The Atterbury Files

An Extracurricular Inquiry Project Illustrating Local History

by Ronald V. Morris

The people in the rural farmlands and villages of Brown, Bartholomew, and Johnson counties of south central Indiana had been hit hard first by the agricultural depression of the 1920s and then by the Great Depression. But, the bitterest pill to swallow was when World War II started and the U.S. government condemned the land to be a new war base. The farmers and villagers left their land forever, and seemingly overnight, a community sprang up that was the third largest city in the state of Indiana—Camp Atterbury was born. It served as an induction center with training facilities and a prisoner of war camp for Italian and German soldiers. After World War II, the population of Camp Atterbury declined until the Korean War, when the population grew again. After the end of the Korean War, however, the camp disappeared almost as fast as it had appeared. The federal government declared the land to be surplus, but did not offer to return it to the families from whom it had originally been acquired. The deeds to the majority of the old camp grounds reverted to the Indiana National Guard, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Fish and Wildlife Division, Johnson County Park and Recreation Board, and the Jobs Corps. By the 1970s, most of the World War II structures had vanished. The forest quickly reclaimed the land, and only a few lonely footings were left as bleak testimony of the former post.

Science teacher Don Wertz and social studies teacher Larry Taulman grew up in Johnson County and lived next to Edinburg and Camp Atterbury when it was in operation. What became known as "The Atterbury Files" began when these two teachers started gathering information for a field trip to the old army base that had been active when they were students. In 1976, they initiated interdisciplinary field trips to the base, which allowed students to use the resources of their local community as a curriculum to learn more about science and social studies.

The students who went on these field trips came from a consolidated school that included a rural area and Franklin, the county seat. Some of them had had little contact with the old camp except as a place to hunt or fish, while others had had no contact with the site at all. Although the site, at one time, had been dotted with small towns, agriculture, and later a large military post, when the students visited the former camp for the first time, very few people worked or lived there.

On the field trips students saw some of the 40,000 acres that made up the former camp. Students went to the air national guard tower to watch bombing runs. They hiked around the camp to see the footings of the American stockade and the POW stockade. Students dropped in at the maintenance shop to climb into a tank and to get a ride in an available vehicle. They also paid a visit to what was then the world's largest indoor horse shoe court.

On the field trips, students also studied all of the science topics in the field from their science curriculum while using discovery learning, in which teachers plan experiences for students to learn about the content. The science content focused on two aspects of study: topographical influences and biosphere interactions between plants and animals. The students stopped at one of the lakes in the camp to study ecology, and the Johnson County Park staff always provided a conservation program. Four to six students documented the entire trip with cameras that were provided by the school and the sponsors.

The Research

No secondary sources existed on the history of the camp, so the first idea that interested the teachers was to put together a booklet. In 1980, the two middle school teachers worked as a middle school team and selected four students who exhibited creativity, content knowledge, and task commitment in their respective classes (Ziegler & Heller, 2000). The teachers selected students based on their academic qualities of writing, research, and working well with both adults and their peers. The teachers then consulted with these four students to select other students with these traits or specific talents needed by the project.

Since it was strictly a volunteer project, the students had to be self-starters in every sense of the word. The process was informal, allowing for merit, talent, and self-nomination, but it was dependent upon results of researching and writing entries for the book. To the teachers, task commitment was of key importance because some of the students possessing talents in the other two areas of creativity and content knowledge lacked task commitment and, when given the opportunity, proved unable to complete their sections of the book. Some students self-selected and volunteered when they had an interest or they found a friend who was writing for the project. Nearly 30 students eventually worked on the project, contributing talents such as illustrations, photography, indexing, and keyboarding. Some of the students only saw their part of the project, while others saw the whole scope of the project from start to finish.

The teachers helped the gifted students make contacts with the community for research and oral history. The students called some contacts to gather information and took notes from their conversations. The students would "go fishing" for information, asking multiple open-ended questions on multiple topics to see if they could get a good story. These "fishing trips" were often held when students would go to an informant's home after school or in the evening.

Because of the age of the students involved, the lack of transportation posed a problem in going to meet the informants. Most of the interviews occurred when longtime residents came to school to talk with the students during lunch. The contact would talk and the students would ask occasional questions with the tape-recorder running. The students would ask the informants how they became acquainted with the site, what they knew about its history, and how the area had changed.

