the Human Rights Watch, which pledges to defend human rights worldwide. One possible scenario could be to hand out pamphlets at the conclusion of the workshop or to openly discuss related issues with a staff member of the chosen nonprofit organization. Yet, both of these scenarios rely on the continuation of the post-experience workshop, something that Cohen is currently struggling with as he makes changes to the program.

A phone interview with Cohen on March 13, 2007 revealed plans to drop the workshop altogether because of the amount of time dedicated to the actual reenactment, only offering it as an option for larger groups such as school functions or business retreats. The removal of the workshop could be detrimental to the success of the program as it simultaneously introduces a significant problem that living history sites have to address if organizers want to create powerful and lasting educational experiences. As Cohen witnessed, the presence of the post experience conversational workshop seemed to create a bridge from past to present within the participant, allowing him or her to create the necessary concrete relevancy. Sites that incorporate second person living history interpretation need to do so cautiously as not every participant will grasp the importance of the scenario and could possibly interpret the event in a different manner than originally intended (remember the 1994 Colonial Williamsburg slave auction?). Moderated



dialogue with a trained facilitator can help prevent such occurrences and should remain a pivotal component in “The Underground Railroad Experience”.

### **Conclusion**

After examining the strengths and weaknesses of both programs, it is apparent that second person interpretation can be a valuable tool in the living history catalog. However, its success is dependent on two important qualities: first, the cooperation and dedication of the participant is critical. Without the commitment of the individual, the experience fails miserably as the possibility of attaining cognitive reenactment and subsequent civic engagement becomes impossible. Second, the existence of a post-experience conversational session is a must. Here, participants can convey their personal feelings to other participants, thus igniting possible civic engagement. Yet, each of the aforementioned case studies contains elements of successful second person interpretive experiences, but ultimately falls short of their overall potential. As history museums are gravitating more towards fulfilling their social obligations, characterized by The Lower East Side Tenement Museum, perhaps it is time for living history sites to follow this example of the museum of conscience. But, is it possible for second person interpretive programming to produce such an engaged citizen? I believe that by looking outside the museum and historical site genre, living history sites can find new possibilities.

## **Chapter V: Going Outside of the Living History Site Genre**

### **Introduction**

By looking outside of the living history site environment, a new perspective on history emerges. No longer is the act of historical education the primary objective, but in its place is an emphasis on how history can affect the future through active civic engagement in the community on which the program is based. The following two case studies, The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project and the Mormon Youth Handcart Trek Reenactments, although each re-creating a specific moment in history, demonstrate this activist-oriented viewpoint and provide examples which living history sites might consider in creating a significant impact on both its visitor and the community at large.

### **The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project**

Over the course of eight days in rural eastern Kentucky 2004, John Malpede, a director of programs at Appalshop, a multi-disciplinary arts and education center, staged a massive reenactment of Senator Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 series of lectures as he gathered support for his bid for the presidency. Kennedy made twelve stops in eight communities and covered approximately 200 miles throughout his tour, focusing on the main concerns of eastern Kentuckians during that time: "the representation of marginalized populations in the national consciousness; the role of government in maintaining a quality-of-life safety net, and fostering sustainable economic development, educational and vocational advancement; ways to stem the out-migration of rural young people and the loss of natural resources; and the priorities of a government administration

engaged in a protracted war.”<sup>67</sup> Undoubtedly, many of the factors that shaped Kennedy and eastern Kentuckians in 1968 still remain in contemporary society in the forms of a struggling working-class, quality of public schools and most strikingly, the public responses to war in Iraq.

