It's Not the End of the World, But You Can See It From Here: The Importance of Local History in a Rural Setting

Kim Perez and Steven Kite
Fort Hays State University

IN FALL 2007, the Department of History at Fort Hays State University (FHSU) began offering an undergraduate certificate of emphasis as well as a Master's degree in the field of Public History. Now entering the third year of existence, the program has a small but enthusiastic group of students involved and is continuing to build to the future. Currently, two full-time faculty members offer Public History courses in addition to fulfilling their other departmental duties. The experience of starting this program has been interesting and inspiring, but we have had to overcome some unique challenges along the way.

FHSU is located in Hays on the western edge of central Kansas. Hays has always been an important local center, well-connected to the railroad and military trails, but in 1965 to 1966, U.S. Interstate 70 provided the town with a modern, efficient connection to the outside world. Still, Hays is predominantly rural. The proximity of Hays to nearby large cities is three hours to Wichita, four hours to Kansas City, and five hours to Denver. Hays itself has a population of approximately twenty thousand residents, with that number fluctuating when the university is in session. As a result of its rural nature, there is little access to substantial research facilities. Students and faculty instead rely heavily on local history resources including small county museums and regional archives. Further,

because FHSU is a mid-size liberal arts university, the library is well run and efficient but limited in historical holdings. Current economic situations have forced budget reductions resulting in even further loss of new research materials.

Despite its rural nature and limited resources, the history of Hays and its immediate environment does offer a variety of avenues for historic research. The town itself developed as a service provider for the adjacent military outposts of Fort Fletcher and Fort Hays. Fort Fletcher was established in 1865 to protect workers on the Union Pacific Railroad and travelers on the Butterfield Overland Dispatch from the indigenous populations of Cheyenne and Arapaho. After a short time in existence, Fort Fletcher was abandoned, moved to the current site of Hays, and renamed Fort Hays. The fort was an important regional military center and, as a result, attracted a number of historically significant characters. Among others, Wild Bill Hickok, General George Custer, and Buffalo Bill Cody spent time at the fort and town. Hickok served as Hays sheriff from December 1867 to August 1868, while Cody attempted, unsuccessfully, to found the city of Rome approximately a mile west of the current city center of Hays. Custer, along with his wife Elizabeth, spent time in the area in 1867 and 1868. Early Hays City, as well as the surrounding region, has a very violent history represented today by the existence in the middle of the town of what is recognized as the oldest "boot hill" west of the Mississippi.[1]

With the closing of Fort Hays, the town of Hays, which was founded in 1867 and incorporated in 1885, continued to thrive as an important regional economic, social, and cultural hub. In addition, the town attracted settlers on its own merit. Arable land and the freedom of open spaces attracted populations as disparate as Scottish entrepreneurs, Germans from the Volga River region of Russia, and eastern "dandies" looking for a taste of the west. With the opening of the university in 1902, new populations seeking education were drawn to Hays. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Hays had settled into a small but stable rural center much as it remains today.

This varied and somewhat checkered past allows students a variety of research avenues. Among the local institutions that preserve the history of Hays and therefore serve as research sites are the Ellis County Historical Society, the Kansas Room at the Hays Public Library, Fort Hays Historic Site, Ellis County Courthouse, and the Western History Collection at FHSU's Forsyth Library. Resources available to researchers include editions of the numerous local newspapers, personal and family papers, photographic collections, oral history collections, maps, locally published books and pamphlets, and a myriad of artifacts. These available resources

provide students with primary materials for original historical research.

There have been a number of models for local history courses or projects published, but rarely do these reflect our situation in rural Kansas. In fact, most of these models are situated in large population centers, at large universities, and/or at schools located near important historical sites.[2] What makes our situation unique is that we live in a relatively rural setting and have limited resources, yet we have been able to effectively fulfill our educational mission by focusing on local history. The Public History Program at FHSU was originally developed to train graduate students for careers in the public history field. However, as we began developing courses to this end, we discovered that traditional history undergraduate students were attracted to these public history courses with a local emphasis. An added bonus to this attraction is the fact that, while moving undergraduates toward a certificate of emphasis in Public History, we are also utilizing local history as a training tool for research, writing, and publication. By broadening the traditional scope of the FHSU History Department, we were able use local history to engage students in original research and introduce new technology into the classroom.

