

The Appalachian Teaching Project 2011

Helvetia, West Virginia: An Exploration of Its German Swiss Background

Can the infusion of a July 2011 student travel experience to Belgium, German, and Switzerland, along with extensive research, be used to assist one community's efforts to market its history and culture thru heritage tourism development from its isolated location in the Allegheny foothills of Randolph County?

The Frank and Jane Gabor WV Folklife Center on the campus of Fairmont State University and Pierpont Community and Technical College

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Final Report Narrative

Name of Project: *Helvetia, West Virginia: An Exploration of Its German Swiss Background*

Grant Period: February 1, 2011 – June 30, 2012

Grantee Name: Gabor WV Folklife Center, FSU/PCTC
Project Directors: Dr. Judy P. Byers/ Noel W. Tenney

Description of Project:

Background:

Helvetia, West Virginia, located in the isolated Allegheny foothills of Randolph County, is a small German Swiss settlement that began in 1869. The community settlers, originally from northern Switzerland, were mostly well-educated in a variety of professions and trades so they were able to sustain a cultured existence in spite of the remote location. Over the past fifty years the small community has explored many avenues of heritage tourism, including a Swiss-American restaurant, Swiss cheese making, traditional community celebrations in the form of community fairs, Fasnacht Lenten Mardi Gras, Swiss National Day, and an Appalachian Ramp Festival, all with an emphasis on traditional German Swiss and regional culture and history through dance, food, music, crafts, and much more. The community of Helvetia functions as an Outdoor Living History Village and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Yet, with all of these assets, the community has a major geographical isolation problem. The purpose of this project is to research the various avenues by which the factors of isolation might be overcome, such as through internet outreach (for marketing of local cottage crafts and community publications, as well as tourism promotion), the development of additional small businesses (camp sites and additional overnight guest accommodations, destination wedding programming, additional cottage craft industries including the marketing of imported Swiss made crafts, and additional food services), and creating a directory of possible grant and financial resources to sustain and promote the historical facilities, educational and museum type programming, and local community needs.

Project Description:

Describe in detail the project (10-12) sentences, including the following:

Community Partner(s) and central focus of the research project:

Students worked through The Frank & Jane Gabor West Virginia Folklife Center, FSU, partnering with the various Helvetia community voluntary organizations (such as the Helvetia Restoration and Development Organization, The Shepherd's Association, Helvetia Community Center, the Helvetia Public Library, and local business people) and other interested community members in exploring the possible avenues to overcome the major isolation factor in cultural heritage tourism promotion and community sustainability.

Research for this project centered on internet outreach marketing, small business development, and financial resources.

Activities:

Project Goals/Objectives:

Students built upon their first person experiences of their 2011 Roads to Appalachian Study Abroad through Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland. They strove to connect the traditional roots of these cultures to Helvetia through the components of history, culture, and tourism.

Students:

- Introduced the community to the 2011 Appalachian Teaching Project in various meetings during the summer and fall of 2011.
- Visited three “Open Air Museums” in Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland and analyzed their marketing structures, education activities, sales and promotion, and cultural preservation as possible application to Helvetia.
- Prepared and conducted a survey of Helvetia community resources, needs, and future expectations for additional promotion of community heritage tourism concepts.
- Researched and prepared a list of possible internet marketing tools (such as Facebook, PayPal, eBay, etc.) to use with promotion and sales.
- Researched and developed a list of possible small business opportunities (camping, biking, cottage craft industries, hilltop farm tours, etc.).
- Researched and completed a directory of possible financial resources (grants, community support membership group [Friends of Helvetia], corporate gifts, etc.).
- Completed a review of the literature and prepared an annotated bibliography of materials accessed.
- Used a multi-media approach to present suggestions to the Helvetia community.
- Presented their compiled project and poster to the Appalachian Teaching Project through the Appalachian Regional Commission’s Conference in Washington D.C. in December 2011.
- Presented their compiled project at the Appalachian Studies Conference at Indiana University, PA, in 2012 on an individual basis in conversations at our exhibit area.
- Presented the research outcomes at the Celebration of Undergraduate Research at Fairmont State University in April 18, 2012.
- Presented their poster exhibit in the Great Room of Culture at the Gabor WV Folklife Center where it was viewed by various community groups, including WV Humanities Council Board of Directors, Marion County Lifelong Learners Senior Citizen Organization, as well as at the WV Association of Museums Annual Conference.
- Will present their poster exhibit to be used onsite at Helvetia for the summer of 2012.

Project Outcomes:

Students:

- Conducted a comparative study between open air museums in Europe and the Helvetia Historic Community with an emphasis on interpretation, promotion, and general marketing.
- Shared **Survey** results concluding the need for additional advertising, other financial resources, more promotion of their website, more places to eat and stay overnight, and more activities for young people.
- Recommended more interpretative signage units throughout the Helvetia Historic Village.
- Recommended that Helvetia offer more group (bus) and individual guided tours of their historic resources.
- Recommended that Helvetia develop and enlarge on the production of local cultural products for visitor marketing as well as for internet marketing with an emphasis on cheesemaking, crafts, and other agricultural products.

Problems Encountered:

- Overall, this project was well received by the Helvetia community and many of our suggested ideas are being taken under consideration by the various groups with which we met. There were no real problems with this project.

Program Continuation and Sustainability:

- Helvetia is an active and productive community and has gone through many changes over the years. Hopefully, with our input, the area will thrive as an economic entity as well as continue to grow as a living communitas of historic and contemporary thinking individuals and families.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Our students had a great combination of experiences in both working in Helvetia and with their time spent traveling in Europe as they were always watching and looking for applicable techniques to apply to the Helvetia community needs.
- We would like to highly recommend to the Appalachian Regional Commission that a series of small grants be made directly to the communities in which these student projects are applied in order that our input will have a much more immediate and in-depth application.

Attachments:

- A. Project Survey
- B. Project Handouts
- C. Project Photographs
- D. News Articles