

COLLECTING STORIES ABOUT STRIP-MINING: USING ORAL HISTORY IN THE CLASSROOM

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The study of history has always been an interdisciplinary exercise that borrows generously from the methods and insights provided by other disciplines, but the narrative method continues to remain central to the discipline of history. Telling stories as a method of explaining how things have changed or why things are the way they are is at the heart of most historical endeavors. Despite the centrality of story-telling to the discipline of history, until relatively recently, historians have given little critical consideration to the narrative as a method of explanation, and non-historians, our students among them, even less so. Most of the students in my classroom enter with the understanding that history is merely a series of stories, and that stories are merely a collection of facts. It is important, however, to make students of history aware that the narrative is a method of explanation, that story-telling is not merely the process of ordering a series of facts. One of the most valuable lessons students of history can learn, I believe, is that narratives can be constructed in ways that will lead different story-tellers (and their audiences) to quite different conclusions. The use of oral history in the classroom can be an effective method to help students understand the power of the narrative.

Inviting students to examine how we tell stories about transformations in the natural world can be a valuable learning tool in the environmental history course as well. In "A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative," William Cronon tells us that "When we choose a plot to order our environmental histories, we give them a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly."¹ Cronon's observation can be demonstrated successfully in the environmental history classroom through the use of oral history to explore local or regional stories about environmental change. What follows is a description of one peculiarly local example, unique to the time and place where I teach. Nonetheless, it might inspire others teaching environmental history, local history, or even more broadly defined American history courses to consider employing oral history to examine their own local or regional stories.

¹William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992), 1347.

This project centered on the demise of an earth-moving machine called "the Big Muskie." The Big Muskie rested atop a ridge about twenty miles south of the college where I teach. It was, until it was cut up for scrap in the summer of 1999, the largest walking dragline ever built.² Between 1969 and 1991, when it was finally retired, the Big Muskie operated 24 hours a day, 364 days a year (with all-too-frequent interruptions for repair), stripping the surface of seven townships in southeastern Ohio in order to expose seams of high-sulfur coal. After its retirement in 1991, it rested upon that ridge, rusting away, until American Electric Power decided to cut it up for scrap. The news of the Big Muskie's demise provoked a curious response in this community. It seems many locals had a great deal of affection for this machine, and great efforts were made to "Save the Big Muskie" and turn it into a museum. But all of these failed.

As a newcomer to the region and an environmentally minded liberal, I was a bit perplexed by this local response. So was one of my colleagues in the Biology Department, who endured the wrath of many when he publicly declared that we should celebrate the demise of "the Great Rapist." The Big Muskie was not only a source of local pride, but had been for many years a source of the highest paying jobs this region had to offer. It was a "mortgage lifter," one of its defenders proclaimed.

The demise of the Big Muskie seemed to mark the end of an era—the era of surface mining in southeastern Ohio. A few small mines remain, and have been given new hope of resurrection by the Bush administration, but in recent years they have had increasing trouble finding customers for their high-sulfur product. The dismantling of the Big Muskie was, for locals, a powerful symbol of the end of an era, and so it seemed to present an ideal opportunity for a classroom-based oral history project. In the summer of 1999 I gathered a range of willing volunteers: ex-miners, including three of the Big Muskie's operators; displaced farmers and others who had grown up on land mined by the Big Muskie; and lifelong residents of the towns nearest the mines.

I prepared the students for the project by presenting two counter narratives about the impact of strip-mining on the region. One came from public relations material produced by Ohio Power and its parent company American Electric Power. The other was Harry Caudill's anti-strip mining screed, *My Land is Dying*, which includes some photographs and discussion of the human and environmental costs of strip-mining in southeastern Ohio, as well as his native eastern Kentucky.³ The narrative presented in

²A "dragline" is a machine used in surface coal mining that employs a large bucket, "dragged" across the earth, to scoop up soil and rock above a coal seam. During the 1960s, power companies built increasingly larger draglines and shovels, in an effort to reach coal seams more efficiently. The 27 million pound Big Muskie, 32 stories high when its boom was extended, could scoop up 325 tons of earth and rock with each pass. It "walked" on four steel "shoes," each 130 feet long and 20 feet wide, at a speed of .17 miles per hour.

