

Blanket Displays

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I have been to many living histories in my time as a re-enactor. Most of these living histories involve a manual of arms demonstration, firing demonstration, and a drill demonstration. After the Demo, the visitors are often invited back to see the camp and to ask questions. Quite often the camp scene is filled with disheveled blankets spread out around a camp fire or rows of dog tents. What of the personal items of the soldiers?

Blanket Displays can be a valuable tool at living histories and reenactments that can give the visitors a memorable hands-on experience. You can read about how the soldiers marched and camped day in and day out and yet never quite draw the picture in your minds eye of what little the soldiers actually had to work with and what they had to do without in their daily lives. Blanket displays are a window into the daily life of the Civil War soldier that no battle reenactment or drill demonstration can open.

As there is more than one way to skin a cat, there is more than one way to put on a successful blanket display. There are many things to consider before throwing down a pile of gear. Should you set up a static display or a more mobile display where you

simply drop pack while talking with a visitor and go through its contents? What types of things should be showcased in the display? Where is the best place to set it up? Do I let the public touch or should it be hands off?

The decision of setting up a static display or a mobile display will be greatly influenced by the type of event you are attending. Will you be on the move for much of the event or camped in a sedentary location? What are the weather conditions? How much time will you have for set up, duration of the display, and tear down?

A static display can be a useful tool when you are in a fixed location, have plenty of time to leave the display out, and will not need to travel far from camp. You will also be able to showcase your collection to more visitors by having a permanent display available whenever visitors wander through camp. Security of your collection is an important consideration when deciding whether or not to set up a static or mobile display. Care should be taken to make sure someone is in camp at all times to watch your display when you are absent. The best place to set up in a campaign setting is right on the ground where you sleep. You should, however, make sure there is enough room around your blanket for visitors to walk around and admire your collection. If you are using a dog tent, you may want to consider setting your display up in front of the tent so that visitors may have greater access for a closer look. If the weather looks bad however, a display in your tent or some other shelter will help to protect your collection from the elements.



A mobile display offers great hands-on education and enhances the memorable experience for the visitors. Mobile displays, however, are not a great tool for interacting with large groups of people. The ideal customer would be a family unit or small group of say four to ten people. The great advantage to a mobile display is that you can do it anywhere at any time. Great care should be taken before packing your haversack and knapsack with items you want the visitors to see. It is best to keep any modern items you have with you such as car keys or medication hidden somewhere other than your haversack and knapsack if you plan to show the contents to a visitor. Through this method, it is more natural to engage in a conversational format as visitors wonder “what else can he possibly have in there?”

Next you will want to decide what types of items you wish to showcase in your display. Will you focus on clothing, the food you carry in your haversack, the musket and accoutrements, the knapsack/blanket roll and its contents or some combination thereof? I have found that putting too much out on display can be overwhelming to the visitors and can actually inhibit them from asking questions. Having too much can also give the false impression that the soldiers typically carried that much stuff. A great way to overcome this is to coordinate your efforts with your fellow living historians by setting up multiple displays, each focusing on a different aspect.



You can get quite creative with theme displays. A display of food and cooking implements can take on a variety of different directions. The food can be set up on a gum blanket in piles as if the sergeants were divvying out equal portions of rations for the company. Food can be showcased in a smaller static display or made part of a cooking demonstration and sampled out for visitors to try. A display of different campaign cooking implements such

as tin cans verses muckets, or canteen halves verses frying pans, also makes for interesting conversation.

Musket and accoutrements can also make for a very intriguing display and can be approached from many different angles. You could showcase it as a single stand of arms as is issued to a soldier or as a compare and contrast style showing different types of weapons side by side. Having a disassembled musket as if in the process of being cleaned is also very interesting to visitors. Don't forget to display your period correct musket tools.



For the knapsack's contents, I have found that grouping personal items together on the blanket in a logical manor helps the visitor better understand the use of each item in relation to the rest of your collection. Setting up separate organized sections of shelter, bedding, spare clothing, hygiene items, literature, pass-times, and personal items make for a display that is much easier to interpret. Having about ten items on the blanket is a good number to shoot for. Much more than that could overwhelm the visitor. Remember, if you have more stuff you'd like to showcase, setting up multiple displays as if the stuff belonged to two or three soldiers rather than all yours breaks the display into manageable chunks for the visitor to examine and comprehend. Care should also be given to showcase the soldier art and games painted onto your gum blanket as these will often be a source for questions.



Take a look at these two photographs. The one on the left is quite overwhelming. Too much stuff is clumped together and the patch work quilt adds to the overwhelming effect. The display on the right is too sparse. No personal items are displayed except the canteen half, cup, and lantern. Why not open up the knapsack and haversack so folks can see what's inside?

Some personal items that I typically display (not all on one blanket) are: news papers, dime novels, family photographs, a pipe, match safe, tobacco, journal, pen and ink, letters, writing paper, stamps, envelopes, dice, cards, tooth brush, comb, razor, towel or handkerchief, pocket watch, pocket knife, spare socks and shirt, and a sleeping cap. For school programs, I have set up separate Union and Confederate blanket displays with similar items on each showing how, although Johnny Reb and Billie Yank may have fought on different sides, they shared much of the same army experiences.



These items are well spaced out and organized into categories.

A polite word of caution should be expressed when letting the public handle the items in your collection if you decide to let them do so. It goes without saying that you have invested a lot of money in original and reproduction items so care should be taken to protect your interpretive tools from damage. Items such as your razor and pocket knife should be displayed with the utmost caution to protect a visitor from being injured. Do not rely on parents to watch their children and keep them from handling your items.

A good blanket display is not stand alone. Half of the display is you, the living historian, and your ability to interact and answer the visitor's questions. Sure, one could label the items and leave it up to the visitor to read about them but I believe the best experience a visitor can have is an interactive one. Remember to always be polite and wear a smile when you answer that same question for the twenty fifth time today. Remember, the visitor is only hearing that answer for the first time.

