

## Pre-Camp Training for Living History Staff Members Chapter 2

### "If you believe, they'll believe" --- Creating Your Character

#### Modes of Historical Interpretation

"Hey, wait a minute," we hear you say. "This sounds like acting. Wearing interps is cool and I want to be in the backcountry, but what do you mean 'create a character'? Can't I just be myself?" The answer to that is "yes" and "yes". You see there are two modes of interpretation for staff when with the crews -- first person interpretation and third person interpretation.

First person is the acting part. Check out this story.

*A 14 year old scout from Greenwich, Connecticut, or any place else for example, hikes into Rich Cabins Camp, a historic old homestead located high up on the headwaters of the middle Ponil river, he and his crew are approached by a young man or woman dressed in period correct clothing from the year 1900. The young homesteader has been busy tending the family garden, caring for the farm animals or doing some needed repair on the corral fence, yet he takes the time to warmly greet these strange looking travelers. He doesn't see many folks other than family except on the monthly trips by family wagon into the small Village of Cimarron, or maybe the neighboring Chase or Ring Ranches to replenish supplies or goods that the family can't provide for them.*

*"Might I inquire from where you fellows hail?" asks young Louis Rich. "From the looks of you, you have traveled a long way. You must be tired, probably thirsty... has been a mighty warm July day. By the way do you know if it's the 2<sup>nd</sup> or the 3<sup>rd</sup>? We sometimes loose track living way out here. Wasn't so back in Austria where we come from...But, we surely don't want to miss the Independence Day doings down at the Chase. I hear that Mr. Manley Chase will even be serving ice cream!"*

*"If you like you can go on up to the house, my sister will offer you something cool to drink and show you where you can stow your tack."*

This Philmont hiking crew has just been transported back 106 years! This experience is an excellent example of first person interp. It's when you become the characters who inhabit your camp as you interact with crews. This crew just met a young man newly arrived in New Mexico Territory from Europe, full of hospitality, faith in his and his family's future and so

proud to be in America. While the crew is at Rich Cabins, they will be immersed into homestead life through meeting the people who lived it.

Third person interp is when you are yourself wearing a costume and talking with a crew about what happened to the characters at your camp before or after the dates that your camp is depicting. Or, maybe you are teaching a skill that would be done at your camp in the time you are depicting, but you are not becoming one of the characters. You are in costume and interpreting the events and activities of your camp but not “in character”.

There is still another mode of operation that is not interpretation at all. An example is distributing trail meals from the commissary at Rich Cabins. It might be awkward and ineffective to be "in character" for that part of the staff's time with the crews. Advisors' coffee is another time when continuing interpretation is just not appropriate although you might be sharing some information at that time, remember that according to the six principles listed in Chapter 1 of this training “information is not interpretation”. Your camp's profile, which we'll talk about soon, gives you guidelines or when to do first person and when third person. At other times you are a costumed staff person offering services or information only.

We encourage you to stretch your imaginations **and** your comfort levels as you use first person interp in your camp's activities. Home visits at Abreu, mine tours at French Henry, greeting campers everywhere, pole climbing at Crater Lake and Pueblano, campfires everywhere are all 1<sup>st</sup> person interpretations that are just waiting to be brought to life by this year's staff. It's a major part of your job at Philmont if you're at an historical interp camp. So, go for it!

To give you an idea of how effective your role in the living history program can be to the overall experience of the Scouts, read what one crew had to say about their experience at Metcalf Station:

*“Metcalf was the first station that we realized our programmed activities would be very special at Philmont. The staff (all twenty-somethings, mostly boys, but a few girls too) would be in period dress, and be acting the part of a period role, in this case, rail workers of the 1800's. This wasn't done in a schmaltzy Disney kind of way, but in a truly authentic manner with a particular attention to historical details and facts. We even had a young man from Dublin, Ireland, named Paddy of course, who in his woolen trousers, cotton work shirt and tweed cap, you could just imagine as a new immigrant to the U.S. working the rails. The boys ate up the history and loved interacting with the older staff. Having the chance to interact with these stations was golden for them. We adults were really impressed. Good job on that, Philmont.”*

YOU too can have that same impact on a crew, even if you have never done ANYTHING like this before. The training begins now and will continue into the summer!

## **Beginning the Creation Process**

The camp profile mentioned above is the blueprint for all of the interpretative aspects of your camp and especially for its characters. Attached to this training session are those profiles. They have a menu of characters from which your staff will choose who s/he wants to be for the summer. Print them out, study them, and bring them with you to Philmont. We'll be using them during training there.

