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Starting and Sustaining a Living History Farm

by Debra A. Reid

Author's Note: In memory of John T. Schlebecker (1923–2010) with respect for his participation in the collective action that resulted in ALHFAM, founded at an annual meeting of the Agricultural History Society in 1970 at Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts. He wrote the first "how-to" (Living Historical Farms Handbook) in 1972, with Gale E. Peterson.

Living history farms offer an immersion experience in rural and agricultural life. Visitors (and staff) cannot get these experiences anywhere else. They rely on living history farms for unique sensory stimulation, historic information and hands-on education. The museums include collections not available elsewhere; complete environments with buildings, landscapes and living collections that once, in combination, defined the lives of the majority. Yet, today only 1 percent of the U.S. population claim farming as an occupation while only 2 percent of the U.S. population and 2.2 percent of Canadians still live on farms. Those farm families, for the most part, are as far removed from traditional practices as their city cousins. Living history farms offer not only unique museum experiences but also opportunities to preserve folkways and foodways and nearly extinct encounters between people, plants, animals and the land.

Living history farms have often



Photograph by Rachel Neubauer.

Loading hay into a stationary baler at Old World Wisconsin.

developed because of their affiliation with some event or person of significance. Others exist because owners donated impressive farmsteads to communities or organizations committed to preserving them. Few preserve living memory, sites that interpret the 1930s to the present, and in this regard, they lose much potential for community engagement. As time keeps marching on, those interested in starting liv-

ing farms often, ironically, still consider the period of construction the most significant, even though the continued occupation up through the last owner might be the period most worthy of preserving and interpreting.

Living history farms provide a setting to interpret daily routines. They can yield insight into decisions about family size and labor

“The farms should be reasonably typical of the time and place. . . The farm size, its crops, livestock, production methods, the products sold – all these and other details of the farm should be as accurate as it is reasonably possible to make them. The critical aspect. . . is that each farm should be operating – a living farm and a living home.”

– Marion Clawson,
 “Living Historical Farms:
 A Proposal for Action,”
Agricultural History (1965),
 110.

needs. They can help visitors understand relationships between diversified production for subsistence compared to specialized production for market. Living history farms also help visitors understand the relationship between technology, agricultural mechanization, and leisure pursuits, and the consequences of technological change on farms. Living history farms can convey the business of farming, the pressures farm families faced, and the seasonal routines and community interactions that defined life. It takes time to document these historic themes, but once documented, they can guide site development, interpretation and programming. The combination of history, food production, and hands-on programming make unforgettable experiences.



Photograph by Todd Price.

Heritage breed pigs at Historic Wagner Farm, Glenview Park District.

Do We Need Another Living History Farm?

Hundreds of living history farms exist, and some may be near you. Why do we need another one? Any group interested in preserving a living history farm, or starting an agricultural museum, needs to answer this question. Does your community need a living history farm or agricultural museum? To answer this question, conduct a feasibility study.

The study will document the attitudes in the immediate geographic area. It can also identify economic, social and cultural resources that exist, or that do not exist, but that are required to sustain the site. Find a person to conduct this study who is willing to report negative findings as well as positive. All too often boosters and entrepreneurs see potential where none exists. The feasibility study must be credible, based in current demographic

statistics, taking into account economic conditions and real interest. If the study answers in the affirmative, then a team of influential (financial and political and social) locals should be approached to lead an effort to raise visibility with the ultimate goal of acquiring it and raising a pre-determined amount of money to endow it.

Yet, financial backing and political and social support are not enough. Another task needs to be undertaken concomitantly to determine the feasibility of the project. Does the site have historic significance?

Preserving the Site

“The small ‘single family’ farm is perhaps the most ubiquitous Historic period archaeological site in America.” – John S. Wilson, “We’ve Got Thousands of These!” *Historical Archaeology* (1990), 23.

John S. Wilson provides a methodology to use to determine the



Photograph by Rachel Neubauer.

Tony Casper grinding flour as a demonstration at Old World Wisconsin.

