

**“Documenting Community Traditions: Railroad History and  
Cultural Heritage Tourism in Northeast Tennessee”**

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## **Final Report Narrative**

Title of Project: Documenting Community Traditions: Railroad History and Cultural Heritage Tourism in Northeast Tennessee

Grant Period: February 1, 2014-June 30, 2015

Grantee Name: East Tennessee State University

Project Director: Ron Roach

### **Description of Project:**

East Tennessee State University's 2014-2015 Appalachian Teaching Project course was APST 5690, Documenting Community Traditions (DCT), taught by Dr. Ron Roach. This project built on a multi-year partnership to promote sustainable development in Unicoi County, Tennessee. The project was designed to begin documenting the history of the Clinchfield Railroad in Unicoi County and to assist the community partners in developing this aspect of cultural heritage tourism for the area.

The railroad was a vital part of the history of Unicoi County but much of its role in the community and in the lives of residents has not been documented. Many of the residents who worked for the railroad or who have memories of using the railroad have either passed away or are quite elderly, making it imperative that these oral histories be collected soon. In addition, the potential role of railroad history in promoting cultural heritage tourism in the area has not been fully developed. Community leaders believe that documenting and sharing the railroad history of the region can be an important part of their efforts to promote cultural heritage tourism and therefore requested the help of the ETSU class.

The 2014-2015 ETSU project had two main goals:

- (1) To conduct initial ethnographic field research to survey existing documentation and conduct interviews of residents who have some connection to the railroad in the region; and
- (2) To work with community partners to develop a draft five-year strategic plan for utilizing railroad history to promote cultural heritage tourism.

The community partners for the ETSU project were The Joint Economic Development Board of Unicoi County (Tish Oldham, director) and The Unicoi County Heritage Museum and Clinchfield Railroad Museum (Martha Erwin, curator).

### **Activities:**

The project set forth the following student-centered learning objectives, planning that students would learn to:

- collaborate with community groups and government agencies

- survey historical documentation and community data
- carry out ethnographic fieldwork
- develop and write a strategic plan
- promote cultural heritage tourism in Appalachia
- communicate effectively in discussions and public address

These goals were largely accomplished in the project, through the following activities that engaged students in active, place-based education:

- Students spent time in class learning the principles of ethnographic field research, oral history interviews, place-based education, cultural heritage tourism, railroad history in the region, and archival research.
- Students took part in a training session in the Archives of Appalachia, part of ETSU's Center for Appalachian Studies and Services. The session was jointly led by the course instructor and by a staff archivist. Students were introduced to the large Clinchfield Collection in the Archives, which houses thousands of documents and artifacts related to the history of the Clinchfield Railroad.
- Using the Clinchfield Collection, students completed a project in which they located, researched, and reported on a cultural artifact that shed light on the history of the Clinchfield Railroad and its impact on the history and culture of the region.
- Students participated in a tour of the George L. Carter Railroad Museum, led by museum director Dr. Fred Alsop, which helped them to understand the role of Carter in the history of the Clinchfield Railroad and ETSU.
- Students hosted, along with the community partners, an initial open house reception at The Unicoi County Heritage Museum and Clinchfield Railroad Museum in Erwin, TN, on September 29, 2014. At this event students met representatives of the community partners and interested community members. The event received positive press coverage from both the Erwin and Johnson City newspapers (See attachments 1 and 2).
- After receiving training in ethnographic field principles, techniques, and ethics, each student conducted one or more one-hour, digital sound-recorded interviews with a resident of Unicoi County who had worked for or had memories of the Clinchfield Railroad. The class worked with community partners to organize two nights of interviews, held at the County Historical Society Museum, the Tenasi Arts and Heritage Center in Unicoi, TN, and at the Erwin (TN) Town Hall. In total, students recorded more than 17 hours of oral history interviews (see Attachment 3 for photos from the students' work).
- A highlight of the project was interviewing Alf Peoples, a railroad engineer who had worked for the Clinchfield and co-author of a new book on the well-known steam engine, the Clinchfield Number One. Alf became a strong supporter of the project, attending all of the students' presentations. Alf has agreed to continue working with the project in future semesters.
- Following the interviews, students transcribed the recordings into a standard format learned in class. The digital recordings and both electronic and print copies of the transcriptions are being deposited into

the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University for use by future researchers.

- Drawing upon their archival research projects, their fieldwork in Unicoi County, and their oral history interviews, students worked together to design a poster and PowerPoint presentation reporting on their findings during the project.
- Students presented their research, with the poster, PowerPoint presentation, and other materials collected during their project, to the community partners, interviewees, and other interested community members at the Tenasi Arts and Heritage Center in Unicoi County on December 2, 2014.
- Students presented their research, along with the poster and PowerPoint presentation, at the ATP conference in Washington, DC, December 5-6, 2014.
- Students made both a poster presentation and a panel discussion reporting on their research at the Appalachian Studies Association annual conference, held at ETSU, Johnson City, TN, March 27-29, 2015.

