



# Walking In Their Footsteps, Talking In Their Voices: History Comes To Life

Presented by Carrie Sue Ayvar, Storyteller and Chautauqua Scholar

**“There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.”  
Edith Wharton, 1862 - 1937**

When telling about a character from history we have a choice – tell it in the third person or as the characters themselves. In this workshop we will explore what’s involved in researching and developing an historical portrayal, how to “put on his/her coat and shoes” and tell the story in the first person. Particular attention will be given to the challenges of telling from the characters own viewpoint. Examples and exercises will be integrated into the workshop.

## **What to research:**

First, find a person or time that you are interested in learning more about, someone who sparks your curiosity. What captures your attention? Choose someone you find interesting and care about – you will probably spend a lot of time with them, “putting on their shoes!”

Now the detective work begins, for that is what the research part feels like.

Find out as much as you can about the person, her/his life, family, likes, dislikes, hobbies and education. Study the times she/he lived in. Consider the mores and ethics, the folklore and superstitions, the language of the era, the economic status and views of the family and society and her/his place in it.

Where did she/he grow up? Was there much moving from place to place? How did she/he travel?  
What were some of the common attitudes toward women, the family or the environment?

Think about the fashions of the era, the popular recreations and entertainment and even the foods they ate.  
How did they cook or do household chores?  
What access did they have to medicine and health care and how did it affect them?

These ideas, of course, are just starting points to get you thinking about your character and their life.

## **Where to research:**

Primary source materials (records or documents from the time) like letters, diaries, birth, marriage and death certificates, city council minutes, immigration papers and photographs are ideal. However, secondary sources like books, newspaper or magazine articles can provide a great deal of information too.

Genealogical or census records can be very helpful. Historical societies and museums often have files or even oral tapes to check. Verbal and written interviews of the person or those that knew them can be priceless! Are there any family members or friends that you can talk to? I am continually finding new facts and information about the characters I portray.



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**“She is sitting in her room thinking of a story now. I’m telling you the story she is thinking.”**  
**Leslie Marmon Silko, Ceremony**

### **Developing the story:**

Think about what you want your focus in your telling to be. Is it that person’s life story or a particular event? Who are you telling to? A timeline can be an effective tool for organizing the information that you have gathered. However, it certainly does not have to be told in chronological order! Think about context and what particular time and place you are telling from – What year is it? Where are you? What is the occasion?

Use the same techniques you use when developing any story. Find the "heart" of the story and what you want to tell. What if you can’t find out all the details? Piece together the fragments and fill in the blanks as best you can. This is where all the background research will prove invaluable! Often there is conflicting data and you must interpret and work out what the facts are. Try to be as accurate as possible.

### **The Portrayal: Walking In Their Footsteps, Talking In Their Voices**

Now we put it all together and “step into” your characters shoes. What year is it? How old are you as the character? Are there any special characteristics that you know about? If they wear glasses, what kind? Are they stylish or frumpy? Think about your voice, language and accent. How about your posture and stance? I find that portraying Dr. Anna Darrow, an early pioneer doctor, does wonders for my posture!

Where are you and why are you there? What is the occasion? Who are you talking to? Think about your costume. How did they wear their hair at that time? What color is it? Is your character chatting over a back fence or speaking at a meeting? Keep in mind status and place in the community. Pictures or photos of the time period can help tremendously.

Don’t forget the details! A wristwatch on a 19<sup>th</sup> century man or a zipper in Colonial times is as incongruous as Ben Franklin arriving at Independence Hall in a stretch Hummer!

Practice walking, moving and talking as your character. Use quotes from her/him if you know any. Speaking their own words can help you find your character’s voice and personality. All of this creates a vibrant, vivid picture of your character and the story you are telling. You are making history come to life!

### **What is a Chautauqua Scholar?**

This is a very common question. A Chautauqua scholar is one who researches and portrays a figure or character from history and becomes so thoroughly familiar with the person they portray that they can



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respond knowledgeably and answer, in character, questions from audience members.