

Episode 1: First Person Interpretation with Norman Burns (Conner Prairie President & CEO)

Transcript:

Easton: Welcome everyone to the This Problematic podcast brought to you by Conner Prairie Museum.

Hannah: Thanks for joining us again. I'm Hannah

Easton: and I'm Easton.

Hannah: And today we're going to be exploring

Easton: The problematic history of first person interpretation through the museum field.

Hannah: We sure are. Shall we dive in?

Easton: Let's dive in.

Hannah: Shall we? Shall we start by defining interpretation? So we're all on the same page?

Easton: Yes. So when we're talking about interpretation, we're really talking about how we tell stories in the museum field. And there are different types of interpretation. A lot of you listening are probably more familiar with third person interpretation, where museums staff in gear and lanyards and nametags are talking to you about the history in a present-day context. But in places like Colonial Williamsburg, or Connor Prairie, we do things in a first person interpretation lens.

So once you cross that invisible boundary, you're in the history, you're living in the history. It's it's one of our mottos step into the story. You're quite literally stepping into the story when you enter a place like Civil War Journey or Prairie Town. You're actually interacting with what life would have looked like or our best recreation of what life would look like back then.

So, Hannah, you yourself actually have probably a lot of stories to share because you were in our first person interpretation department.

Hannah: Yeah. So I was an interpretation coordinator before I was in our research department,

Easton: A coordinator telling people what to do.

Hannah: A little bit not too much. So as a coordinator, I primarily oversaw our third person interpreters.

So I think before we talk about my role, I'd like us to give a summary of what first second and third means because they are all slightly different and each museum chooses to use them in their own ways and at different times for different reasons. Connor Prairie is, I would say, more well known for being a first person site, but at different times we employ all three types.

Places like Colonial Williamsburg do too. There are other more traditional settings, I think, of the Smithsonian museums, where you're only really going to interact with individuals in what we call here on the prairie blue shirt because we were blue shirts. But that's your modern day docent person guiding you through the museum experience from a 21st century context.

Easton: I love the word docent. It just brings me back to happier times when I first got my start in history. As a youth docent, and at that time, first person interpretation was an entirely foreign concept to me. So I'll throw it over to you. Do you want to tell us the differences between first, second and third person interpretation?

Hannah: Yeah, sure. So we are using definitions taken from research and academia done in this field.

I would say different institutions, different museums put them to work in slightly different ways. And so these definitions are not set in stone. They're flexible. But I'll give a brief overview is kind of how we see them. So first person would be someone in a historic role, for example, someone playing a character from history. So you might have them playing George Washington or Frederick Douglass.

They are in costume. They are playing that person. They are an actor and they don't break that character. They stay in that character and they're primarily to be viewed and somewhat interacted with. Second Person takes us more into our kind of opening doors approach, more of a back and forth between that costumed interpreter and the guest. And so that's where you're kind of having those discussions about history.

Maybe you can pull in a little bit of that modern context but you're still keeping it grounded in that historical character. Third person is entirely out of costume. It's more of a historian role, I would call it, as opposed to maybe so much of an acting role. You were encouraging a dialog, facilitating a dialog and moving a conversation forwards from a modern context, allowing people to engage in historical debates And I would say the most important thing as well for you to understand before we go into our conversation with Norman is here on the Prairie.

We do not use currently, we do not use historic character. So I used the George Washington example. Some sites do we choose not to at the current moment. Occasionally we will in a play or something of this kind. But real people are not interpreted on the prairie. These are composites. So these are examples of real people mashed together and then producing a character.

Easton: So I am curious to hear about your standout experiences and your perspectives from being in a first person interpretation role. You may want to share a little bit about that.

Hannah: Yeah. So I have to be totally upfront and honest. I was not primarily a first person or second person. Any kind of costumed interpretation was not my primary role ever.

So the museums I started out in, I started out in a docent role and then in a museum educator role, both in that modern third person. Then when I came here, I came here to oversee our third person work. So I oversaw, I believe, six areas of the grounds that were in blue shirt first as or sorry excuse me, blue shirt third person.

I occasionally was in first person for programing, so I got the chance to be in first person for Thanksgiving video that we made. And the only time I was first person with guests was A Merry Prairie Holiday, our Christmas celebration. And I was in our Prairietown space as a young woman in the village celebrating Christmas Eve, a rowdy, as we call them. So kind of a lower class individual who was kind of singing and jolly and enjoying Christmas time.

And so I can't say in that position I was engaging in full on first person interpretation because I wasn't really having super deep historic conversations. It was a little bit more in the entertainment end I would say being the holiday season.

But I have had some experiences and I have certainly observed a lot of experiences. My direct coordinator alongside me was our first person coordinator, and so I saw her work quite closely. I saw how the struggles that some of her staff had. And then I would be out on the grounds that I would be, you know, working directly with those individuals, helping to make sure there are unique struggles that come up with first person interpretation, even simple things like getting these people water I mean, you know, you're out in 100 degree heat some days and multiple layers and these clothes can breathe a lot more than you maybe think they can, but you still need to be keeping these people safe. And so there are practical elements to first person that don't exist a third.

Easton: So as interesting as being called a rowdy must be. Did you have fun during your time out there, A Merry Prairie?

Hannah: I did have a lot of fun. It was a really good time. And but also I think in saying the fun I had, I think it's important for me in that to recognize my privilege as a straight white woman.

I wasn't going to I was able to engage in just a pure, joyful experience. Without having to experience a lot of the abuse and troublesome questions that a person of color or a person who did not fit the expectations of that era being portrayed. And so it was a fun experience. For me. But that doesn't mean that I don't recognize that it wouldn't necessarily have been the same experience for everybody.

