


Community History



This is the story of doing community history in Ivanhoe, Virginia, between 1987 and 1990. Ivanhoe is a small, rural, mountain community on the New River at the far end of two counties in southwest Virginia. Its industrial history began with lead mining during the Revolutionary War. At the turn of the century, Ivanhoe, an ore center, boomed with lead, iron, and zinc mining. Two of the largest industries in southwest Virginia were located here: National Carbide and New Jersey Zinc. Between 1960 and 1985, both companies closed and the town which once had schools, a railroad, hotels, many stores, theaters, a bowling alley, doctors, and restaurants became almost deserted. Those remaining in the valley had to travel far and wide for work, shopping, medical care, and recreation. With schools and recreation outside the community, young people went elsewhere for fun and sport. Yet, many who were forced to move away still consider Ivanhoe “home” and return frequently to visit. The history of Ivanhoe is the history of American rural industrialization and deindustrialization.

The Ivanhoe History Project began in September 1987 as part of local community development activities. In 1986, citizens organized the Ivanhoe Civic League to revitalize their community. The Civic League invited me to initiate a series of discussions to help the community in economic development planning. As part of these discussions, the Civic League conducted a survey to obtain a profile and needs assessment of the community. People began to collect stories from older citizens and photographs from the past. They decided to form a history project not only to save some of their rapidly disappearing history but also to understand what had happened to their town.

Participants decided to produce a history book and began to interview their neighbors and retrieve their history systematically. We planned carefully, trying to make sure we interviewed individuals from a variety of social classes, groups, and families; we wanted a history representing all of Ivanhoe. We looked for people with special experiences and from all types of careers. We sought out former residents at the annual Jubilee celebration to record their memories. We interviewed people at the post office,

in the Civic League office, on the street, and in stores. The “history group,” consisting of ten to fifteen people, collected, transcribed, and edited fifty-three oral histories and gathered over eight hundred old photographs.

The process created excitement and encouraged community participation. We invited some local historians to present their research—e.g. on the old charcoal furnaces up and down the New River, the history of the railroad in the area, and early Native American settlements in the valley—to the community through a series of meetings. To conduct additional research and assemble a history book, members of the history project enrolled in and received college credit for a course in local history which I taught in a storefront education center through Wytheville Community College.

The class developed a collaborative way to write the book and provided the opportunity to reflect on the process of history. The group had to determine what constituted “history,” what should be recorded and preserved, and what (at least for now) “let go.” Project participants decided to report neither just the “bad,” the notorious stories of fights or days of despair, nor only the romantic, that is, the “good old days” of Ivanhoe.

A major problem with many local histories is that they are often developed for promotional purposes and frequently exaggerate and draw stereotypical accounts of the “harmonious” ways of the past. There is an overemphasis on uniqueness and a neglect of the conflicts, social divisions, competing values, and wider contexts. We decided we wanted to give as honest and correct an account of Ivanhoe’s history as possible and to place the local history in the context of wider historical changes that surrounded it, including the impact of industrialization, immigration, settlement, and modernization on the community.

The class spent time talking about the history, trying to understand it, and trying to draw information and ideas from it which would help the community. The development of a chronology and the editing and selection of the “best” stories for the history book led the group to attempt to define the most significant aspects of the community’s past, to explain and identify social patterns in Ivanhoe.

The project led participants to a greater understanding not only of their own traditions and history, but also of Ivanhoe's relation to regional, national, and international economies.

The Ivanhoe Civic League published two history volumes in 1990: *Remembering Our Past, Building Our Future* and *Telling Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives*. The first was the community history developed by the class. The second volume contained the full texts of the oral history interviews and numerous photographs. The community took pride in the books and the local effort which produced them.

Not only did the first volume quickly sell out, but it also won the W.D. Weatherford Award for best book on Appalachia in 1990, and members of the history group went to Berea College to receive the award. They presented a session at the Appalachian Studies Conference where participants told of their research and read the excerpts they had written. Members of the group also conducted workshops with other communities on doing local history.

The history project stimulated other activities in the community: a quilt exhibit, essays and papers by GED students, a project to photograph the town, and a major theater project based on the oral histories. For the theater production, entitled "It Came From Within," community members developed scenes from the oral histories, created puppets of local heroes, choreographed dances, and wrote songs.

Using oral histories in drama added another dimension to the education process, as drama is reflexive. As people become heroes in their own dramas, their self-awareness increased. It, therefore, provides a medium for the community to understand itself actively. Additionally, it provokes powerful emotion and can provide the will and vision for change. But, it also mirrors distortions, being used either to evade scenes of discord and conflict or to comment on conflict. The theater project helped to reveal some of the universal human qualities inherent in a small community and the effects of change on its members. Acting out or public telling of the stories added an emotional dimension that greatly contributed to the community's understanding of what had happened.

Participatory Research

The methodology of the community history project was "participatory research"—a process in which outside researchers and the community combine their knowledge and resources to research, dialogue, analyze, and reflect together. Participatory research methodology has evolved as educators and researchers have worked with grass-roots community groups seeking to make changes in their economic and political positions. The traditional role of the "expert researcher" who "helped" the natives produce respectable reports, studies, and analyses has only made the people more dependent. Researchers began to question their own expertise in the face of people who knew their own problems and who, with a little help and encouragement, could produce much richer insights and develop more powerful research data and analyses. In fact, participatory research requires that the community maintain control of the process, and outside researcher-helpers intervene only in ways the

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community considers appropriate.