Preserving a living history farm offers much potential, but comes with many challenges. John Schlebecker and Gale Peterson indicated that major decisions have to be made early in the process to ensure survival: “Would the farm stand alone or should a museum be part of the development? Would additional restoration work or reconstruction efforts, such as a village, be included in the project? . . . Is there already a restoration project in the community to which a farm could be added? Are there other tourist attractions nearby?” [Schlebecker and Peterson, *Living Historical Farms Handbook* (1972), 4].

significance of farmsteads. He suggests starting with a survey of published sources such as county atlases and plat maps combined with town and county histories. This quick survey should result in a broad understanding of the social and economic characteristics of farms in an area, and the geographic distribution of crop cultures and processing centers. A farmstead’s significance can be tested based on how representative or exceptional it may be in relation to the local or regional context.

This process requires objective assessment. Interested parties must agree that the site fits within a significant storyline. Only then should they expend time and money on preservation. If the site’s history (and history of the occupants) cannot be made relevant to larger issues of significance in state and national history (and specifically in rural and farm history), then the

project seems pointless. Concerned citizens need to debate the merits of preserving the site and investing in it as an educational resource. Only after documentation and debate can the project move to the next phase.

The interested parties should be officially appointed (either self-appointed or instructed to participate as part of their job) on a project team. Once formalized, the team should begin undertake the work, or commission the work that will result in a report documenting its significance. With this in hand, they can gauge the breadth of support for the project. Only with some firm understanding of the willingness of the community and funders to support them, should they begin preservation. This may start with nominating the site to the National Register of Historic Places, an important step to affirming the site’s significance.

Living history farms, regardless of their partnerships and affiliations, qualify as museums. To attain the highest standards, they must adhere to the International Council of Museum’s (ICOM) definition of a museum. Thus, the farms need to collect, preserve and interpret rural and farm life. For living history farms, collections include multi-dimensional artifacts such as the natural and built environment (buildings and landscapes) as well as the plants and animals, living, cultivated and shepherded. Collections also include the machinery, equipment, household artifacts, and intangible heritage (folk culture) that sustained the farm family and the larger rural community.

Preserving a farm site requires stewards, people willing to invest expertise and economic resources in the large physical plant that all living history farms need. Steward-

ship starts with identifying a site and ensuring its preservation, but stewardship continues as local enthusiasts expend large sums of money to restore extant parts of the site, and recreate other elements essential to the interpretation.

John Schlebecker identified, in 1968, the most critical challenge that people faced when trying to start a living history farm – raising money. He wrote: “The problem of raising money always appears, chiefly because the farms do not offer real prospects for profits or eventual self-support.” In fact, Schlebecker “did not locate even one self-supporting educational or historical farm” as he conducted research for *Living Historical Farms: A Walk Into the Past* (1968). Profit comes not from financial gain but from the priceless experiences that visitors and staff and supporters can experience as a result of the farm. This requires a significant financial investment with no tangible return. Other means must be devised to measure the intangible benefits the site brings its constituents and community, and to convince people to invest in that.

Experts bring more than funding and political influence to the project. Experts should also be identified who have knowledge and other talents. Thus, the team entrusted with preserving the site should include representatives from multiple disciplines (farmers, historians, architects, lawyers, bankers and agricultural marketers, conservationists, gardeners, veterinarians, teachers, folklorists, archaeologists,



Photograph by Debra A. Reid

Volkening Heritage Farm, part of the Schaumburg, Illinois Park District, Fall 2006.

engineers) and a range of ages (youth to elders) who represent multiple perspectives, economic support and factual information. It really takes a village to identify, preserve and interpret a living history farm, and only with such diversity can long-term stewardship be guaranteed.

Architects, both a building and a landscape expert, can complete reports to guide stabilization and preservation efforts as well as long-term stewardship. A historic structures report should be done for each historic building in the facility. It should document the condition of buildings before restoration to minimize damage that stabilization may cause. It will guide restoration and preservation of structures and ensure their long term care and management. It will indicate what buildings need, everything from the roof to

“Successful living historical farm projects do not begin in some singularly different way from unsuccessful efforts. . . . There is no way to simply categorize the greatly diverse organizations that are developing living historical farms.”

