

Shining Times

Ideas on
How to
Grow Your
Club's
Membership

by Thad Stern

Do you remember walking through camp early in the morning with the slight haze and smell of campfire smoke, coffee, and bacon hanging in the air; the sound of wood being split into kindling, and the clank of cast iron being set on the grid iron? The dew from the grass soaks your moccasins as you stroll between the rows of lodges.

A man would never need to bring anything to eat or drink because you can't pass half a dozen camps before being asked, "Want sum coffee? Did yuh eat yet?" as a grey bearded skinner extends his hand with a steaming hot tin cup. As the day wears on you hear the shots ringing out from down at the range, the flatlanders are pouring in and fill the lanes between the rows of merchant tents, running two directions, like salmon swimming upstream. Late in the day the sun settles

below the horizon as cool air drifts down from the hills.

Dutch ovens are set out over campfires filled with venison stew, ham and beans, cornbread, and peach cobbler! Roasting ears of corn still in the husk are lying beside the glowing embers. After dinner the sound of music and laughter begins to fill the air. Lantern and candle light illuminates the many faces of young and old alike. People gather around tables or campfires to exchange stories, long winded yarns, and just pleasant conversation with old or new friends. Those were some "Shining Times!"

That remembrance could've described hundreds of events or rendezvous across America during the late 1970s and through all of the 1980s. The same thing continues to occur to this day, perhaps not as frequent, perhaps

not as large, but "Shining Times" are not over. For many who read this and remember those early days you were in your late twenties, thirties, and forties; for many of us we were still in middle or high school.

During these years many of our muzzleloader clubs were formed. Back then everything with rendezvous and muzzleloaders was new and exciting – there was nothing else like it! Major motion pictures like the *Mountain Men* and *Jeremiah Johnson* inspired many folks to join up with a group or club. Thousands of men, women, and children joined up and came to rendezvous.

Now, roughly forty years or so have passed. Many of the founders of our muzzleloading clubs are now in their seventies and eighties or gone. Many have given up shooting because their

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eyes aren't what they used to be, they aren't going to rendezvous very often, and no longer travel to other club's shoots.

Many muzzleloading clubs are suffering from these facts of life. I have been told many times that they don't have enough members still shooting at their own shoots much less try to go to another club's shoot and make a good showing of themselves. They tell me they're having a lot of difficulty getting new members.

I'd like to share some ideas that work for our club.

First, regain your enthusiasm. What was it that "hooked" you? If you enjoyed shooting black powder firearms – then get back into it; if you can't shoot any more teach someone else to. If primitive camping or the history of the settlers is what inspired you – get back into that; bring some folks that have never been to a rendezvous with you next time you go.

Second, have your club engage in activities that interest others. People gravitate to organizations that are active. But be careful of too narrow of a focus. If your club's focus is just competitive shooting you may be limiting your club's number of new members. This was one of the phases our club went through a number of years ago.

Today we continue the competitive shooting matches and have added activities that others may enjoy. For example, we have added education days for the local schools.

We are currently restoring and building three log cabins on our grounds, one of which is with the Stone's Trace Historical Society. We allow local scout groups to do camps and other activities on our grounds. We have been invited to give living history demonstrations for schools and scout groups at their facilities. We have monthly club shoots, work days, camping weekends, and the occasional fundraiser.

Third, become involved with your local historical society. We are fortunate to have the Stone's Trace Historical Society allow our club to lease the grounds we have our shooting range, cabins, blacksmith shop, and other buildings on. They invite us to participate with them on many of their projects both for the public and

just ourselves. Both organizations benefit from the relationship.

Fourth, as a club, attend other events and rendezvous. You will maintain old friendships and meet new people. With your attendance you help that club make their event a success and they will likely come to your club's event in return.

Fifth, engage with the public. This is probably the most important thing when looking for potential new members. When you are at rendezvous, a living history event, doing living history demonstrations, helping with an historical society work day, or at a shoot, talk to the public! Answer their questions. At times let them do what you're doing. Give them their first shot with a muzzleloader. Let them get involved if possible.

Some of my most enjoyable moments have been when I had the crowd asking questions, laughing with me, and even heckling some of the other shooters with me during a shoot at our rendezvous. The crowd got a kick out of me letting an Amish gentleman shoot my flintlock because he was in "period clothing." He enjoyed it very much and since then joined the club and has been attending our event for the last several years, bringing his whole family along! There are folks I've met and made friends with that I see every year.

Sixth, invite others to participate and ultimately join your club. Always have membership applications available. It's not often people will seek you out to join your club. When you're engaging with the public and you can tell that they have an interest, ask them if they've considered getting more involved. Let them know they don't have to dive in, but can start slow and ease into it. It's neither hard nor need be expensive. Family membership should not be expensive.

Seventh, once you have new members, let them be involved. New members bring much needed energy to a club. Quite often they bring a fresh perspective and new ideas. There is nothing worse than to join an organization and feel like you're unheard. If the same few people do everything all the time they will continue to be the same few people who "have" to do everything all the time. Invite your new members to help with

work days, elect them to club offices like board of directors and eventually executive officers.

As long time club members become less active after many years of giving their time and sweat for the benefit of the club, other members need to and will step up to fill their shoes. This is the changing of the guard. The new members are essential to the success and longevity of any organization. It is a good idea to make your club and activities as family friendly as possible. Having things planned for the children and young adults to do and to be involved with will ensure the families will want to come back.

Eighth, recognize people for their efforts. It doesn't always need to be with prizes and awards, just simply making mention of someone's actions through a monthly newsletter can be sufficient. Other times something more like a member of the year award at an annual meeting or shooter of the year award is warranted.

A quick summary:

regain your enthusiasm, connected with a local historical society, get out to events or activities, engage with the public, invite people to join, involve your new members, recognize participation, and don't be afraid to pass the torch, but don't leave them after you've handed it to them, stand beside and help them begin "Their New Shining Times."

I hope these thoughts will give you an idea how you can regain the excitement of being a muzzleloading club member and share that excitement with others.

My particular club, the Stone's Trace Regulars, was founded in 1977 and we're a Charter Club of the NMLRA. We are a well rooted club located on the grounds of the Stone's Trace Historical Society at the crossroads of US-33 and SR-5 near the town of Ligonier, Indiana. Currently we have one hundred thirteen members (not including their families) of which about half are life members. There have been about six new members joining each year for the past five years (not including their families). We put on a rendezvous the first weekend after Labor Day every September. We have employed the eight points listed above and have seen our club membership grow. My advice to you is to give the eight points a try. I think you will be happy with the results. MB

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