

WORKING ON YOUR PERSONA

*Taken from,
"WHO ARE YOU?"
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Your uniform is researched and top-rail. You bivouac authentically with your pards. You eat out of your haversack. You carry only essential period items in your blanket roll or knapsack. But the question remains, "who are you?" That is the question that trips up many re-enactors today.

I am of course alluding to one's first-person persona. Many re-enactors today have made this approach to living history much more difficult than it has to be, and as a result it has been all but shunned. A little research and practice will go a long way in helping to create, improve, and further one's first-person. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on the two main aspects of a first-person: conversation and impressions.

Conversation in first-person, despite the notions of many, is not that different from modern conversation. To begin with, not everyone in the 1860's talked in poetic, Victorian verse, nor did they hold doctorates in history or political science. Remember that most volunteers came from small rural towns and farms. Their experiences in government and politics would have limited to the local level for the most part. A great way to begin to develop a first-person is to simply list your age, place of residence, occupation before enlistment, why you enlisted, your feelings on issues of the day, etc., etc. Cpl. Mike Watson has a capital handout that asks such questions. For those interested in creating a first person, please contact myself for a copy of this questionnaire.

The easiest way to begin to practice your first-person conversation is to incorporate your reenactment experiences. For instance, if you were at Raymond, you could comment to your pards or the public (yes, you can still talk to and "educate" the public in first person) how hot and dusty it is, how you wish you had a better pair of shoes or some cool water, how you hate marching in the rear of the army, how you wish the generals had to march instead of ride. See the concept? Above all else, keep it simple. A sure-fire way to kill a good first-person conversation is to speak louder than you have to, as if you were on stage. Resist the urge to use modern slang("ya know", "uh huh", etc.). Addresses to top-rail sites for period slang are listed below; incorporate these words instead. Another conversation killer is the use of cartoon-like accents. Leave the Lucky Charm's leprechaun and Col. Klink accents at home. Political Correctness did not exist in the 1860's; avoid this pitfall. Be yourself.

Besides first-person conversation, there are also first-person impressions. By this, I am referring to the physical actions of a first-person persona. These are the simple but yet neglected actions and routines that made up life in the Federal army. The following three examples are all bully impressions to try. For more ideas check out the links provided below.

Firstly, pick lice from your uniform (role playing, lice not needed nor recommended). We tend to forget how dirty the average soldier was at that time. First-hand accounts almost always describe the infestation of these graybacks. By sitting on the ground or on a log, whether in camp or next to passing spectators, drape your sack coat over your lap and pick away, being sure to show off the more lively ones. Invariably, the response will always be, "what are you doing?"

Secondly, try doing some period cooking minus the grates and boxes of cook gear. A bayonet and ramrod, or some green saplings and a canteen half along with a mucket will do a first-rate job. Try doing it as they did, and I assure you that you will come away with a better appreciation of the men we represent. Not to mention, for some reason, spectators are enthralled at watching a piece of salt-pork roast on a bayonet or in a canteen half and find it much more easy to approach a group of re-enactors doing this rather than sitting on folding chairs talking about their jobs and the like.

Thirdly, make it a point to mount the guard and post pickets (yes, artillery too!). Just watch as your chums' names are called every half hour or so for their turn to mount guard. Even with all the grumbling and harrumphs, they are exhibiting first-person whether they know it or not.

Again these are only a few examples as many, many more are available. Check out others, or come up with a few of your own. Research and practice these two aspects of first-person. Before long, and without pain or difficulty, you will find yourself combining these two elements together into one capital first-person persona. The result will please you, your comrades, and the spectators too. Moreover, we all will do a better job of representing the Civil War soldier, officer, and civilian. I hereby challenge every member of the brigade to undertake this effort at a first-person persona. Who will step forth and sign the roll?

Sources:

"First Person Impressions: Fortes, Foibles, and Facts," by Bob Braun, 33rd Wis.

"Creating 'First Person' Conversation," by Eustis Cain

"First Person Impressions that Peak Curiosity," by Jim Butler of the Huckleberry Mess

"The Veteran's Tongue," by Aaron Young and Joe Strauser

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