Prior to 2007, the FHSU History Department followed traditional liberal arts practices, including time-tested course offerings, standard lecture formats, and a reluctance to experiment with new technologies in the classroom. In order to develop the Public History Program, a change of focus, method, and the acquisition of new technology was necessary. The traditional role of the department has been either to prepare students for a career in teaching or to pursue a graduate education in history. Thus, in order to train public history students, we had to expand our course offerings accordingly to include an introduction to public history and museum studies, internship programs, and various public history-based topics courses. Like other public history programs, our new courses were experiential and interactive with the community and involved a variety of methods that had not been used in our traditional history curriculum. We envisioned a number of innovative new courses in order to school the students in the art of public history.

We quickly developed two different innovative projects. The first project was an examination of the commercial history of downtown Hays. This project was developed by co-author Kim Perez, in cooperation with a graduate student, Elisha Beck; the purpose of the endeavor was to research the history of certain businesses/sites and provide a historical narrative for the current business owners. The second project was Podcasting Hays. This project was jointly developed by the authors; the task required students to research, write, and record ten- to twenty-minute podcasts on local history subjects. Each of these projects, in their own

unique way, encouraged students to cultivate methodological skills and computer literacy. They also provided opportunities for interaction with the general public and historians within the community. The remainder of this article will focus on the implementation of these projects.

Commercial History of Downtown Hays

In Spring 2006, Perez and Beck were brainstorming local history projects and came up with the idea of researching the commercial history of businesses in downtown Hays. The project proved to be a viable idea for a public history course. Downtown Hays History was offered in Spring 2007 with credit for both undergraduate and graduate students.[3]

The students were assigned a single address/site to research for the semester.[4] The addresses/sites were selected by the presence of a business currently at that address.[5] It was important to have the participating business owners and their staff involved in the project, so Perez solicited their participation. The obvious goal of the project was to engage students in local research, but equally as important was our goal of educating the current business owners about the history of their address or building and further drawing attention to the rich heritage of this historical district. The result of this education was to convince the public that local history is significant and that the historical district was worth preserving.

Downtown Hays began its gradual decline in the 1970s due to the rerouting of the major highways that had originally made it the center of the town.[6] In the 1990s, an effort to revitalize the downtown region began with the formation of local groups, the Liberty Group and the Downtown Hays Development Corporation. The area was formally recognized as a historic district in 2005 and named the Chestnut Street District in honor of the main thoroughfare that was called Chestnut Street until 1929 when the name was changed to Main Street.[7] This naming selection indicated that the renovation focused on the historic nature of the downtown region. The aforementioned groups sought to return the buildings to their historic appearance, although with an eye to aesthetics and not necessarily historical accuracy, and to recapture the significant heritage of this region. The downtown history project sought to capitalize on this renewed interest in history.

To prepare for their research, students were required to enhance their understanding of local history and business history by reading *Nearby History* by Kyvig and Marty and *Local Businesses* by Kerr, Loveday, and Blackford.[8] After a couple weeks of reading and discussion, the class compiled a list of questions that students should ask about their site, business, or building during their research; these questions were typed up and

students were required to keep the copy near at hand during their semester of research. In the early weeks of the course, Perez provided students with a list of resources to be found at the Ellis County Historical Society, Ellis County Courthouse, Kansas Room at the Hays Public Library, and the Forsyth Special Collections. We visited each of the research libraries and students were introduced to the more important sources that they would need and trained in how to use the sources. Students also met the archivists and librarians that they would be working with throughout the semester. They were further provided with a list of resources that were available for their consultation that were held in our Public History collection in the department.[9]

After the initial preparation, a meeting was arranged between the business owners and the students at the Ellis County Historical Society.[10] Prior to the meeting, the class created a list of questions for the participating business owners. During the meeting, the business owners were introduced to the project and the resources that would be an integral part of our research, including Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, phone directories, and yearbooks. The students then interviewed the business owners, using the questions we compiled as a group, and arranged visits to their assigned buildings.[11]

