

SOUTHERN POTTERIES HERITAGE TRAIL: Honoring An Industrial Past Through Asset-Based Development

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Introduction

Graduate students at East Tennessee State University collaborated with RISE Erwin, a non-profit in Unicoi County, TN, to begin implementation of a cultural heritage tourism project: the Southern Potteries Heritage Trail. This project, built around the design of a heritage trail akin to the various quilt trails throughout the region, will instead make use of hand-painted patterns from Southern Potteries popular Blue Ridge line of dinnerware.

As part of the Appalachian Teaching Project, sponsored by the Appalachian Regional Commission, Appalachian Community Engagement students sought to support RISE Erwin as they work to renew the economic infrastructure of the local community by way of reinventing the once heavily industrialized economy into a more post-industrial model centered on cultural heritage tourism.

Project Goal

To collaborate with RISE Erwin in planning the Blue Ridge Pottery Trail by using ethnographic and historical research to develop art installations documenting the oral history and cultural impact Southern Potteries had on Erwin, Tennessee.



"That's a heritage, you know."

- Mildred Silvers, Blue Ridge Pottery Artist

Lessons Learned

Process of learning and applying theory with fieldwork is dialectic.

Realistic and inclusive community projects should be refined through community feedback.

Cultural heritage tourism, as a means to economic diversification, should be historically accurate, community driven, and respectful to people and place.



Methods

The methods for this project included three different types of data collection: participant observation, oral histories, and social media survey.

Participant Observation:

After visits to Erwin students produced field notes that included personal observations of the town, its people, and its physical environment.

Oral History:

Interviews were conducted with various Blue Ridge pottery enthusiasts and Erwin community members both through Zoom and utilizing traditional using audio recorders.

Community Engagement:

The community selected the final eight patterns (shown below) through a Facebook poll. Through their work, students gained first-hand experience of the process of cultural heritage event planning and the community organizing necessary to gain community buy-in for a successful event and for the long-term sustainability of a non-profit organization.



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