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

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PROJECT FOCUS: East Tennessee State University will continue to document the oral 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 2015 Appalachian Teaching Project class proposes a project designed to continue documenting the history of the Clinchfield Railroad in Unicoi County and to develop this aspect of cultural heritage tourism for the area. The first year of this project was successfully completed in 2014-2015. 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; in 2015, the class began the current project focused on railroad history.

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
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 continues a multi-year partnership. Students in subsequent semesters can continue working with community partners to develop further plans and projects to promote cultural heritage tourism, 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. For example, a community festival, *A Clinchfield Christmas*, was held last year in Erwin, TN, as an outgrowth of the interest created by the 2014-2015 ATP class.

**Planned Meetings with Community Partner:** The ETSU ATP class successfully launched the project in 2014-2015, spending that initial year developing contacts in the community, conducting archival research into the Clinchfield records, and completing initial ethnographic interviews in Unicoi County. Initial discussions to plan the 2015-2016 project details have already begun with the community partner. Once class begins in August 2015, the plan calls for students to meet with representatives of the community partners at least once each month. The first meeting will help to finalize the plans for the oral history interviews and other activities projected for the semester. For example, the community plans to continue *A Clinchfield Christmas* community festival and we hope to involve the ATP students more directly in that event. Subsequent meetings will provide the opportunity for progress reports and for continued dialogue needed to inform the collaborative process. At the end of the semester, the class will meet with the community partners to present its report 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 additional 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 continue developing plans and projects for utilizing railroad history to promote cultural heritage tourism. The focus of the fieldwork will be on retired railroad workers and other elderly residents who have memories of the railroad and its role in the community. At the request of the community partners, a particular emphasis for 2015-2016 will be on the historical role of the railroad in developing a regional economy. This focus will not only help to document important history but also can help to promote economic development in the region today. At the end of the fall 2015 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 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.

The first year of the project successfully began building a broad coalition of community support, encompassing civic, economic, educational, and cultural leaders. The primary community partners 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 partnership provides 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 has been developed into a hiking trail, which was dedicated in August 2014. As a result of the 2014 ATP project, the ETSU Department of Appalachian Studies has been asked to research and develop historical markers along the Tweetsie Trail. 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. The Carter Museum offered a training session for the fall ATP class.

Goals and Objectives: The first phase of the project has two main goals:

1. To continue conducting 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 continue developing plans and projects that utilize 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 place-based cultural heritage tourism in Appalachia
- communicate effectively in discussions and public address

These goals and objectives directly support the broad goals for sustainable development required by the Appalachian Teaching Project. First, by helping the primary community partner develop cultural heritage tourism related to the history of the Clinchfield Railroad, the project can help the community create jobs and develop a more sustainable economy. Second, by highlighting the historic role of the railroad as a generator of commerce and development in the area, the project can provide
the community partner with valuable data to support its 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.

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
- 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