Now that the logistics were in place, the class began the research portion of the course. The primary objective of the course was for each student to research their assigned business address, produce a ten- to twelve-page narrative regarding their research, and to present their findings publicly to the participating business owners and a larger audience. Students were also asked to keep a research notebook containing documentation of their research process and their interpretation of the sources. The students' research began with a systematic search of the Hays Telephone Directories from 1931 until the present. Telephone directories were an essential first step in establishing what businesses were or had been at their assigned address. With this information, they could search through the newspaper and archival files more effectively for the names of the businesses. Several of the businesses had been documented through photographs. Some photographic records were focused on the business, while others were general photographs of the downtown regions during draft drives or parades; students learned the value of scrutinizing photographs for information regarding their business or site. Prior to 1931, the information was spotty and unorganized, and students had to piece together the site history based on Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, Deeds and Records, archival files, and newspaper advertisements. This proved to be a challenge for students, but also introduced them to the skills needed to work through an incomplete historical record. For some businesses, there was

an abundance of information either because a business was owned by a prominent family or because the business was in Hays long-term; for other businesses that were more ephemeral, information was hard to gather and an intact history of the site was not possible.

The benefits of the course were many and varied. First and most obviously, the students gained experience in hands-on local history research that had an actual impact on their community. They learned to use important resources for local history, including the archives of the historical society and public library, historical newspapers, Sanborn Fire Insurance and other local maps, courthouse deed records, phone directories, and historical images. Students also learned to appreciate the role of local history in developing their historical skills. Many of these students had only taken traditional lecture-based history courses and the research courses that they had taken did not allow them to dig through archives in order to develop a historical story.

Students, however, were not the only ones to gain from this new approach. The business owners benefited from the research that the historians-in-training completed on their behalf. Students shared their research with the business owners in the form of a written historical narrative that the owners could keep on hand. In turn, the business owners were able to share the rich historical heritage of their building with their customers. This benefited the revitalization efforts of the historic Chestnut Street District as it allowed the business owners to educate the public regarding the importance of this region and the need to preserve it. Another benefit for the community as a whole was the broadening of what constitutes Hays history. Prior to the class, students and locals would have immediately associated Hays history with the Wild West and frontier themes. After the course, students and business owners were able to understand that the history of Hays is made up of many more components than traditionally thought. Because students identified important local businesses and business leaders, and focused on the commercial history of the downtown region, it led to a broader definition of our local history.

The final group to benefit from the course was the Department of History and the Public History Program. The students developed an understanding and an appreciation of the skills needed for local history and the importance of the pursuit. This not only promoted the cause in general, but the Public History Program specifically, and resulted in more students entering the program. Further, through student research, we were able to identify a number of future avenues for local history research for courses and Master's theses. Finally, the project resulted in a number of important partnerships between the Public History Program with local entities interested in Hays history.

Podcasting History

While the first project utilized traditional tools in a nontraditional way, our second project we feel truly pushed the boundaries of contemporary local history because it utilized new technologies and new formats for accessing and distributing historical knowledge. Over the past few years, the term "podcast" has increasingly become part of our popular lexicon. Podcasts have become an acceptable way to share knowledge beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom. It is common for classroom lectures to be dispersed via podcasts; online college courses also utilize podcasting technology. It is becoming increasingly accepted for leading historical experts to share their ongoing research and ideas via podcasts. Even state and regional historical organizations, like the Kansas State Historical Society, have regular podcasting features to share their information and collections with their public. Building on this trend, why not then utilize this beneficial technology to mine the richness of local history and convey it to the public?

In Fall 2008, the authors jointly offered Podcasting History as a variable topics course for undergraduate and graduate credit. Given the rapid acceptance of podcasting within the larger history community, we felt that it would be beneficial, if not necessary, for our students to become versed in the utilization of this new medium. Not only were we requiring our students to research local history, this course also required students to increase their knowledge of cutting-edge computer technology. Further, the new technology and medium of the Internet required students to not only to write well, but also to present their research in a manner that translated into an audible format. Due to the independent nature and heavy research requirements of this course, we strongly recommend that a methods course be taken prior. A course in Historical Methods proved valuable to students in collecting, organizing, and interpreting the material.

