

CLD 560 COMMUNITY INEQUALITIES

APP 500 Special Topics in Appalachian Studies: Intersections of Race and Class in Central Appalachia

Instructor: Dr. Lindsay Shade, CLD (Lecturer)

Students in the interdisciplinary Appalachian Studies / CLD course "Community Inequalities" were immersed in labor history and the ongoing struggle for environmental justice when they visited Mingo County, WV on a class field trip. The course focuses on the intersections of race and class in Central Appalachia, bringing together advanced undergraduates and graduate students to explore different theoretical lenses for understanding persistent inequalities.

Students lodged for two nights at the Big Laurel Learning Center, an environmental education center located on a 456-acre ecological preserve and community land trust. We enjoyed communal meals, experienced solar showers and compost toilets, helped split wood for heating, and explored the trails of the preserve while learning about rural mountain life. The learning center is a place to disconnect from technology and reconnect with our social and ecological selves; students had no cell service or internet access



for the weekend. And, we had an unexpected encounter with what it means to live in rural mountain areas that do not always have reliable infrastructure when the electricity went out for an entire afternoon and evening. We had warm woodstoves, candlelight discussion, and a delicious dinner cooked entirely on an outdoor grill.

Students got the chance to learn in more depth what life is like on the mountain as they split up

in smaller groups to visit with residents of the land trust, which ensures that the land serves community needs like housing while also limiting extractive activities. Timbering and oil and gas operations surround the land trust, while families in southern WV often have few options to lease or buy land for housing, since most land is owned by coal, gas, and timber companies. A major focus of the course is how land use and ownership dynamics are intimately bound



wrapped up with a bonfire and s'mores, shared with board members and staff of the land trust who answered questions about how this alternative way of owning and sharing land works.

The highlight of the trip was a tour of the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum in historic Matewan, WV. The museum was

to unionize, but faced armed mine guards and private police who violently suppressed their efforts. As museum co-founder Wilma Steele explained when she shared the history of the red bandana to the students, "the miners wore red bandanas to show their solidarity with each other despite different ethnic and racial backgrounds, language differences, and other enormous barriers to their unionization effort. They called themselves the 'redneck army.'" The conflict was

up with the making of race and class in America. Kevin Slovinsky, who earned his MA in history at UK earlier this year, took the class in a previous semester and returned for the field trip. He is now working with the Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network, which links scholars with community experts working on land, environmental, and other community issues. For him, *"it was a great experience visiting a community land trust and learning about that model of land ownership and the unique challenges it faces, and benefits it provides in Central Appalachia. Conversations with the people who lived in and around the Jasmer community land trust brought out themes of land dispossession, utility scarcity, and persistent poverty's relation to drug abuse. For those interested in Appalachian Studies, this kind of experience is absolutely crucial."* The day



born after a 2011 protest to stop mountaintop removal mining at Blair Mountain, in nearby Logan, WV, where the Battle of Blair Mountain took place in 1921. Blair Mountain is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places,

the largest of several at the turn of the century between unionist laborers and industrialists, which ultimately led to the passage of the National Labor Relations Act. At the end of the tour, each student received their own red bandana from Steele.

thanks to the group's efforts. The battle was the largest armed civil conflict in US history after the Civil War, as striking miners sought

Students examined artifacts and discussed the process of museum interpretation in a "people's history" museum that collaborates closely with communities. Ellie Cook, a MA student in Historic Preservation from Appalachian Kentucky, found inspiration in the museum's approach. "The interpretation of Appalachian



history is told best when there is active involvement from the local community, preserved documentation in whatever form possible (oral histories, letters, objects, etc.) and when there is an emphasis on the built environment and cultural landscape of the area. All of these factors can be seen in the curation of the Mine Wars Museum in Matewan, West Virginia."

hall, where we discussed current events, local economic development, healthcare challenges for miners, and more. We then enjoyed a driving tour to understand what life was like in the coal camps and how things have changed, and were even welcomed into the home of local community leaders Terry and Wilma Steele. They talked to the students about



Inequality is not something that can be understood or transformed by reading about a theory, you have to engage with people and communities, and that's exactly what we did on this trip. It was jam packed, but every bit of it was rewarding for me and I believe for the students as well.



After our tour of the museum, we had lunch with a group of retired coal miners at the United Mine Workers Local 1440 union

the southern mountain tradition of ginseng digging and its role in the local economy today, including a demonstration of how to identify and sustainably harvest ginseng.



As the instructor of the course and a board member of the WV Mine Wars Museum, it was amazing to see material come to life for students as they experienced the landscape, people, and history of southern West Virginia. Students are already using the course final project and field trip to come up with their own research projects, some turning them into chapters of a Master's thesis.



Lindsay Shade, Ph.D.



COMMUNITY AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT