

Henderson's Notes on the First Person Impression

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Trouble Mess

The first person Impression is the telling of life and actual or fictitious events as if you were actually there. Doing this can be rewarding for both the "actor" and the audience or bystander. On the same token, it can either be as easy or as strenuous as you perceive to make it. By this, you can either dream up a persona to portray or you can dig for months at a time researching an individual person in a specific unit at a specific time of the war along with his/her family history, descendants, &c. Either way, you do have a bit of work to make your first person impression workable, believable, and fluid.

These are some questions to answer that you can use to help create a good, solid impression that may actually have some people walking away asking, "is that guy for real?" (Which is exactly what you want!) A good impression can be obtained with a little research or a lot of research- it is really up to the individual. Remember to keep these three rules of thumb in mind-- 1. Who and when you are, 2. a few current events, and 3. at all costs, avoid "slipping" into the 21st century- this includes mannerisms, etiquette, and dialect.

Here we go!

1. Who are you?

For this question, you may choose to stick with your name, the name of an ancestor, the name of another actual person, or a totally fictitious name conjured up out of the clear blue sky. Part of who you are, also, is your family- do you have children? who are your parents? what is your wife's name &c.

2. Where are you from?

Again, you can use documentation or reasonable fiction. Study maps of where you are supposedly from as it helps you know what you are talking about when it comes to geography of an area, towns, rivers, lakes, &c.

3. When were you born?

This is probably one of the easiest aspects of the persona because all you have to do is the math. Take the year you are portraying and subtract your age for your birth year. (Ex; year:1863 - 25 yrs. old= born in 1838) Try to kind of read up on events that might have happened during your lifetime- especially locally as few people traveled or got news as they do today.

4. What is your occupation?

What is your livelihood? You can either derive this from what you do now, something that you have done, or something you make up. Just remember that since this is what you do for a living, you need to know at least some of the in's and out's. You should really have a working knowledge of the job, its duties, the tools, implements, animals, accoutrements, &c. You also need to be able to answer questions or converse about the line of work you are in. Remember that not all men of the period were farmers and most had never been a soldier until they mustered into service for the war.

5. What kind of economic background do you come from?

How much money did your family make per year? Where your family's financial status was often dictated your circle of friends, your way of speaking, your mannerisms, your personal hygiene/image, and your etiquette.

6. What kind of house do you live in?

7. Do you live in the city, town, village, or all alone in the country?

8. What kind of community do you live in?

Is it religious in nature? Is it all or mostly family working the same land? Are you even settled or are you a drifter/adventurer?

9. Do you have domestics (slaves)?

As it is today, this was a hot topic of the era. If you don't, what are your views or opinions on the subject? If so, how did you come upon them? Was it that you bought them? Did you get them in a trade or as a gift? Did you inherit them? Do you only hire Negro labor occasionally from a slaveholding neighbor? Your occupation or financial standing can also help determine this.

10. Are you Christian or Jewish?

People of the 19th century were, to say the least, devout in their religious convictions. Most Christians learned to read by their mothers teaching them Bible verses.

11. Were you born in America?

Where do your roots go back to? England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, France, &c. Most families were only one or two generations removed from their native countries.

12. Are you a traveled person?

Have you seen the wonders of what the country or the world had to offer? Where have you been?

13. Are you an educated person?

How long did you go to school? Did you graduate? Did you attend the University or Franklin College (UGA)?

14. Why did you decide to fight in the war?

What were your motives for "joining up"? Was it pride, courage, boredom, defiance, bounties?

15. How often do you get to write home? How often do you hear from home?

16. How is your free time spent when you are not on duty?

17. What do you do on duty?

18. When do you think the war will be over?

19. What will you do when the war ends?

These are just a few of the questions you may be asked at any given event by a spectator or arrant "know-it-all". While it best to avoid the latter, you need to be up on your historical information just in case. Also try reading up on specific battles you might be portraying or that the unit might have just participated in. Read about campaigns they might have just made or are currently on. The information is out there, you just have to know what you want to find out.

Remember to stay in character at all costs. Do not slip into the 21st century. This mistake is easy to make, especially if you start making comments on modern items that the spectator has or is wearing. Nothing makes someone look as ignorant as saying, "duh, what is that box around your neck?," or, "why is your silver thingy chirpin'?" or the dreaded, "the dress pirate done stole yer dress, little lady!" This makes them think that they have to teach up instead of us teaching them.

Don't be afraid to engage in conversation with each other. It looks equally as bad when two people are having a conversation and five others are standing there just shaking rocks around in their heads. Something else that

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sounds bad is the fake “Scarlet O’Hara” or the “Southern drawl” (it makes you sound like a moron or a retard). Use your normal everyday accent and you will be just fine. Refrain from modern slang and try to pick up some period speech from various books, lists, and articles written on the subject. Also be not afraid to talk with visitors.

All in all, the first person impression can be a very enriching and rewarding experience- not only for our benefit but the benefit of those who are captivated by the goings on of our camp. I hope you savor the experience and enjoy the practice of being in the 19th century. It gets easier each time you do it.

See you in the field.
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