Easton: That's very well put. I do ask because I will soon be reprising a role for the very first time as a brother in an African-American wedding here on Prairietown. And, you know, I've never done anything like that before. I was curious because as excited as I am, I also know that there is a level of responsibility that comes with portraying these people. And you will be seen people will be watching you, especially in a space where there are a lot of people of color around.

So we have a very special guest joining us today. It is our very own CEO, Mr. Norman Burns, and he's going to be talking to us about his own experience regarding first person interpretation, not just here at Conner Prairie, but at other museums across the country as well.

Hannah: We're so excited to have him join us. His experience goes all the way back to being a first person interpreter himself in the early days of his career. And he's worked his way up through different positions throughout the museum field across the country. So I definitely think he'll be able to give us some incredible insight into what this work is like from different positions and how he can take care of our staff and doing this work.

I do think there is one more definition I'd like to hammer before we go into that conversation. Okay. So I think one question we often face or comment we often face as interpreters here and especially as interpreters in costume is, oh, these are historical re-enactors. There's a big difference between a historical re-enactor and a historical interpreter. And I think that's really important to understand both of our guests before they come out on the grounds But also before we dove into this conversation.

So Interpreter is an educator. They are someone with a lot of academic knowledge about history. They are someone who understands the context in which they are putting themselves in. And they are someone whose core purpose is to create debate, discussion and to facilitate that learning process.

A historical re-enactor is someone who simply gets joy from being in costume and pretending to be in a historic situation. This is purely for personal interest as opposed to for the educational process. And they don't necessarily have they generally do not have any level of training and if they do, it's simply because, you know, they have taken a personal interest and educated themselves in certain ways. But it's important to see and for the society to be able to see these interpreters as a trustworthy figure similar to a teacher as opposed to historical re-enactors who are doing it for their own personal interests.

Easton: Absolutely. And looking forward to this conversation. Also, we want to give a rating.

Hannah: Yeah, I think E for everyone, I think this is a great conversation for all ages to get engaged with and learn from.

Easton: Yeah, you can you can you can play this one with granny in the car. Absolutely.

Hannah: Okay. Let's head into our chat with Norman

Music

Hannah: Thank you so much for joining us today, Norman.

We really appreciate having you here. We've invited Norman to come and speak to us as a public historian and as a CEO here at Conner Prairie. So we're going to enter into a discussion about first person interpretation today, what it means to him and what it means to us as a field as well as contemporary as an institution.

Norman: Well, thank you, Hannah. I'm happy to be here today.

Hannah: Let's start with the importance of first person interpretation to yourself. I would imagine having worked in this field for such a long time, it's close to your heart. So would you like to tell us a little bit about your background and how you got started in the work?

Norman: Yeah, it's an interesting way that I got started. I grew up in a rural part of Middle Tennessee, and because we lived on an adjacent farm to my grandparents and both of my parents worked for the most part. I lived with my grandparents from about probably ten weeks old until I went to first grade. So that meant I was out in the community with my grandparents talking and listening to older people and hearing the stories of the community as an early child all the way through, you know, basically first grade.

So I've always been listening and listening to stories of the community. And I think that's what really got me interested in history in the first place, is that the human side of it. And while my undergraduate degree took me through several areas of disciplines from wanting to be a civil engineer to computer science and mathematics, I finally settled on being a historian and intended to be an academic historian and get a Ph.D. in teaching Russian history.

But in the mid-eighties, that was not possible all because of that of the number of people that were in that part of academic areas at that time. So I decided to move into the public history sector and kind of stumbled into my first job at a state historic site. So now, 36 years later, I have worked at six different museums in my home state of Tennessee and in Richmond, Virginia. And now in Fishers, Indiana.

And I am a trained social historian. And for those that may not know what a social historian is, basically, and looking at the background, if you will, of all people in telling their stories. So for me, it's about the human experience. And when you think about mankind, and in that human experience, man, from the very beginning, he became curious about the environment around him.

And that caused him to say, I want to do different things with it. And because of his curiosity and his environment, that led him to continue to grow and create things like mathematics and engineering and things to be able to build things. He was inspired by the environment around him, the sky that the land to be inspired to both to create art, both visual, one spoken and written.

And it's those aspects of how man has evolved in that human experience that I think is as is best for historic sites like Connor Prairie. And I truly believe that the way we interpret and whether it's first person or other is a way that we can engage our guests and the stories of mankind. And we can be inclusive as social historians.

We should be looking at every one story at our best. If we're in first-person interpretation, actually portraying and or interpreting history for a particular character, we should be able to place that person. So they feel like they're part of that.

So, you know, people think of probably first-person interpretation as historical re-enactors, and we know that that's not true. A Civil War re-enactor is trying to reenact a specific person and time and doing that for a battle. Historical first-person historical interpreters, we're actually trying to

interpret the past. So what we do is, is by, by doing the research where both researching and were analyzing, we're evaluating, we're presenting and we're giving perspective to that, to that era as opposed to just reenacting we're interpreting so first-person interpretation like we do here a kind of prairie and have been doing since 1974 is as a historical character.

Once again playing in that time in our case it's 1836 and that has some barriers to it. And so Hannah, you've heard us talk about the interpreters toolbox and the interpreters toolbox has many tools in it and first person just happens to be one of those and we do first-person interpretation meaning basically a monologue from 1974 up until the early 2000 because that's what Colonial Williamsburg and that's what other first person sites did.