– John Schlebecker and Gale Peterson, *Living Historical Farms Handbook* (1972), 3.



Photograph by Julie Baran-Reilly.

Children get to know the source of the milk they drink, a dairy cow at Historic Wagner Farm, Glenview Park District, during the Dairy Breakfast event, June 2012.

specifications for an HVAC system that will not harm structures.

The same can be said for the landscape, particularly given the significance of the place to the complete story of the property. An expert should be commissioned to complete a historic landscape report that will guide preservation and maintenance of the historic landscape. It should integrate contemporary field use within the parameters of historic use while balancing modern visitor, staff and animal needs. The landscape report should sensitively allow for proper lighting, parking, roadways, restroom facilities and security.

Creating a Living History Farm

A team of committed individuals must garner support from con-

stituents at the local, community and regional level. Then the team, in consultation with interest groups, can take specific steps to legally create a living history farm.

Museums, including living history farms, must establish their legal identity. This means that representatives from the living history farm should complete paperwork to incorporate as a business, specifically a private, not-for-profit educational entity at the state level.

Each state has different laws, so be sure to take all steps necessary to both incorporate and receive not-for-profit status at the state level, which makes the site exempt from sales tax payments on purchases in that state.

To apply for incorporation, sites must submit by-laws signed by the governing body and official representatives of the organization must sign the application forms. Thus, some organizing and decision making about purpose, governance, membership, and dissolution, must occur before incorporating. Only with the articles of incorporation in hand can a corporation then file for state and national tax-exempt status as a not-for-profit.

Not all living history farms begin as private non-profits. Some may

function as public entities, as part of a larger government unit (municipal, metropark, county, state). In this case, sites do not have to incorporate or file for not-for-profit status. Instead, it would be in their best interest to incorporate a friends group to operate as a private not-for-profit, specifically one that will act as a fundraising entity for the public site.

After incorporation and after securing state not-for-profit status, the next step to securing legal identity requires completion of requisite paperwork at the national level. Full benefit of economic donations can only be realized if an incorporated entity applies for 501(c)(3) status at the national level which conveys exemption from income tax regardless of the income that derives from activities associated with the museum's educational purpose. The site or friends group should also request a Federal Employer Identification Number.

Professional organizations that support the living history farms include the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums, the American Association of Museums, other state and regional museum associations and ICOM. These organizations have established the standards that guide museum operations. Stewards of living history farms must acknowledge and comply with these minimum expectations including but not limited to ethical behavior. With by-laws as the guide, officers should be elected to the living history museum's board. They must be informed of professional standards of behavior and they must comply with them. The

board should adopt a code of ethics that establishes protocol at the living history farm.

Governance should be clearly defined in the bylaws, and terms of office should be defined to require rotation of board members, a step toward ensuring the health of the organization. Board members of a private, not-for-profit bear the fiduciary responsibility for the institution. They should not bear this burden uninformed. Board nurturing should occur through regular reminders about their duties, regular professional development opportunities, information meetings, planning retreats, committee work and public engagement.

Institutional planning should begin with a firm understanding of the site's significance based on the history of the site and its occupants in local, regional and national context. Such knowledge will help stewards articulate a mission statement that can be further refined into a "brand" for the site. All of this supports marketing. A research report should state the interpretive approach that the site should take to realize its potential. In other words, if the site documents a notable development in agricultural or farm history, i.e. the development of Funk Hybrid Seed, then the site should take a documentary approach, focusing on the family and events associated with the development. If, on the other hand, the site illustrates the process by which German immigrants acquired land, divided land among children, and established viable farmsteads that supported community development and economic stability, then the site could develop as a representa-

tive example of a larger cultural trend.

