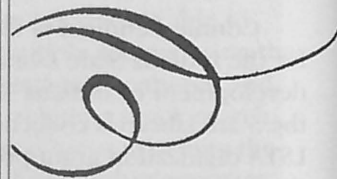


BRINGING THE VOICES OF COMMUNITIES TOGETHER: THE MIDDLETOWN DIGITAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

by Amanda A. Hurford & Maren L. Read



In 2006, Ball State University Libraries was awarded a Library Services Technology Act (LSTA) digitization grant to create the Middletown Digital Oral History Collection. The 188 interviews chosen for this project come from the Ball State University

Libraries Archives and Special Collections, and document the lives of African American, Jewish, and Catholic residents of Muncie, Indiana, from the Great Depression into the 21st century. Grant funds were used to purchase new equipment to digitize the interviews, hire two project assistants, conduct thirty new interviews, and make the collection available online in the University Libraries' Digital Media Repository (<http://libx.bsu.edu>).

Archives and Special Collections holds a number of oral history collections as part of the Middletown Studies Collection and the Stoeckel Archives of Local History. The collections selected for digitization provide research material on the three communities that were left out of the seminal studies conducted and published by sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd in the 1920s using Muncie as "Middletown," a representative American community. Recent scholarship has focused on documenting the African American, Jewish, and Catholic experience in Middletown, and researchers have conducted oral histories to fill this gap in the historical record.

Eight collections from Archives and Special Collections were selected for digitization:

- The *Black Muncie History Project*, conducted with African Americans between 1971 and 1978 by community leader Hurley Goodall and Ball State professor J. Paul Mitchell.
- The *Black Middletown Project*, conducted in 1981 by faculty and graduate students from the University of Virginia and Virginia Commonwealth University. These interviews were conducted as part of the Middletown III project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.
- The *Other Side of Middletown*, a collaborative ethnography project on Muncie's African American community, conducted by Ball State professor Eric

Lassiter and students at the Ball State University's Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry in 2003. Students conducted interviews and wrote a book entitled *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie's African American Community* based on their research.

- The *Middletown Jewish Oral History Project I*, conducted in 1978-1979 by Ball State professors C. Warren Vander Hill and Dwight Hoover, under the sponsorship of long-time Jewish resident of Muncie, Mr. Martin Schwartz.
- The *Middletown Jewish Oral History Project II*, a follow up to the 1978-1979 project sponsored by Mr. Schwartz, conducted with members of the Muncie Temple Beth-El congregation by C. Warren Vander Hill between 2003 and 2004.
- The *St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church Oral History Collection*, the *St. Lawrence Catholic Church Oral History Collection*, and the *St. Mary Catholic Church Oral History Collection*, conducted in the fall of 2006, with members of the three churches, by volunteers as part of the LSTA grant. Funds were used to offer a training session for the volunteers on how to conduct oral history interviews.

PREPARING COLLECTIONS

One area that should not be overlooked in the beginning stages of an oral history project is copyright. For the Middletown Digital Oral History Collection, it was necessary to evaluate the copyright status of each subcollection. This involved reviewing deeds of gift and release forms to determine whether or not permission was granted by the interviewees and interviewees to put their oral histories online. In the cases where there was some uncertainty, efforts were made to obtain permission from the interviewees and interviewees to include their oral histories in the project.

It is also important that the selected collections be in good condition and adequately processed. Many of the tapes digitized in this project were thirty years old and, although we did not find any major preservation problems, many did need to be relabeled and re-

housed. Finding aids also had to be reviewed and updated to provide an inventory of each collection that included the number of tapes for each interview, names of interviewers and interviewees, date of the interview, and other information that became the basis for the metadata records.

AUDIO DIGITIZATION

After reviewing the literature on best practices for analog to digital audio conversion, including the Colorado Digitization Program Digital Audio Working Group's comprehensive overview of audio digitization procedures (<http://www.bcr.org/cdp/best/digital-audio-bp.pdf>), project staff consulted with audio experts at Sweetwater Sound (<http://www.sweetwater.com>) in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and the following software and hardware were purchased. This list does not include computers or monitors, although they were also required for the project.