Malpede recognized these similarities and, over the course of four years, slowly developed a curriculum that not only focused on historical education, but more importantly, encouraged participants to relate personally to the historic material. When he trained his cast of local and amateur actors and actresses in rehearsal, Malpede began to see his vision form: “The rehearsal process went far beyond line practice, character development, and staging—cast and staff often engaged in extended dialogue about the facts presented in the script, what changed and what hadn’t since 1968, and current events in the region and the world.”<sup>68</sup> By the time he was ready to stage the reenactment, Malpede and his staff had incorporated within the program several conversational opportunities for the actors and audience members in order to create maximum participation. He even offered clothing advice for participants from costume director Brooke Stanton to enhance participants’ experiences. This change in costume was significant as it “solidified a kind of temporal community, a citizenship in the recreation that transcended individual differences—opening up a broader public space and encouraging deeper interactions.”<sup>69</sup> This slight physical change allowed participants to slip into the mindset of the 1960s and to be comfortable to include themselves within the project as 1968 citizens. Yet, by no means was it the extent of the reenactment process.

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.appalshop.org/kennedy/project/about.htm>. Accessed 22 February 2007.

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.rfkineky.org/library/how-it-went.htm>. Accessed 22 February 2007.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.rfkineky.org/library/what-happened.htm>. Page 2. Accessed 22 February 2007.

The reenactment itself lasted four days and covered the same 200 miles that Robert F. Kennedy had originally traveled. On the first day, a local cast recreated a field hearing from the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty, a 1968 testament to the poverty of the subjected region. This reenactment was held at a local church that stood next to where Kennedy originally held the meeting since that locale had been demolished several years prior. After the reenactment, participants drove an hour to the next site where Kennedy visited a local schoolhouse. Here, audience members were met with a multimedia presentation, including verbal interaction as well as a video documentary of Kennedy meeting students. Following the video footage, John Malpede read a letter sent by an eye-witness to the original event describing the interaction of Kennedy and several schoolchildren. This was followed by a moderated discussion led by former Kennedy aide, Peter Eldelman, which focused on “the changes in the community, and... the nature of rural poverty and hunger over the past thirty-five years.”<sup>70</sup>

The entire reenactment loosely followed this outline. Audience members traveled upwards of an hour to different stops and were met with thought-provoking programs: actors and actresses recreated Kennedy’s speeches from original transcripts. Their speeches were followed by intense discussions, sometimes held by community leaders and other times opened up as a roundtable environment to audience participation. Similarities from the past to the present were consistently made as demonstrated at the end of the first day of the reenactment when the re-enactor playing Kennedy responded to questions about views on the Vietnam War: “the response, taken from an RFK speech in Chicago the first week in February 1968, literally stunned the audience with its parallels

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

to the current situation, the war in Iraq.”<sup>71</sup> This response was one of the key moments within the reenactment that provided participants with a concrete sense of relevancy. As the Vietnam War played a significant role in the social and political scene in the 1960s, so has the war in Iraq in the present.

The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project provides a concrete example of cognitive reenactment in regards to second person interpretation. Although participants were encouraged to dress in a historical manner and physically travel to selected areas to where Kennedy spoke, the ultimate reenactment was the act of re-creating the thought processes of citizens in 1968. This emphasis on cognitive reenactment provided an opportunity to provoke important conversations between its participants, thus actively engaging citizens not only with each other, but also with social dilemmas of their current situation. Jane Hirshberg, managing director and CEO of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange Company and participant within the Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project, describes the effect:

“RFK in EKY“ laced moments of real time with moments of historical re-enactment, lending ample opportunity for audience and actors to ask questions, reflect on what was being said, share memories and just talk. This provided a platform for no barriers—no barriers between the material being presented and the opportunity to inquire about it, no barriers between audience and actor, and certainly no barriers between understanding the art and understanding historical events.<sup>72</sup>

This conversational component of the project is reminiscent of what Daniel Yankelovich describes in his work *Magic of Dialogue*: by creating a comfortable atmosphere, one

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Hirshberg, Jane. “RFK in EKY: Maximum Feasible Participation” Community Arts Network Reading Room. <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/articles/2004>. Accessed 22 February 2007.