When choosing your character, think about your own talents, strengths, interests, and appearance. It is always best to base your character on who you are and what you know. Decide which character fits you the best. Most staff members are naturally drawn to one of the characters outlined. Trust that and start filling out the details of your character in your mind, words, and body. Each person has a specific history -- family, education, experiences, physical and vocal characteristics, strengths and weaknesses. Research will help you make the person real.

## **Turning Research into Character**

This online training is designed to give you time to do some research before arriving at Philmont. See the research suggestions at the bottom of the profiles. Expand on that with reading of your own.

Learn what your character would logically know from his/her experience and interests. For example, the Abreus, a prominent New Mexican family, educated and politically active, would know and care about what was happening in the capitol of Santa Fe in 1912 -- this is the year that New Mexico became a state. Know the facts and stick to them. No sitcom, Hollywood, or crowd-pleasing embellishments are necessary to be good and engaging.

"If you believe, they'll believe" is a saying in the theatre that applies just as well to living history portrayals -- which is what you are doing. The more you are grounded in sound research and in your own personal knowledge, the more secure you will feel crawling into your character's skin. The strength of your conviction is what will rivet the attention of your audience -- the crews. That conviction and sincerity is more powerful than all the hamming it up in the world. Although a little ham in a diet is okay, too, if appropriate to the character.

Be judicious and have respect for your character. The Abreus and the Richs are real historical people who lived on the sites of those camps. They have descendants who live in the area. All characters for all camps are based on historical research, and, if not on real people, on probable characters for that site.

Work the facts into your character's conversation with the crews naturally. Ask them where they are from, then launch into your character's story. This can happen mixed in with a black powder or blacksmithing demonstration, milking the cows, serving root beer in the

Cantina. Ask if they've ever milked a goat, loaded a burro, panned for gold, then tell how you (as your character) learned how. Ask if they've ever heard about the Aztec mine before, then offer the history from your character's point of view. This personal spin is THE BEST way to attract your listener's attention. Much more effective than a third person lecture. They will want to know more about the person you are portraying and the historical interpretation you have to share will follow.

Be true to the time frame. Although the Abreus would know about New Mexico's process of attaining statehood, they would not know that New Mexico passed the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. That didn't happen until 1920. But, Gertrude Abreu may be in favor of it in 1912. There was almost a hundred years of struggle to get this amendment through Congress and ratified by the states. Whether they were actively seeking it politically or not, many women had wanted the right to vote for years. Gertie and several other Abreu women are likely to be among them.

File in your minds the information that are postscripts to the time that your camp portrays and are relevant to the words or attitudes expressed by your characters. Those can be given from a third person perspective after you come "out of character". A good time to offer information as a follow up and to answer the crew's questions would be at the end of a cabin visit, mine tour, or livestock tending. Then you can take off a hat or pair of glasses or simply turn around and reappear as a staff person in costume.

### **Practice Assignment.** Okay, give it a try.

- Look at your profile in the attachment to this chapter.
- Find a character that you like. Warning: Don't get too attached. This character could change when the entire camp staff gets together at Philmont. However, if you are communicating with each other already or want to, go ahead and make selections that will stick.
- Read the profile's historical notes. Check out what you can from the research list.
- Do some research for other sources, especially online. Send us information on any good resources that you find; so that we can add those citations to the profile list.
- Now write a welcome to your camp in your character's voice as if you were greeting a crew. Have a strong beginning and a clear, concise ending. Use your ingenuity to include where the crews are, what's happening there, and the precise time period that they are in. This last part takes some finesse to get in naturally without boldly stating "it's 1927". However, it is one of the most important pieces of information for the crews to understand right away.

Philmont Scout Ranch

Boy Scouts of America

Greeting crews is meant to be “welcoming” by the way. *To start off yelling something like “What are you doing on our land?!” “Get off my lawn!” “NO Trespassers!” etc, sets a negative tone that is not in keeping with Philmont philosophy.* Also, avoid contemporary words and slang expressions.

Remember we welcome your comments, additional references, success stories, enthusiasm, challenges, questions, etc.

Chapter 3 is "Looking the Part" complete with photos of Philmont staff in costume (interps), online sources for each camp and a very important size survey for you to complete. Watch for it.

Till then best wishes...

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