The original intention for this class was the creation of video podcasts. However, due to the steep learning curve necessary for producing a video product, we opted to require audio-only podcasts. While we plan to move on to video podcasting in the near future, we strongly recommend that interested persons with no prior experience master audio podcasts first in order to learn the basics of podcasting. Even the production of audio podcasts required equipment that the department did not have access to. An internal grant from the university resulted in funding allowing us to purchase the necessary equipment.[12] The newly acquired computers, field recorders, microphones, video recorders, and software allowed us to move forward with our plans.[13] After much research, we opted to purchase Macintosh laptops because of their versatility with audio and video formats.[14]

Each student had a pair of high-quality noise reduction headphones and a professional-quality portable audio recorder for use in the field.[15] After evaluating a number of sound editing software packages, we chose to use Audacity.[16] While minimal in its features, this program is easy to learn, simple to use, and produces professional-quality results. Further, we asked students to familiarize themselves with three helpful online resources: iTunes, Atomic Learning, and the Podsafe Music Network.[17]

The course began with the students learning the rudiments of podcasting.[18] We required students to acquaint themselves with the types of podcasts available. Students were provided a list of acceptable podcasts, in a variety of formats, by a variety of authors, and were asked weekly to select a podcast and critique the format, mechanics, and content. Regarding podcast format, students were asked to evaluate whether the selected format, be it audio or video, enhanced or detracted from the content material. In addition, we required the students to appraise the mechanics of their selection by determining if the flow or organization of the podcast was effective and if the podcast was edited in a professional manner. Finally, students were asked to evaluate the historical accuracy and overall success of the podcast in conveying the material to the intended audience. Students quickly realized that the near universal ability to publish on the Internet resulted in podcasts with less than rigorous standards of accuracy. We were able to cut down on this a bit by providing students with a list of acceptable podcasts that we were familiar with, but even within this list, there was variability in quality.

Students were asked to create three podcasts revolving around local history with criteria that increased in difficulty as the course progressed. The first assignment involved students producing a simple, ten-minute podcast. The second assignment was a fifteen-minute podcast incorporating a music bed (background music). The third and final assignment was a twenty-minute podcast, with a music bed, at least one external sound effect, and an interview with a person concerning their topic. Each podcast assignment was divided into three different elements: research, script evaluation, and production, with students spending one to two weeks on each element. For the research component, students were asked to choose a viable local history topic. The choices of topic demonstrated students' ingenuity in finding feasible subjects for examination; for example, subject matter included everything from a history of churches in the surrounding area to an examination of advertisements for local products in the 1920s. Students would visit the abovementioned local repositories in order to investigate their chosen topic.

Students were required to craft their research into a podcast script of the assigned length. It was a challenge for students to translate their skills

for writing a traditional research paper into a podcast script. The script required the same rigors of traditional research, but with a style of writing intended for oral communication rather than simply written communication. For example, sentences that flow well on paper sometimes sound awkward when spoken out loud. Another difficulty we found was with regards to word choice; particular vowel/consonant combinations did not sound good when spoken aloud, forcing students to rewrite. A lot of time was spent editing these scripts before recording the podcast. We used at least one class period for each of the three assignments to read aloud and evaluate scripts. The script critique sessions required students to read their papers aloud before the class; these sessions were recorded so students could get feedback on the script structure, word choice and pronunciation, missing components, and how their reading translated into a recording. More importantly, we used this opportunity to instruct students about the art of a good spoken performance. This proved to be another difficulty. as students in their early readings were awkward and self-conscious. Although improvement did occur over time, extensive out-of-class practice with their scripts was required of most students. In retrospect, we found that the script writing, reading, and evaluation was the most difficult element that we encountered; we had to remind ourselves continually that broadcasting was uncharted waters for traditional history majors.