without barriers, participants are able to produce intriguing ideas about the situation at hand and, therefore, create a vehicle for civic engagement. Here, the continual act of conversation throughout the RFK project generated awareness of contemporary issues and, more importantly, served as a catalyst in provoking civic activism. For example, in the years following the initial reenactment, the staff at Appalshop has utilized recordings, interviews, and other materials associated with the project in order to produce a documentary that is available to students nationwide via regional libraries and other educational institutions. An in-depth and educational website chronicles the project and describes in detail its influences and other significant associated materials. In addition, project staff members have teamed up with several organizations to encourage participants to further the mission of developing the eastern Kentucky region. The website chronicling the RFK Project experience divulges the following information:

RFK in EKY is continuing its powerful alliance with the LKLP [an acronym for the Kentucky counties Letcher, Knot, Leslie and Perry] Head Start Program. Head Start, along with UNITE and the Letcher County Action Team, is working with the project and LAPD (drawing on its experience with “Agents and Assets”) to develop regional discussions on art and rehabilitation, and to explore treatment alternatives to drug incarceration.<sup>73</sup>

While such programs are extremely effective and positive for the community, the underlying importance of the project was the collective bringing together of citizens in the community, all of whom demonstrated prior acknowledgement of the situation through individualized efforts such as soup kitchens or pledge drives. Importantly, the project allowed for these acts of goodwill to come together, which had circulated the community, but never brought together as a whole because of the lack of initiative.

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.appalshop.org/kennedy/project/ongoing.htm>. Accessed 6 April 2007.

Through the RFK reenactment project, participants and community members have increased awareness of the historically inadequate conditions of the region and are actively working to lessen the problems.

The apparent effectiveness of the project in its subsequent ability to produce civic engagement provides a physical representation of R.G. Collingwood's revolutionary theory. By focusing on historical thought processes instead of its physical constituents, cognitive reenactment serves as a powerful educational and motivational tool. John Malpede appears to agree as he expands on his own feelings towards the project:

I've become aware of other artists also interested in historical recreations and documentary theater, and for similar reasons: to tell an alternative history, to retrieve history from the realm of nostalgia and cultural heritage and to inject it with critical thinking. Unlike just about every "historical recreation" I'm aware of, this project is not about recreating a battle, or any kind of violence. *It's about ideas ... the force of ideas and about the history of ideas.* It's about the problems confronting the region then and now...<sup>74</sup>

Malpede asserts that it is recreated ideas that generate concrete relevance for participants and not their physical re-enacting of historical events. Although portions of the project involved physical reenactment, traveling to specific points and dressing in period appropriate clothing, the overwhelming majority of the project rested upon cognitive reenactment and the emphasis on critical thinking.

This is where the Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project succeeds. Instead, history sites should use the reenactment process only as a secondary device that supplements the more important critical thinking component. In doing so, I believe that

<sup>74</sup> Malpede, John. Taken from Jane Hirshberg. "RFK in EKY: Maximum Feasible Participation" Community Arts Network Reading Room. Italics mine. <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/articles/2004>. Accessed 22 February 2007.

visitors would receive a more powerful historical education and also would make connections more easily to contemporary issues. The following case study represents this sentiment, demonstrating that historical education and subsequent realization of similarities between the past and present rests primarily within successive post-experience conversational sessions. Thus, it is the aspect of critical thinking that produces effective results and not necessarily the reenactment.

### **Mormon Youth Handcart Trek Reenactments**

In 1997, the Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS) unveiled a program for teenagers at the Mormon Handcart Visitor's Center at Martin's Cove, WY, that serves as a reenactment of an ill-fated 1856 journey of two Mormon Handcart Companies in which numerous members perished. A brief historical synopsis of the historical event can explain the reason for the reenactment's creation: during the early nineteenth century, Mormons were shunned from society and, as a result, migrated west to the Salt Lake Valley region via covered wagons. The trek was slow and arduous, therefore prompting Brigham Young, renowned Mormon leader, to develop a faster and more reliable method of traveling. His answer was the handcart, a large wooden structure resembling the back of a pick-up truck with two long handles for pulling. Using this device, approximately 4,000 religious followers made their way across the Great Plains with few casualties. However, in 1856, two handcart companies—the Martin and Willie Companies—because of inadequate supplies and irrational decisions, became stranded halfway through their



journey and succumbed to the harsh winter months. Before help could arrive and provide an escort to safety, bitter cold and starvation claimed the lives of roughly 200 members.<sup>75</sup>

