

## In Character with Scott Biddinger: the *History First Hand* Program

*By Emma Rainear, Volunteer Coordinator*

History First Hand (HFH) is one of two volunteer acting troupes that comprise the *Stan Hywet Historic Players* (the other is *Murder in the Mansion*). This group is an integral part of Living History during Vintage Days, select Sundays during the season when visitors get to step back in time to a bygone era.

History First Hand characters inhabit 1920, offering visitors a unique opportunity to experience history and culture first-hand as they walk through the Manor House. From laundresses and other domestic staff to Akron socialites and businessmen, the program encourages participants to use their creativity and knowledge of Stan Hywet and local history from 1920 to develop a character, and then work with a seamstress to design a costume. In addition to Vintage Days, History First Hand characters will also appear during special tours for VIP guests; and domestic staff characters participate in Stan Hywet education programs on immigration.



So what is it like to don the attire and persona of someone from 1920? To find out, I sat down with Stan Hywet Historic Players Committee Chair and History First Hand member, Scott Biddinger. Scott has been a volunteer at Stan Hywet for over 10 years and a History First Hand cast member since 2016.

### **Q: What interested you most about joining *History First Hand*?**

History has never been so interesting and stimulating. The setting is perfect, a century-old home with original furnishings, to shine a light on what it was like for the Seiberling family to live in 1920. And 1920 turns out to be a pivotal year in the United States for many reasons. History First Hand is about telling those stories. The character is only a vehicle to share the information and bring life to the story.

**Q: Tell me a little about your character, John Stuart Morrell. How did you create him?**

I find the establishment of the Lincoln Highway as a tremendously important achievement in the early 1900s. F.A. Seiberling was one of the founding members of the Lincoln Highway Association, and served as president of the organization from 1918 – 1920. To tell the story, I needed a connection to the Seiberling family. John Morrell is my grandfather who grew up on a farm in Kansas. He served with the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in France, and was



wounded in the battle for the Argonne Forest in 1918. Fred Seiberling also served with the AEF in France, and was hospitalized for illness. I use a fictional hospital stay as the connection with the Seiberlings. In the hospital, Fred tells John Stuart Morrell about the growth and opportunity in Akron and gives me a letter of introduction to his father. Growing up on a farm, my character learned to drive the Holt Caterpillar Wheat Combine. Mr. Seiberling

thought that was good experience, and he hired me as field supervisor to drive the Lincoln Highway and to keep him apprised of progress — improving and completing the project.

As I researched the Lincoln Highway, I learned that it was a tremendous economic stimulation to local communities along the route, and that it increased the personal freedom of travel. It also helped to fuel sales of automobiles and, of course, tires. These are the stories I want to share.

**Q: For anyone who's really interested in history and re-enacting, but has a busy schedule, what are the time commitments involved in being a History First Hand character?**

The first step is completing our *Tier I Training*. Stan Hywet provides a great deal of historical information about the Seiberling family, and the building of the estate. The Tier I course is done in a logical and professional manner, and there is plenty of help and mentors to assist with the learning process. It is really through this process that you start to develop an idea of how you want to fashion your character. For instance, I found the Lincoln Highway connection to be so fascinating. Once you identify the framework of a character and build a story, you need to decide what it is that you want to share with visitors when you are a HFH character. This process can be a lot of fun. The actual performance as a HFH character takes only one Sunday per month.

***Q: What is your favorite event or day to be in character?***

Vintage Days are great. Especially when the Goodyear band is playing, and there is vintage “base ball” on the Great Meadow. The estate is full of music, action and people of all ages.

***Q: How hard is it to stay in character while interacting with guests or during a tour?***

I don’t find it too difficult to stay in character. The presentation is all about the story I’m telling. People do ask questions that my character doesn’t know about because the answer relates to the future. It is a fun conversation.

***Q: Have you had any fun and/or interesting encounters with guests while in character?***

I’ve had a number of visitors talk to me about their ancestors living in the area 100 years ago. People seem to enjoy reminiscing and sharing memories, and stories of their past. One day a group of ladies, all one family, stopped to talk about the Lincoln Highway, and they told me their great-grandfather was one of the first automobile distributors in the area. Many of his customers were farmers and they often didn’t have time to come into the showroom to see the new models. So he would load a new automobile on a trailer and take it out to the farmers so they could see it. What a thoughtful and proactive strategy!

***Q: What would you recommend to people who are interested in the program, but unsure if they are ready to join yet?***

I recommend two things: first attend one of the Vintage Days to see and experience the event through the self-guided tour. Secondly, come back on another day and take a guided tour of the Manor House. The guides are filled with stories of the Seiberling family and historical events of 1920. If you get hooked on the history, then you will enjoy participating in History First Hand.



**Thank you to Scott and all of the History First Hand actors for helping bring 1920 to life at Stan Hywet!** If you are interested in

learning more about the History First Hand program, please contact Stan Hywet’s Volunteer Department at [volunteer@stanhywet.org](mailto:volunteer@stanhywet.org) or 330-315-3224.