

Threads of Tradition: Connecting Rural Voices to Future Generations

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This project investigated and documented oral histories, with the goal of preserving and understanding the experiences, perspectives, and cultural heritage of individuals living in rural areas. It addresses the potential loss of valuable narratives and insights due to the changing landscape of the region. Existing knowledge about rural communities often focuses on statistical data, economic indicators, and policy analyses, providing limited insight into the lived experiences and personal stories of rural residents. Oral histories offer a unique and invaluable source of information, allowing researchers to capture the nuanced narratives, traditions, and challenges faced by rural people groups in their own words. While there have been studies examining various aspects of rural life, including economic challenges, social dynamics, and cultural transformations, there is a dearth of comprehensive oral history projects that center specifically on the lived experiences of rural people. By filling this gap, the project contributes to a more holistic understanding of rural communities, shedding light on their rich cultural heritage, community dynamics, and the impacts of societal changes. Making use of digital presentations and tools, oral history interviewers examine and analyze the rural narratives collected, focusing on what makes communities and neighborhoods in rural areas truly great, i.e., stories of their people.

Keywords: Oral histories, digital analysis, preservation, rural stories

Permalink for Digital Project

<https://sites.google.com/view/the-stories-we-tell-preserving/home>

Situated within rural teaching communities, we, as teacher educators, want our pre-service teachers to recognize the value of oral history as a teaching and learning tool. Like a well-worn quilt, the stories passed down from one generation to the next are woven together with the dialect, culture, and lived experiences of an often-overlooked people group that is more nuanced and distinct than any written text. Each narrative is a colorful scrap of memory, stitched together to reveal a richer, larger image of cultural heritage, community dynamics, and the impacts of societal change on rural people, whose marginalized voices are often hushed by mainstream research (Currid-Halkett, 2023). Collecting and analyzing these stories binds the diverse perspectives together with a shared thread to develop a culturally responsive teaching approach that highlights cultural knowledge and experience to make learning more relevant and effective.

Rationale/Goals

Our goals for this project were two-fold. We wanted to raise awareness of the value of highlighting the stories and history of underrepresented people groups and places (specifically rural areas) and to teach about the role oral history plays in understanding our worldview. Our project serves as an academic heirloom, aimed at helping current and future generations of K-12 students understand more about who they are, where they come from, and how their own stories can shape the future of rural communities.

Project Details

At its conception, the project aimed to collect narratives from rural Tennesseans. Centered on the research question “What are the experiences, perspectives, and cultural heritage values of individuals living in a rural area?” students, i.e., teacher candidates, were tasked with identifying and interviewing people representative of rural communities. Upon identification, we stressed the importance of obtaining interview consent. Rather than asking teacher candidates to draft their own consent letters, we elected to [draft one](#) that outlined the project’s purpose, procedure, confidentiality assurance, and other pertinent details. Ensuring understanding of informed consent, we turned our attention to the next phases of the project, i.e., interview questions and interview protocol.

The development of interview questions began during our respective classes, where we sought input from teacher candidates (i.e., interviewers). Couched within the [interview protocol guidelines](#), we stressed the freedom to pose questions not on the suggested list. We also encouraged the interviewers to ask any questions that may organically arise. Following this, we discussed audio recording vs. video recording the interview. While our initial thoughts for the oral history collection process centered on videoing, we begrudgingly admitted our own personal aversion to being videoed and decided to allow the person being interviewed to determine preference. It should be noted that the majority of participants elected to be audio recorded. Upon completion of the interviews, teacher candidates began the analysis phase of the project.

To capitalize on the nuances and everyday lived experiences of people in rural communities, teacher candidates analyzed their interviews by identifying recurring themes, topics, and patterns while noting their key takeaways and insights. After analysis, we challenged them to create a culminating project that summarized their research findings through a digital format of their choice, i.e., presentation tools such as Prezi, Emaze, iMovie, and Canva. The technology presentations served as an additional way to document the oral histories; storing them on the [project website](#) ensures future accessibility and celebration of the people who graciously shared their stories. Additionally, they function as resources for future education endeavors, ours and those of our teacher candidates. Because place is at the heart of the project, we also chose to map the various rural locations represented using Google Maps. The interactivity of Google Maps allowed us to highlight the rural areas with photos and text, thus providing a platform for students to engage in geographical exploration. Additionally, the ability for students to contribute their own observations and reflections on the map promotes active participation and collaborative learning, ultimately enriching their appreciation of the diverse landscapes and experiences found in rural regions

Similarly, two field trips emphasizing rural settings informed our knowledge base of the intersectionality of place and people (Biana, 2023; Crenshaw, 1989). Each trip and oral history interview allowed us to delve more deeply into the concept that place, particularly rural places, shapes human experience and helps people understand themselves and the world (Biana, 2023).

Statement of Impact

This oral history research project sought to preserve and illuminate the rich oral histories of rural Tennesseans, capturing their unique experiences, perspectives, and cultural heritages. By prioritizing personal narratives over statistical data, the project addressed the often-overlooked voices of rural residents, thereby enhancing understanding of their diverse realities and contributions. The outcomes not only document these invaluable stories but also foster connections through technology-driven presentations, ensuring that these narratives remain accessible for future generations, especially within the K-12 classroom.

Technology Description

Housed on a Google Sites website, the project incorporated various technology tools. Specifically, we employed Google Maps to pinpoint the [rural areas represented](#). Audio or video versions of the [oral history interviews](#) were recorded using tablets (i.e., iPads) or smartphones, which were then uploaded to Google Docs and transferred to the [project website](#). Additionally, interviewers accessed multiple digital presentation tools to create [digital story summaries](#). Representative tools are listed below:

- [Emaze](#)
- [Canva](#)
- [Prezi](#)
- iMovie

Throughout the project, to promote mobile accessibility, we incorporated QR codes for various project documents.

Funding Statement/Agency

A Rural Reimagined Faculty Grant supported this project. The funding agency aims to support innovative initiatives that enhance and potentially transform rural living by addressing rural-facing issues.

References

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About the Authors

Melissa Comer, Ed.D., is a professor of literacy education at Tennessee Tech University, teaching graduate and undergraduate courses. A native of rural Tennessee and a first-generation college graduate, she previously worked as a middle school English language arts teacher in a small K-8 school. Dr. Comer is involved in professional activities, including presentations, keynote addresses, webinars, and publications. Her research focuses on literacy, education, and Appalachia, appearing in various journals and conference proceedings. She has received the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Award for Excellence in Innovative Instruction and several grants, including the Rural Reimagined Faculty grant for documenting oral histories from rural communities. Currently, she serves as the editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Childhood Education*.

Kristen Pennycuff Trent, Ph.D., is a third-generation educator and professor of literacy education at Tennessee Technological University. After teaching at the elementary level for over six years in rural, Title I schools, she has spent the last twenty-four years working with undergraduate and graduate programs. She is a past president and past district coordinator of the Literacy Association of Tennessee, and she served as the co-editor of *The Tennessee Reading Teacher* journal for three terms. As a grant writer, Pennycuff Trent has been awarded over \$ 2.4 million for her work in literacy professional development for PreK-12 educators. When not working with TTU or the Literacy Association of Tennessee, she can be found spending time with her family at their Christmas tree farm, cooking, or reading.