I sought to provide help when my skills were requested and to step back when my own agenda seemed manipulative or alien to the community process. But, I was not always successful. I sometimes found myself acting as "taskmaster," pushing folks to meet deadlines, ignoring the natural rhythm of the community, or getting in the middle of community arguments and trying to act as reconciler.

The process of book publishing brought to focus all the problems of being "fully participatory." The history group was anxious to complete the project but still wanted to keep control over the final product. Others in the community wanted the book to be done and were putting pressure on the group to finish it. So we compromised, stopped the participatory process, and let it go to the experts to expedite the final production. Although most of the copy was read and corrected by members of the community, it was myself, an editor, and a graphic artist who put the final version of the two books together. In the end, the final deadlines, the printing schedules, and the goal of producing the "high quality" book resulted in several important decisions being left in the hands of the outside experts.

Compromises had to be made. The community wanted both high quality and *all* of their favorite pictures, which the graphic artist said was impossible. While she substituted "better quality" pictures to produce a better quality book, the result was that some people and things of importance to the community were left out. The history group rejected the photograph which was selected for the cover of Volume 1, an image which was artistically superior but showed a Carbide manager with workers in subservient poses. The graphic artist was, in turn, a perfectionist with little patience for what she termed "community bickering."

There were, and remain, dissatisfactions. The cover did not have the name "Ivanhoe" prominently displayed. Some felt the book ignored certain families. Remarks in one interview which embarrassed a prominent resident were not deleted as some

people felt they should have been.

In reviewing the process, I believe it would have been better for the community group to do the lay-out and final selection of photographs and cover, even though it might have resulted in time delays. There were great differences in the perspectives of the outside expert and the people in the community who know what they wanted to say, what images they wanted to project. The trade-off, however, is that this would have been a much slower process, and there was pressure from people in the community to complete the book. But, the artistic quality would have been different.

Importance of Community Histories

Those who write history are often outsiders: managers, teachers, missionaries, officials. They tell the story from an outsider's perspective. The inside story of ordinary people's lives is not often found in the library. Yet ordinary people possess a vast amount of information and a wealth of detail that is never committed to writing. Oral history is one means of correcting the

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historical bias that favors "great men."

The memories gathered in the two volumes are invaluable historical resources and vital links to Ivanhoe's past. Although some dates may be incorrect or the name of a company or store mixed up, oral histories tell us vividly, at first hand, about people's lives, their work, their upbringing, and their perceptions. The written records of historians and institutions may contain the right dates, but they can never reconstruct with equal intimacy the lives of people and how they feel about what happens to them.

The Ivanhoe History Project enabled voices not usually heard to engage in wider public conversation, both within and beyond the community's borders. In addition to strengthening community identity and pride, it became an opportunity to set the record straight about the community's collective life, a way to educate the larger public about the neglected or forgotten experiences of ordinary people living in a small town on the back side of two counties.

These memories, sometimes detailed and precise, sometimes nostalgic, are all bound by an awareness of how hard people have worked, how carefully they have managed their resources, and how

little outsiders have respected or appreciated their contributions. The histories also reveal the importance of community itself, living and working together in a network of mutual responsibility and trust. Additionally, the histories reveal how members of the community have maintained the spirit of community through changes which threatened to destroy the community itself. For many who remain, there is a sense of great loss, as well as a determination to rebuild and survive. Telling their stories, remembering and recording the stories, and reflecting on those stories, made it possible for members of the community not only to preserve their history, but also to learn from it and plan together for their future development.

Although the story of Ivanhoe is the story of one community, it is a story repeated many times throughout this country as rural towns have lost their industrial or economic base and have been threatened with extinction. Although the Ivanhoe history books were written mostly for those who call Ivanhoe home, the history project provides lessons for others who can learn not only from Ivanhoe's story, but also from the community's process of telling its stories and presenting its history.

History and Community Development

Sven Lindquist in "Dig Where You Stand" says "History is important because the results of history are still with us. History is still paying dividends. History is still conferring power on people." This became clear to us as we began to explore the past and break through superficial historical consciousness to understand complex social forces and relationships. By trying to understand those forces which had shaped Ivanhoe thus far, its citizens could now build on that understanding to gain some control of those forces and influence Ivanhoe's future. Learning their history became an integral part of the community development project.

Through the process of gathering history, Ivanhoe has looked to its elders and has carefully recollected times past, seeking lessons from traditions which may be creatively applied to present realities. Building a vision of an alternative future based on strong community ties demands a new way of thinking from people historically dependent on decisions from outside. But within Ivanhoe's own rural, mountain traditions are roots from which the new thinking can arise: respect, hard work, family, self-reliance, personal dignity, tolerance, fairness, cooperation, and democracy. These roots remain in the community's collective memory, in stories and lives; they are neither lost nor dead. Ivanhoe's people have sweated together, digging deep, to reclaim them, and they have begun to graft the buds of tomorrow's visions onto those roots. □

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