- Tascam 322 2-Head Dual Auto Reverse Audio Cassette Recorders
- AKG K 271 Closed Circumaural Studio Headphones
- PreSonus FIREBOX 24-Bit/96kHz 2x6 Fire Wire Recording System
- TRS Cables (Pro Co. BPBQCCXF5 5' XLFR and BP10 10' TRS)
- Sony SoundForge 8 Audio Editing/Mastering Software
- Waves Restoration Audio Clean-Up Plug-In Bundle

After ordering, obtaining, and setting up the audio digitization equipment, we were ready to begin digitizing. A student assistant was trained to digitize using the following workflow (see Figure 1 for complete project workflow). First, the cassette was inserted into the cassette player and played as normal. After monitoring the volume with headphones and adjusting levels if needed, the digitization assistant rewound the tape back to the beginning and initiated the recording process. Audio information was then transferred from the cassette deck to the Firebox recording system via TRS cable. The Firebox then converted that signal sent from the tape deck into a digital format. The computer captured the digital sound at 16 bit/44.1 kHz, which was then saved as an archival WAV file. A copy of that master file was then "cleaned" using volume normalization and audio enhancement applications in SoundForge and Waves Restoration software. Finally, an access WMA file was created for each file which was placed on an offsite Windows Media Server for streaming.

TRANSCRIPTION

The LSTA grant awarded for the Middletown Digital Oral History Collection included funds for transcription. Based primarily on cost and quality control considerations, we decided to produce transcripts of the interviews in-house rather than hiring professional transcribers. Commercial services are available for transcription, but are quite costly. Transcribing in-house also gave us greater quality control over the transcripts we presented online than would

Middletown Digital Oral History Project Basic Workflow

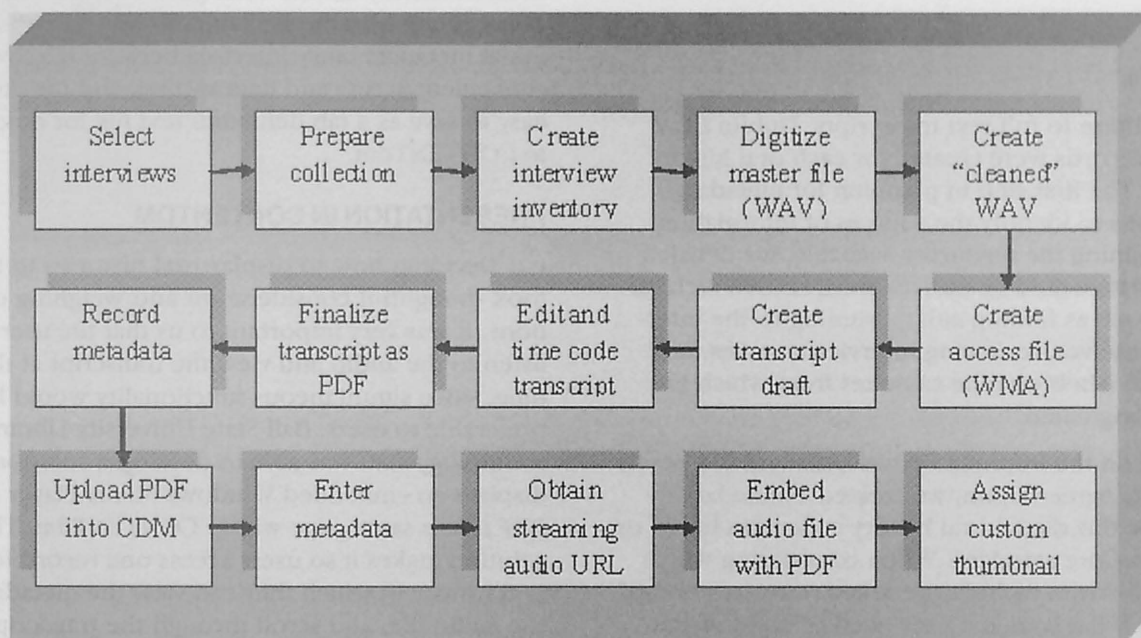


Figure 1

have been possible if we had relied on outside transcribers.

