

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

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February 1, 2015 – June 30, 2016

May 26, 2016

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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, 2015-June 30, 2016

Grantee Name: East Tennessee State University (ETSU)

Project Director: Ron Roach

Description of Project:

East Tennessee State University's Documenting Community Traditions course completed the second year of a multi-year partnership to promote sustainable community development in Unicoi County, Tennessee. The project was designed to continue gathering oral histories related to the Clinchfield Railroad in Unicoi County and to assist community partners in identifying ways to develop this aspect of cultural heritage tourism for the area.

The ETSU course continued working with the same community partners from year one: The Unicoi County Economic Development Board (Tish Oldham, director) and The Unicoi County Heritage Museum and Clinchfield Railroad Museum (Martha Erwin, curator).

Activities:

The project accomplished the majority of its objectives, 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 interviewing and transcribing, cultural heritage tourism, and railroad history in the region.
- On August 31, 2015, students experienced a training session in the ETSU Archives of Appalachia, part of the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services. In particular, students were introduced to the Clinchfield Collection, which houses thousands of artifacts related to the history of the Clinchfield Railroad.
- Using the Clinchfield Collection, students completed a project in which they located, researched, and presented an oral report on a cultural artifact that gave insight into the impact of the railroad on the history and culture of Unicoi County.
- On October 5, 2015, students toured the George L. Carter Railroad Museum, led by museum director Dr. Fred Alsop. This tour helped students to learn more about the role of Carter in the history of the Clinchfield Railroad and the founding of ETSU.
- The class traveled to Unicoi County on September 14, 2015 for a tour of the community and sites connected to the railroad. After this tour, students met with community partner Martha Erwin, curator of the Unicoi

County Heritage Museum and Clinchfield Railroad Museum in Erwin, TN, to discuss the project. Mrs. Erwin also gave them an extensive private tour of the museums.

- The class made three subsequent trips to Unicoi County to conduct oral history interviews with residents who had memories of the Clinchfield Railroad. The class worked with its community partners to organize the interviews, held at the Tenasi Arts and Heritage Center in Unicoi, TN, and at the ETSU Community Outreach Office in Erwin, TN. Most of the interviews took place on October 26 and November 9; two students returned on November 18 to interview a narrator who had missed the earlier sessions. The students conducted eight separate interviews totaling more than 10 hours of recordings (see Appendix 1).
- Students transcribed the digital recordings of the interviews into a standard format learned in class. The recordings and transcriptions will be deposited into the ETSU Archives of Appalachia for use by future researchers.
- Drawing upon their archival research projects, their fieldwork in Unicoi County, and their oral history interviews, students designed a poster and PowerPoint presentation reporting on their findings.
- Students presented their research at the Appalachian Teaching Project (ATP) conference in Washington, DC, December 4-5, 2015 (see Appendix 2).
- Students made a poster presentation of their research at the Appalachian Studies Association annual conference, held at Shepherd University, Shepherdstown, WV, March 17-19, 2016 (see Appendix 3).
- Students presented their research to community partners, oral history narrators, and interested community members at the Erwin Town Hall on April 21, 2016 (see Appendices 4 and 5).

Project Outcomes:

The 2015-2016 ETSU project had two main goals:

- (1) To conduct ethnographic field research to survey existing documentation and to conduct interviews of residents who have some connection to the Clinchfield railroad; 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 project set forth the following student-centered learning objectives, which stated 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

All but one of these project outcomes were accomplished (the fourth learning outcome was not fully accomplished, as described below.) The project met the required goals and objectives specified by the ATP and students learned valuable research, leadership, and community engagement skills that will be essential to them as help develop sustainable communities in the future.

Problems Encountered:

- On October 15, less than two weeks before students were to return to Unicoi County to conduct the first round of oral history interviews, CSX Corporation (the current operator of the former Clinchfield Railroad) announced that it would be closing the railroad operation in Erwin, ending 300 jobs (see Appendix 6). This disturbing news taught students firsthand about the challenges facing communities in Appalachia as the region shifts to the post-coal economy. In addition, the CSX closure heightened interest in the students' project and underscored the relevance of oral history documentation. As a result, students found an even greater interest in preserving railroad history and exploring ways to use it to promote tourism. Upon hearing the news of the closure, the ATP class immediately contacted community partners and offered to help the community. Community partner Tish Oldham and the Unicoi County Economic Development Board have played a central role in the response to this crisis. Oldham's office in Erwin, the ETSU Office of Community Outreach and Economic Development, became a center for career counseling and services for former CSX workers. Through all of this, the work of the ATP project has been cited often as a positive contribution to the community.
- As noted above, the only goal not accomplished was that of assisting the community partner in drafting a strategic plan. This goal was originally set forth in year one and was carried forward with the hope that it might be attainable in year two. However, it has become apparent that this goal is too ambitious for this particular course. First, the amount of time required to prepare, carry out, and transcribe oral history interviews, then to prepare a presentation for the ATP conference, does not allow enough time to work on strategic planning. Second, with the closing of CSX and other immediate challenges, the Unicoi County Economic Development Board did not have the time to engage in strategic planning with the students. In spite of this, however, students have learned a great deal about community planning by observing and engaging with the community as it has responded to a major economic downturn.

Program Continuation and Sustainability:

This ATP project began in 2014 and was designed to be a multi-year initiative, building upon the positive relationship that the ETSU program has developed in the past with communities in Unicoi County. The first year of the project established a good foundation, which the second-year class was able to build upon successfully. The closure of CSX has served to strengthen the ties that the class has to Unicoi County and to enhance the importance of the project moving forward.

There are positive signs that the community is continuing to embrace its railroad history and find new ways to utilize this history to promote tourism. The Erwin

Downtown Merchants Association continues to take a more active role in promoting tourism and has also utilized its Facebook page to promote the activities of the ATP course. A new railroad-themed coffee shop, Steel Rails, has become a successful business in downtown Erwin. In addition, two businesswomen have renovated an old storefront building into The Bramble, an event space and wedding venue. As a positive way to deal with the tragic story of the execution of Mary the Elephant on a railroad crane in Erwin in 1916, The Bramble's owners established the Bramble Elephant Trust to raise funds for rescued elephants. On April 30, 2016, the town of Erwin and the Downtown Merchants Association collaborated in launching a new street festival, the Great Outdoors Festival. While this festival is primarily designed to promote Erwin's great cultural asset of the Appalachian Trail, the town's railroad history was in evidence as well and The Bramble Elephant Trust raised more than \$1000 for the nation's largest natural habitat elephant sanctuary, which is located in Tennessee. Coincidentally, the idea of Erwin partnering with the elephant sanctuary had been raised a number of times in the ETSU ATP course and in conversations with community partners as a positive means of dealing with that chapter of Erwin's railroad history, demonstrating that the students were in concert with the community (see Appendix 7 for examples of community uses of railroad history).

In addition, this year's ATP project has led to several ongoing collaborations that contribute to cultural sustainability in the area. One example is Rocky Fork, Tennessee's newest state park, which opened in Unicoi County in 2015. On February 18, 2016, ETSU ATP instructor Ron Roach and Appalachian Studies faculty member Roy Andrade met at Steel Rails Coffee House with community partner Tish Oldham and with Tennessee State Park rangers Tim Pharis and Jesse Germeraad, to plan a fiddle convention to be held at Rocky Fork in the coming year. Roach, Andrade, and Pharis then toured Rocky Fork and the Flag Pong community center. The group has worked together to apply for a state grant to help fund the event and the ETSU Department of Appalachian Studies will be a major partner in its execution (see Appendix 8). As a second example of collaboration, the owners of The Bramble venue mentioned above contacted the ETSU Department of Appalachian Studies to ask the department to hold square dances at their venue in Erwin. The department is pursuing this collaboration and hopes to hold the first such dance in the 2016 fall semester. Third, as a direct result of the ATP project, the ETSU Department of Appalachian Studies was brought in to design informative markers for the newly opened Tweetsie Trail rails-to-trails project in nearby Johnson City and Elizabethton.

A number of additional projects and possible future partnerships in the region have resulted from the work of the ETSU ATP course with the Clinchfield Railroad project. All of these initiatives demonstrate the continuing relationship being built with the community and have the potential to make positive contributions to cultural sustainability in the area. Community members continue to affirm their support for the continuation of the Clinchfield project.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Both ETSU and the community partners are eager to continue phase three of this project. The project plans to continue to collect the oral histories of residents connected to the Clinchfield Railroad and assist the community partners in developing further plans and projects to promote cultural heritage tourism, based on emerging community needs.