Policies for all branches of the museum's operation should be developed, implemented and adhered to as soon as possible. These include the ethics policy, financial development plan, personnel policies, emergency plans and procedures, a facilities management plan and collections policies which take into account the unique nature of living history farm collections. For example, collections policies should include a policy for objects that the farm site will use in programming. This can address documentation and use of replicas as well as living collections including plants and animals.

Interpretive policies can articulate the philosophy to govern daily programming and special events. Will the site have first or third person interpreters? Costumed docents or uniformed guides? Paid or volunteer interpreters? These decisions must be made early, justified, codified and then used to sustain viable public programming.

Maintaining Operations

It is impossible to maintain a site without a clear purpose and without community investment in the project. Everyone involved in the fledgling (or mature) living his-

“Historical farms. . . are approximations of their originals, or more accurately, our generalizations, our hypotheses and theories about them. Like any model they present ‘selected’ data and are therefore subjective. They must always reflect, to some extent, the particular interests and biases of those constructing them. . . . [Some may] come to treat it as sacrosanct, indeed to consider it the living past. It is only an account of the past, the same as the next model.”

– Darwin P. Kelsey,

“Historical Farms as Models of the Past,”
ALHFAM Proceedings (1974), 38.

tory farm should be able to recite the purpose of the organization – sometimes clearly stated in a mission or vision statement. These should be drafted in consultation with community representatives, a process that will generate the financial and emotional commitment that must exist for living history farms to survive and prosper.

Focus groups can be convened regularly and well ahead of major changes. Living history farm staff should always remember that they work at a site, but others “own” it. The best relationship that can exist between community and museum staff is one of exchange. The public has a major stake in the survival

of the living farm; the staff cannot ensure survival alone. The staff must keep the public informed and should engage the public via focus groups and regular discussions. Remember, museum staff must listen to their audiences when trying to decide what the museum can do for them. Changing things without discussion may generate a maelstrom of discontent. Avoid this by making decisions in consultation with stake holders. That said, the conversation is not a one way street, and staff members must remember that they have a duty to fulfill the institution's educational purpose. This will generate the positive relationships between institution and community that have to exist to maintain operations.

Living history farms should cultivate good working relationships with cultural partners including other museums, the media, public and private schools, public libraries, colleges and universities, churches, service organizations, in fact, any entity with which they share goals (education and service). These partnerships can generate substantial non-monetary support, ensure visitation at events, develop alliances to support and expand programming, and convey information to diverse audiences.

Fund raising remains critical to an organization's long-term success. General operating support should come from diverse sources, including donations, membership dues, gift-shop sales and program revenue. Rarely, however, will income meet expenses. Development must be a top priority. Directors usually bear the responsibility for cultivating major donors, but directors

cannot be expected to do so without the support of their board, and their staff.

Yardsticks to measure success in daily operations exist in various forms. The American Association of Museums and the American Association for State and Local History have both published documents that define standards in administration and governance; interpretation, education and public programming; collections and facilities management.

Sites should prepare a schedule of public programs that reflect professional standards of authenticity. Programs should be relevant to the site's history. The schedule should not exhaust the staff and threaten the integrity of the physical plant. Staff should evaluate the programs, identify what works and doesn't work and improve on subsequent offerings.

Staff should consider the entire site as a changing exhibit, and they should market it that way. Seasons governed chores on the farm and daily routines in the farm home historically. But seasons do not affect the daily routines of most visitors in the same way. Keep your audience attuned to seasons and feature routines as major events.

“Clearly the living historical farm and community are important phenomena in the museum world. Products of the interaction of a number of cultural currents in the [1960s], they mean many things to many people. . . The concepts of living history have a quality leading to self-correction, to re-editing the models of the past and using them for a process approach to interpretation and education. Thus, fundamentally, I am optimistic in regard to the future.”

*– Edward L. Hawes,
“The Living Historical
Farm in North America,”
ALHFAM Proceedings
(1975), 58-59.*

You have to do chores anyway, so why not have an audience.