The recording process proved challenging. Since we did not have a permanent audio laboratory, we would set up the recording facilities before each session. The equipment for each session varied based on every script, although our basic list of components consisted of MacBooks, headphones, a studio microphone, a pop filter, field recorders, and an audio mixer.[19] The optimum setup was to route sound through the mixer, allowing us to adjust sound levels from various input sources.[20] From the mixer, the audio was directed to the MacBook hard drive and saved as an Audacity file. Since we were limited in our recording setup, one student would record at a time; when one finished recording, s/he would begin the editing process while the next student began recording.

After recording their features, students were given one to two weeks to edit their audio. It was during this editing process that the benefit of analyzing other podcasts became apparent. Going into the editing process, students were aware of the elements that made a successful podcasts, and of things to avoid. For example, they were already schooled in the use of music as a background, the incorporation of sound effects, and the transitions to and uses of personal interviews. After students finalized and burned their podcast to a CD, the productions were turned in for evaluation. They were then graded based upon the thoroughness of their research, the quality of their writing, and the mechanical aspects of their podcast.

We found multiple benefits for this project as well. Like the downtown history project, we found that students in Podcasting History developed their research and writing skills and learned to appreciate local history. Students also gained technological skills that would make them more marketable in the public history arena. Finally, by presenting local history in a podcast format, we hope to introduce a new audience, the iPod generation, to local history. This generation is less likely to pick up a musty old book or scroll through microfilm than to download a podcast segment.

In conclusion, despite the handicap of being in a rural area, we are pleased with the continued progress of the Public History Program and the overall success of these two new projects. They have allowed us to move forward as a program, engage students in local history research, and to include the local community in a discourse on public and local history. These projects have taught us that we can successfully involve students in original research and introduce new technology into the classroom. We understand that viable research topics can be built out of the everyday events in one's community. Clearly, working in a rural isolated community with limited resources need not limit our success in introducing innovation into the classroom.

Notes

1.   The best resource that has been incredibly valuable is Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County, 1867-1992*, vol. 1 and vol. 2 (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Co., 1991). Specific articles that we have referenced include Ellis County Historical Society, "Butterfield Overland Dispatch," in *At Home in Ellis County, 1867-1992*, vol. 1 (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Co., 1991), 26-27; Ellis County Historical Society, "Fort Hays Military Post," in *At Home in Ellis County, 1867-1992*, vol. 1 (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Co., 1991), 13-18; Ellis County Historical Society, "Hays City," in *At Home in Ellis County, 1867-1992*, vol. 1 (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Co., 1991), 45-49; Ellis County Historical Society, "Rise and Fall of Rome," in *At Home in Ellis County, 1867-1992*, vol. 1 (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Co., 1991), 44-45; Ellis County Historical Society, "Union Pacific Railway," in *At Home in Ellis County, 1867-1992*, vol. 1 (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Co., 1991), 27-28.

2.   David Coles and Deborah Welch, "Bringing Campus and Community Together: Doing Public History at Longwood College," *The History Teacher* 35, no. 2 (February 2002): 229-235; John F. Lyons, "Integrating the Family and the Community into the History Classroom: An Oral History Project in Joliet, Illinois," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 4 (August 2007): 481-491; Andrew Myers, "Teaching History in the Backyard," *The History Teacher* 35, no. 4 (August 2002): 455-464.

3.   The project served many purposes; in addition to the course, the project was funded by the Kansas Humanities Council (KHC) and completed by Perez and Beck. The

KHC provided funding to research ten downtown businesses, write historical narratives for the current business owners, and create poster exhibits regarding the history that currently hang in the businesses. Beck also researched five downtown businesses and wrote her master's thesis. Elisha Beck, "A History of Select Businesses in the Historic Chestnut Street District of Downtown Hays, Kansas" (M.A.thesis, Fort Hays State University, 2008). For the purpose of this article, we will focus on the course only.

4.   Since the development of downtown Hays was not uniform and the town did not remain static, students encountered a variety of scenarios regarding their business or site history. Some lots remained empty, while others contained structures and businesses; buildings were torn down or burned down; and buildings were upgraded and added to. As a result, students were asked to provide a complete history of their site, even if there was not a business on the site at all times.