As has become apparent, the work of the ATP course not only collects oral histories but also generates a number of ways to use that history. We are already seeing that the resources of ETSU's full Appalachian Studies program can then help to follow up on the collaborations that result. There is much yet to be done in this project, which has the potential to make important contributions to sustainable economic development in Unicoi County.

Attachments:

- (1) Photographs of ETSU students conducting fieldwork in the community.
- (2) Photographs of ETSU students at the ATP Conference in Washington, DC, December 2015.
- (3) Photographs of ETSU students making a poster presentation at the Appalachian Studies Association conference in Shepherdstown, WV, March 2016.
- (4) Photographs of ETSU students making their final community presentation in April 2016.
- (5) An article from the *Johnson City Press* about the final presentation to the community.
- (6) Articles from local newspapers about the closing of CSX operations in Erwin.
- (7) Some examples of the community's use of railroad history to promote cultural heritage tourism.
- (8) Photographs showing a meeting and field visit to Rocky Fork State Park and Flag Pond School to discuss a proposed fiddling convention.

Oral histories of the Clinchfield Railroad collected, preserved in ETSU Appalachian archives



ERWIN — One day last fall, a group of students was midway through a three-year oral history project, gathering stories about the Clinchfield Railroad from some of Erwin’s older residents.

Then the sound of trains suddenly stopped in the little railroad town at the heart of their project.

The unexpected closure of the CSX rail yard, ending more than 100 years of railroading in Erwin, became a new chapter the history the graduate students in East Tennessee State University’s Appalachian Studies program were documenting — and the significance of their work for the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Archives of Appalachia at ETSU was suddenly elevated.

Monday evening, four of the graduate students involved in the ARC funded project and Ron Roach, chair of ETSU’s Department of Appalachian Studies, returned to Erwin for a presentation of their final report, “Remembering, Recording and Re-imagining Life in a Railroad Town.”

The students’ collection of exhibits, publications and video recordings of interviews with 24 Unicoi County railroaders and residents who recalled the Clinchfield is already well traveled and will soon be available

online. It has already been presented to the federal agency in Washington and to the Appalachian Studies Association at its annual conference at West Virginia's Shepherd University.

The work includes such pearls as an audio recording of Fiddlin' Charlie Bowman's "CC&O No. 558," a fiddled tune inspired by engineer J. Fred "Fogless Bill" Leonard's distinctive pull of the train whistle as he pulled into Clinchfield Station in Johnson City; the personal recollections of A.J. Alf Taylor, a lifelong railroader, engineer and co-author of "The Clinchfield No. 1, Tennessee's Legendary Steam Engine"; and the original architectural plans for the "Garden Village" of Erwin drawn by the famous New York architect Grosvenor Attebury under contract by Clinchfield Founder George L. Carter.

Jen Bingham, one of more than a half-dozen ETSU graduate students involved in the project, said the focus of the study was on how the railroad had been an engine of economic development in the region. Now complete, Bingham said the hope is that the collection will be an engine for the county's development of heritage tourism, a growing economic driver in other communities.

Bingham said it was "a project of many hearts and hands."

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From the Publisher's Desk – Whistle absence brings eerie silence (Oct. 21, 2015 issue)

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Erwin just experienced the biggest train wreck of its history.

It is amazing how something that we lean on, depend on and build our lives around can be taken in a moments notice. That rang true last Thursday when CSX pulled out of Erwin so unexpectedly. I am sure some rumors were floating around a day or so before, but the certainty of it became a harsh reality to approximately 300 workers early Thursday morning.

The mother that birthed our little town seemed to disown us, claiming we were no longer necessary in her life and not useful enough. But, we have to remember, that CSX was our adoptive mother. I feel that the true parent, Clinchfield Railroad, would never have done this.

Too much hard work had been put into those early years of laying down track, blasting through mountain sides, building bridges and tunnels, to just walk away. Has the economy changed that much? Its like building a super highway to decide we no longer need to take the exit it goes to.

There are very few in our county that arent affected in some way by this decision. We all have family or friends who are connected to the railroad. Stores benefited from sales to railroad employees. We all benefited from the tax dollars brought in and spent in our community. Churches benefited from railroad tithes.

But, most of all, our railroad family and friends were able to support themselves

and their families on hard earned income from a job that is not easily replaced. As the last coal train to leave Erwin slowly pulled out a little after 3 p.m. last Thursday, so did the hopes and dreams of many families. Regardless of age, it is not easy to start over. I am sure many of these workers had never worked anywhere else their entire lives. Many are at an age that is closer to retirement than starting over.

