

Where to Lay a Weary Head?

With more family involvement in Living History, there is necessarily a challenge in finding places to sleep. It is not an insurmountable challenge, and “family” does not equate with “farb.”

There is one very primary place to *avoid* laying the family’s collective head—military camps. A good gauge of the progressive mindset of your current or anticipated civilian group is whether or not they allow family camping in the military areas. If they do, be wary—they will likely advocate other reenactorisms, and may not have the same standard for accuracy you are developing.

There are only limited situations that would have an entire family camping: permanent migration to another area, religious revival meetings, and in limited cases, refugee situations. None of these routinely involve having a male family member in the military, or necessarily imply owning a tent. (However, an emigrating family is an under-represented impression, should you choose to pursue it at select events.)

Taking day trips for the majority of your event participation relieves some of the challenge in accurate sleeping arrangements, as does becoming part of the “motel militia.” Each of these has its downside: day trippers need somewhere to use as “home base” during the day, and may miss out on evening activities; sleeping at a motel each night can become very expensive (but the availability of a shower is nice!)

At immersion-style events, sleeping arrangements for non-combatants are often provided with the use of period buildings for dormitory-style sleeping, or with “camps of convenience”, where military-style A-tents are used for sleeping only, located in an off-the-path area, and not used for “home” activities during the day.

“Campaign” style events may not have sleeping accommodations at all (participants are expected to “sleep rough” with a quilt or two under the stars); these events may not be appropriate for your small children. At

more mainstream events, look for or request a civilian-only camping area; ideally, this will be a closed-to-the-public area, but still “period appearance enforced.”

No matter the age or arrangement, never leave a sleeping child alone! A parent or trusted friend should be within eyesight, and preferably within a quick reach..

If you sleep on-site, keep things simple and direct. Use a canvas A-frame tent (easy to set up with only women and children as labor—large families may need two or three A-frames), bring as little gear as possible, and anticipate sleeping in a puppy-pile with your children. (A bonus: A-frames were one style of canvas shelter used on the western migration routes, so you’re staying within your period options, but a row of them will look quasi-military in nature if you’re using them only as a sleeping area—be sure to remove all external household goods, though!)

Use a water-resistant ground cloth, and make large bed-ticks or pads, planning to sleep several people under the same covers. The shared body heat helps on cool evenings, and the reduced bedding needs saves a great deal of space, both in the tent, and in off-event storage. Sleeping in this fashion offers more insulation from ground breezes than will cots or raised beds, and it can be accomplished in the vast majority of settings and climates.

It is not difficult to make a simple patchwork quilt. You will find that when making your family’s wardrobe, you amass a decent number of 100% cotton scraps that can be pieced together for a utilitarian bed covering. Use lightweight wool batting as the filler, and you’ll sleep comfortably in most weather. Quilt-making can be an ongoing project for the whole family. Children enjoy arranging scraps into interesting patterns for the blocks, and can be taught a simple running stitch to join the pieces, as well as to quilt the finished product.

You will not likely wish to launder your quilts after every event; the smoke odors can be removed by a good airing outdoors on a sunny day, with a bit of beating to remove dust. (I don’t recommend Febreze or other fabric perfume agents, as they don’t really do more than a good airing, and leave chemical residue on the fabric.)

Pillows can be as simple as folding all a person’s underwear into a pillowcase (though if you have a bed-time drooler, this may not be pleasant the next morning.) You might also use mounded hay beneath a bedding area, or satchel filled with spare clothing. Or, your family may be most comfortable without pillows. Keep things simple as possible.

Ideally, keep one set of bedding reserved for event use. This lessens the likelihood of arriving at an event only to remember that the top quilt is still in the living room, where it has been used as a TV blanket or child’s fort. Keeping a distinct set is a higher investment at first, but the convenience in the long run is worth it for many.

Another parental sanity saver is to set up the bedding situation as soon as possible upon arrival at an event. This creates a place for naps as needed, and eases the transition to bed-time on the first, chaotic, exciting night of the event.

If there is a possibility to change into night clothes for sleeping, do so, and have everyone take a quick wash before donning them. Having some historic nightclothes (gowns and longer shirts) for children increases the historic “time travel” aspect, and reduces the amount of non-historic gear you have to manage. Adding sleeping caps in cotton and light wool will greatly increase the family’s comfort in cold weather, as will wool sleeping socks. The bottom line is to keep everyone comfortable and well-rested, after all.