We're all about being authentic and making sure that the monologue that we were giving was the right information, whether it was the history of an area or the objects in the room. It was basically monologuing. We created, as you know in the early 2000 as a new philosophy that as part of second person interpretation called opening doors, which meant that we gave the visitors an opportunity to ask questions and actually be part of the dialog now that was taking place between that first person character who might be asking a question of the visitor that's there. And even though they might not be dressed like them, they still engaged in a dialog. And that can be both engaging as well as informative. It can also lead to some problems as we know with first person and second person interpretation has barriers because you can get perspective as a historical character in that particular time. You can't necessarily give perspective to the context of modern days. And that's one of the limitations, if you will, a first person and second person interpretation. That's why third person interpretation, someone that might be dressed in a costume but actually contemporary to the Times is able to kind of might start in first person and go to third person or might not ever be in first person, but allows them to describe the costume that they might have on or describe the process that they're doing.

Put it in context with the modern times. And then, of course, there's all sorts of other tools in that interpretation toolbox. We're talking about various techniques of verbal interpretation first, second, third. There's also museum theater and then there's improv and then there's a good a good second person sometimes can have a proctor. So if you think about improv, museum theater tends to be like the typical theater where there's a fourth wall, unless you at the end of that piece, open it up for dialog with someone proctoring the process or sometimes the character that steps out of the first person or the acting role. But when you get into really the process of breaking down that fourth wall with music and theater, it becomes more like improv. And that's really a good way to interpret.

So those are all different techniques that can be used And then if you think about the devices that we use in interpretation and we use them here at Kind of Prairie, we don't just have costume interpretation or museum theater.

We also have exhibits we have interactions, we have immersive theaters where we have live actors along with our theater devices and audiovisual that creates a specific place in time like our 1863 Civil War journey, which is DuPont in Indiana in July of 1863, where we have both live characters and we have the audio visual, we have the immersive experience to tell that story.

So we have a lot of different tools in our toolbox. But one of the things that I think historic sites a living history, sites like Connor Prairie is beginning to look at is how do we really use all those tools?

Hannah: I mean we've read quite a bit looking at, you know, greenfield village and colonial Williamsburg. You know, everybody has taken a slightly different approach on that path of, you know, where do we where do we start, where do we start, where do we change up or are types of interpretation. And so I was going to ask you and your opinion kind of we definitely got into some of the benefits a little bit. But when you're deciding what tool to take out using that analogy and you're weighing up those pros and cons, I was wondering if you could speak a little bit more towards maybe what some of the pros of taking out first person is versus some of the cons and when that's appropriate and when it might have some more challenges?

Norman: Well, I do believe that first person interpretation when done well, when you've done all of your research and for us, we use as you know, we use composite characters. We do not use historical characters. So we research the era and we create a composite character that can have a dialog with our with our visitor in a way that hopefully is a good interpretation of that particular place and time. And so when it's done well and that historical character can have that dialog, that opening of the doors, if you will, where that guest can actually have that interaction and play along. And it's almost like in and in our opening doors or second person interpretation with the interpreter and the guest are actually playing along, it's almost like a tennis match. I mean, the interpreter kind of throws a question out there and lobs it across the court, if you will, and it's up to that person to lob it back, if you will. And the problem with that is if you're only playing singles, everyone else is watching, aren't they? And even if you're playing doubles, everybody else is watching. And even if you shorten the court and make it a pickleball game, everyone still watching, aren't they?

So I think that's the limitations that comes with first person sometimes is that if you have more than one guest that's doing that and everyone else is an observer and perhaps that door that we tried to open to the guests is actually closed to many. And what if that guest doesn't see themselves in that particular historical character, then we're not being inclusive, are we? We're not involving everyone. And so that can be a limitation to first person. And so that's why I think when done well, it's great but it has its limitations because we cannot give true perspective. We can't truly be inclusive of, of, of everyone with a specific character. Whereas if I'm in third person, I might be in costume, I might portray a character, but I can easily step out. And if the person is of another ethnic group or whatever the case might be, they can have a dialog about that and they can ask questions and they can answer. Much easier than a first person interpreter can do because they have to remain in character in that time. So I think those are the things that we are at Conner Prairie are beginning to look at and explore. And you've heard me say this probably multiple times now and that interpreters toolbox because Conner Prairie has been using first person so long since 1974. It's tended to be the only tool that we pull out the toolbox.

Hannah: Its comfortable. Right?

Norman: Yeah.

Hannah: To use something for a long time.

Norman: It's comfortable and I think that's right and for me I think yes we've been using a hammer, we've probably been beating people to death with it for a long time. And I know that sounds harsh and I don't mean that because I respect every colleague that that is here with us at Conner Prairie and the work that they do and the fabulous work that they do as first person interpreters. But we want to give them more tools. We want to build a reach down into that toolbox and pull something else out, because if you're only using a hammer, you can't really do refined things, can you?

So we want to make sure that there's tools available. So our interpreters which are some of the most creative people I've ever met, they can create they can have all the tools to create a tapestry of that's needed to really engage and inspire our audiences. And that's that's where I think interpretation can be at its best. And then you throw all these other tools in. I mean, you know, I'm going to be 61 next month, so I'm dating myself a little bit here. But I mentioned an undergraduate I actually did computer science and mathematics. So I'm one of these, one of these historians that I'm not afraid of technology. But that being said, I have to tell you that virtual reality and augmented reality or things that I've been not stubborn, but I'm like, is that truly what we want to do?

But our but our friend and colleague, Rich Cooper, as you know, is a big proponent of both VR and AR. And we're exploring augmented reality as a way to be able to tell stories that can be more inclusive and representative of different characters. In Prairietown, our director of interpretation Mari Carpenter is beginning to look at ways we can take Prairietown and not just be 1836 that we can be established in 1836, but that means we can tell stories before that, we can tell stories after that, including today, and possibly address things in the future.