### **Project Outcomes:**

In support of the goals for the 2014-2015 ETSU project, the following outcomes were adopted, stating that the class would:

- survey historical documentation and community data
- conduct oral history interviews and compile results
- present their findings to the community partners
- present a draft strategic plan to the community partners
- develop a poster for the ATP conference
- present their findings to the ATP conference
- make a poster presentation at the Appalachian Studies Association (ASA) annual conference

With one exception, these project outcomes were accomplished. (Only the fourth outcome was not fully accomplished, as described below.) Through this project, students learned valuable skills that will serve them well as they work with communities to find sustainable solutions to age-old and future problems. The project met the required goals and objectives specified by the ATP. Namely, students were actively engaged with a community partner for the semester and presented their research to the community partner, to the ATP annual meeting, and at a scholarly conference (the ASA).

In addition, this project helps to address two of the broad goals for sustainable development required by the ATP. The primary community partner for the project, the Unicoi County Joint Economic Development Board, believes that developing cultural heritage tourism related to the history of the Clinchfield Railroad can play a major role in their efforts to help the community develop a more sustainable economy and create jobs (see Attachment 4). In fact, some initial cultural heritage tourism projects are already being developed around the railroad theme. For example, a community festival, *A Clinchfield Christmas*, was held by the Downtown

Merchants Association in December 2014 in Erwin, TN, as an outgrowth of the interest created by the work of the community partners with the ETSU class (see Attachment 5). The ETSU Department of Appalachian Studies also provided a student bluegrass band for the event.

Tish Oldham, executive director of the Joint Economic Development Board, believes that highlighting the historic role of the railroad as a generator of commerce can help the county in its present efforts to attract more industry and businesses from the US and abroad to locate in Unicoi County, thereby helping this Appalachian community become more competitive in the global economy. Ms. Oldham has asked the ETSU class to consider making this aspect one of the focuses of its 2015-2015 project.

### **Problems Encountered:**

- As noted above, students were unable to accomplish the goal of assisting the community partner in drafting a strategic plan by the end of the semester. Once the students were engaged in meetings with the community partners, two things became evident. First, the project goals were too ambitious in calling for the development of a strategic plan in such a short period of time, while at the same time students were carrying out archival research and ethnographic fieldwork. Second, students learned that the community partners had their own timetable for developing a strategic plan, which would take more time to develop. This was a valuable learning experience for students as they got to encounter a common, real-life challenge that is a necessary part of working with community and governmental organizations. Students learned that plans must be adjusted in order to accommodate problems encountered in the field. In addition, students were reminded that they have to respond to the community's specific needs.
- Students also learned to be flexible and to adapt to situations found in ethnographic fieldwork, choosing the best methods and media required to tell the story most effectively. For example, students found that the old analog central control board for the Clinchfield Railroad was preserved in the Clinchfield Museum. They then discovered that one of the oral history interviewees, Bill McClanahan, had been one of the operators of the control board and was one of the few people alive who could explain how it worked. Due to the visual nature of the control board, a verbal explanation alone would not be sufficient. Therefore, the decision was made to record a video interview of Mr. McClanahan explaining the operation of the control board (see Attachment 3 for a photo of Mr. McClanahan with the control board).

### **Program Continuation and Sustainability:**

The 2014-2015 ETSU project was designed to be a multi-year project, building upon the positive relationship that the ETSU program has developed with communities in Unicoi County. It will take time to develop sustainable cultural heritage tourism plans and projects that highlight the rich railroad history of Unicoi County. Accordingly, the original project proposal called for the first year to be a foundational one, building initial relationships with the new community partners,

beginning the collection of oral histories about the railroad, and beginning a dialogue with the community about cultural heritage tourism.

Conversations with the community partners and other members of the community since the end of the project have affirmed that the community is eager to continue the work on the ETSU project, as reported in the final 2014 meeting of the Unicoi County Joint Economic Development Board (see Attachment 4).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations:**

The broad purpose of the Appalachian Teaching Project is to engage students and regional citizens in posing answers to the question, "*How can we build a sustainable future for Appalachian communities?*" In so doing, the project seeks to strengthen leadership skills, raise awareness of community resources, engage students as active learners and participants in community projects, and to carry out traditional and active research to assist communities in creative approaches to sustainability through asset-based development. The 2014-2015 ETSU project was successful in helping its students to carry out these objectives.

Both ETSU and the community partners are eager to begin phase two of this project. The project should continue to assist the community partners in developing further plans and projects to promote cultural heritage tourism, based on emerging community needs. Such later phases should continue to collect additional cultural history related to the railroad and assist community partners in developing initiatives to promote cultural heritage tourism based on the railroad. Such initiatives could include cultural heritage festivals (such as *A Clinchfield Christmas*) and other events; dramatic, literary, and musical presentations of railroad history; marketing and promotion of railroad tourism; museum exhibits; and creative uses of audiovisual technology to present the story of the railroad, such as computer kiosks, cell phone apps, and webpages. There is much yet to be done in this project, which has the potential to make an important contribution to sustainable economic development in Unicoi County.

### **Attachments:**

- (1) *Johnson City Press* article about the initial kickoff meeting for the ETSU project.
- (2) Link to a post on the *Johnson City Press* Facebook page:  
[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=550492415084295&id=285938284873044](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=550492415084295&id=285938284873044)
- (3) A series of photographs showing the ETSU students engaged in the project.
- (4) *Erwin Record* article about a meeting of the Unicoi County Joint Economic Development Board at which the ETSU project is mentioned.
- (5) Flyer for *A Clinchfield Christmas*.