³Harry Caudill, *My Land is Dying* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1971).

these two accounts could not have been more starkly differentiated. Ohio Power compared strip mining to harvesting in one of its brochures and began its story with images of failed, impoverished hillbilly farms, a land used up by improvident farming methods over many generations. "Ninety-five percent of the land here wasn't suited to agriculture to begin with," they asserted with questionable statistical authority. The mines brought prosperity to an impoverished region; good wages and company taxes created a positive ripple effect throughout the community. Stripped areas were reclaimed and replanted—the more level landscape, the company declared, was actually an "improvement" from what had existed before, impossibly steep ridges and dark hollows. New uses were found for post-reclaimed lands, including a 15,000-acre grassland preserve for endangered species called "The Wilds."⁴ Harry Caudill presented a far darker narrative. Powerless Appalachian peoples were forced off their land, poorly compensated or not compensated at all. Streams and lakes were contaminated by acid run-off. Machines like the Big Muskie were described as "monsters of death."⁵

The task of the students was to determine to what extent either of these narratives reflected the experiences of the people they interviewed. So they went out to interview people in their living rooms and at their kitchen tables. They were welcomed warmly into homes of farmers, miners, ministers, and merchants, and often left with full bellies as well as full tapes. Not surprisingly, the stories they collected were quite varied, but few conformed to either of the narratives. Miners told of endless hours of overtime and rotating shifts, working at dangerous but high-paying jobs, and, while they tended to accept the stereotypes of impoverished farmers, they also more readily acknowledged than company propaganda the serious limitations of the lands some of them helped to reclaim. Farmers were often hesitant to voice open criticism of mining companies, but bristled at the ways they had been stereotypically presented as impoverished hillbillies. They eagerly shared pictures of neatly kept farms and comfortable farmhouses and confessed that leaving the land was difficult. Some had signed option contracts and were forced to leave at the company's lowest price; others held out and believed they made a tidy sum for their farms. People living in the towns closest to the mines generally did not witness the prosperity celebrated by the power company—in fact, surface mining brought hard times, not good. When the farmers who had filled their churches, bought gas at their gas stations, and groceries in their grocery stores disappeared, so did the local economy. The miners took their good wages and bought homes thirty to forty miles away from the noise and disturbance of the mining operations. What wealth the mines brought seemed to benefit communities on the periphery, while those near ground zero witnessed steady decline.

⁴"Harvests," Ohio Power Company brochure, undated, ca. 1980, in William Kerrigan's personal collection.

⁵Caudill, 93.

But people's perspectives on the Big Muskie and the mines were complicated further by webs of personal and family relationships. Many miners were indeed "outsiders," who moved to the region from other mining operations in other states, and these individuals were the most likely to present stories in line with company propaganda. But for long-time local residents, complex webs of relationships moderated their views. One miner grew up on a farm; he took part in strip-mining. Most farmers and townspeople had some friend or relative who took a job with the mining company. Difficult decisions—to hold out or sell out—and vastly different outcomes (farms sold for as little as \$30 an acre and as much as \$2000 as acre) caused rifts in families and between neighbors that have not completely healed.

What united farm families was a vigorous rejection of the stereotypes associated with the term "Appalachian." They were not rich in money, but were independent and self-sufficient, most contended, and many insisted their original quarter-section farms still might be able to sustain them today had they not been forced to move. In order to get at the truth behind these disparate portrayals of the region's farming potential, one student unearthed old copies of a Soil Conservation Study for the county completed in the early 1940s. The report did not paint an entirely bleak picture (and certainly contradicted the power company's "95%" claim), but suggested that these lands were in fact not being farmed in a sustainable manner, that some acreage would need to be turned to woodlot or pasture, and that the number of acres in crops would need to be reduced.⁶

After conducting the interviews, students were required to prepare a content index of each interview tape and to write up a personal narrative on each subject, connecting the life stories of the participants to the changes brought about by strip mining. Students shared these with the rest of the class, and the class discussed how these personal narratives supported and challenged the power company story and the liberal environmentalist story. As part of a take-home final exam, students had to construct their own narratives on strip-mining in southeastern Ohio.

Student response to the project was highly favorable. Although some were nervous about leaving the classroom and venturing out to the homes of rural residents, nearly all returned from their interviews eager to share the stories they collected. Post-interview discussions included perhaps the broadest participation I have ever encountered in the classroom, because each student brought to them a unique authority—the knowledge of the stories they had collected. Comments on evaluations gave the project a near-universal approval, with many commenting that the project was "interesting" and "fun," and that they appreciated the opportunity to encounter the perspectives of "real" people. The best measurement of its success, however, was in the

⁶C.L. Whiteford, A.H. Paschall, and E.C. Sease, "Physical Land Conditions in Muskingum and Guernsey Counties, Ohio" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, 1944), in William Kerrigan's personal collection.

quality of the final exam essays. Students approached materials written by both environmental historians and power companies with a more confidently critical eye as a result of their oral history experience.

