Undergraduate Library Research Award Reflective Essay

My research project covers the 1890 post-Land Run business community of Guthrie, Oklahoma, and how it compared to both Stillwater in 1890 and Guthrie today. Going into it, I had already had my first experience working with research and the subject matter when writing a research proposal for the Arts and Sciences Freshman Research class. During this process, I had my first exposure to writing historical background for a research project. I learned how to work with library databases, and how to find and request books; perhaps more usefully, I learned to use bibliographies to further dive into sources, and to search for keywords to find relevant works and narrow my searches.

The first two-to-three months of the actual project were spent on data cleanup. This essentially meant taking a PDF of a list of names and occupations, and then copying all of it manually into Microsoft Excel. The process was not a huge learning experience, but I did get to learn of the mundanity of some elements of research. Sometimes, you’ve just got to do some grunt work to discover the things you want to discover. I also learned the very basics of Microsoft Excel for the first time.

After the end of the first semester, the data copying was complete, and it time to move on. Now, there was some data classification: we had to classify various occupations under different banners. This process was very much a learning experience, as I learned how subjective some parts of research has to be - there was no definitive classification for every occupation, and so I simply had to use my best judgement. This I found surprising, as I expected more rigidity in such a process; learning that sometimes things have to be subjective was very interesting.

I then proceeded to analyze this data. Essentially, that meant looking at the percentages of different occupation categories and interpreting the implications – what could be the reasons certain
categories are more prominent than others, and why are there differences from - or similarities to - Stillwater? This was all actually a new experience – I had never before been asked to translate numbers and graphs in such a way, and it gave me experience in working through what is worth analyzing and what is worth leaving to the graph.

I then went back and began to build up the background. Working on the history of early Guthrie was actually my favorite part of the project, and I showed a considerable amount of growth from when I had worked on the general Land Run history portion during my class the previous semester. This was where I got to spend hours upon hours at a time holed up among library bookshelves, working through every source I could find on Guthrie’s history, and feeling some of that magic of research. This is also an area where I got to use library databases, and even check out the library archives – which also lent to that feeling of searching through dusty old tomes.

My ability to use these things effectively had completely flipped since I first worked with them in my research class the previous semester; my use of sources was far more comprehensive, and the speed with which I was able to find relevant articles on library databases had increased. My ability to find relevant information in the midst of large numbers of sources is now far greater; before, I would get too caught up in reading entire sections, or I would skim too lightly.

It was also becoming clearer when to use what sources – full books were the most common, being invaluable for finding a lot of relevant information for an event, including information I did not even know I needed, but reliable websites and journals were great ways to find either more specified information, or finding simplified narratives to understand an event.

Now, for much of the project I had felt like there was something missing. The Guthrie Land Run was not my idea for a project; I was not in a position to formulate the original plan, but as I worked on it I felt something more was needed to make the project more immediately relevant.
Originally, I had hoped to find the descendants of some of these 1890s workers, and see how their occupations had changed– or not changed – from their ancestors, but this turned out to be unfeasible. We also planned to merge the data of demographic census of 1890 Logan County with the business census. We realized this would take an extraordinary amount of time, however, and so shifted focus, making the business side of the paper as detailed as it could be.

Over time, we realized the best option for the project was mirroring our data in the modern day. This would give a clear example of economic development in Oklahoma over the twentieth century – and it used readily available data.

Hence, this meant going to census.gov and getting information on employment in modern Guthrie, and as usual, working on data cleanup, organization, and analysis. Once again, I found I had grown exponentially in my working with data – finding the appropriate statistics, formatting them, and analyzing them was a remarkably straightforward process, and it took far less time than it might have just a couple months earlier.

Looking back, my development over the course of the project has been far greater than I expected. After beginning using limited sources and a total lack of knowledge in Microsoft Excel, I learned to find relevant information in the library’s array of catalogs, archives, and services, and better collect information from a variety of sources; I learned to use Microsoft Excel; and I learned the process and expectations of economic history research, from data cleanup to data analysis to background development to the expansion of the project to encompass new ideas (and the limiting of a project when it becomes too large.) I hope these newfound skills will serve me well in future research opportunities.