The Mormon Handcart Trek Reenactments seek to re-create this difficult journey by providing teenaged participants and their adult leaders with period costumes and reconstructed handcarts with which they cover approximately fifteen miles over the course of three days. While this may be a minute distance compared to the original trek, it is, nevertheless, a significant undertaking and should not be overlooked. Participants are organized into groups of approximately ten members and are accompanied by an adult leader, a “Pa“ or “Ma”. To create a sense of historical accuracy and remembrance, participants are given the name of a specific member of the 1856 journey and asked to retain relevant information about that particular individual. Participants are even asked to respond to the given name. In essence, this characterization effort serves to alter the mindset of the participant out of his or her modern viewpoint and into that of the historical time frame. In this manner, the program blends both physical reenactment and cognitive reenactment to produce a dynamic and invigorating learning environment. At the same time, however, this method introduces an idea that many critics of second person interpretation find troubling. Megan Jones, assistant professor at Brigham Young University and participant within the program, explains the consequences of utilizing this method: “The trek reenactment had all the markers of legitimate theatre: characters that were played, period costumes, props (handcarts and little doll “baby“ that needed care), and a script based on actual events (each family encountered a series of planned deaths

<sup>75</sup> Jones, Megan Sanborn. “(Re)living the Pioneer Past: Mormon Youth Handcart Trek Reenactments.” 119.

and disasters).”<sup>76</sup> The similarities to theatrical performance raise several questions as to the overall effectiveness of the program. In theater, actors must always remain in character throughout the performance in order to produce a believable experience for the audience. Participants in this particular reenactment are made to be both actors and audience members, thus blurring boundaries and possibly creating confusion. More importantly, if participants were made to continue acting as if they were specific characters throughout the reenactment, would this not jeopardize the opportunities for spontaneous dialogue and conversational sessions set within the contemporary time frame, as demonstrated in the RFK Project?

Despite this question, the reenactment experience at Martin’s Cove proves surprisingly productive. Instead of focusing on the exact events of the 1856 journey, organizers create supplementary events that highlight specific occurrences throughout Mormon history, not necessarily those accompanying the 1856 disaster. The effect is two-fold: one, participants are able to understand the historical aspect of past events through their physical reenactments and possibly relate those events to their modern day lives; two, because of the disruption in the historical time frame, participants are able to shift their focus from a historical aspect towards a more faith oriented viewpoint, which evidently serves as the main purpose for the reenactment altogether. Furthermore, participants are able to discard their character after each historical “experience” in order to take part in organized spiritual gatherings, which are led by adult leaders and expand on the significance of the physical reenactment as it relates to contemporary issues that surround Mormon doctrine. As demonstrated in the RFK Project, such gatherings are a

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 115.

decisive element in the reenactment process, as they are an opportunity for participants to express their emotions and to discuss important topics that have deep relevant connections to their modern day lives.

For example, during the first day of the reenactment, participants engage in a recreation of the Mormon Battalion Experience, an event within Mormon history in which male migrants, despite the prospect of leaving behind their families, volunteered for the Mexican-American War and embarked on a 2,000 mile march from Leavenworth, KS, to San Diego, CA. To simulate this experience, male participants within the reenactment separate from their female counterparts and remain at a different location for approximately one hour. During this separation period, female re-enactors are left to push the provision-laden handcarts up a large hill. Afterwards, they gather to reflect on their physical accomplishments as it relates to contemporary issues. Jones describes the experience in terms of its loftier goals:

The inclusion of the Mormon Battalion Experience... might be puzzling when one considers that the two events of the Mormon Battalion march and the Martin Company disaster occurred nearly ten years apart. Understanding the re-enactment in the context of connecting pioneer hardships to contemporary trials faced by Mormon youth, the Battalion episode makes much more sense.<sup>77</sup>

Although participants take part in the physical reenactment, the post-experience spiritual gathering conveys a deeper understanding of the events from a theological point of view, thus creating a stronger sense of relevancy for the participants.

