7.3. Rural history and ‘reenactment history’- Challenges, questions, opportunities. Part I: Museums and beyond

Panel organiser: Sayre, Laura, National Institute for Agronomic Research, France

This panel will bring together historians and others interested in “agricultural history reenactment” – defined here as projects and situations in which various aspects of agricultural heritage are explored, invoked or put to use for specific contemporary purposes. Living history farms and other kinds of agrarian museums, “protected geographical indications” attached to specific foods and modes of production (Guernsey cheese, Welsh beef); antique tractor clubs and other enthusiasts’ groups, competitions and festivals; the preservation of traditional crop varieties and livestock breeds with an eye to future agricultural resilience; the reconstruction of traditional agricultural landscape systems within international rural development efforts; reality television series focused on traditional foods and farming practices – all these and more testify to the enduring appeal of at least certain elements of agricultural history for both popular and scholarly constituencies. Critical analysis of these phenomena, however, is spread across a variety of academic fields (public history, rural sociology, anthropology, archaeology, media studies), while the idea of “reenactment history” remains marginal within the academy, seemingly tainted by its association with popular entertainment. This panel proposes to rehabilitate a notion of historical reenactment as a unifying framework for considering a wide variety of contemporary (or indeed historical) efforts to come to terms with, reinterpret or otherwise make use of the rural and agricultural past as a means of contending with the present (and future) of food and farming. As such, it will engage directly with the conference’s aim to discuss the future of rural history in an increasingly urbanized world: agricultural history reenactment appears to gain in popularity as the number of people directly engaged in agricultural falls, an inverse correlation that raises the stakes for historical integrity within reenactment projects. Questions to be considered include: Why is agricultural history reenactment at once so popular and yet so curiously overlooked? What are its strengths and limitations as a means of constructing, contesting and conveying historical information? What role does agricultural history reenactment play in the maintenance of national and regional identities rooted in rural images, activities and landscapes?

Chair: Martin, John, De Montfort University, UK

7.3.1. Where have all the farmers gone? Gone to living history’s greener fields?

Reid, Debra, Eastern Illinois University, USA

Museums that collect and preserve the tangible evidence of the rural past began in Europe at the same time that farm families left that field. Many of those in the Midwest and East did not look back, but others’ hearts grew fonder for that pastoral life. Some took steps to document their history and create venues to share it with the general public. Others understood the need to collect and preserve the tangible and intangible heritage as a means of protecting diversity and ensuring access to complex study collections. Living history farms resulted from national initiatives (Sweden’s Skansen), private investment (Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village), and local history enthusiasts. The living history farms that developed drew former farmers who could share their unique lifestyle with children and grandchildren. Visitors could get dirty in fields without having to work from sun up to sun down (from can see to can’t) for an uncertain return. The exhibits took the life-and-death gamble out of farming and thus, some argued, the reality. Yet, agricultural reenactments at once so popular and yet so curiously overlooked? What are its strengths and limitations as a means of constructing, contesting and conveying historical information? What role does agricultural history reenactment play in the maintenance of national and regional identities rooted in rural images, activities and landscapes?

7.3.2. Reenactment, reconstruction, and performance at the Museum of English Rural Life, 1951-1956

Douglas, Ollie Angus, Museum of English Rural Life, UK

In 1950, in a letter supporting the establishment of the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) at the University of Reading, historian and Vice-Chancellor Sir Frank Stenton commented on open-air museums. MERL was by comparison, he believed, to become a serious venture wherein curators would not dress in period costumes or play-act historical figures. These were not common tropes in English Rural Life, 1951-1956

7.3.3. Toys, trials and information technologies: Miniaturization and virtualization as reenactment

Sayre, Laura, National Institute for Agronomic Research, France

Agricultural miniatures – carefully constructed scale models of agricultural implements – have a long and varied role within agricultural history. They have been used by inventors to test or communicate new designs; by manufacturers to facilitate sales; by researchers as experimental tools; as museum pieces and as collectors’ items; as sophisticated toys and as holotypes in support of patent registrations. Agricultural miniatures constitute a version of agricultural reenactment in that they can be understood either as a serious and responsible or as a frivolous and inadequate substitute for the object or activity they represent. In recent years, miniaturization has been increasingly displaced by virtualization in the pursuit of simulated agricultural experience, again in the context of agricultural history. While virtualization is not an alternative to the object, it is an attempt to provide an alternative that is both more affordable and more accessible. In this session, we explore what we might mean by reenactment, reconstruction, and living history today.