And that is a total break from your typical first person living history site when you start doing those things. So I think the future of Conner Prairie and even Prairietown itself is about to really put all the tools in the toolbox, make sure that everything that our guest wants to be able to use at Conner prairie. They will have access to the stories that they want to hear about, they'll have access to. And even if we can't provide it on site that day, that eventually that we will have a digital twin. Ryan, are you happy that I mentioned that? We will digital twin so people can go back and learn even more that we will have and engage them, inspired them and inflame their curiosity or spark their curiosity so much that they'll use our digital twin and learn more.

And if they're using our digital twin, that means that they're going to be learning from not just us, but other people online. And that's when we truly take this local museum and make it have a global impact.

Hannah: Absolutely. I love I really love the toolbox analogy as well because there are so many ways that we work together as an institution to bring this to the public and that the public can interact, but also that we can keep our staff safe.

And I do really like that about the virtual reality element. It's allowing us to bring these wonderful stories to light while still putting up those safety guards and protecting each other. And so I think you're completely right. I think with all the pieces together, we create a safe and healthy environment to learn and grow in.

Easton: So, Mr. Burns.

Norman: Yes?

Easton: Yes, here I am talking to you from the other side.

Norman: Norman. You don't have to call me Mr. Burns

Easton: Norman, I appreciate that, Norman. So I kind of like the way you put it as us being in here at Conner Prairie in the living history front, talking about how as it is right now, you'd step across that invisible line and it is 1836. Or if you're going to Civil War journey, it's 1863 or you know, the 1860s in a more general context. And we know that sometimes a guest can come and be ever so clever plan to take out a smartphone and dangle it in front of interpreter's face and be like, what's this talk about this. And there are different ways to go around that.

But I'm curious to see what your personal how you tackled these problems in your own personal experience because I'm sure in your first six years you got a much more different perspective than your last six years. And I really do want to just inquire as to how you how you work through those types of issues, because you can't in a way, you sort of put the interpreter not at a disadvantage, but they can only do so much with a guest coming in and doing something like that.

Norman: Well, thank you, Easton, actually for asking the question about the first six years, because, wow, I learned a lot in those first six years, including my first job was actually to manage of one of the Tennessee State historic sites, very small state historic site and very challenging. It was a Civil War shrine to Sam Davis, the boy hero of the Confederacy. And I can tell you there are a lot of challenges being, you know, in my mid-twenties at that time, back in the in the mid-eighties, and beginning to look at how we wanted to interpret as being a social historian, I knew that I wanted to tell the stories of everyone

Easton: Right.

Norman : And slavery was totally ignored at this particular site and to be able to do the research and bring voice back to some of the people that had been forcibly enslaved on this particular farm, to do the work that to be able to tell their stories and be able to do that, to create an exhibit for when Tennessee had its first literally MLK days, we actually did a program and an exhibit on slavery at the Sam Davis home and those were challenging times and, and, and, and learned a lot from that. And it really laid the groundwork for me as a social historian to look at how we interpreted. And we started we created a basis upon the research that we did.

We did characters and brought them back to life with high school drama students at that time. And in that particular location. The next place I went to and this would answer the question about first person interpretation a little bit better was a first person living history site in northeast Tennessee and actually interpreted the year 1791. So both historic characters and composite characters and when I say historic meaning these were real people that William Cobb family and Governor William Blunt who were staying with them but also created composite characters that interacted with those people.

So quite a very small site compared to Connor Prairie, but people would do that same thing that you said. People were always wanting to trip up the historical interpreters. And one of the common

questions was what is that airplane? What's that thing flying up in the air? And it would be easy to say, I don't see anything which then is really kind of putting that visitor at a disadvantage or what a lot of first person interpreters do at sites around the United States. And I'm assuming that our interpreters occasionally do say, oh, I've seen that large bird before. It's been flying over quite often. Or that someone held back when I was doing it, this first person interpretation. And at the site in the early nineties, there was no such thing as a as a cellphone, right. Except the big ones. And no one was carrying those. So people weren't carrying that. But today, when people pull out like a cell phone, if you think about it, it's like it's like a small book, right?

And so interpreters come up with creative ways to say, while I've never seen a book that has that, you can read quite like that. But isn't that a novel idea? And so you're not acknowledging that that is that that's a smart device or or a personal device. You're once again putting it in context. The best you can do something I might have, which would be a small book that I might put in my in my coat pocket or that type of thing.

Quite often people will say, well, how do I get to a restroom? Well, how do you acknowledge that if you are a first person interpretation? Well, what I always did is I would say sir or ma'am or the young child I might be speaking to, if you'll take this pathway that you see, it will lead you to the place that you desire. And so there's always ways that you can actually get around these things. But see, and I'll go back to Hannah, and this is one of the problems. See, we're putting our interpreters at a disadvantage because they have to, at a moment's notice, come up with creative ways to do that. And they do, trust me. And that's sometimes part of the fun. But it also sometimes can be disruptive because we talked about that opening doors and perhaps that volley that's taking place. That same thing when someone wants to trip up one of our interpreters or first person interpreter at any site that is to the disadvantage of everyone else in that audience and that becomes something that's disruptive.

So once again, when done well, that great volley that's taking place is great for a handful of people, but it's a disadvantage to a larger group. That's why we have to put all the tools in the toolbox to bear.

Easton: Right. The sad thing about it is, is it's never going to be ideal because it's such a one person has all the knowledge, but one person has all the control because they don't have to worry about breaking character as a visitor. And the first time I ever went to a historical site like that was Colonial Williamsburg, and I just didn't understand what was going on. I just until I turned and saw a carriage going down the street, I was like, oh, the things are a little bit different, but I really do like the way you put that as far as, you know, the strategies of looking at it like, oh, a book. This is, this is I've never seen anything quite like that. So I'm not ignoring you. I'm acknowledging you, but I'm also not giving in to what you want me to do, which be like, Of course, dude, it's a cell phone.

