

Rural Culture Recovery Project Honors Seminar, Fall 2000

I. Formulate a few focused inquiry questions about rural life in northwest Georgia. Refine your questions based on the methodology you choose for II below. Examples of an inquiry question would be the following: What was education like in a typical rural elementary school in northwest Georgia before World War II? What are the various jobs that members of a family farm still operating today do to keep it running? What are the key places and traits of recreational life in a particular rural community?

II. Select one of the options below for your inquiry methodology, and narrow the focus of your inquiry question(s) accordingly:

1. Conduct and synthesize an **“oral history” interview** with a person who can share information about his/her key life experiences in rural Georgia. The person you select to interview may be a current resident or someone who has moved away, but s/he should be able to draw upon personal experiences to answer your questions.
2. Describe and analyze your **visit to a particular location** and that you think can reveal aspects of rural life in northwest Georgia, currently or in the past. Choose a place that you feel will reflect some of the crucial aspects of community culture in a rural Georgia setting.
3. Retrieve and interpret **an artifact (or a set of related artifacts) of rural life** in northwest Georgia. Your artifact should be some piece of “material culture” that you feel reveals something interesting about rural community practices (e.g., family life, church activities, farming) that might be in danger of being forgotten in our region. Examples might include a farm implement, a print publication read by members of an agriculture-centered town (e.g., small-town newspaper), a piece of clothing or home decoration associated with rural life.
4. Do some combination of the above. For example, you might interview a dairy farmer at the site of his farm, where you would take some photographs (with the owner’s permission, of course) and gather some artifacts (e.g., copy of a letter from the farmer’s grandfather).

III. Prepare a report based on your investigation.

Your report should follow the basic “I-Search Paper” outline below:

- what you wanted to find out (your inquiry questions when you began) and why you thought those questions were worthwhile to investigate.
- how you did your investigation (e.g., a description of your trip to a site, a summary of your actual interview experience, an explanation of how you found your artifact and what you did to learn more about it).
- the major discoveries you made *and their implications/significance*.
- how could you investigate your questions further in the future.

Your report should be about 4-7 pages in length, typed double-spaced.

You may supplement with illustrations or photographs, if you like.

You may have an appendix with supplementary information, such as the transcript of your interview, notes from your visit, or a list of artifacts related to the main focus of your paper.

Background on a Rural Recovery Project

By Sarah Robbins

Early in the fall 2000 honors seminar which I taught at Kennesaw State as an overview of the *Keeping and Creating American Communities* program, I introduced my students to one of our project themes—Cultivating Homelands—and to the specific local application of that theme that our Georgia team had been studying—Farming Georgia in the Early Twentieth Century. We read Benny and Raymond Andrews’ *Last Radio Baby*, a memoir that includes vivid portraits of the Andrews’ family life as mixed-race sharecroppers south of Atlanta. We marveled at Raymond Andrews’ gift for crafting striking anecdotes about such experiences as using the family radio to build a sense of connection with a larger world that otherwise seemed far away; attending a segregated small-town school, and observing his parents’ ongoing interactions with other sharecroppers but also with the region’s more well-to-do residents. We explored the powerful interconnections between Raymond’s journal-like writing and Benny’s distinctive line drawings. Integrating our literary study with history, we studied some northwest Georgia farmers’ oral histories, originally gathered and edited by KSU history professor Tom Scott. Then we discussed the similarities and differences between the “reporting” of Andrews’ memoir and Scott’s transcribed interviews. Moving to the web, we spent one of our once-weekly computer lab sessions seeking out websites that depicted rural life in Georgia during the early twentieth century; then we critiqued those sites—both in terms of their probable historical accuracy and their effectiveness as hybrid presentations using both text and image (like and not like the Andrews book).

While we were doing this reading and discussion, I gave my students a Rural Recovery Assignment, asking them to do some research of their own. Since we were just beginning to learn how to do interdisciplinary research, I constructed the assignment to emphasize process more than product—to report on what students learned about the topics they chose but, even more so, on how they investigated and prepared their reports. Some students interviewed relatives about their life experiences during a time when our own area of Georgia was more rural than today. One longtime resident investigated the history of a turn-of-the-century crossroads general store that is still commemorated in exhibits in what is now a suburban bank.

Two students—Stacie Janecki and Amanda Closs—chose to look closer at places they found out about from our website-searching. Stacie visited a farm about two hours from Atlanta—a combination living museum and family home, with pieces of Georgia’s rural past preserved in a cluster of authentic farm buildings but also in the vivid memories of family members who treasure the place’s heritage and are working to keep that heritage alive. Amanda, originally attracted to the little town of Euharby by a community website’s information on its covered bridge, wound up becoming close friends with the local museum curator, Miss Taff, whom Amanda came to value as a crucial custodian of local culture.

Both Stacie and Amanda later expanded their original Rural Recovery reports for the course’s final project assignment, when some students produced “new” work but most revised one of their pieces from earlier in the course.