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The Discomfort Zone: Reenacting Slavery at Conner Prairie

Carl R. Weinberg

I am standing in the woods. My arms hang motionless at my sides. My head is down, my eyes focused on my feet. A tall figure, whose face I cannot see, approaches. Addressing another man in front of me, he asks, "What kind of work do you do, boy?" "I'm a blacksmith, sir," the other man answers. The tall man moves back to me. "What kind of work have you done, boy?" he asks. I say nothing, embarrassed that I have no identifiable trade, no definite skill like blacksmithing. "I don't know nothing about no irons," I stammer. He pauses, then asks, menacingly, "Are you a nancy boy?" "No, sir," I answer. "Are you a nancy boy?" he asks again. "No, sir," I repeat. "Get over there with those breeders!" he commands. I comply and move from the line of "bucks" to join the "breeders." "Now, hold up your arms and say, 'I'm a nancy boy.'" I lift my arms up and say, weakly, "I'm a nancy boy." "Say it louder," he orders. "I'm a nancy boy," I yell in response.

It is only five minutes into my participation in the "Follow the North Star" (FTNS) program at Conner Prairie Interactive History Park, a living history museum in Fishers, Indiana (just outside of Indianapolis), and I'm starting to think that I might just want my money back. The man in front of me is my assistant editor Keith Eberly; the tall man is an historical interpreter playing a slave trader; and for ninety minutes, the two-man *OAH Magazine* editorial team, along with the other "bucks" and "breeders," have been transformed into fugitive slaves trying to survive in the marginally free state of Indiana in 1836. As a Conner Prairie staff person had explained to us back at the Museum Center, we were about to leave our "comfort zone," and get a taste of the harsh reality of antebellum slavery. While teaching openly about slavery has become more common at public history sites over the past two decades, using living history to do so is still rare. Because of our lucky proximity to Conner Prairie and the uniqueness of this program, we thought it would be worth exploring for the benefit of teachers and students both the promise and perils of entering the discomfort zone.

While historical simulations of slavery are new to public history, the use of a classroom simulation to teach about racism goes back at least to April 5, 1968, when a third-grade teacher in Iowa named Jane Elliott carried out a lesson that has since become world famous. In the "Brown eyes, blue eyes" exercise, Elliott divided her class by eye color for an entire day to teach the students about the racism that had resulted in the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. the previous day. Then and since, the use of historical simulations to teach about controversial historical topics raises a host of difficult questions: how realistic should the simulation be? Is it sadistic for a teacher to put students in stressful situations? Should there be restrictions on the language that participants can use? Can students opt out if they feel uncomfortable? Are certain topics out of bounds? Do students really learn more by "experiencing" the past?

Developing Follow the North Star

Conner Prairie, which traces its origins as a living history site back to 1937, when Eli Lilly purchased the land and began restoration of the original Connor homestead, traditionally excluded the history of slavery

and racism in Indiana. But in the 1990s, the cumulative pressure of the new scholarship on slavery and the social changes unleashed by the civil rights movement made it increasingly difficult for public history sites, even southern plantation houses that catered exclusively to white tourists, to ignore slavery. In 1994, Virginia's Colonial Williamsburg, which had traditionally steered clear of the subject but then began cautiously incorporating it in 1979, made a major splash by holding its first (and only) reconstruction of a slave auction. Starting in the early 1990s, Conner Prairie began offering a week-long program during Black History Month. In 1996, after visiting a YMCA camp in Ohio that was running an experiential Underground Railroad exhibit, Conner Prairie staff, including current Guest Experience Manager Michelle Evans, set to work on FTNS. Evans and her colleagues consulted with a range of historians as well as leaders from the African American community in Indianapolis to create a program that is "real" enough to be discomforting, but not so real that it drives potential guests away.

The Scenario

Here is the scenario she developed: You are a Kentucky slave. Your master, Joshua Taylor, has brought you into the state of Indiana in 1836. Since slavery and slave-trading are illegal there, he needs to sell you. In the process of a nighttime clandestine sale held in the woods, you learn the rules: no looking white people in the face; answer with "yes, sir" and "no, sir"; stepping out of line or dissatisfying your "superiors" in any way will bring a torrent of verbal abuse. (The terms "nigger" and "wench" are never employed; they are replaced with "buck" and "breeder.") Somehow, you manage to escape and you are now eluding slave catchers. You aim to follow the north star to freedom in Canada. Along the way, you meet several characters: local white farm women who say they are sympathetic to your plight but who support "colonization"—sending you back to Africa; Jacob Williams, a poor white from South Carolina who blames you for his poverty and tries to capture you and turn you in for reward money; an abolitionist Quaker family who takes you in, feeds you and offers moral support; Jack Hunter, a recently escaped slave who has managed to evade capture, is earning a good living as a free laborer, and aims to return to Kentucky to rescue his still-enslaved wife and son; free blacks Charlotte and Abner Ward, who offer stories and practical tips for making the rest of your journey; and (until last year when this "post" was replaced with Jack Hunter), Ben Cannon, an evil, foul-mouthed, cigar-smoking bounty hunter who lets your group pass only on the condition that he takes one of you with him, usually a young woman. Add to this the sounds of screams and gunshots in the dark. At the end of your journey, you learn from a fortune teller at the Golden Eagle Inn of your ultimate fate. Some of you live and make it to freedom, and some die. A debriefing discussion with staff wraps up the evening.

