

Teaching the Teachers, Instructing the Instructors, and Interpreting for the Interpreters

By Doug Wood, Appalachian Living History

The living history interpreters of Appalachian Living History have participated in or led nearly 1,000 history or nature events and activities since 1989. The types of events and activities included historical re-enactments, historical lifeways demonstrations, first-person dramatic performances, interpretive hikes, history and nature tours, and “how-to” workshops for others interested in learning how to teach, instruct, or interpret cultural and natural histories. We believe those workshops for teachers, instructors, and interpreters, are the most important type of activities that we participate in. Providing tools to others who teach cultural and natural histories, allows us to reach many more people through surrogacy, to spark their interests in history and nature.

Over the decades, we have been blessed with invitations to teach state park staff, national park staff, national forest staff, college staff, lower grade school staff, and business personnel. This has been very rewarding for us and we hope, very useful to those we have taught in Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and our home state, West Virginia. The handful of years we attended the Southeastern State Parks Program Seminars, allowed us to also reach interpretive staff in most of the aforementioned states as well as Alabama, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, and South Carolina.

For the teachers, instructors, and interpreters we have guided in their quests to make history and nature subjects more interesting to their students, we have tailored our programs for their specific needs. There are several important aspects of productive interpretation, but the foundation is research, research, and more research. Know what you teach and teach what you know. If we do not fulfill the first phrase, we cannot accomplish the second with any level of veracity. So we have read books, watched videos, visited sites, attended lectures, conversed with others who have greater knowledge than ourselves, and experimented with demonstration techniques for lifeways of historical peoples. Our family upbringings gave us our first experiences with some of the past lifeways that were continued in practice here in Appalachia, like growing the three sisters (corn, beans, and squash) in our gardens and harvesting wild greens, fruits, and nuts for healthful dishes at our family tables. I learned to hunt and fish from my grandfathers, my father, and my uncles, including my uncle Gert, who taught me the use of green Black Walnut hulls to stun fish. I adapted that technique to a living history demonstration that does not result in dead fish, an act that would have me running afoul of fish and game laws these days. Of course, I did my research first and have quotes from historical documents that describe the use of Black Walnuts and other plant parts for the poisoning protocol.



Black Walnut fish poisoning demonstration in 2011 at Meadowcroft Rock Shelter in PA and in 2018 at the Greene County, PA Historical Society Museum.

We have slowed down a bit since the aging process has continued to take its toll on our bodies, but we are still learning and still teaching those who want to learn to encourage a sincere interest in history and nature. Contact us if you have such a desire. I'm sure we can work out an effective program for you.