5.   It should be noted that students were assigned their research addresses in a random manner; in the future, I would do some preliminary investigation regarding the availability of sources in order to make the experience more even for each student.

6.   In 1952, Highway 40 and Highway 183 were rerouted to the outskirts of town, away from the downtown region, and in the late 1960s, Interstate 70 was built along the northern edge of town. The downtown region was no longer the core of commercial activity and businesses cropped up along these new routes. For an in-depth discussion about this phenomenon and a discussion of how this changed the pattern of cities, see James R. Shortridge, "Postindustrial Kansas I: The Interstate Cities since 1950," *Cities on the Plain: The Evolution of Urban Kansas* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 282-335; and James R. Shortridge, "Postindustrial Kansas II: Life Beyond the Exit Ramps," *Cities on the Plain: The Evolution of Urban Kansas* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 336-368.

7.   "Chestnut Street District," National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, October 24, 2005, State Historic Preservation Office, Topeka, Kansas.

8.   K. Austin Kerr, Amos J. Loveday, and Mansel G. Blackford, *Local Businesses: Exploring Their History*, The Nearby History Series, no. 5, ed. David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1990); David E. Kyvig and Myron Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*, The Nearby History Series, no. 1, ed. David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1982).

9.   There are a number of excellent sources that were available for students to consult, but among the most useful were: Stewart Brand*, How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994); Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture* (New York: Alta Mira Press, 2000); John Poppeliers and S. Allen Chambers, Jr., *What Style Is It: A Guide to American Architecture* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2003); Carole Rifkind, *Main Street: The Face of Urban America* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977); and James R. Shortridge, *Cities on the Plain: The Evolution of Urban Kansas* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004). These sources were purchased with a Service Learning Grant through the Center for Civic Leadership at FHSU. Because the students were lending their historical expertise and research skills to the participant businesses, the course was a service learning course, which made it eligible for funding.

10.   One of the requirements for the participating business owners was that they would pay the student membership fee to the Ellis County Historical Society, which would allow the students to research there for a year. In exchange for the ten-dollar membership, the business owners received the services of the historians-in-training.

11.   One of the greatest disappointments of this project was the lack of participation by the business owners who had originally signed up to be a part of this project. Some

business owners were incredibly enthusiastic and participatory; others were not. Much of this is due to the demanding schedules that these entrepreneurs experience in trying to maintain and build their businesses. The next time that this course is offered and business owner participation is solicited, it will be essential to be more specific about what their participation entails.

12.   We stored all of our equipment in a common secured cabinet dedicated to the Public History Program. Students were required to use the same equipment for the whole semester and were responsible for its upkeep and maintenance. We utilized a stringent check out and return policy to track equipment. Use of the equipment was monitored closely to prevent loss, damage, or misuse.

13.   Although we were lucky enough to receive funding for such high-end equipment, an acceptable podcast can be produced with a reduced budget.

14.   We chose laptops because we did not have the space for a permanent lab. The MacBooks that we purchased had a 250 GB hard drive, with 4 GB of RAM.

15.   The headphones we chose were AudioTechnica ATH-M30. The professional quality recorders we chose, based on experience, were the Marantz PMD 660 Recorders.

16.   Audacity is a free audio editor and recorder that is available for download at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>.

17.   An iTunes account allowed students to access podcasts to evaluate and use as examples. Atomic Learning is an online tutorial program for hardware and various computer applications. The Podsafe Music Network provides a selection of non-copyrighted music and sound effects.

18.   Two books that we found useful in introducing students to the basics of the process of podcasting and the technology involved are Michael W. Geoghegan and Dan Klass, *Podcast Solutions: The Complete Guide to Audio and Video Podcasting* (New York: Apress, 2007); and Shel Holtz and Neville Hobson, *How to Do Everything with Podcasting* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007).

19.   We chose AudioTechnica 3035 Studio Condenser Microphone for our studio. For the mixer, we chose a highly rated, but simple unit, the Yamaha MG102C 10-Channel Stereo Mixer.

20.   Typically, the input would come from the studio microphone, but for some assignments, students also incorporated in sounds from the Podsafe Music Network or their own recordings and recorded interviews.