Norman: Yeah, yeah. And I've been at plenty of places where the interpreter won't acknowledge at all. Well, I don't see what you're talking about, sir. And really, that puts that that person at a disadvantage. So you're actually making that person look bad and you never want to do that any guests.

Easton: Right

Norman: And so that's why coming up with clever ways, like we've said, as a way of doing that. But still, it's something that our that an interpreter has to think about all the time, has to be prepared to respond that way. And like I say, when it's done well, it can be quite humorous, but and that's part of the engagement, I guess the first person interpretations.

Hannah: Hopefully we're not, you know, over using. That's what I'm going to go back one more time to that toolbox interpretation and say perhaps that is the answer for all sides. But I'm curious, obviously here at the Prairie, we've talked a little bit about what the future first person interpretation might look like. But I'm curious what you kind of see as the bigger future first person interpretation. Do you still think it deserves the prominent position that it has in the field? Do you feel like that tool needs to be used a little more sparingly? Do you think at the use of it will change as we move further into the 21st century? Just curious to hear what your thoughts are on how first person may change as we move into the future.

Norman: Well, I think there will always be a place for first person interpretation, so it's not going away. However, I will say that and I think everyone knows this, whether you're a medium sized first person living history site like Conner Prairie or a large one like Colonial Williamsburg or even small ones, if you're going to do good first person interpretation, it is expensive to historically costume people.

And once again, having the right number of first person interpreters that are properly trained and then engaged with the public, continually having them there. Because once you've created a storyline or program line, if you will, for a historical village like Prairietown, once you don't have enough interpreters in buildings for that, then that building goes dark, right? And the experiences is great for the guest. And even then, the best employment situation is getting harder and harder to find people that want to do costume interpretation. And then you throw in what's happened in the last two plus years and where we are as a society today. And we know what the job market's like. And so it's really tough. And I can tell you that we're having a hard time, you know this, we're having a hard time finding enough people to hire, to put in costume.

And so as I think about the future first person interpretation, I'm not sure that's going to change. And so I think that's why we have to not only look at the fact that we want to make sure that that toolbox and the tools are there for our interpreters to use, but that people that might want to have a career as an educator or someone who interprets history at a place like Connor Prairie can say, you know, I would never want to necessarily be in costume. I'm not that's not my thing. But I love to educate people and I love to use this tool.

So we want to make sure that we can, not just hire people to be costume interpreters, that we can hire people that are going to be true interpreters of the past, that are going to be educators. And if we do that and open up that toolbox and realize that not everyone has to be an 1836 tradesman, they can be a 20, 22 tradesmen, right? They can use those tools today, whatever that year is.

So I think that's probably the future of first person interpretation as we continue to evolve it and use it as one of the tools that's in that toolbox, but not the only tool, because when used properly, it can really sing for, for the public and sometimes it can even sing or even for just a kind of a dialog going on between a couple of people in the room. You never know how that's going to resonate with

others. Maybe they walk away or maybe that's a question they wanted to ask, but we're never brave enough to do it. And I think that's where also these others, like the digital twin that we and other museums are creating to, to expand our interpretation beyond our site, that's another way that people can begin to ask questions, even augmented reality.

Perhaps they open up their smart device and they don't have to say to a costume interpreter, Hey, what's this? And try to trick them. They actually open it in an augmented interpreter as they are in the room with them or on the site. And they hear the interpretation, perhaps have an opportunity to ask a question of someone who's actually live online with them, perhaps, or there might be proctored questions that the interpreter comes back, and that really opens that up for that person. That might be a little shy, that doesn't want to ask a question in front of a large crowd. For the interpreters, those that perhaps to keep them safe, having an augmented reality type of is another way of putting a costume, historical character that while they're not doing first person, they would be a historical character. They can be placed anywhere on the grounds of kind of prairie weather inside a building on the ground.

And that's what augmented reality will do for us. And I know it's tempting to say, well, what if that person doesn't bring, you know, a personal device with them once they don't have a smartphone? Well, 90% of the world has smartphones right now, I believe. So most people have it with them. But we'll come up with ways, as you know, we always do, not just contemporary, but most museums. We will come up ways to make sure that people have accessibility.

Hannah

I'm so excited about the potential for that, for overcoming staffing issues for, as we say, keeping people safe, also forgiving that accessibility, you know, being able to see different languages or be able to engage different communities that aren't able to be engaged in traditional ways. It's so exciting.

Easton

So, Norman, I have a personal curiosity I would like to add,

Norman

Oh Boy!

Easton

Just saying now, what's your favorite first person site you've ever been to outside of Conner Prairie? What place really spoke to you in that way? I know that's a huge question.

Norman

It is a huge question, but I have an answer. It would be really easy to say Colonial Williamsburg because it was the first place I ever went to that was a first person site beyond Rocky Mount, which was the second job that I told you about, that I started it in 1989, did wonderful first person interpretation, and because it was a smaller site and the staff got to know each other well, really good first person interpretation, the, the camaraderie and you know, this camaraderie between the people living in the present sometimes flows over into how the dialog between the characters on site can take place. So I think a really good first person site will always does that. But I have to say that probably back in the, in the, in the nineties old Salem was one of my favorite places to go and primarily because I love baked goods.

Easton

Oh yes! Oh yes!