I don’t recommend or advocate bringing travel cribs, playpens, or other modern arrangements for infants and small children. These contribute to a high level of modern gear needs, and intrude

on the period feel of any on-site sleeping arrangement. If you or your child will not be able to use one of the period solutions, it may be wise to wait on overnight events until your child is older, and better able to be away from modern cribs.

Small babies need a sleeping spot that is warm, has a firmly padded surface, and is free from things that can choke or smother. If your family uses a “family bed” sleep arrangement in modern life, there is no reason this cannot continue at overnight events, provided your own sleeping arrangements meet your baby’s safety needs. Wool flannel blankets will keep the solo-sleeper warm; be sure to use sleeping caps to contain Baby’s body heat.

Our oldest daughter napped best when alone; we used a shallow, flat-bottomed “Moses” basket during her infancy, filling the bottom with either firmly-folded quilts, or the oval, cotton-stuffed mattress I made at home. This mattress had the firmness of a good futon, eliminating the possibility of smothering in too-soft bedding, and had a “pillowcase” sort of sheet to be changed as needed. We could also lay the pad on a table or chest, and let her nap in the open air. And, quilts spread on the grass under a shade tree served very well in most weather, if no one wanted to hold her.

Our son and youngest daughter loved to snuggle, and preferred to be held for most naps; we found no shortage of volunteers among our friends for the task.

As a baby passes first infancy and begins to creep about, the primary needs are warmth and containment. Firm ties on the tent flaps, as well as the use of straw or ground cloths to block escape under the tent sides, goes a long way toward keeping your creeper safe. Add constant adult supervision, “Family Bed”, and/or co-sleeping with an older sibling, to keep toddlers warm and happy in most cases.

Keep your child’s unique temperament in consideration when making sleeping arrangements. Some children are very sensitive to change, and will become agitated and cranky if their nap or sleeping arrangements are altered. If this

is the case, be realistic about the level of enjoyment you and your family will have at overnight events. Local living history events may be the way to go until your child is old enough to endure the changes and stresses of an overnight or all-day event.

Many children can be trained to tolerate these changes. Our own do well, but whether this is from familiarity or temperament, I do not know. Certainly, they are not genetically predisposed to like camping from their Mother’s half of the chromosomes! (I consider sleeping out of doors an infrequent necessary evil, not a recreational activity.)

We have encouraged a certain resiliency and flexibility in our children by taking overnight trips from early infancy, varying the location and arrangement of their naps, and having the simple expectation that they will be able to sleep comfortably in most situations, once their basic needs are met. I am convinced this attitude works for many children, though I do know those whose temperaments will not tolerate that level of change until middle childhood.

Older children who are able to stay in bed alone, and who are successfully night-trained, can sleep comfortably alone, or with a companion. They will often prefer to have their own quilt, even if edges of it are shared with another.

Pre-teens may like to have segregated sleeping, though it is not vital if the sexes have privacy during dressing.

Teenagers will likely prefer segregated sleeping as well, and I find it healthy to allow this, so long as the tents are immediately next to a parent’s or guardian’s resting place (for safety, as well as for spoken admonitions for “silence and sleep, girls!”)

Ideally, each tent the family uses will have an adult for supervision and safety; it is not wise to let children tent alone or at a distance at any event involving strangers, or access by the public.

Though not directly related to sleeping, one wise investment any family can make is a good chamber pot. This helpful article can be used day or night, and is much less hassle than walking a training toddler to the toilets at 3am, or

waiting in line with a six-year-old who didn’t realize he had to go until it was nearly too late. Chamber pots can be taken to the flushing or portable toilets after use (or in the morning) and emptied safely. A small crock of diluted vinegar water will keep the pot sanitary and clean smelling between uses. Never dump human waste in regular trash bins.

When arranged with an eye for simplicity and period-appropriateness, sleeping accommodations can be streamlined and portable. It is much easier to cover the ground in straw, top it with a ground cloth and quilt, and snuggle under with your children, than to haul air mattresses, pumps, covers, sleeping bags, pillows, cots, and other modern items. You’re also more likely to have those “magic moments” in the absence of the modern paraphernalia.

If you’re not sure you have everything you need, or aren’t sure the system will work out, give it a try for several nights running in your own back yard!

A Checklist for Sleeping Arrangements

- Children
- Parental supervision
- Ground insulation (straw)
- Waterproof barrier (gum blanket or treated floor cloth)
- Lower blanket (preferably high wool content)
- Upper blanket(s), with wool batts
- Appropriate nightwear and caps
- Canvas or other “roof” covering to keep off the damp
- Several restful ballads for crooning