Since the students conducted the research, their topics emerged from their growing interests and their latest contacts with informants. Each interview grew out of the last, and the students' interest in the topic led them to pursue more information in the next interview. Leads came from every direction. Informants, members of the community, and the students themselves constantly identified new leads who should be interviewed. At the end of an interview, the students would ask the informant if he or she knew anyone they should interview, and the informant usually had a name or two of interesting people to speak with next. Some informants would even volunteer to come, but most of the time they were solicited.

The Writing Project

What started as a fact-finding mission in which students gathered information and conducted research on a local history site grew into a booklet and evolved into a large book, but the project

mission did not change substantially in any way except size. The students kept their focus on writing a book to preserve the history of the area for the people who had connections with it and for future people who were interested in the area.

The teachers found a place for the students to meet, and the students had cubby holes where they could work and store their information. They also had a very small room with two typewriters, two chairs, tables where they could lay out their work, and a file cabinet where they could store their work.

Warren Rowe, Manager of the Atterbury State Fish and Wildlife Area, helps Jim Mead and Analicia Pianca better understand the goals and objectives of his department.

Gifted students worked with teachers as peers to ask questions, plan, and carry out the project. The project grew because students followed their interests in partnership with adults. The ideas came from the students, especially the original group of four who were most interested in the project, and they kept uncovering more and more information, causing the project and book to grow both in depth and scope. The more interested the students became and the more they studied and learned about the topic, the more detailed and complex the project became.

Students shared the information they found from one informant with several different student authors who were working on different projects. Students met together as an informal group to talk about the project periodically and kept notes from the tape-recorded interviews on file cards, which were color-coded by topic. Although they were at different points in their writing, they shared their progress, discussed their needs, and suggested future directions for the group. They worked informally in groups to talk about the papers or to listen to a tape. For the first edition, the students illustrated the book with primary sources, original photos, student art work, and photos of the students.

Some of the students worked as partners on a chapter to interpret what they learned from oral history and documents, other students worked individually, and some students wrote multiple essays. Students were responsible for editing their own work; they referred to their English teachers for help. The students typed the first edition on a typewriter, but when it was ready to be typeset, it went on to computers. The teachers arranged for the local vocational educational program to typeset and publish the book.

The teachers edited the students' work for grammar, but it remained the students' work with their middle school voice in the interpretation of the history of the area. The volunteers and teachers proofread the writing and handed the work back to the students for them to consider making changes. Although the teachers helped the students with grammar, what the students wrote was what was actually printed.

The two teachers who served as editors helped to keep the project moving along and drew it to a conclusion; they also led, pushed, and supported the students during the writing process. Interestingly, the two teachers took on very different, yet equally important roles in the process of mentoring the students. The social studies teacher acted to push and drive the project to a conclusion and to get it to the press, while the science teacher had the democratic vision of students working collaboratively with adults. Both of them understood the importance of creating a student work framed within the community, featuring good writing and meritorious work.

The Atterbury Files

The gifted students organized their book, *The Atterbury Files,* to tell the chronological history of an area that had become a World War II army base. To examine the Atterbury story, the students worked with content that came from both social studies and science (see Figure 1). Specifically, the social studies content illustrated the pre-Atterbury landmarks and early neighborhoods, and they started with the story of the removal of the towns and families who lived there at the beginning of World War II.

Life in the Area Before Military Activity: Transcript of an Interview Jim Mead, Grade 8

Jim Mead: What do you remember about the land acquisition?