Collections Stewardship

Visitors go to museums to see objects, and they go to living history farms to see objects in motion (along with people, animals, crops). Collections runs the gamut from traditional artifacts to heritage breeds of livestock and seeds and plants. Collections care includes maintaining equipment in operat-



Photograph in possession of Dale Yoder; courtesy of Tom Vance.

The farmstead in its prime during the Golden Age of agriculture (1909–1914), now the site of Rockholm Gardens, near Arcola, Illinois. Elvin Yoder owned Rockome from 1958–1993. Dale Yoder and his brother Alan owned Rockome from 1993 until they sold the site to a group of investors in 2005.

ing condition, propagating plants and animals, and managing livestock in a historic context.

Consider the health of the collections. The report *A Public Trust at Risk: Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections* [<http://www.heritagepreservation.org/hhi/>] indicates that collections care has not been a priority for museums in the United States. The condition of objects has deteriorated rapidly due to storage in damp, dirty environments, in non-secure areas, and in the hands of incompetent or careless staff. Collections care has always been a topic of debate in living history circles. Proactive measures to protect objects from use resulted in a movement to create replicas for use, or to create a tiering system to identify objects that would bear the stress of use or that were plentiful and non-significant enough to warrant use for educational purposes.

For collections to remain secure at living history farms, and remain an attraction for visitors, sites must continue to be proactive in collecting and preserving the objects. The objects (real ones) need to remain on view in secure exhibits. The objects for use need to be clearly marked and managed with care to ensure the most accurate educational opportunity for visitors.

Staff Stewardship

Support staff. Encourage them to participate in professional development activities in the community and with their peers in local, state, regional and national associations. Special interest groups such as the American Minor Breeds Conservancy or Seed Savers Exchange might interest them more than a museum organization. Nurture their interest in what ever way you can. This can be as low-budget as holding monthly book discussions to keep them reading, chapter

by chapter, a major new monograph that can enhance site interpretation. Following the reading discussions, continue with planning how the information can be integrated into daily or special programming. It can be as expensive as supporting staff to attend a conference (paying registration, lodging and transportation) or as inexpensive as providing coffee, donuts and an extra hour of pay for a conversation before regular work hours. Both will be good investments.

Planning for Perpetuity

John Schlebecker and Gale Peterson began their *Handbook* (1972) defined living historical farms as places where “men farm as they once did during some specific time in the past. The farms have tools and equipment like those once used, and they raise the same types of livestock and plants used during the specific era. The operations are carried on in the presence of visitors” (1). The operation of a living history farm may seem straightforward in light of this definition, but the reality is more complicated. Men do not work them alone. Farm fields constitute only a part of the “farm.” Livestock require care outside the normal 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. workday. No one step-by-step approach to starting, maintaining and perpetuating the sites can serve the purpose. It takes constant vigilance after the site opens to maintain integrity.

The day-to-day routine of operating the labor-intensive site may

consume all work hours, but staff must be proactive in planning for survival. Planning cannot stop after a site opens. Instead, strategic planning must be an ongoing process best accomplished through a major master planning initiative and updated through regularly scheduled reviews and refinements.

Living history farms can benefit from a well-crafted collection development plan that takes into account what the institution owns (inanimate and animate collections) and what else it needs to tell its story. Then staff can prioritize objects for accession and be ready to acquire and care for them when they become available.

Interpretive planning can ensure well-structured, pedagogically sound and audience supported programs. *The Journal of Museum Education*, a publication of the Museum Education Roundtable, developed a special issue on interpretive planning in 2008. The process should involve constituents and staff in a series of talks to confirm or revise the interpretive mission of the site, and to identify programs to further that mission.

The American Association for Museums facilitates holistic planning by offering Museum Assessment opportunities for institutions interested in self-improvement, with the ultimate goal of applying for accreditation. Consult the AAM webpage <http://aam-us.org/museumresources/map/index.cfm> for additional information on benefits of participating in the four self-assessments available including organization/institutional, collections management/stewardship, commu-

nity engagement/public dimension and leadership/governance. The process includes a visit by a museum professional who will review the self-assessment, will meet with staff and discuss the organization's strengths and challenges and will complete a report that the site can use for leverage to improve its operations. Completing each assessment in turn can improve overall operations at a site, and position the site favorably to undertake the rigorous process of applying for AAM Accreditation.

