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# The Nature of Illinois

## Storytelling, Podcasts, and the Classroom

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Agricultural and environmental historians are skilled storytellers. They condense, organize, rework, and structure stories in ways that account for the human and nonhuman actors of the past. This can be a difficult task. After all, plant cycles, geological processes, and ecological systems hardly fit into the neat conception of time we humans have designed for ourselves. Though a challenging undertaking, it is an especially important one. Stories create a sense of place. They connect us to the natural world and humble us in the face of larger, environmental forces. They can also call us to action. As William Cronon has argued, "The special task of environmental history is to assert that stories about the past are better . . . if they increase our attention to nature and the place of people within it." Telling effective and compelling stories might be one way that we can "hope to persuade readers of the importance of our subject."[1] A good story can spark change, grow the field, and encourage a generation of students to examine the complex relationships between humans and the natural world. Understanding the importance of storytelling in our work, we must center the narrative form as a foundational component of teaching and learning.

For those invested in preserving and promoting agricultural and environmental history in the classroom, narrative-based podcasting can be a powerful tool. Unlike traditional text-based essays, podcasts have the capacity to appeal to broad audiences by using a variety of editing and production techniques including the use of multiple voices, sound effects, shifts in pacing, adjusting the length of episodes, or serializing an entire season. Podcasting can be aurally immersive and widely accessible to audiences who might otherwise shy away

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from more traditional forms of narration. By assigning students to research, record, and create their own podcasts, they become active storytellers, tasked to compose compelling agricultural and environmental histories with a host of new narrative techniques.

As a learning tool, podcasts teach critical thinking skills through a nontextual, audio format. In addition to the traditional practice of evaluating argument and evidence, students must think about how editing, sound effects, volume, and timing can shape the listener's engagement with the podcast. This form of critical engagement helps students develop multiliteracies that are not always common in the traditional history classroom. The act of creating podcasts also offers pedagogical benefits, including an opportunity for students to engage with the developing field of digital humanities. By learning and working with microphones, audio editing software, and digital publishing platforms, students get access to new technologies through multimodal learning. Additionally, student-created podcasts offer tangible evidence of their scholarly work. In my experience, students are eager to share their research with family and friends who otherwise might not be willing to sit down and read a long-form essay. As active learners, they became invested in researching and sharing compelling stories.[2]

In fall 2021, students enrolled in HIS 5160I: Graduate Seminar in United States Environmental History at Eastern Illinois University produced an

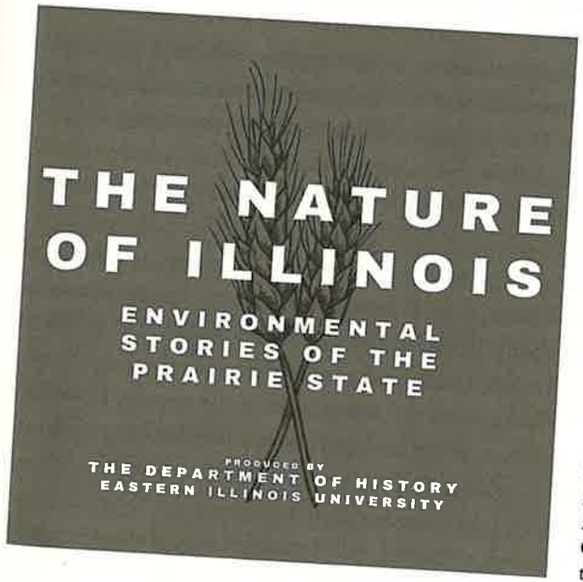


**FIGURE 1.** Podcast logo of *The Nature of Illinois: Environmental Stories of the Prairie State.* Class participants agreed upon the podcast logo.