I. Social Studies
  A. Pre-Atterbury Landmarks: Early Neighborhoods
    1. Life in the Area before Military Activity
    2. Hog Bottoms
    3. Sugar Creek, Furnace Mill Area
    4. Mauxferry Road
    5. We Know Pewter
    6. Final Resting Place
  B. Development of the Camp
    1. Land Acquisition
    2. Suggestions for Naming Camp Atterbury
    3. Construction
    4. Water Supply
    5. Streets of Atterbury
    6. High Flying Hopes
    7. Tojoberg
    8. Wakeman Hospital
    9. Project Guardhouse
  C. Day-to-Day Life of the Training Camp
    1. Administration
    2. Unit Training
    3. Hidden Talents
    4. Entertainment at Atterbury
    5. Women in Service at Atterbury
  D. Support Services
    1. Civilian Personnel
    2. Fire Department
    3. Railroad Activity at Camp Atterbury
    4. Phone Services for Soldiers
  E. Atterbury Prisoner of War Camp
    1. The Chapel in the Meadow
  F. The Camp Since World War II
    1. Units Trained and Departed, Inactivate, or Released
    2. The Army Reserve of Camp Atterbury
      a. The Ceremonial Unit at Camp Atterbury
      b. New Construction at Atterbury
    3. Air National Guard at Camp Atterbury
    4. Atterbury State Fish and Wildlife Area File
      a. Current Fish and Wildlife Use
      b. The Quartermaster
    5. Johnson County Park and Recreation Area
    6. The Atterbury Job Corps
    7. The 1972 Atterbury Campvention
    8. Superior Training for Semi-Drivers and Heavy Equipment Operators
II. Science
  A. Getting Lost in Atterbury
    1. The Lakes, Streams, and Marshes of Atterbury
    2. Trees at Atterbury
  B. Ecological Relationships in Camp Atterbury
    1. The White Tail Deer of Atterbury
    2. Beavers at Atterbury
    3. Birds of Atterbury
    4. Summaries of Studies Done at Atterbury

Figure 1. Atterbury Files Topical Outline

Mrs. Hants: Everybody got all torn up. A lot of people died.
Mr. Nichole: There wasn't anyone who got enough money for their land. They couldn't buy a farm equal to what they had to give up. A lot of them had to give up farms for less than they bought them for 2 or 3 years earlier. (*The Atterbury Files*)

They proceeded to tell the story of the development of the camp as a U.S. Army induction center, including daily life in the camp and the support services included there.

Construction File
Jim Mead, Grade 8

No signs of life are anywhere. Farm houses stand empty and forlorn. The cornfields are plowed, but have not been planted, nor will they ever be. No birds are singing in the bare trees; no cows are in the field. Chicken coops stand quietly with no chickens, and not even the sounds of a dog disturb the sound of the wind blowing through the empty buildings. A war has hit this place. This is Camp Atterbury on March 25, 1942. (*The Atterbury Files*)

They followed with a history of the Italian and German prisoners of war housed at the camp and the history of the camp since World War II.

Atterbury Prisoner of War Camp
Cindy Morris, Grade 8

The prisoner of war compound at Camp Atterbury covered 45 acres in the extreme western edge of Camp Atterbury, about one mile from the regular troop quarter. The campus, built to house 3,000 prisoners at one time, was enclosed with guard towers on all four corners in the alley between the fences. The principal compound, which functioned from May 1943 to June 1946, was equipped very

similarly to the American soldier faculties. (*The Atterbury Files*)

After the Korean War, the camp was decommissioned and the land was reused by a variety of state and local governmental agencies. In a series of science essays, the students described the land, animals, and plants.

Atterbury State Fish and Wildlife Area File
Analicia Pianca, Grade 8

A few miles south of Indianapolis lie 5,800 acres of peace and relaxation that comprise the Atterbury State Fish and Wildlife Area. This area is bound to become well known with its ideal central location and nearness to Indianapolis, the largest city in Indiana. The Atterbury State Fish and Wildlife Area, which is located south of State Highway 252 and north of Hospital Road in Camp Atterbury, is the 15th fish and wildlife area to be developed by the Division of Fish and Game. (*The Atterbury Files*)

In 1983, *The Atterbury Files* was printed. The local newspapers carried results of the project, and the local Wal-Mart, bookstores, and banks sold copies of the book, and students mailed copies around the world. Word of mouth helped to sell the book, and the first printing was sold out in the first week of January. In March and November of 1983, two more printings were made and these sold out, too. With each new edition of the book, the students made small corrections. Appreciative veterans of World War II and the Korean War have sent multiple letters to the students that now fill two file cabinets.

Visiting the motor pool is one of the favorite activities of these young learners.

After the book was published, the students spoke to civic groups and teachers about their project. The book was used as a primer to help students preview what they would see before going to the camp. Students at Indiana University and Franklin College used the book as a model for student research projects in methods classes. The students of the Linton-Stockton School Corporation in Linton, IN, used *The Atterbury Files* as the model for *The Coal Project*, their publication about the local history of the coal mines. Students were invited to the state Senate, where a proclamation was passed and read in their honor and the students were introduced on the floor of the House of Representatives. There was a reception in their honor with a book signing.

