

Digitizing the Appalachian Oral History Project: Engaging Students Through Project-Based Learning in the Digital Humanities

They were teachers, farmers, mill workers, storekeepers, bricklayers, cab drivers, housewives and housekeepers, mail carriers, nurses, maintenance workers and loggers. They were barbers, merchants, counselors, doctors, bookkeepers, and school principals.

They worked at the Virginia Glove Factory, Olin-Mathieson, Fieldcrest Mills, Jewel Ridge, Carbo, Appalachian Power, Tennessee Lumber Company, for the Norfolk and Western Railroad, for the school system, the local college, the town.

They lived at Glade Spring, Saltville, Clinchburg, Blacksburg, Friendship, DeBusk Mill, Chilhowie, and St. Paul, and Coeburn, and Big Stone Gap and Sandy Ridge, at Broadford, Ceres, Slottsville, Damascus, Kelly's Chapel, and Tin Bridge Hollow.

And in the first half of 1973, they opened their front doors to college students, young people from elsewhere, who were strangers to them. They invited these students in to their front rooms and offered them coffee and cookies and answered their questions as the tiny reels inside the cassette tape player turned and turned and turned, recording their voices, some strong and clear and forceful, others feeble and small, some laced with bemusement, others deadly serious. The tapes captured it all. In the background their TVs roared and clocks chimed and their children and grandchildren bumped into their knees while cars passed out on the road and pots and pans clanged in the kitchen. They told the stories of their lives. Of the wars they had served in, of the vegetables and stock and tobacco they had raised, of the churches they had worshipped in, of

their grandparents who had been slaves, of doing all they could to keep putting food on the table, of the hard work of trying to make a life, of the people who had left, of being black in a white world, of the Depression and floods and strikes, droughts and revivals and all manner of hard times. And good ones.

When we opened the door on their voices, they had been packed away in darkened silence for years. We had been led by a librarian to a locked and abandoned study carrel, inside of which was a mess. A few cassettes lay on the small table, manilla folders were scattered about, and boxes were stacked as high as my nose. A tape player was also on the table, headphones tossed beside it as if someone had simply gotten up, turned out the light, shut the door, and walked away. And, that is essentially what had happened.

The Appalachian Oral History Project was started in 1973 and developed through a consortium involving Emory & Henry College, Appalachian State University, Alice Lloyd College, and Lees Junior College. In just a couple of years time, students and faculty conducted and recorded personal interviews with thousands of citizens across the region. Funded in large part through grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, approximately 3,000 such interviews were collected, with most of them being conducted, recorded, and transcribed by college students. A resultant book, *Our Appalachia*, was published in 1977.

Nearly five decades later, the scholarly descendants of those original students each day beat a steady path into our building and up the stairs to a workroom in the back. They have picked up just where their forebears left off. Connected through time and place to those who first trekked

out beyond the campus gates into the region to collect history as told by those who lived it, our current students do the tedious work of bringing those voices back from their long and silent respite. They sit down to tape players now connected by USB cords to computers, pick up the headphones -- or put in their ear buds, I should say -- press play, and listen. They dig through musty files of brittle typewritten transcripts and stand at a scanner while those pages are turned one by one into pdf files that will live not in a dark, closeted space, but in the cloud.

We have three goals. The first, to organize and inventory the physical collection as it now exists. The man who headed this effort up for Emory & Henry in 1973 -- renowned historian, Dr. George Stevenson -- saved everything. Every piece of correspondence with the other institutional representatives about the work of putting this book together, for instance, and all of his experiments with what was his new and favorite toy -- a portable cassette recorder. Our second goal, of course, is to protect the integrity and usability of the material through digital preservation -- to save it forever if we are able. Our third goal is the most important. We are working toward the creation of a digital collection of Emory & Henry's portion of the AOHP that is fully accessible, searchable, and widely available online to students and faculty and scholars worldwide.