We are all hurt by this decision, puzzled and stunned at the same time. I am sure the community is binding together in great numbers to offer prayers on behalf of those affected. In fact, there was a prayer vigil held Sunday. In times like these, it makes me proud to see how residents put their differences aside for the greater cause.

For those of us who have grown up here, there has never been a day without the railroad. We grew up with the whistle sounding its way through town, the banging of coal cars and, of course, the tracks blocked from time to time. It is almost an eerie feeling now to glance over and see no activity and hear no whistle. It is the first time weve known such silence in over 100 years. It is like coming to a harsh sobriety that leaves us wondering if this really did happen.

Where do 300 men find comparable jobs? Where does this put Erwin for enticing families to our community? What does it do to our real estate market? Only time will tell.

On an ironic note, the town gathered last Friday, the very next day after the announcement, for a ceremony naming the railroad overpass. The bridge that had taken decades to achieve was barely finished before it was no longer needed. If only that price tag of millions could now be divided among the railroad employees who are jobless.

We are all familiar with the old saying that nothing is sure except death and taxes. For many of these employees, it was a type of death from a routine that was so familiar that they could have performed it blindfolded. I am sure that waking up this week still causes them a moment of pausing to realize that they no longer need to rush to get ready for work.

We often hear of disasters in other parts of the U.S. and other parts of the world, but this time it is in our own community. As we face this shock, lets all be mindful of our neighbors and families affected and anyway we can help them through prayer or other means of support. I feel like somewhere down the track there will be light at the end of the tunnel for these betrayed employees.



☺ October 22, 2015 in **Viewpoint**

CSX closure ends more than 100 years of railroad operations in Erwin



[Sue Guinn Legg](#) • Updated Oct 15, 2015 at 10:32 PM

ERWIN — The last coal train to leave Erwin rolled slowly out of town just after at 3 p.m. Thursday, less than eight hours after CSX Transportation employees heard the news that rocked all of Unicoi County.

“Its a hard pill to swallow,” county Mayor Greg Lynch said. “Of course, we heard rumors that something was coming down. But never in my wildest dreams did I imagine they would just shut down and leave town.”

CSX delivered the news of its decision to immediately close Erwin’s 175-acre rail yard and abruptly end the employment of the facility’s 300 workers in a series of meetings with employees conducted at the start of their morning shifts.

The company’s official notification to county leaders came by courier during the lunch hour. But by then, the shockwave of its departure from a town built around railroading had already reverberated across all of East Tennessee.

A statement posted at the company’s web site Thursday morning cited significant declines in the coal industry as the reason for the closure of town’s 135-year-old rail terminal.

From our partners: Channel Tunnel blocked by angry workers

CSX security, communications staff and employment specialists from its headquarters in Jacksonville, Fla., remained at the terminal throughout the day, meeting individually with workers who had questions about their severance and the opportunity to bid on jobs at other CSX locations across the country, and fielding questions from community leaders and media outlets from as far away as Knoxville.

About a dozen rail yard shop workers and contractors who for decades have provided services and supplies to the terminal remained on site through the afternoon, shutting down the shops and building the last trains of railcars to be assembled in the yard. Most of 300 employees impacted by the closure left the facility immediately after the 7:30 a.m. employee meeting.

Despite the workers' efforts to remain positive, the mood was grim among the employees who remained outside the eerily quiet terminal building, and in downtown Erwin as well. Few of the workers would talk to the media. and those who spoke with the Johnson City Press chose not to give their names.

"It's just the nature of the business, the nature of the industry," said an 18-year employee of CSX who chalked up Thursday's closure as his third layoff. "It's technology. Before people burned coal they burned wood and shipped it. You got to look at it optimistically. Gloom and doom won't get you anywhere."

A yard taxi driver employed for many years in Erwin by a company contracted by CSX to deliver workers to trains across the region said he expected to lose his job as well. "It's going to impact a lot of contractors also," he said. "There are companies who deliver ice and bottled water for the trains here every day. Diesel fuel suppliers. All sorts of different services. It's widespread."

Tish Oldham, director of Unicoi County Joint Economic Development Board, came to the terminal Thursday to learn what she could about the company's plans for rail service to industries in the county that depend on it, and was assured by CSX that service will continue.

"Its going to have a regional impact not just in the town and county," she said. "There's a percentage of people who drive here from Johnson City and other places to work at CSX. And more than just here, the railroad has been an important part of the economy of this region for 100 years. It's a regional economic issue.

