



Folk Writing: The Importance of Preserving Rural Stories

In April of 2017, I learned for the first time that Granny, my maternal great-grandmother, had written a chapter in a book called *More Rail Fences, Rolling Pins, & Rainbows*. In it, she shares details about her life that I never had the opportunity to hear as a kid. The only thing I ever really remember anyone saying about her growing-up years is that they were hard. Her chapter exposes some of just how hard they really were, and I learned so much about who she was and the strength of the people I come from.

The entire book is a collection of stories like Granny's from folks who grew up in the Cicero/Noblesville area in the early 20th century. Collected by Lois Kaiser Costomiris, the book was published in 1995 when I was just nine years-old, and it is so precious to me to have Granny's recollections in print. In her preface, Costomiris writes:

Perhaps someday others in your family will want to know what it was like to have lived and loved in those years of the early 1900s. Stories are being bantered about at family gatherings, but who has written them down, preserving them for future generations? Why not pull out your tape recorder and tape family memories, before they and their stories vanish forever? (p. viii)

After the recent death of my Papaw, who was an excellent storyteller, I realized that I wish I had done this very thing. That I wish I would've taken the time to write down all of the stories he used to tell about his growing up and mine. And I feel the same way about all my grandarents and great-grandparents.

In the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic, across the nation and globe, we have lost so much of our history way sooner than we expected. So, in this spirit, I am proposing a folk writing workshop for the residents and patrons of your library.

My Background

I grew up in a tiny Indiana town where the only library I had access to was my school library (that is until we bought some property in the nearest city). Because of the way education privileges urban and suburban stories, I grew to believe that no one cared about my rural experiences and that they weren't important – that the only thing that *was* important was getting out and away from my one-blinking-stoplight town. When I taught in a rural school, I operated under similar assumptions and included virtually no rural-affirming books or writing assignments in my teaching. When I moved to the outskirts of Austin, TX to pursue my PhD, I began to realize just how important my rural roots were to who I was as a person, reader, writer, and teacher.

Through my doctoral research, I discovered that I was far from alone in my experiences, and I wanted to do something to help rural teachers, students, and community members connect with their roots through learning and writing more about their family histories. Learning more about who and where I came from has given me invaluable insight to who I am (and want to continue to become) as a person and teacher, and I hope to share the same opportunity with rural folks across the country through this workshop.

I have a combined total of 12 years of teaching experience, a masters in English Education from Purdue University, and doctorate from the University of Texas at Austin. I run a website called Literacy In Place where I showcase rural young adult literature and rural writers (<https://literacyinplace.com>) and am currently a visiting assistant professor at Purdue University where I work with preservice teachers.

The Workshop Structure

The folk writing workshop is a two-session workshop to take place at the library (or with library patrons digitally). As I currently reside in Texas, and keep costs low, I would need to conduct each meeting virtually but patrons could come in person. I envision meeting for two sessions over the course of one or two weeks and have outlined a more detailed plan below. While this is my vision, I am happy to hear feedback and am willing to make changes to better accommodate the library and participants.

Each session would last 60 minutes and would include a mini-lesson/example of the part of the writing process we'll be working on during that session and time to apply the strategies discussed. Participants would need to bring the tools they enjoy most for composing (e.g., laptop, pencil and paper, iPad, etc.) so they can write during the sessions.

Completion of the workshop would include the opportunity to publish their stories on my [Literacy In Place website](#).

Workshop Outline

Session 1: Collecting Ideas & Drafting	<p>In this session, I would discuss strategies for collecting ideas to write about and get started drafting. I would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduce the project and read some examples (including my own writing) from different genres of the kinds of things folks could write.• Demonstrate a few different approaches to collecting and drafting, including my own work.• Give participants opportunities to jot down ideas and ask questions.• Encourage participants to write in a way that feels good and authentic to them and their stories.• Conference with writers as they have questions or want to run writing by me.• Allow writers to work alongside one another, asking questions and getting feedback on their work.• Encourage writers to have a finished draft by our meeting the next week.
Session 2: Revision & Polishing	<p>In this session, I would discuss the revision process. Unfortunately, many English teachers conflate revision and editing, so this session would help writers re-envision their work in a way that will strengthen their important pieces. I would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demonstrate a few of my favorite revision strategies.• Ask writers to work in groups to help one another to build on the strengths of the pieces and discuss anything that trips them up as readers.• Conference with writers, reading parts of their pieces and answering any questions they may have.• Ask writers to share their work and discuss how to submit their pieces for publication on my website.

Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions: readingrural@gmail.com