



Historian Leah Glaser Garners Two Top Awards for Research

Associate Professor of History Leah Glaser, whose research is distinctive for shedding new light on the historical development of natural resource use and energy issues in the American West, garnered top awards in 2012: both the University-wide and the ConnSCU-wide Norton Mezvinsky Research Awards.

In her latest book, Glaser studies the process of electrification in three demographically diverse rural regions of eastern Arizona to detail how technology impacted these places, economies, and lifestyles. She concludes that a national goal of rural electrification may have been government supported and promoted as a tool for modernization and thus social and economic equality—but it was locally directed in terms of systems design and energy use.

Glaser says, “I wanted to focus on ethnically diverse communities, in the case of the West, those including Mexican and Native Americans, and see how each accessed, adapted to, and incorporated electricity and electrical systems. What I argued was that Native Americans as rural westerners had some degree of ‘agency’ in accessing the grid and using electrical power. They are part of and survivors of the complex history of the modern West, not just simply victims of American expansion and aggression.”

Her approach in *Electrifying the Rural American West: Stories of Power, People, and Place* (University of Nebraska Press, 2009) explores this topic in a new way. Her method, grounded in public history, was to look at the process on a local level and at diverse communities reflective of the regional characteristics of American Western communities. “I indeed found that rural electrification was not just a benevolent government New Deal program, as historians have often characterized it, but that the process was a locally initiated and directed

process where communities enlisted modern technology to sustain themselves in the twentieth century,” she said.

Andrew Gulliford of Fort Lewis College in the *American Historical Review*, writes, “Much history of the New West has focused on environmental issues, and recent American Indian history addresses cultural continuity and change, but the prosaic application of electricity, of ‘a light in every hogan,’ has not been comprehensively studied until the publication of Leah S. Glaser’s book, which is a synthesis of Western history, public history, and Native American history.”

Inspiration for her research interests in public history, historic preservation, and the American West stems from Glaser’s graduate studies at Arizona State University, where she earned a master’s in public history and a doctorate in American history. She has published steadily in a variety of journals, written a chapter for a book entitled *Indians and Energy* with the Clement Center for Southwestern Studies at Southern Methodist University, and helped organize professional conferences on these subjects.

Glaser joined the History department at Central in 2006 to help build the growing Public History program, specifically in historic preservation. She had taught at Quinnipiac University, Arizona State University, and in the Maricopa County Community Colleges. Her public history experience includes work with the New Haven Preservation Trust, Virginia Center for Digital History, the United States Bureau of Reclamation, and the National Park Service.

In her current research, Glaser continues to be interested in how people of the past have enlisted natural resources for development (specifically in Connecticut), and how public historians can

interpret those practices within this modern concept of environmental resource use known as sustainability.

Further, this research hooks into the idea of Eastern industrialization influencing Western expansion and settlement in the American West. “In Connecticut, a lot of the people who initially made the decisions about the development of the state forests and parks also helped shape policy on a national level and in the national parks and forests of the American West,” she observes.

“I am working on a paper now in which I am trying to understand the historic roots and perceptions of what we consider today to be ‘sustainable practices’ to the conservation movement of the early twentieth century.” That has all, in part, been inspired by her involvement in the Global Environmental Sustainability Action Coalition at CCSU and the sustainability symposiums and programs on campus.

“I hope to address present and future issues with which the profession itself is struggling, such as how do we manage sustainable historic sites?” Her hope is that her work will offer site managers new ideas for integrating sustainable technologies into the treatment of historical resources, but also to use historic sites to educate the public about sustainability and historically sustainable practices. “Historic sites can often manage pollution and energy use in ways more environmentally sustainable,” she observes. “Furthermore, those techniques are often more historically accurate.”

As Glaser’s intellectual explorations evolve in this new direction, her future public history scholarship will rest firmly on sound scholarship and on an interest and commitment to making history relevant and useful in the public sphere.

— Geri Radacsi