agricultural and environmental podcast series, *The Nature of Illinois: Environmental Stories of the Prairie State*. The course began with a traditional, seminar-style structure. Reading historiographical essays and discussing scholarly works, students spent the early course meetings grappling with the major debates and conversations of environmental and agricultural history. As we transitioned into the second third of the semester, I introduced the project and began to assign agricultural and environmental history-themed podcasts. Students listened to "Atom in the Garden of Eden," from *99% Invisible Podcast*—an episode that discusses atom gardens in the nuclear age. They reviewed an episode of *Radiolab*, "Even the Worst Laid Plans?," that tells the story of how unique bacteria in dead snow geese might have accidentally provided a solution to the toxic problem at the "pit" in Butte, Montana. They followed the story of a feather thief in "The Feather Heist," from *This American Life*, which tracks the colonial roots of modern museums, the culture of leisure, and the lucrative underground market for rare feathers among fly-fishers. These short assignments encouraged students to evaluate podcast episodes much like a book: look for an argument, evaluate evidence, and situate the work within the broader fields of environmental and agricultural history. They also examined the unique structure of podcasts and the ways in which sound, music, editing, and timing can shape the listener's experience. By breaking down the structural elements of a podcast, students learned to identify, and later replicate, effective techniques of podcast storytelling—a unique form that differs from traditional historical research paper assignments.[3]

After evaluating published podcasts, students then selected their own research topics. I kept the boundaries of the assignment broad, only requiring that their research related to Illinois history. My goal was to encourage student buy-in by allowing them to follow their own interests. The remainder of the semester class sessions blended seminar-style discussion of additional readings, regular check-ins of student research, and an introduction to basic podcasting technology. I dedicated an entire class session to the technical aspects of podcasting where students learned how to use portable microphones, practiced clipping sound clips on Audacity (a free audio editing software), and explored the vast libraries of copyright-free music and sound effects on the Free Music Archive and Freesound.[4] Throughout the remainder of the course, I continued to track the students' progress, often leading brief troubleshooting sessions. Many of the students grew confident in their technical skills and often served as resources to their classmates. I dedicated an entire class session to peer evaluations, where we listened through a draft of each episode. Through peer-to-peer learning, students refined their episodes for final publication at the end of the semester. The official launch of the series coincided with a small, socially distanced celebration among the class.[5]



By designing their own podcast series, students embraced a foundational component of agricultural and environmental history: storytelling. After engaging with scholarship, completing research, and considering the ways in which historians discuss the complex relationship between ecological systems and human actors, students produced their own narrative-based podcasts. The series followed a chronological history of the region. One student explored how the colonial fur trade led to broader cultural encounters in the Great Lakes region. Another explored how overtrapping and Euro-American agricultural development led to the collapse of the American Fur Company in the region. Yet another student, interested in the history of coal mining in Illinois, used the 1909 Cherry Mine disaster as a lens to examine the ways in which the extractive industry shaped everyday life in rural Illinois. Some students turned their attention away from industry and toward recreational uses of the environment, including an episode that explores the rise of tourism in the Upper Great Lakes region as a result of increased industrialization and urban anxieties in early twentieth-century Chicago. Another student explored the ideas of Charles Macdonald, the architect behind the Chicago Golf Club and America's first eighteen-hole course. The range in topics added depth to the series and allowed each student to follow their individual interests. *The Nature of Illinois: Stories of the Prairie State* provides a model for instructors seeking to encourage student learning, introduce basic digital tools in the classroom, and continue to develop interest in agricultural and environmental history among students and the podcast-listening public.

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## Notes

1. Cronon, "Place for Stories," 1375.
2. On the use of podcasts in scholarly communication, see Hagood, "Scholarly Podcast." On the uses of podcasts as a teaching tool, Blevins, "Podcasts"; Hew, "Use of Audio Podcast." On the uses of podcasts as a form for historians to engage with public audiences, see Covart, "Podcasting History in Public."

3. For an overview of the course, see the syllabus, Camden Burd, "U.S. Environmental History, HIS 51601-001," fall 2021, http://www.camdenburd.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/HIS51601_syllabus.pdf. For access to the published student podcasts, see *Nature of Illinois*; Youssef, "Atom in the Garden of Eden"; Wheeler, "Even the Worst Laid Plans"; Cole, "Feather Heist."

4. Audacity, https://www.audacityteam.org/ (accessed February 8, 2022); Free Music Archive, https://freemusicarchive.org/ (accessed February 8, 2022); Freesound, https://freesound.org/ (accessed February 8, 2022).

5. Each student had the right to determine if they wanted to publish their episode at the end of the semester. Final publication of their episode was not a requirement of the course; however, each student did eventually agree to publish their episode. I established a free account with Anchor.fm, a service that automatically published episodes to Spotify and has since been absorbed into Spotify as Spotify for Podcasters.

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