Ultimately, living history farms must plan for success as not-for-profit educational organizations. The success depends on the ability of the site to balance competing objectives of preservation and use, and to operate in a fiscally responsible way. The most successful operations have stable sources of income, generated from well-managed endowments or public funding streams. They use their financial resources to maintain regularly scheduled high-quality public programs. If the public thinks the site is indispensable, they will rally to protect and support it. But the public trust can be fickle and it requires nurturing much as stock, crops and staff require nurturing. It takes constant effort to keep living history farms flourishing.

Selected Publications for Further Reference

Author's Note: I completed most of this essay before consulting John T. Schlebecker's and Gale E. Peterson's Living Historical Farms Handbook, the first (as far as I can tell) piece of advice literature on creat-

ing living history farms. I did this because, as a historian, I would have been worried about putting their ideas into context, rather than running with the ideas that I had. A lot has changed since 1972 when Living Historical Farms Handbook appeared. Schlebecker and Peterson wrote the Handbook at the beginning of an era of intense development; I proffer this guidance at a time when crises in funding force established sites to innovate or close. Yet, hope springs eternal, and many enthusiastically launch new sites. Schlebecker and Peterson indicated that sites were "starting fresh, with neither personal nor institutional experience to guide them" (1). The same can be said for living history farm development today. They created their Handbook "to provide [those engaged in creating living historical farms] with information gained by the experiences of others" (1). Finally, they hoped that the information would "be useful in helping them get started or in keeping going" (1). I hope the same. Please let me know if information proves more or less useful, and please recommend your favorite readings to expand the bibliography. With your help, this resource can remain relevant and up to date.

NOTE: This article will appear on the ALHFAM website under "Living History." It can be easily updated, so please contact the author with ideas.

Clawson, Marion. "Living Historical Farms: A Proposal for Action." *Agricultural History* 39, no. 2 (April 1965): 110-111.

Hawes, Edward L. "The Living Historical Farm in North America: New Directions in Research and Interpretation," *Proceedings*

of the 1975 ALHFAM Conference and Annual Meeting, vol. 2. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1976: 41-60; reprinted in Jay Anderson, ed. *A Living History Reader*. Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1991: 79-97.

Kelsey Darwin P. "Historical Farms as Models of the Past," *Proceedings of the 1974 ALHFAM Conference and Annual Meeting*, vol. 1. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1975: 33-38. reprinted in Jay Anderson, ed. *A Living History Reader*. Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1991: 73-78.

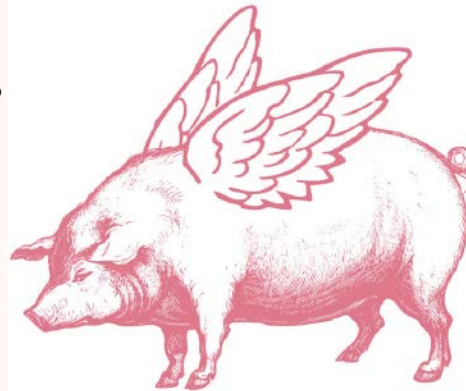
Schlebecker, John T. and Gale E. Peterson. *Living Historical Farms Handbook*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1972.

Wilson, John S. "We've Got Thousands of These!: What Makes an Historic Farmstead Significant?" *Historical Archaeology* 24, no. 2 (1990): 23-33. One in a series of articles published in this volume of *Historical Archaeology* that described and applied methodological approaches to assessing the archaeological significance of historic sites.

Debra A. Reid has been writing about different aspects of living history farms since the mid-1980s. She teaches in the Department of History at Eastern Illinois University and will become the ALHFAM President in June 2013. Please contact her at: dareid@eiu.edu to continuing the living history farm discussion.

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When pigs fly!



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