Norman

oh my gosh, they, they, they, the interpretation they, they do in their bakeries that I would say when they still do and when you walk into Old Salem or in Salem in the Carolinas, they you just immediately smell it across the hotel. But especially when you're in a historic village and the interpretation they were doing at that time, not just baking but talking about the families that were in the bakery business there. And of course there were other trades, you know, shoemakers, cobblers, I mean the whole thing again but taking place that there but that sensory thing that I got immediately drew me in and I think that's once again what first person living history villages do, whether it's the sound of a hammer on an anvil or even if you're walking by a plate and a building that might have an open hearth cooking taking place, you hear the pop of the crackle of the fire or you hear dishes moving around in the space, or you walk by and you might hear the bang of a loom as someone's weaving and all these different things that you're doing that's I think that's what a good first person site will do.

But for me, I have to say, because of that sensory smell of old Salem, not that they have they don't do the cooking at Colonial Williamsburg Not that we don't do it here at Conner Prairie. As a matter of fact, my first year here, every time I walk to the Golden Eagle Inn, there's at least two of our two of my colleagues in costume who are always having me try what they were cooking that day. And that wasn't always good, though, you know, that's because they're always testing receipts. And they

wanted to see if I would be honest, in my opinion, about or whether I'd say, Whoa, that doesn't taste good. And they would say, You're right, and here's why

Easton: I've heard a lot about the notorious carrot beer.

Hannah: Oh, yeah. That was that was an interesting one. That was an interesting one.

Norman: Well, as we know, the receipts, it's hard to you don't always interpret. They weren't quite as specific as we are today. And then just their tastes were different. They didn't have the different or had herbs, but the spices and things that we that we commonly use were very expensive or inaccessible at all. And so they're using substitutes. And so those substitutes sometimes are not as good as what we what we used in the 21st century.

Hannah: Like the pea coffee that they make out in the ground, out in the peas and make it in the coffee and civil war. That's because they'd be short on coffee beans and so they would make do and

Norman: Yeah. Like chicory and you know, all the different things and root tea is actually, you know, as long as you know you're drinking root tea is, I mean it has its own taste. But if you, you think that's going to be coffee, it can kind of story for a loop.

Easton: Right. Funny thing is, I almost at the time this episode is coming out, I will probably be celebrating my one-year anniversary here at Conner Prairie.

Norman: Congratulations on that future Anniversary.

Easton: Thank you very much, sir. But I will say for a little while, I was thinking about going back to Cincinnati and getting a degree in sensory studies.

Norman: Okay.

Easton: Just because that was such a new historical concept to me, I've had one of my professors sit and explain it to me about feeling history, not just speech and just not just lecturing to someone, but also letting someone..

Norman: Listen. Let me put you on the spot now.

Easton: Oh, boy, I'm ready.

Norman: How would you use that at Conner Prairie? Think about what you just said. How would you personally use that at Conner Prairie, if you were sitting in Norman's chair right now and you could say, this is what we're going to do snap your fingers and make that. By the way, I can't snap my fingers. Make anything happen here. A lot of people think I do. But no, that's not true. But tell me, how would you use that as a tool in the toolbox?

Easton: Well, sensory studies are it's important because you don't want to scare people either. You don't want people to come in and hear a cannon boom every 10 minutes because they might not come back after that. But I think there are different things to be done in in different spaces. I think if I were sitting in your chair, I might think about changing spaces somewhere where you can play a character, but also making sure that place is historically accurate.

I've never been to DuPont ever, but one of the things that was told to me was that there are a little bit of there are a few liberties that are taken with the interpretation out there and Civil War journey. Sometimes when I hear Civil War journey, I just kind of get a little bit of a Civil War journey like what kind of history are we teaching out there?

If that raid didn't really happen in DuPont. I just but I, I understand what it and I understand what it's what they're trying to teach and the purpose in which that space was made and the time in which it was made.

Norman: Easton, I hate to burst your bubble here, but, you know, there's no such place as Prairietown either.

Easton: Well, yeah, yeah, I, I wasn't going to be that up front, but yes, there also is no such place as Prairietown.

Norman: Yeah. Let's go ahead and get it out there. We, we and but I'm glad you brought that up because that is something that, that is we think about the future of Conner Prairie. And as an academic historian, myself, I can tell you there's no reason why we shouldn't be bringing historical characters to bear in everything that we do.

We it's not that we can't use composite characters. I'm a true believer in research and in telling a greater story, but by that way, but with historical characters. And there's no reason why we should have to make up anything because history is so infinitely engaging and interesting and we heard that we don't have to always we don't have to make anything up.

We can just we can authentically tell stories of all people and tell the truth about it. And the truth can be hard and it can be it can be ugly. And we have to be prepared for that. And, you know, I think Connor Prairie, as we continue to evolve with our diversity, equity, accessible and inclusion promise that we're going to be a place where the doors are always open to the diversity of voices and limitless experiences, that that means that we have to be more inclusive in the in the stories that we're telling across this side and how we tell those stories and making sure they're authentic and making sure that that people can see themselves here because right now, not everybody can see themselves at Conner Prairie. And, you know, we're dealing with that. And it's a long it's it's going to be a long journey.

But thankfully, we've started that journey. And I think that that this organization is going to continue down that pathway and hopefully partner with other community groups that that will help us along the way. And we've had some great community partners thus far that have done that. And I just hope that, you know, that as we continue this journey and we we're beginning to bridge be that that firm bridge between the two sides that seem to be polarized right now, that we can be that safe place that people know that they can stand on the bridge of Conner Prairie, and that can be a place

of open dialog and that despite things perhaps being hard that we can tell the truth and, because that's really if you're not telling the truth about history, it's fiction, right?

Easton: That's true. I do know people who in my own family who see historical place and safe place as two very, very different things.

