"Documenting Community Traditions: The Use of Railroad and Industrial History to Promote Cultural Heritage Tourism in Northeast Tennessee"

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February 2016 – June 30, 2017

June 15, 2016

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PROJECT FOCUS: East Tennessee State University (ETSU) will document oral histories of the Clinchfield Railroad and related industries in Unicoi County, Tennessee and assist the community in identifying strategies to use this aspect of its history to promote cultural heritage tourism.

PROJECT DETAILS:

Course Number, Name, and Instructor: APST 5690, Documenting Community Traditions, Dr. Rebecca Adkins Fletcher.

Community Partner(s): The Unicoi County Economic Development Board (Tish Oldham, director) and the Unicoi County Heritage Museum/Clinchfield Railroad Museum (Martha Erwin, curator).

Need: Since 2012, Unicoi County has been categorized as "Transitional" in the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) scale of economic indicators. In addition, as noted below, in the past year the county lost one of its major employers, which will have a significant impact on the economy. An important part of the county's plan to develop a more sustainable economy is the development of cultural heritage tourism and ETSU's Appalachian Teaching Project (ATP) course has been assisting in this effort for several years. Leaders from the county government, economic development board, historical association, and heritage museum all identified the need to collect oral history related to the Clinchfield Railroad as a high priority and requested the assistance of the ETSU ATP course.

The railroad was a significant part of Unicoi County for more than a century, but much of its role in the community and in the lives of residents remains undocumented. In addition, the potential role of railroad history in promoting cultural heritage tourism in the area has not been fully developed. Further, the results of the first two years of this project revealed other industries that in the past were either recruited by or were closely related to the railroad (the most significant of which was Southern Potteries). Therefore, this year's project is being broadened to include some of the history of those industries. Community leaders believe that documenting and sharing these aspects of county history can be an important part of efforts to promote cultural heritage tourism.

In 1902, coal entrepreneur George Lafayette Carter founded the Clinchfield Railroad and soon thereafter moved the railroad headquarters to Erwin, Unicoi County, Tennessee. The Clinchfield remained the major employer in the town until the 1970s, when it became part of the Family Lines railroad. CSX Transportation acquired the line in the 1990s and operated it until 2015. On October 15, 2015, less than two weeks before the ETSU students were to return to Unicoi County to conduct the first round of oral history interviews, CSX announced that it was closing its operation in Erwin, ending 300 jobs. This disturbing news taught students firsthand about the challenges facing communities in Appalachia as the region shifts to a post-coal economy. In addition, the CSX closure heightened local interest in the students' project and underscored the

relevance of oral history documentation. As a result, students found an even greater community interest in preserving railroad history and exploring ways to use it to promote tourism.

One of the strengths of the proposed project is that it continues a multi-year partnership with the community, which affords greater opportunities for engagement and lasting impact. The first year of the project, in 2014-2015, established a good foundation, which the second-year class was able to build upon successfully. The project has helped to bring students together with residents and organizations from across Unicoi County to work together toward a common goal.

Number and description of planned meetings with the community partner: Initial planning meetings for the 2016-2017 project took place in the spring of 2016. Further meetings will take place during July and August. Early in the course, students will have an initial orientation meeting with the community partners. The class will then make two or three visits to the community to conduct oral history interviews and to continue dialogue with community partners. At the end of the semester, students will meet with community partners to present their report and to share the poster and presentation from the ATP conference. Throughout the course, the instructor will have frequent contact with the community partners to monitor progress and make adjustments.

Concise overview of the project, including its central focus: The central focus of the project is to work with the community to document and preserve significant aspects of its cultural heritage and to identify ways to use this history to encourage cultural heritage tourism. Students will learn the principles of ethnographic fieldwork and cultural heritage tourism, conduct archival research, go into the field to study the community and to collect oral history, and meet with community partners to explore strategies for using history to promote cultural heritage tourism. Following collection of the oral history narratives, students will transcribe the narratives for deposit into the ETSU Archives of Appalachia and will present their research in several venues.

As a specific and direct engagement with the project focus of promoting cultural heritage tourism, students will create a brochure for the Clinchfield Railroad Museum. Drawing from the knowledge gained in meetings with community partners, community interviews, and visits to the museum, this brochure will highlight the artifacts on display in the museum and the significance of the Clinchfield Railroad to the local culture and regional economy.

Beyond the initial ATP course itself, the scope of this project offers further opportunities for students, the ETSU Department of Appalachian Studies, and the ETSU Center for Appalachian Studies and Services to collaborate with community partners in Unicoi County, thereby contributing to the development of a sustainable economy. Such partnerships are already occurring as a result of the first two years of this ATP course. For example, the ETSU Department of Appalachian Studies is partnering with the Unicoi County Economic Development Board and with Rocky Fork State Park in Unicoi County, Tennessee's newest state park, to plan a fiddling convention. The group has

received a grant from the Tennessee Arts Commission to help support the event. As a second example of collaboration, the ETSU Department of Appalachian Studies is collaborating with the owners of a new venue in Erwin, The Bramble, to hold square dances and other events in their facility and to support The Elephant Trust, which was formed by the Bramble owners to raise funds for an elephant sanctuary in central Tennessee. The Bramble is located in an historic, repurposed storefront in downtown Erwin. Such initiatives will continue to afford students the opportunity to experience community engagement firsthand.

Course Guidelines and Project Goals: Broadly speaking, this course is meant to enable students to grapple with the question, "How do we build community capacity in order to shape a positive future for Appalachia?" In doing this, the course is designed to primarily support Goals Four and Five from the ARC Strategic Plan: (1) By working with the community to document oral history and develop strategies for using that history to promote cultural heritage tourism the project directly supports Goal Four, which is to "strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by leveraging the Region's natural and cultural heritage assets." (2) By engaging students in a community-based ethnographic learning experience, the project is designed to support Goal Five, which is to "build the capacity and skills of current and next-generation leaders and organizations to innovate, collaborate, and advance community and economic development."

In support of these strategic goals, the proposed course has several primary goals:

- To help students develop leadership skills and awareness of community assets that can foster sustainability.
- To engage students as active learners and participants in community projects.
- To engage students in active research to assist communities in creative approaches to sustainability through asset development.
- To equip students with the tools to conduct additional ethnographic field research, focusing on oral history.

A number of student-centered learning activities will support the course goals above. These objectives also help to fulfill the course guidelines and project goals of the ATP Scope of Work. In this course, students will:

- Complete archival and other research to survey community history and demographic data, focusing on the railroad and related industries.
- Conduct oral history interviews and compile results.
- Transcribe oral history interviews for deposit into the ETSU archives.
- Actively engage with two community partners.
- Create a brochure for the Clinchfield Railroad Museum to promote cultural heritage tourism
- Create a poster for presentation at the Washington, D.C. conference.

- Present their research at the ATP conference in Washington, D.C., on December 2-3, 2016.
- Present their research to the community partners.
- Present a poster session, panel discussion, or formal session at the Appalachian Studies Association's Annual Conference in March 2017.

Project Impact: As a result of this project, we hope that the following changes will occur in the community:

(1) Increased awareness of cultural heritage related to the railroad and related industries, such as Southern Potteries, in Erwin and Unicoi County.
(2) Enhanced cooperation and unity among diverse community members, groups, and organizations in the celebration of cultural heritage.
(3) Further development of creative strategies to use this aspect of the community's history to promote cultural heritage tourism.