"I talked to them today about the line still being available to manufacturers and my understanding is the rail line will be available."

At this time, Oldham said the primary concern is for the loss of CSX jobs by "a set of very skilled workers and figuring out how those skills can be used in other segments of the economy.

"These are people who know how to build things, design things and make things happen," she said.

The CSX property, which extends several miles from Highway 107 at Exit 37 of Interstate 26 to the industrial park on the the southeast edge of Erwin, will also be an issue.

Mayor Greg Lynch said CSX's 175-acres of level land with utilities running through the heart of the valley is "something the county has very little of" and something he believes the economic development board will be looking at purchasing an option on.

Lynch said he learned Thursday afternoon federal grants are available to assist with the retraining of workers displaced from jobs because of decline of fossil fuels, and will be pursuing those grants in the coming days as well as assistance for the workers available through the state Department of Economic Development.

As for CSX presence on the property, company spokeswoman Melanie Cost said, "At this time, we don't expect to come back or to return operations to Erwin."

"We are continuing to look at options on the property," Cost said.

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Development board brainstorms response to CSX closure



[Sue Guinn Legg](#) • Updated Oct 17, 2015 at 10:55 AM

ERWIN — With the full impact of Thursday's closing of the CSX railroad operations in Erwin still unclear, members of the Unicoi County Joint Economic Development Board quickly turned their attention to recovery.

Finding ways to recover from the closing dominated Friday's quarterly meeting of the board, and from the brainstorming session sprang the creation of a task force to detail the many parts of the community affected by the loss of the county's longest serving industry. The task force will include the economic board, the mayors of Unicoi County and towns of Erwin and Unicoi, representatives of each of the community's public utilities and others.

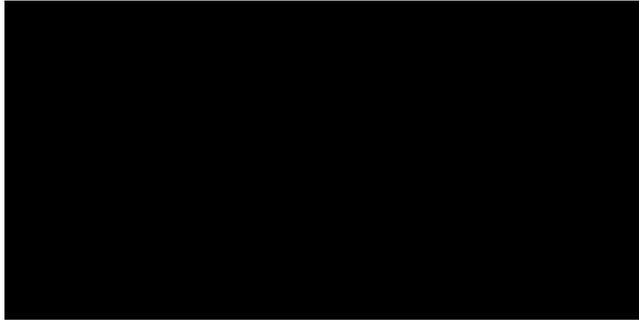
"It was a shocking day yesterday and we need to respond as a community," UJEDB Director Tish Oldham said. "Your leadership will be important to making sure we do all we can to help people effected."

To help re-track the careers of the 300 railroad workers who lost their employment with CSX, Oldham said the federal Workforce Investment Board is sending an emergency response team to Erwin.

"They're employment specialists" Oldham said, adding that an East Tennessee State University community

outreach facility with offices, computers and software already in place in Erwin will be made available for their work with the former CSX employees.

From our partners: ECO:nomics: How Cap and Trade Helps Railroads



On Oldham's suggestion the board agreed to start work on a compilation of former railroad employees' skills and and job descriptions to share to with potential employers in the region. They also agreed to conduct the comprehensive assessment of the impact at the urging of Erwin Town Recorder Glenn Rosenoff.

Citing an urgent need to step up recruitment efforts, Erwin Mayor Doris Hensley said she and county Mayor Greg Lynch have already discussed a sending a delegation to CSX's headquarters in Jacksonville, Fla., to begin the process of buying the 175-acre CSX rail yard for industrial and commercial development.

Hensley said the 100-year-old railroad terminal building located next door to the former railroad depot — which was renovated for use as the county library — is a prime candidate for similar renovation for commercial use.

Lynch cited the value of the miles-long stretch of flat land with rail access, utilities and and buildings suitable for new industry, and said, "We still have a long relationship with CSX and, really, our fate remains in their hands."

In addition to new industry, the board also discussed the potential for using the rail line and the county's rich railroad heritage to enhance tourism, including the possibility of securing the former Clinchfield Railroad's "Old No. 1" locomotive for passenger excursions along the former Clinchfield route through the mountains.

"It would be a pretty ride and most people have never seen it," said board member Aaron McClellan, a county resident with past work experience with the railroad.

Lynch told the board he has already begun researching a federal grant available for job training and employment assistance for people who have lost jobs because of the reduction in coal production and will be expediting the county's application.

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