The community interest in the project has resulted in the camp's taking on a variety of local history projects. The post restored the Italian POW chapel and established a museum, monument, and static equipment exhibit. The county historical society set up an exhibit on the camp in their museum. The county library got copies of the oral history tapes and the school kept a copy. The fourth edition came out in 1987. In 1999, with 10,000 copies in print, the title changed to *The Atterbury Files: The Next Generation*. With the new chapters students have added to this fifth edition, the book now runs 540 pages.

Implications of the Project

Since 1976, talented middle schools students have studied Camp Atterbury as an extracurricular educational activity. A group of seventh- and eighth-grade middle school students researched and wrote a history of a military base that opened at the beginning of World War II and closed after the Korean War. The students attended school less than 20 miles from Camp Atterbury, which is located in a rural area of Indiana south of Indianapolis near the small town of Edinburgh. The students documented the history of this area as an extracurricular project growing from interdisciplinary science and social studies field trips to the area with the purpose of preserving the history of the past. Students conducted research for their book through oral history interviews with members of the local community and by examining local records. They wrote during their free time, in study halls, at lunch, before and after school, and occasionally when they got release time from science or social studies classes.

The enormous collection of student-researched and -written essays on the history of Camp Atterbury provides readers with a view of nearly a century of history starting from agrarian land, through war years, describing the dis-

mantling of the army post, and including its present uses. In the introduction to the most recent edition of *The Atterbury Files*, the editors state, "The goal of *The Atterbury Files* (1999) is for students, ages 12 to 14, to 'take on' more responsibility for their own education by preserving and sharing some of the interesting story before it is all lost forever (Custer Baker Middle School, 1999, p. ix)."

Students did capture memories of local residents in the book and successfully told the story of the army base. The role of the students in this project gave them many opportunities. "While evaluating and organizing the materials, rational decisions had to be made. Some decisions were made by the individuals; others were made by groups of various sizes. These problem-solving decisions were based on accurate, usable records shared by the group" (Custer Baker Middle School, 1999, p. x). Decision-making experiences found students with multiple and very real problems to solve in bringing the book to completion and marketing it. In the research and writing processes, the students made adult real-world decisions. And, not only did they make decisions, but they held power over the projects and recorded the past in their community. The production of the first edition took one and a half years; it has sold more than 10,000 copies.

The students provided a service to their community by preserving and disseminating the stories, which were in danger of extinction. Through this project the students had experiences working with military personnel, community members, and other students. Students found this project important for a number of reasons that support service learning and authentic assessment. Students had power over their learning because they were equal partners in the creation of a meaningful product. They had control over the project, and they exercised that editorial control to produce the best work possible. The results led to honor by their teachers, peers, families, and the community. All of these people had granted them the power to take risks on this project and celebrated with them when they achieved success.

When gifted students face a challenge, they demonstrate that they possess task commitment, creativity, and academic ability. They exhibit these qualities in their desire to find connections and community (Gross, 1999; Howley, Harmon, & Lopold, 1996; Silverman, 1999). Their interests in establishing their place in the world coincides with how they understand and interpret their community through both critical and compassionate lenses. Since these conflicting views are sometimes held at the same time, gifted students need help discerning and clarifying their insights. They can use service learning to get more experience in their community and deepen their connections with segments of the community they may not have yet encountered. Then, they can use their academic abilities, creativity, and task commitment with reflective inquiry to make decisions about the state of their community.

In an era of standards when government and educational institutions focus primarily on the minimum standards, these students worked to surpass the minimum with a community project that involved writing, historical research, and science. Their after-school efforts exceeded the expectations of the community as they worked through their lunch period to interview guests and spent hours sorting through historical society, library, and newspaper records. The students maintained all of their regular classes and kept up with their coursework while producing a book of interest and marketability.

Holly and Chris autograph books for those attending the "kick-off" celebration.