But, we are, after all, a liberal arts institution, and this project offers us enormous potential for the integration of this effort into the learning objectives of multiple courses and programs across the College curriculum. We mean for their work with this material to enhance students' conception of civic memory and civic life and for it to provide a chance for them to engage in

valuable, long-term, hands-on scholarship that gives them vital preparatory experience for either graduate school or the professional world. It seems this kind of learning must be constantly justified anymore. We must answer the burning question: What kind of job will it get me?

To date, the work of the project has been incorporated into courses in Appalachian Literature, Research Methods, in a special topics seminar on Appalachian Civic Identity, and even in a history course being taught at a nearby public high school. It has provided the primary framework for the completion of a senior capstone project for students in the College's unique Civic Innovation program and has allowed for the creation of an undergraduate research assistant position. The first student to hold that job was accepted earlier this term into a graduate program in public history thanks in no small part to the useful skills and experience she could point to as having already accumulated. The work has stood also as an ongoing project for students in our Bonner Scholars Program, as we seek for that community service scholarship program to measure not volunteer hours but the impact of civic engagement through real and tangible outcomes created for the benefit of the larger community beyond the campus gates. And, finally, lest we catch any of our work study students dawdling or staring with a blank, expressionless face, they are quickly put to work at the scanner. Most importantly, our students are using and sharpening a host of concrete, appreciable skills they can identify in e-portfolios and on resumes, from teamwork and leadership, communication and critical thinking to organization and time management, research and creativity.

Furthermore, the effort to digitize and preserve the AOHP material creates equally compelling implications for campus library and information instruction. In addition to serving as a model of cross-curricular and cross-campus collaboration between the academic library and another college department, the project creates an uncommon avenue for the extension of special collections into the undergraduate classroom. More so, the expansive and interdisciplinary utilization of such a collection increases the visibility and reach of the library, broadens its overall value to the campus community, allows for the cultivation of attentiveness to library services and collections among current students and seeds the interests of potential future library and information science professionals.

Here is what we have learned. Patience. Work like this progresses in fits and starts. There is the groundwork to be laid for every course to which it is added, the training for every new group of students that comes into the picture, and always the normal ebb and flow of energy and enthusiasm in a typical academic year.

Also, a good deal of structure works. It is our general philosophy to throw students into the deep end right away and let them learn to swim, but we found quickly that without a quantifiable goal or without very clear, very detailed instructions, a great deal of time can be wasted in simply spinning our wheels.

The most surprising lesson has been this: to make no assumptions about technology. The first question to every single person now is, do you know what a tape player is? Have you ever seen

one? Most have not. A favorite story is of the student who came running into my office exasperated and upset because something had suddenly happened with the tape. As she exclaimed, it had simply stopped playing. Trying to calm her down, I walked with her back to the workroom to find that she had gotten to the end of Side A. She had no idea that you had to take the tape out and flip it over. The instructions were thus promptly amended.

But, we have also learned how our students will surprise us. There are a lot of connections that must be made explicitly, but we also must give them room to interpret and analyze and to see the importance of this work for themselves. As they sit and listen, they learn about things of which they have never heard. I cannot tell you how many times I've explained what a grist mill is. Yet, too, they are reminded of their grandparents, of their own family stories, and for so many of our students who are the first in their family to go to college and who are from these mountains, they see that the stories of the people and places they know are vital and necessary and as of much value to the history of our country as anyone else's story. When they come down the hall and knock on my door and I see that glint in their eye as they tell me that I have to come listen to this, I know that they have gotten it. Something has clicked.

My office at Emory & Henry is in the Appalachian Center for Civic Life and there we recognize that all places exist as part of an ongoing, intertwined relationship between the natural environment, the built environment, and human culture and history. All three elements shape and define the place, both as it was and as it will be, and all three are equally important to the development of a clearer understanding of citizenship. A further guiding tenet of our work is the

belief and recognition that students have within them *now* the capacity and tools and creativity for making a difference in the world. Each of these principles is expressed daily through this project, which not only offers our students a critical way to think through questions of place and civic identity but to also participate in project-based learning with real and concrete benefits for themselves, for the world of knowledge, and for the communities beyond our own.