During the meeting, adult leaders vocalize the pivotal connections between physical reenactment and the Mormon religion, explaining that the bodily exertion used in climbing the hill is comparable to overcoming the temptations in the participants' own

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 120.

lives, including the modern trials and tribulations of alcohol, drugs and premarital sex, all of which carry excessive weight within Mormon doctrine. Here, leaders attempt to make a striking connection, as Jones demonstrates: “in the process of performing their ancestors as dying victims of religious persecution, Mormon youth are assured that their current-day trials are equally life-threatening events.”<sup>78</sup> Here, both the original pioneers and reenactment participants are metaphorically linked through their sacrifices for faith. The effect essentially unites participants and creates a common bond, an essential ingredient in the Mormon faith. In this aspect, the reenactment has achieved its purpose: to instill a greater understanding and belief in the Mormon religion. In addition, the purely physical efforts of the girls also trigger connections from past to present as well. Jones describes one girl’s testimony of the Mormon Battalion experience: “One of my “daughters” explained to me that the push up the hill...was the hardest thing she’d ever done physically, and she really felt that she understood what the pioneers must have gone through.”<sup>79</sup> Yet, by the same token, other physical activities that were meant for reflective purposes do not achieve similar results.

As the handcart groups follow the historic course of their ancestors, they come across the Sweetwater River, the location of a brutal river crossing that claimed the lives of three teenaged members of the 1856 handcart companies. At that time, the river was several feet deep and had chunks of ice floating in it, prompting three teenage boys to carry their family members across, which ultimately induced fatal hypothermia. The exercise is designed to continue the metaphorical message of overcoming temptations in the participants’ lives. However, because the river is now only mere inches deep,

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 122.

participants view this experience as an enjoyable and refreshing opportunity for recreation, dipping their toes in the water and cleaning their dirt-embedded skin. Megan Jones illustrates the episode: “the Sweetwater experience that had originally been a freezing, deadly crossing became a refreshing moment of fun...No matter how horrible [the participants] might be told the first Sweetwater crossing was, the material reality of their own crossing was a positive experience.”<sup>80</sup> Here, the emphasis on physical reenactment and its accompanying message fails. Without a doubt, organizers cannot replicate the original severe conditions associated with the river crossing and if they were able to, it would endanger the lives of its participants and ultimately ruin any possibility for an educational experience. This situation creates an interesting conundrum, one that Scott Magelssen, assistant professor at theatre arts at Augustana College, IL, acknowledges: “A paradox emerges in performances such as...handcart treks; the closer the event moves towards realism (and its accompanying discomfort), the greater the risk for participants to break out of character and destroy the seemingly authenticity of the moment.” The apparent failure of the river crossing experience demonstrates that second person interpretive programs that use physical reenactment as its primary mode of interpretation must do so with extreme caution, stressing the implementation of conversational sessions that enforce greater understanding of the issue at hand.

The Mormon Handcart Trek Reenactment, despite its use of physical reenactment, accomplishes its goal of inducing critical thinking within its participants by relating past events with current issues. For example, Jones describes several participants’ personal epiphanies throughout the experience:

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

Some commented that (re)living the hardships the pioneers had faced put their own lives into perspective. Others mentioned that they had a renewed commitment to learn from the past, and to honor their ancestors. Many testified that at some time during the trek, whether it was listening to a story, pulling the handcarts, or standing quietly in the cove, they had been touched spiritually in a way that strengthened their resolve to be better people.<sup>81</sup>

The relationship between the pioneer's physical hardships and the participant's religious values is important as it creates the necessary bridge between past and present. Although its central message rests within a religious context, the emphasis on a more future-oriented viewpoint that enhances society in a manner of civic engagement illustrates the success of the program.