This immersion in one local environmental story also offered ample opportunities to reflect on other issues addressed in the course: How is this contest over land use (farming vs. mining) similar to and different from other such contests in American environmental history (Native American vs. European subsistence methods, for example), and why do we privilege some land uses over others? What stereotypes (positive and negative) do we possess of the self-provisioning farmer, and of the person who earns a living as a strip-miner, and how are our impressions of them fashioned by our understanding of their relationship with the natural world? Does the popular dichotomy in which so many environmental issues are presented—jobs vs. nature—make any sense in explaining the story of strip-mining in southeastern Ohio? Finally, by asking students to reconcile three or more narratives on the story of strip-mining in southeastern Ohio—the power company's story, the liberal environmentalist story, and the personal stories of those they interviewed—students gain an intimate understanding of how we employ narratives to make sense of our personal lives and communal experiences.

Although this project drew on specific recent developments in the historiography of environmental history, projects might be developed with the same goal—to help students understand the power of the narrative as a form of explanation—in other history courses. In selecting a suitable topic, instructors should consider stories that have significant local meaning (and thus can be revealed in the personal experiences of local residents), but they should also be stories that can be tied to one or more particular meta-narratives constructed by external groups—historians, the media, or corporations, for example. A course on women's history might examine the impact of World War II on local women and measure local women's personal experiences against the historiography on women and war. Students enrolled in a course on the Cold War might interview locals about their childhood concerns about the Russians, bomb shelters, and atomic fallout. And virtually every American community—rural, urban, or suburban—has been transformed by the construction of interstate highways in the last half-century. An oral history project focusing on the specific local impacts of any part of our interstate highway system could be built into a course on modern America. The above suggestions, of course, might be used in any region of the country. I would encourage instructors to search out stories that are peculiarly local, but can be given broader meaning by tying them to broader national narratives. The rewards of such projects might be measured in the classroom, but they also can have positive impacts on the wider community.

Doing Oral History in the Environmental History Classroom: Practical Details

Pre-planning: While oral history projects can be immensely rewarding, they do require some pre-planning to be successful. Expect to spend a fair amount of time in the months before the class preparing for the project. Networking in the local community to find subjects is critical and will require some advance planning. Contacting churches, grange halls, and other local institutions will yield some results. Getting invited to a dinner for locals organizing against a planned mega-hog farm connected me with a large group of interview subjects. Earning the trust and confidence of a few key people will open many doors.

There is paperwork that should be prepared before the class begins. Contact information sheets providing critical information that students will need to know before conducting interviews (name, phone number, address, basic biographical details, relationship with other interview subjects); a letter of introduction to each participant, explaining the goals of the project; and release forms, which are essential if you expect to make the interviews available to others or to use them in your own research.

Equipment: A classroom oral history project can be done quite cheaply if the primary purpose is a learning exercise. We had pretty respectable results with \$20 portable tape recorders and \$30 lapel microphones available at Radio Shack. If you are serious about creating "radio broadcast quality" tapes, or are concerned about preservation issues, more expensive professional equipment is recommended. Search the logs of H-Oralhist for extended discussions of the benefits and drawbacks of different professional quality recorders.

Training: It is important to devote a few class sessions to training students in the use of equipment and the art of interviewing. You should be able to accomplish this in two or three sessions.⁷ I invited a colleague from our Communications Department who had extensive oral history experience to come into class and provide students with a "crash course" on interviewing. It is also important that the students are educated interviewers. Test students on relevant course materials before sending them out to interview, and require them to submit lists of interview questions beforehand.

After the interviews: Students were required to prepare a content index of each tape (indexed to the tape counter) and to write up a personal narrative on each subject, connecting the life stories of their subjects to the changes brought about by strip mining. Students shared these with the rest of the class, and the class discussed how these personal narratives supported and challenged the power company story and the liberal environmentalist story. As part of a take-home final exam, students had to construct their own narratives on strip-mining in southeastern Ohio.

⁷I relied on two books, Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Simon and Schuster, 1994) and Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 2000), in preparing sessions and handouts on "doing oral history."

After the class: This project took on a life of its own after the end of the semester. With the aid of a group of community volunteers and a grant from the Ohio Humanities Council, we created a traveling display that is currently making the rounds of libraries, banks, and town halls throughout southeastern Ohio. The exhibit, entitled "Reclaiming Our Heritage" combines images of the affected communities over time with excerpts from the oral histories, many of which were also transcribed and deposited in local libraries for public use. While the exhibit attempts to cover all aspects of this story, as the title suggests, the volunteers who worked on it were most interested in "reclaiming" the history of communities erased from the landscape by years of mining and reclamation. That project was unveiled last fall at a community event at The Wilds, a 15,000-acre refuge for endangered exotic animals established on reclaimed strip-mined lands. Students and subjects all gathered to hear indigenous music, to picnic, to view the display, and to share more stories. Octogenarians gathered around pictures of churches, schools, and general stores now long gone and pointed to spots on a transformed landscape (where rhinos and zebras now roam), to show the places once occupied by their childhood farms.