Extracurricular programs can be excellent ways to meet the needs of gifted students to learn in depth accelerated or enrichment information. Libraries, museums, or historical society members sponsor many extracurricular programs, but other programs have school connections. The variety of extracurricular activities for students provide student choice in the events in which they participate and student power in determining the

direction and organization of the group (Morris, 1997, 2000, in press). Furthermore, many extracurricular activities provide students with experiences in learning about social studies, civics, and democracy that they would not normally receive in the classroom.

The Atterbury Files project is important for teachers because it drew upon elements of inquiry. The students did research and writing when they compiled the history of their community and used the local resources to interpret this place and its context in world events. The product they created had to stand inspection before the members of the community (Wiggins, 1996; Wigginton, 1986), and it provided evidence of what the students could do that would equate to real-life and real-world tasks. Community and peer scrutiny of materials produced is key in the evaluation of this type of project. Students may evaluate their own work based on standards they set for themselves. All of the participants from the project experienced close scrutiny by the people who remembered living through the historical period covered in the project.

Jacob Goode and Chris Rynerson take time to compare their size to the life-size statue at Camp Atterbury.

Many educators in social studies education discuss the merits of inquiry. When educators (Azbell, 1977; Dewey, 1998; Griffin, 1992) talk about inquiry, they refer to students defining and owning a problem, using thinking skills to make decisions, taking action to solve a problem, and allowing students to evaluate their solutions. While teachers can guide students to inquiry, at some point the student must own the problem. The purpose of inquiry in the social studies classroom is to prepare citizens for dealing with the problems of a democratic society. Students examine civic problems and offer solutions or examine social science content to find problems within the scope and content of the discipline. Students do all of this in the context of the community—whether it is in the classroom, the school, or the extended community.

Students perform service learning when they take the academic content they would normally learn in school and combine it with performing a real service for a person or persons in the community who need that service. When students determine the service, select a problem to address, determine which content to use, or discern that they should use service learning, they must use inquiry to reach that decision. Students engage in selecting the problem, tie it to academic content, and engage in structured reflection about the project (Billig, 2002; Wade, 1997b; Winiarcyk & Long, 1996). For service learning to be imposed without student input and decision making would rob students of their ability to find meaning and power in service learning; it would be just another method imposed upon them by adults, rather than students taking responsibility for their actions and education. An inquiry project that benefits the community could, of course, combine both inquiry and service-learning methodologies. Researchers (Claus & Ogden, 1999; Wade, 1997a) have described the civic purpose of service learning in social studies and democratic education. In service learning, students identify a real need and take action to produce a good or service that is of benefit to others while also supporting their academic curriculum. Service learning may add to the community materially and may help to develop a sense of civic efficacy in students. Students learn more about local, state, national, and world history while creating a product of great interest to the community members.

The Atterbury Files remains important for the field of social studies because it provides a model project that is still of interest to the community. The continued interest in the publication over time is a testament to the efforts of the students and their teacher sponsors. *The Atterbury Files* provides an excellent example of an inquiry project for middle school students. Students owned the project; no one knew the answer when they started; they made decisions throughout the project; thinking skills were used at multiple points; and students produced a tangible product at the conclusion that they were able to evaluate. This project is also useful because, in retrospect, the effects can be more clearly seen than when it was in progress or when it had recently been completed. Students who endeavor to write a book must conquer oral history and local research skills in addition to mastering basic language arts skills. They must then merge those skills with rudimentary historiography. As one student put it, "It gets harder and harder as we go along . . . We have only scratched the surface" (Jim). Such a book must be com-

pelling and interesting to both the students and the reader. Students practiced inquiry where they held power over the project. It was theirs, it belonged to them, and they found it meaningful (Hefner, 1988; Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1998). If the students are not interested, they will never complete the project; if the readers are not interested, they will never finish reading the book. This democratic ethic of student control is in opposition to the top-down mandates of standards and compulsory learning (Bosmajian, 1989; Kopenhaver & Click, 2001; Ross, 2002). Gifted students use the freedom of inquiry to exceed the narrow confines of minimum standards as seen in some classroom settings.

This project was important for the community because it preserved and disseminated its history. The students met a need for the community that the community had not recognized nor filled. When students filled this need, they used the expertise of community historical groups, listened to its mature citizens, and worked to organize material that had not been explored. In an area that lacks professional historians, students contributed their best efforts to the community, and the community had an opportunity to see young people at their most altruistic. It was and is good to know that they could and can stand as examples of future democratic citizens. GCT

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