We had two types of collections to transcribe. Four of the collections had original transcripts and four lacked transcripts. The existing transcripts varied in completeness and accuracy. It was very important to have high quality transcripts for all the interviews, in order to make them searchable once they were available in the Digital Media Repository. Many of the transcripts had misspellings, question marks, blank spaces, inaccuracies, and many other problems that were caused by poor sound quality of the original recordings. We chose to retype, edit, and format the existing transcripts to the same standards we developed for the transcripts of the interviews that required completely original transcription. We followed guidelines developed by the Baylor University Institute for Oral History in their publication, "Style Guide: A Quick Reference for Editing Oral History Memoirs" (<http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php?id=14142>), for all our transcripts.

In addition to following the Baylor guidelines, we also created a wiki to track progress on our project and included a section on style and format (http://www.bsu.edu/libraries/wiki/index.php?title=Oral_Histories). The wiki was a great tool, because it provided an accessible place to post style and format guidelines as we went through the transcribing process and new issues and questions were raised. Transcribers working on this project also referred to city directories and local history collections in Archives and Special Collections to confirm spellings of names, places, and other terms discussed in the interviews. The wiki includes a list of terms, mostly related to Judaism and Catholicism, for transcribers to reference.

METADATA

In addition to full text transcripts, Dublin Core metadata records were created for each oral history interview. The first step in planning for metadata creation was to identify the sources of information. After examining the resources available, we decided that metadata would be derived from related archival records (such as finding aids), listening to the interviews themselves, reviewing interviewer notes, and referring to labels on tape cassettes from which the resource originated.

Based on the information available and the depth of metadata agreed upon, we created a metadata scheme for this digital oral history collection based on the Dublin Core standard. When considering which metadata fields to include, we asked ourselves several questions. What does the user need to know about these resources? What information will systems adminis-

trators, librarians, and archivists need to manage this digital collection?

Ultimately, we included the following fields, which are mapped to Qualified Dublin Core:

- Title
- Interviewer
- Interviewee
- Date Recorded
- See Photo of Interviewee
- Run Time
- Location Recorded
- Subject Notes
- Media Type
- Original Physical Format
- Project ID
- Archival ID
- Digital ID
- Repository
- Collection
- Subcollection
- Digitization Specifications
- Ordering Information
- Copyright
- Full Text

The metadata fields selected and notes for their implementation are also documented on the project wiki.

The project's metadata creation was a collaborative process between the two authors of this article - an archivist and a digital projects librarian. In order to create metadata records for the oral histories, we kept an Excel spreadsheet in a shared server space to which we both had access. This spreadsheet essentially began as an inventory for the collection and was filled in as other details became available. Excel was chosen as our initial metadata entry interface because it allowed for convenient access and data sorting, and the data was easy to save as a tab delimited text file for quick upload to CONTENTdm.

PRESENTATION IN CONTENTDM

Deciding how to display oral histories to the public took thoughtful consideration and weighing of options. It was very important to us that the user could listen to the audio and view the transcript at the same time, since simultaneous functionality would be preferable to users. Ball State University Libraries' technology staff was able to develop a solution that displays an embedded Windows Media Player above the PDF in the same page within CONTENTdm. This solution makes it so users access one record for each oral history in which they can view the metadata, play the audio file, and scroll through the transcript all at once in a very user friendly way.

CONCLUSION

With the completion of the Middletown Digital Oral History Project, a valuable resource is now available online. It has exposed researchers to previously under-used oral accounts of life in Muncie, Indiana, and is currently being used as source material in courses at Ball State University and beyond. The project is also an extremely valuable learning resource from the information professional's perspective. Working on this project, we have learned a great deal about digital oral histories and have had many opportunities to share our experience. As other archivists and librarians prepare to move to the next frontier of digital collections, our project might be considered one model of how institutions can create digital oral history collections in CONTENTdm.

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