

Get Your Hands Dirty!

by Kathleen Ernst

For over a decade, while I was developing my writing skills, I had the great good fortune to work at a large outdoor ethnic museum near Milwaukee called Old World Wisconsin. This historic site includes a crossroads village and ten working farmsteads, with restoration dates ranging from 1845 through 1915. Old World Wisconsin is a place where Interpreters get their hands dirty, so my knowledge of historical domestic and agricultural processes grew exponentially. I learned how to warp a loom, how to milk cows, how to make rennet and lye soap. I made wine, sauerbraten, hops yeast, Finnish egg coffee. And I've passed many of these skills, of course, on to my characters.

But hands-on experience brings much more to a writer's toolbox than technical understanding. Living history sites and events can provide the specific sensory details that bring a scene to life. I know what hog intestines smell like when they're being prepared for sausage casing, how flax fibers feel between my fingers as they twine into linen thread, what threshing machines sound like when they rattle to life in the middle of a newly-shorn wheat field. And because I have a novelist's vivid imagination, my experiences at the site provided compelling insight into the lives of people long gone. Standing on a brick kitchen floor until my knees ached, having to fetch draft horses that broke through fences on a daily basis, wanting to weep when cabbage moths or drought destroyed crops I had carefully nurtured, cutting oats with a sickle so slick with sweat it was hard to grasp—this kind of experience provided new perspectives of the women who peopled both the restored homes I worked in and the pages of my novels.

The good news is that, to varying degrees, anyone can gain some hands-on perspectives about the people they are writing about. If possible, visit a working historic site. Obviously this is easier for those writing about, say, the nineteenth-century farm experience than those writing about Biblical days. But even sites only tangentially related to your time and place might provide some useful sensory experiences. Ask the interpreters (guides) questions. Visit during different seasons. Hang around, take photographs, jot sensory details and impressions in a notebook.

Look, too, for reenactors interested in your period. Ask reenactors questions that go beyond process and facts, and get to the experiences of the people they portray. Ask if you can hold their musket, or try your hand at tamping cabbage into sauerkraut, or whatever else is going on. Volunteer to help out at the next event. Get involved.

Finally, be creative about finding ways to experience bits of life. Sew (or order) a wool frockcoat, or a corset and period-appropriate dress. Learn how to tat lace or carve

