

# Civil War Living History

By: Cleon Plunk, 77<sup>th</sup> PA

*This article was originally written for the 77<sup>th</sup> PA Newsletter. Cleon has some good thoughts that are applicable to all in the hobby. – Editor*

Sometimes when the word Living History is used some shy back and aren't sure of themselves in this side of re-enacting. I want you to be comfortable doing living history's with the 77<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania, as it is a good time to be up and close with the public, allowing them to gain a greater understanding of what we represent. Remember they came to the event because they had an interest in the Civil War time period. (I know many are more than capable, and have helped in this area in the past. It is not my intention to insinuate that you don't know how.) I would say you do not need a degree nor a doctorate in public speaking to share what you have read, or been taught about the uniform, weapon, camp life, drill of the 1860's, and I could write on.

Remember the senses: sight, touch, hear, taste, and smell. When you and I can get the public involved in any of these areas of their senses, then it becomes a part of their memory. I realized at my second event in Texas in March 2003, it is mostly for the children that I do living histories, so I can salt their senses so they want to discover more about this time period. The Civil War was pivotal in shaping America and what Americans stands for today. (I helped with my first school day at Beaumont Ranch), Shucks I knew nothing, yet I realized I had something to offer as I observed others do their talks and demonstrations. I realized even if I only offered myself and my uniform, I was being an example. Through the years, I have learned other things I can verbally share. To watch their eyes light up as their minds process what they are learning is exciting to me.

Well, I suppose you have figured out my purpose after just a few paragraphs. I hope I can encourage you to get involved in this area of our organization. When a person goes fishing, should he want to catch a bass, crappie, or a catfish he needs certain bait for each type of fish. If he casts a net, he is happy to catch whatever comes back into the boat. I am casting a net for you and others in the 77th and I am not looking for perfection. The 77th needs your willingness.

## **Needs for Living Histories**

A Living History Station: is what I call the area (space) where a person shares for 8-15 minutes upon a certain topic of their choosing. The public will pass through the camp area where we would have one or more Living History Stations. Years ago Rex and I and others sat and brained storm a few station topics and used them at several events. I'll mention a few of them again and maybe you have a topic of interest you would want to present at a Living History Station. With just a few minutes of research on Wikipedia any topic can be expanded.

Medicine: Jim Langley, Tammy Gass, Russell Gray, Shanna Langley always do a great job in this area. How could I try to improve upon their displays and talks?

1860's cooking: The civilian group of the 77th has had many displays and teachings in these areas through the year. I remember the time they made butter and got the children involved. A soldier cooking: You could talk about your haversack and its purpose. It is to store up to three days rations while on the march. You could show your eating utensils, cup, a potato, onion, carrot, an apple, some hardtack, some coffee beans, peanuts, maybe some salt pork that he would store in his haversack. You could talk about your mucket, canteen half, or the small skillet for cooking. You could talk of how the soldier would use his bayonet while cooking. I have been watching several of you lately around the campfire and you are becoming quite the Civil War Soldier cook.

Letter from home: You could pre write a letter from your loved one. Read of the happenings back home with neighbors and family. Tell of the funny story about Josiah Jones. Read of the news of Hannah Washington's new baby girl when Samuel wanted a boy. Talk of the courting of James Nibble and Sarah Tillcut. It's your letter be creative. Have a tear in your eye as you read with drama your pre rehearsed letter. This is actually the easiest station, as you will be reading everything. Remember the soldier thought continuously of home and his loved ones. As you finish the letter from home, sit down with pencil and paper and say I must write home to share of my experiences here in this here army. As the public walks away, your line might be "Where do I begin".

Army Recruiter: John Miller always did a great job with this station. Sign them up. We need new recruit. Have a table. Talk of the different bounty the soldier would receive. Maybe have some forms for little ones to keep for their experience in joining the army. Speak of the "Colors" and how proud a regiment was of them.

Have a display of the different types of tents: Possibly share that as the war progressed the United States sent an ambassador to France to learn from its French army. America learned that instead of having to load the "A" tent onto wagons and then transport them for thousands of men, they decided that instead of the wagon trains, each infantry soldier could carry his own half shelter. This would be more expeditious.

