

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

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**PROJECT FOCUS:** East Tennessee State University will help document the history of the Clinchfield Railroad in Unicoi County and assist the county in utilizing this history to promote cultural heritage tourism.

**PROJECT DETAILS:**

**Course Number, Name, and Instructor:** APST 5690, Documenting Community Traditions, Dr. Ron Roach

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

**Need:** Building on a multi-year partnership to promote sustainable development in Unicoi County, Tennessee, East Tennessee State University's 2014 Appalachian Teaching Project class intends to launch a project designed to help document the history of the Clinchfield Railroad in Unicoi County and to develop this aspect of cultural heritage tourism for the area. The railroad is a significant part in the history of Unicoi County but much of its role in the community and in the lives of residents remains undocumented. 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. County 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.

In 1890, tracks of the precursor of the Clinchfield Railroad reached Erwin, the Unicoi County seat. In 1902, coal entrepreneur George Lafayette Carter, who donated the land for the original ETSU campus, bought the railroad and renamed it the Clinchfield. Soon thereafter, Carter moved the headquarters for the railroad from Johnson City to Erwin, which became home to the largest railroad yards in the area. The Clinchfield continued as a major employer in Unicoi County throughout most of the twentieth century. The railroad became the Family Lines System in the 1970s and was acquired by CSX Transportation in the 1990s, which still operates a large rail yard and repair shop in Erwin.

From 2007-2011, Unicoi County was categorized as "Transitional" in the ARC scale of economic indicators. However, in 2012 the county declined into the "At-Risk" category and has continued as such in each year since. According to the ARC, this means that Unicoi County ranks between the worst 10 percent and 25 percent of the nation's counties and is at risk of sliding into economic distress. A major part of the county's plan to improve its economy is the development of cultural heritage tourism and ETSU's ATP class has been assisting in this effort

for several years. From 2007-2009, the class helped to develop the Tanasi arts and heritage center in the county; from 2010-2013, the class helped to document the country's agricultural history as part of its efforts to promote agri-tourism and sustainability. Leaders from the county government, the local economic development board, and the local historical association and heritage museum all have identified the proposed railroad history project as a high priority and have requested the assistance of the ETSU ATP class. As a result, this project has the potential to bring together residents and organizations from across Unicoi County to work together on a common goal that is important to the entire county.

One of the strengths of the proposed project is that it has the potential to develop into a multi-year partnership. Students in subsequent semesters can continue working with community partners to develop the draft strategic plan into a final plan, which will identify future phases of the project based on community needs. Such later phases should continue to collect additional cultural history related to the railroad and assist the community partners in developing various initiatives to promote cultural heritage tourism based on the railroad. Such initiatives could include festivals and other cultural 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.

**Planned Meetings with Community Partner:** Initial meetings to discuss the need and broad plans for the proposed project have already taken place. Once the class begins in August 2014, the class will meet with representatives of the community partners at least twice each month. The first meetings will help to finalize the plans for the oral history interviews and the process for developing the draft strategic plan. Subsequent meetings will provide the opportunity for progress reports and for dialogue needed to inform the strategic planning process. At the end of the semester, the class will meet with the community partners to present the draft strategic plan and to share the poster and presentation from the ATP conference.

**Overview of the Project:** The project will emphasize the cultural history of the railroad as a significant force in local communities and in the lives of residents. The project has 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 leaders to develop a draft five-year strategic plan for utilizing railroad history to promote cultural heritage tourism. The initial focus of the fieldwork will be on retired railroad workers and other elderly residents who have memories of the railroad. At the end of the fall 2014 course, students will

present their findings to the local community partners and at the ATP conference in Washington, DC.

The scope of the project offers opportunities for the ETSU Department of Appalachian Studies and the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services (CASS) to utilize additional courses and resources help carry the future phases of the project through to completion. For example, the department's spring course on Current Events in Appalachia, which includes a section on sustainable development, could continue to work with the community partners, building on the work of the fall 2014 ATP course. In addition, the Department's program in Bluegrass, Old Time, and Country Music Studies is interested in supporting the initiative, as many traditional songs revolve around the role of the railroad in Appalachian culture. CASS units such as the Archives of Appalachia, the Reece Museum, and *Now and Then* magazine are also prepared to lend their resources to supporting later phases of the project.

Several meetings have already been held with community partners and a broad coalition of support has been gathered, encompassing civic, economic, educational, and cultural leaders. An advisory committee of representatives from community partners will be appointed. The primary community partners identified thus far are the Joint Economic Development Board of Unicoi County (Tish Oldham, director) and the Unicoi County Heritage Museum and Clinchfield Railroad Museum (Martha Erwin, curator). In addition, a number of secondary partners have indicated support, including the Town of Erwin, Town of Unicoi, and Unicoi County. The ETSU Center for Community Outreach and Applied Research and a railroad-themed local business startup, Steam Horse Dry Goods Company, have also expressed support for the project. Steam Horse is an example of economic development that draws upon the cultural heritage of the area, as it uses traditional railroad worker clothing patterns to produce modern clothing made in the United States from local materials. This could provide a good opportunity for students in the project to learn firsthand about cultural history as it relates to local sustainable economic development in Appalachia.

There is growing interest in railroad history and tourism in Northeast Tennessee, which can provide opportunities for collaboration in future phases of the project. For example, the abandoned railroad bed of the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad (The "Tweetsie") that runs from Johnson City, TN to Elizabethton, TN is being developed into a hiking trail. The Tweetsie Trail will be dedicated in August 2014 and the ETSU Department of Appalachian Studies is partnering with community leaders to help present the dedication ceremony. ETSU is also home to the George L. Carter Railroad Museum, which provides a showcase for a local model railroaders club to present railroad history.

**Goals and Objectives:** The first phase of the project has 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 leaders to develop a draft five-year strategic plan for utilizing railroad history to promote cultural heritage tourism.

Student-centered objectives will include learning how 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

**PROJECT OUTCOMES:**

In support of the project goals and objectives, students will:

- 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 annual conference