### **Conclusion**

Both the Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project and The Mormon Youth Handcart Trek Reenactments illustrate the effectiveness of second person interpretation outside the living history site environment as it evokes civic engagement. In each example, organizers were able to actively include participants and relate the historical material on personal level, via either geographic location or theological doctrine, thus making a simple connection to modern day issues. Once participants achieved this association between past and present and were coaxed into a general discussion about its relevance to their lives, organizers witnessed a flourishing of civic engagement, characterized by a better understanding of religious faith as well as the participants' general desire to enhance society according to Mormon doctrine.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 127.

## Placing the Past within the Present

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The interpretation of history can be a complex and difficult assignment, as there is no one correct method in doing so. However, the majority of history museums and living history sites are currently offering a stagnant methodology, allowing visitors to study history passively, thus creating an infinite imaginary boundary between themselves and the historical material presented. Anthony Cohen, of The Menare Foundation, describes the effect in an interview with the *Baltimore Sun*: “I think when people look back at history, they always think of it as something in the distant past and they never see themselves as a part of history.”<sup>82</sup> Instead of looking back at history, museums and living history sites should be looking forward and constantly examining the relationship between the past and the present using constructive dialogue as its foremost component.

Living history sites have the unique opportunity of pursuing this relationship between past and present through the innovative technique of second person interpretation. This method has the unique ability to present history from a variety of positions, thus opening a larger window of opportunity for the participant to make the all-important connection between past and present. John Hope Franklin, current historian on nineteenth-century slavery and author of *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans*, explains the significance of providing visitors with a more in-depth look at history: “Explaining history from a variety of angles makes it not only more interesting, but also more true. When it is more true, more people come to feel that they have a part

<sup>82</sup> Cohen, Anthony. Interview conducted by *Baltimore Sun*. 31 January 2007. [www.baltimoresun.com](http://www.baltimoresun.com). Accessed 19 April 2007.

in it.”<sup>83</sup> Extending Franklin’s thought-process, once participants feel that they have a part in the presented historical material, civic engagement becomes a much more attainable reality, characterized in this study by The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project and the Mormon Youth Handcart Trek Reenactments. Yet, this is not to say that Conner Prairie and The Menare Foundation are not capable of producing similar examples of civic engagement. In fact, both Conner Prairie and The Menare Foundation initiate components of civic engagement demonstrated by their inclusion of post-experience conversational sessions, but choose to end the program at the conclusion of the dialogue.

By ending the program at the conclusion of the conversational sessions, both Conner Prairie and The Menare Foundation are placing responsibility in the hands of the participant. Essentially, both sites are acting as catalysts to initiate critical thinking within their visitor; however, it is ultimately left to the participant as to whether or not civic engagement will occur. In this manner, Conner Prairie and The Menare Foundation exist only as a means to an end, in a manner of speaking. Yet, if both Conner Prairie and The Menare Foundation were to incorporate elements of The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project and The Mormon Youth Handcart Trek Re-enactments and actively engage participants *outside* the site’s program, it would ultimately create a dynamic learning environment and revolutionize educational learning at living history sites. At the same time, the combination of such programs would inform visitors on contemporary issues, therefore merging past and present. Through the close examination of the aforementioned case studies, we see that civic engagement is, indeed, possible within the field of living history; however, as demonstrated by Conner Prairie and The Menare Foundation, it

<sup>83</sup> Franklin, John Hope. Taken from the report of a workshop entitled “The National Park Service and Civic Engagement” December 6-8, 2001. (5)



remains the participant's responsibility to act upon the heightened sense of relevancy created using second person interpretation.

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