Explain that the "A" tent when used it could sleep 4to 6 soldiers. Share that the average height was 5ft. 6in. and weight 140 lbs of the men. Their small stature was because they did not have nutrition and prenatal care that you and I have today. They would be issued a blanket each but in the cold nights, they would have 4-6 blankets in their tent to help keep them warm. Show the inside of the tent. Have it set up so you could allow the children to go in to explore for a moment. Remember the senses are important. Get four to six volunteers from the public that are about Period size to line up and imagine sleeping in the "A".

Talk about the Half Shelter or Dog tent as the soldier would write home and talk of their new shelters were the size for their dogs back home. We are still, a 150 years later in our modern army and scouting, calling those Dog tents. Have a shebang (a single half shelter) and a dog tent set up. Display your ground cloth and blanket in your half shelter. Show how two pards would put their half shelters together if the weather got bad.

Model your uniform: Offer to let someone feel your wool. Their question," isn't this hot"? Show your wool socks. Let them see your brogans up close. Show your hobnails or peg nails in your soles. The footwear is important to the infantry soldier. Talk of how they would stretch or shrink their shoes to fit by soaking them before a day's march. Talk of the different types of covers (headwear). Talk of the 4 button fatigue blouse, and the frock coat.

Display your Knapsack: Have your two bag knapsack laid out upon your ground cloth. Have your personal items that a soldier would carry in his Dresser Bureau (a name they called their knapsack). A Fresh Fish (new recruit) would stuff his knapsack with many items. Later, he, as a veteran, learned to lighten his load with only the essentials. Display on your ground cloth your period toothbrush, tooth powder, a candle, an extra shirt, and pair of socks. Lay out a small period testament, maybe a letter from home. Have a tin image of a loved one. Show your wallet and the \$13.00 the typical soldier received each month and compare the size that period money was to modern money. Lay out your housewife (soldiers sewing kit). These are only starters. Be creative. Explain that their Great Coat, blanket, ground cloth, and their half shelter would all store in their Dresser Bureau.

Rifle or Musket: You could display several different types of weapon. I am sure there are several weapons others would allow you to use while they worked a different station. Show the ammunition that was used and the different caliber. Explain that the government would have the cartridges pre- packaged and sent to the troops. Explain how each package would have ten cartridges and 12 caps per pack. Let them see the length of a smoothbore versus a rifled weapon. Talk of your cartridge and cap box. Let them see the tins within your

cartridge box. It can house 40 rounds. The lower tin could hold a package and in the upper tin held the individual cartridges.

School of the Soldier: With your musket in hand you could teach the different arms position an infantry soldier would use as he transported his weapon on long marches. Show the position of the soldier. Teach loading in nine times. You and a four man squad could do a firing demonstration. Drill your squad marching facing them left and right.

Musician: Talk of the fife and drum. Have some period camp songs on paper. Teach them the Union version of “Dixie”. I am sure some of you who are more musically inclined could do a great job with this station.

Officers in the camp: Have some maps laid out while you study them. Talk of strategy. Read the orders that were given you from the Colonel. Here is your chance to show your leadership skills as an officer. I give you permission at a living history to be an officer. Please let’s not everyone show as a Captain. I usually enjoy being a NCO at living histories.

Punishment: Be a soldier that has been punished for a crime. Talk of the buck and gagging, being spread out on a wagon wheel, the embarrassment of having to wear a sign for being a drunk or thief. How you might have to carry your weapon over your head marching around the camp as discipline. Talk of the firing squads. Always explain you are innocent of the crime. Aren’t all criminals innocent?

A debate: You and a friend could debate a topic around a campfire setting or while sitting on your ground cloth.

Parson: There are many areas that could be done with this.

Need I go on? You get the idea. If I could read your mind I am almost certain there are ideas running through your thoughts right now. Create your own station and perfect it to your liking. I know you and I are re enactors on our spare time. I realize time and money are valuable to each of us and it cost to travel. If you are able to help with one or more of the living histories this fall you are most welcome. If you just want to attend to observe I promise I will let you watch through the first group, then I will get you involved to the degree you feel comfortable.

Enough said! As the old saying goes **“Uncle Abe Wants You”!**