Since Follow the North Star opened in 1999, some 13,000 visitors have gone through the program. Some 60 percent of these are students on field trips, mainly from central Indiana middle schools, high

schools and colleges. Conner Prairie estimates that 30 percent of the total visitors have been African American. On the night when Keith and I followed the north star, there were three large groups of students ahead of us—two of them all white high school students and one all black group, who came from a charter school in Gary, Indiana. Adult visitors often come in groups as well, from workplaces, churches and community organizations.

Second-Person Interpretation

Most living history sites, including Conner Prairie, make use of first-person interpretation, where an historical interpreter in period dress speaks to visitors in character, or third-person interpretation, where a museum docent or interpreter (in period dress or not) speaks to visitors in “the present.” In contrast, what a growing number of public historians are calling “second-person interpretation” puts visitors in the middle of the action. Many of us have had a limited version of this experience at living history sites—spinning wool, churning butter, making soap, grinding corn meal, or panning for gold. But FTNS takes this to the next level. As visitors, we are not only performing “old-timey” tasks. We are central actors in a drama, taking on a whole new identity, as well as the risks that identity entails.

Promising Program

If our experience this spring is any indication, FTNS appears to succeed in getting participants to think about the history of antebellum slavery in a deeper way by making us identify with enslaved people. For me, the most powerful emotional experience, aside from the “Nancy boy” incident, was the next “post,” in which we “bucks” were forced to carry pieces of firewood back and forth between two woodpiles, while two of our fellow “breeders” yelled at us to “carry the wood,” and the slave traders stood by, guns in hand, harassing us further. Even though we were all acting, I found myself getting progressively angrier and imagined myself taking a whack at that tall slave trader with a piece of wood. In this case, leaving my comfort zone helped remind me that the need to contain anger in the presence of white people was a common survival tactic that slaves learned at a young age.

John Schlotterbeck, a professor of history at DePauw University, has gone through FTNS several times with students in his class on “Deconstructing Race in the United States.” No stranger to public history, Schlotterbeck served as a consultant to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, working with six historic plantation sites to make their interpretation more inclusive of African American history. FTNS is “one of the edgiest presentations of a controversial subject of any museum I’m aware of,” says Schlotterbeck. “It is amazing how sophisticated 18- and 19- year old students break down completely in this process,” he adds, noting that the students learn both about “the experience of powerlessness” but also the “unexpected understanding of the resiliency of people” who had to endure slavery.

Not only does FTNS contribute to visitors’ understanding of the dynamics of slavery in general, but it also teaches about the operation of the Underground Railroad in Indiana. A key aspect of this is the presence of characters based on free blacks, such as Jack Hunter and Charlotte Ward. They make clear that the Underground Railroad comprised not only white Quakers such as Levi Coffin, who operated out of the eastern Indiana town of Newport (now Fountain City), north of Louisville, but that it included several settlements of free black pioneer farmers—the Roberts and Beech settlements—that started in the 1830s near Indianapolis. It so happens that Larry Duvall, the interpreter currently playing the character of Jack Hunter, is descended from the Roberts family. As visitors to the Conner Prairie museum center learn, the Roberts won their freedom fighting in North Carolina on the

Patriot side in the Revolutionary War. When hostility toward free blacks rose in the wake of the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831, the clan left North Carolina and settled in Indiana.