Norman: And I understand that.

Easton: But it is a tall order, but it's something you can't back down from, especially when you're the CEO. I think you're doing a great job. Absolutely.

Norman: I appreciate that I mean its

Easton: I wouldn't want your job

Norman: for those that cannot see me, I'll just let you know. You heard me say earlier, I'll be 61 next month and I'm a 61 year old privileged white male. And despite not growing up privilege as far as my background, I'm still privileged because I'm a white male. I have every advantage and just been able to acknowledge that. And with my background as a social historian, all the programing I've done, it's hard sometimes to be taken seriously as a privileged white male, you know, when you're trying to make changes.

But I think that as we get into this dialog, as people see a place like Conner Prairie with a leader like me making these changes, hopefully they'll be accepting, and when people are talking in the community that they'll say, You know what, that that place is? Yeah, they stumble occasionally, but they always fall forward

Easton: Right.

Norman: That's the big thing about this journey were on. If we're going to fall, I want to fall forward and we might fall flat on our face. But I promise you, we're going to get up and take that next step. We're not going to go backwards. So tell me what you were going to study before you answer that question.

Easton: The way sensory studies was pitched to me, I'm sure if you ask someone who is a professional or go Google it, it may say something different. But the way that it was pitched to me by the University of Cincinnati faculty was the new right way to teach history in the fact that you aren't sitting behind a lectern and talking to people about things that happened years and years and years ago, and then giving them dates to memorize. This is about getting you out there, letting you hear the sounds of the rifles going off, letting you try the foods that.

The main thing is that one of the saddest things about going into a place like this is that you can't just give food out to everyone because people have allergies and you don't want any type of legal things going on. But these professors would literally say, we're going to give you some sensory studies today. That meant we were being fed that day and they would bring us in food. This was a

World War One class, and they bring us in like all the different things that people would eat in the trenches. And some of it was awful. I you know, I eat a clay. I ate weird hard tack. It was it was awful. But I almost felt in a weird way kind of proud to eat it because I was like, wow, this is the closest thing I'm going to get to feeling what they felt I'm not at war, but it's it did it succeeded where a lot of lectures failed, I'll say.

And that's just how it was pitched to me. And that we want to get you thinking about history in a way where you could relate to it. You know, what would you kill for? What would you die for? That was the big thing that was constantly brought up in the war classes was that type of thing. You know what? What would it take in for you to have taken that step if you were in that time? But on a more cheery note, here Conner Prairie, it's a lot different. And I definitely I'm definitely with you as far as you know, it's important toÖ There, there's nothing quite like you can't explain what it's like to hear a musket go off or hearing a blacksmith working and smelling the smoke and things like that.

Norman: You know, when you think about sensory studies and it really that plays well to a place like Conner Prairie being a living history site. But we think about the sensory and I mentioned you mentioned cannons going off, I've mentioned the anvil and those types of things. But as we think about being a truly inclusive site, we have people that engage in all five senses are not something that they can handle. And so we also have to be careful sometimes as living history sites about the audiences that that we're that we're facing. But, you know, considering the way I was likely trained, even though I was trained as a social historian, so believing in stories and doing a lot of sensory things, unless you went on and got an academic degree of my generation, if you just had if you just had, say, high school history or even fourth grade history.

Easton: Right.

Norman: You you didn't get real history at all. And so you almost have you didn't really learn what real history was unless you went on and took undergraduate and graduate courses. And that's where you would really get into the reading and research and get into professors like you, like you mentioned that want to get from behind the lectern and get their students to engage and the senses of what they're doing to help them understand it and placing those people in the chair. One of the curatorial talks that I used to give, I don't give anymore, but is that that if you truly want to interpret something, you have to make sure that person understands it. So let's say a Chippendale chair I use as an example, I could easily as I could easily talk about that chair and I could talk about the design or the shape, the style and all those different types of things. But if you sit in that chair and I turned it around, I talked about the person who owned it and the fact that they held a baby when it was sick or they saw a daughter being married in their home, or they saw a war raging on their on their front lawn. That changes that totally. And you can see yourself sitting in the chair.

And that's a form of sensory, I think, training too. Coming smelling the senses, being a place the guests in that chair or in that location. And once again, I think that's what really good living history sites like Conner Prairie can do for our guest.

Easton: Right.

Hannah: I think it would be really interesting. Then jumping off of that to talk about how our newest exhibit, Promise Land as proving ground that's opening this year embodies a lot of that work. The changes we've chosen to make going into that exhibit and the ways that we're hoping that it can bring a lot of this work together. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Norman: I do. You know, we had a program for over 20 years called Follow the North Star, which was a totally immersive experience, allowing the guests and the guests were usually middle school or, you know, students that were coming in for tours, even though we did it for public tours as well.

But to immerse that guests on what it was like to be a runaway slave, that was captured trying to run away to the north, followed the North Star and then been recaptured, and then once again escaping once again after being captured and then having the profit at the end, be able to talk, give some context to say perhaps there will come a time where and that was our way of doing that. But that still was very limiting to and can be quite harming to some audiences. And to be quite frank with you didn't give the right agency for how that program was developed. So we knew that we needed to change that and we needed to be able to tell a much larger story than one just about slavery and just about people escaping from slavery that we needed to tell about the black experience.

And that that started pre-colonial and goes all the way to today and in the future, just like my history does. So that's where Promised Land as a proving ground came about because as we know, Indiana was part of the Northwest Ordinance, and there were certain things within the Northwest Ordinance that can be explored about why it was free compared to the southern part of the country.