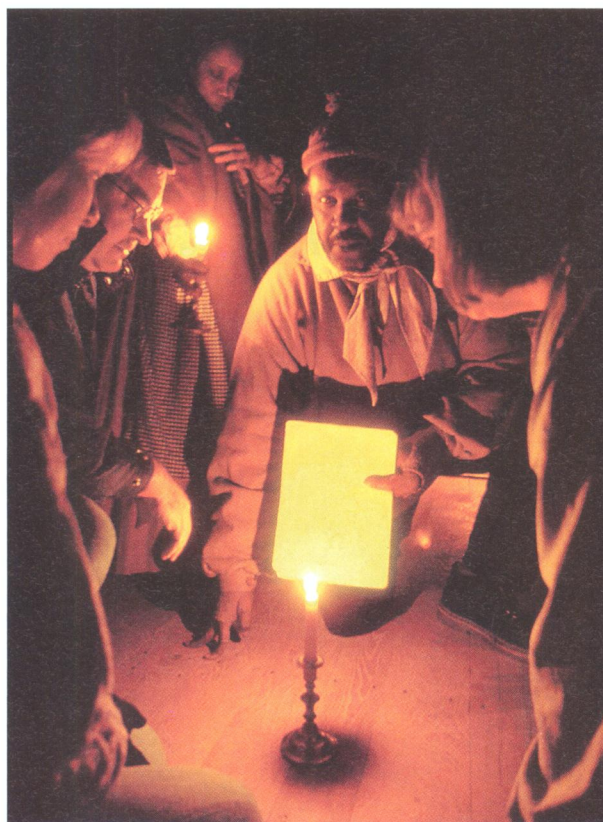
Legacy of Slavery

Duvall and his wife Ginny Streaty, who currently plays Charlotte Ward, not only reenact these characters, but also regularly take part in the debriefings with FTNS participants that follow the program. These can sometimes be short and perfunctory, where staff review the posts that participants visited and highlight key points about slavery and the Underground Railroad. They can also branch into deeper discussions of race relations today. Having been born when Jim Crow was still alive and well, Duvall and Streaty are able to enrich these discussions by talking firsthand about the legacy of slavery. Streaty, who is a visiting infusion nurse, relates that elderly hospital patients will sometimes assume that she is there to clear their food trays; or refer to her as “that colored nurse” or even “nigger nurse.” For her, though, the primary lesson she draws from the history she portrays at Conner Prairie is a positive one that she sometimes relates to her black patients: “You’re going to have to summon up some

of that courage that your great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother had when they tore her baby from her bosom, when they took her child away, and they sold her husband off. You’re going to summon that courage. You need to do that in order to survive.”

The Downside

To be sure, FTNS has its detractors. Just as some African American organizations initially slammed the Colonial Williamsburg slave auction for “trivializing” history, understandably there are African Americans who prefer not to enter the discomfort zone and relive this aspect of their past. Leondra Burchall, who is a public historian of African American history, says of FTNS, “As an African American woman, I don’t have a desire to reenact or experience any aspect of slavery.” As the great-granddaughter of a slave, she explains, “I don’t want to revisit that, because I



Abner Ward (played by Lorenzo Penn) shows fugitive slaves (played by Follow the North Star participants) the way to the free black Roberts Settlement, as wife Charlotte Ward (played by Camille Steward) looks on. (Image courtesy of Conner Prairie.)

have my own family story. I have textbooks, lectures, which tell me the horrors of that institution." Larry Duvall and Ginny Streety confirm that Burchall's reaction is common, though not universal, among African Americans considering the FTNS program.

Conversely, according to Michelle Evans, there have also been African American visitors who think the program is too tame—that it should take visitors even further from their comfort zone and "show all the ugliness." But even now, as interpreters are scrupulous in avoiding certain language, their intensity can provoke strong, even violent, reactions. On the night we visited, it seems that one of the youngsters from Gary got so incensed with a slave trader that he threw a rock at him. When the Ben Cannon post was still part of the program, visitors would on occasion grab Cannon's gun, and in one case slammed a door on his hand. As any teacher who has conducted a historical simulation in a classroom knows, it can be difficult to balance the need for intensity with the need for students to feel safe.

High Points and Low Points

When I talked with Conner Prairie staff about FTNS, I asked them to recall the low and high points of the program over the past decade. Michelle Evans recalled a mixed race group that began their debriefing on a tense note. After a white participant spoke about his experience, a black woman commented, shaking her head, "You just don't get it." But this fortunately opened up such an engaging conversation that the whole group headed to Steak and Shake afterward to continue to the discussion. In another case, a visitor from the Netherlands broke down crying by the end of program. He explained that his ancestors had been slave traders.

Thinking about some of the problems that typically take place, Aili McGill, Conner Prairie's Assistant General Manager for Guest Experiences, made an intriguing observation. Often when high school or middle groups visit, she said, "The teachers are yelling at them the instant they get

in the door because they expect them to be out of control and the kids at the beginning of the program are beginning to display that head down, not looking at anything behavior . . ." Before the program starts, that is, the students are already acting the part of slaves. While this might raise a whole other set of uncomfortable questions, it points to a valuable lesson of the Follow the North Star program. Slavery, at base, was about one group of people exercising power over another. In giving participants a taste of that unequal power relationship, it inevitably sheds light on inequalities of power that still exist in our society today.

Blazing a Trail

The thorny issues involved in reenacting slavery came to light this past December when a middle school social studies teacher in suburban New York, who was white, bound the hands and feet of two girls, both black, and instructed them to crawl underneath a desk to simulate the conditions of a crowded slave ship. After one of the students complained to a parent who called the school, the story made local news. The reaction was fierce. "Are you telling me when you do a section on the Holocaust, it's okay to simulate an oven and have a grandchild of someone who was a survivor just get in the oven?" asked a leader of the local NAACP. While the teacher in this particular case may have been misguided, this NAACP official might be surprised to learn that teachers have indeed begun to use historical simulations, in a sensitive and thoughtful way, to teach about the Holocaust. In applying this approach to the history of antebellum slavery, Conner Prairie has blazed a trail that many are sure to follow.

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Carl R. Weinberg is editor of the OAH Magazine of History.

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