But this really opens the door for the first time in and that was no pun intended, opens the door for the first time in Prairietown for us to be able to tell a more a story beyond just a historic period. So we can go pre-colonial with black people coming from Africa and before slavery and talk about that and take it all the way through to the present and the future and give a place both in Prairietown and across the site to be able to tell those stories and that's really different. The fact that our Origins Cabin is at the beginning of Prairietown, and we will be building a new museum building at the end of Prairietown to be able to tell contemporary stories.

That's really different for a living history site, and that's really different for Conner Prairie. And I can tell you I'm excited not only for Promised Land as a proving ground, but the fact that we because of this project, we were also able to really go out and bring academic historians back into Conner prairie. And and what I mean by that, as someone who's totally focused on it, I mean, I'm an academic historian. We have a couple of colleagues that are academic historians, but that's not our day job. So we can get advice and work, but we're not constantly focused on that. And Dr. Charlene Fletcher, who we hired to be the curatorial director of this project, has done a remarkable job with the people that she's hired. And the research has been done. And working with Jesse Cramer, a director of Exhibits and his team and others, to really put together what I think is going to be a benchmark type of project, not just for Connor Prairie's future, but I think to help other living history sites be able to break this mold of saying we can only do interpretation and a particular time or era and we can't go the past to the future. Because that's just not what we do.

Well, that is what we do. If we're truly interpreting the past, it has to be in context to what we are in the present so we can make informed decisions about the future. That's the very definition of what

we at history at its best been interpreted is, so why have we put literally, you know, barriers to that? We've tied her hands by saying we can only talk about a particular time in the past. Well, that's not what Promised Land as a proving ground is doing. It allows that continuum to be able to fluctuate between and allow people to learn from the past and consider contemporary issues today and in the future. And what that means for their lives and how that can change not only themselves individually, but their community. And I hope the world, because our aspirational goal is to change the way the world views and uses museums. And Hannah, you know, this is starts one person at a time.

Hannah: Sure does. And I'm so happy to hear that and excited to hear it, not just because it gives us our positions as researchers here, which obviously is wonderful. And we absolutely adore working alongside Charlene, uh, Dr. Fletcher I just I was feeling so enveloped by it when you were talking about the sensory experiences, because I think we're taking the beautiful sensory experiences people have always gotten here and merging them with that ability to diversify and include, you know, you'll still be able to smell from the gardens, the plants, you'll be able to smell the food cooking, but also have the medium of video and sound to be able to feel completely immersed. It's just such a beautiful merging of those two worlds.

Norman: For those of you that might be visiting Conner Prairie starting this summer will start the first phase of promise as a proving ground in the in the Origins cabin, and that is going to be a sensory experience. To your point, there's going to be trails leading up into that. So everything from the types of vegetables and plants that were being grown all the way to two are Osabaw island hogs that are going to be there. So there's going to be a lot of sounds and smells that are going to be competing with each other, heading into the Origins Cabin. And then I'm not going to I'm not going to give away the wonderful bit. But you mentioned an audio visual experience but the story that's going to be told in the Origins Cabin and then that iterative process through the rest of 2022 and then going into 2023 when we do have the new museum building augmented reality is going to be able to tell stories across Prairietown in ways that we've never been able to do before.

And that's what Promise Land is a proving ground is, is going to bring the Conner Prairie. And that's just the first step for that story that can be used for all sorts of stories and more inclusive histories that Conner Prairie's never been able to tell.

Hannah: Beautiful. We thank you so much for your candor and for sitting with us today having this conversation. We'd love to open up at this point before we close for the episode. If you have anything else you want to share with the guests and the listeners that we haven't gotten to?

Norman: Oh Wow, I've talked so much, what extra should I. What would I share? Well, I will share this. I'm not only an academic historian, I'm not just a historical leader of a living history site, I'm also a personal historian. And I want you to know that you all have personal histories. And I don't care if it's if it's a parent a sibling, a grandparent, or just a close friend, ask them questions. Ask them questions about their life and their past life and listen the most important thing you can do is listen and ask another question. And if you want to be do an oral history, make sure that you ask them that you can record it and write their histories up and share it with others. But more importantly, don't ever think to yourself, well, I don't have any important history my family didn't do anything important.

Well, I didn't think mine did either until I asked my grandfather one day as we were sitting on his namesake's grave because I'd never seen that, and he was sitting there and talking about an Uncle John, and there was a lot of John Burns's in my family tree going way back, and I said, So, which John Burns is that? He said, Oh, you know, Uncle John, he's the one who killed his nephew in the family feud. And my eyes got big, as did my father, who had never heard the story at that time. And I'm like, Wow. And so that that led into a subject matter for my master's thesis, but is also a book I'm writing now called The Ghost of Murder Mayhem.

So if I hadn't asked that question, I would have never known, because when I started asking my grandfather further questions that day, he said, I'm not going to say another word. He said, because I'm afraid the feud will start up again. Now, he was a small child when this feud was taking place between the two families. But he said he was afraid to stick his head out the back door at night in fear of being shot. So that makes you think, doesn't it? And but I would have never known that because he said he wanted to take it to his grave. So think about those stories that you have in your family and that that's a very specific one. But we all have things when I'm not I haven't always been a fan of genealogy sites. But I do have to say that I do think they're doing a better job of helping people see how their stories can be told. So I think that's the thing I would say you don't have to work at a historic site like Conner Prairie or Colonial Williamsburg or teach at a university. You can be your own personal historian. You can be it for your family, you can be it for a church or community Center or for anything. But just get out there, ask questions, learn about yourself, learn about your family, learn about your community. And if you do, I promise you can make a difference. It will make a difference in your personal life and how you view your family. It'll help you view your community differently, too. And that's really what we need today we need a different view.