

White Paper

Report ID: 2878497

Application Number: PW-234713-16

Project Director: Emily Pfothenauer

Institution: Wisconsin Library Services

Reporting Period: 6/1/2016-5/31/2017

Report Due: 8/31/2017

Date Submitted: 8/31/2017

Listening to War: Uncovering Wisconsin's Wartime Oral Histories

WHITE PAPER

National Endowment for the Humanities
Division of Preservation and Access
Humanities Collections and Reference Resources

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Project Director: Emily Pfothauer, Wisconsin Library Services

August 31, 2017

The NEH-funded Foundations project, *Listening to War: Uncovering Wisconsin's Wartime Oral Histories*, identified oral history collections documenting personal experiences of 20th century war, both at home and on the battlefield, held by small and mid-sized libraries, historical societies and other cultural heritage institutions across Wisconsin. *Listening to War* aimed to increase Wisconsin cultural heritage institutions' awareness of and engagement with the Recollection Wisconsin collaborative statewide digital program by planning a statewide digitization project around a shared theme.

Working with numerous partners, stakeholders and consultants, WiLS established a comprehensive plan to digitize, preserve and provide access to more than 1,000 hidden, at-risk oral history interviews with Wisconsin veterans and civilians. WiLS (formally Wisconsin Library Services) is a 501(c)(3) member organization that has served as Recollection Wisconsin's project manager and fiscal agent since the program's inception in 2005. Additional partners in the Recollection Wisconsin consortium are Marquette University, Milwaukee Public Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Project Activities

Grant activities were carried out in three general stages between June 2016 and May 2017: identifying collections, assessing collections and planning for future preservation and access. Grant funding supported a Digital Archives Assistant position (0.75 FTE for one year), tasked with identifying and assessing audiovisual collections in small and mid-sized cultural heritage institutions across the state. Dana Gerber-Margie, a 2012 graduate of the Archives program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison iSchool, was hired in this role. Grant funds also supported travel costs for the Digital Archives Assistant and consulting services from AVPreserve, a leading audiovisual collections consulting firm. Additional staffing for the project, contributed in-kind by WiLS, was provided by Recollection Wisconsin Program Manager Emily Pfothenhauer.

Over the course of the grant year, Gerber-Margie traveled to 24 repositories in 18 counties around the state to identify and assess relevant audiovisual collections. She encountered many situations where storage conditions for A/V resources, both analog and born-digital, were far from ideal, confirming our assumption that many media collections throughout the state are at high risk for loss and in need of immediate preservation actions.

At the outset of the project, we chose not to distribute a statewide survey to identify A/V collections, as was originally planned. By coincidence, a group of oral history experts in the state had distributed a similar survey to the same target groups just a few months before the project started and was willing to share their data. Although that survey was not limited to *Listening to War's* scope of wartime oral histories, it was an invaluable starting point. Using the data from the statewide survey, prior connections and relationships forged by Recollection Wisconsin, word-of-mouth about the project, and some "cold call" emails to likely institutions, we assembled a list of more than 100 contacts.

Although the original grant proposal described either phone calls *or* in-person visits to assess collections, we found that it was important to conduct a phone interview prior to *each* site visit, in order to discuss the project in more depth than could be conveyed over email. This preliminary phone call also established some expectations for what the repository would need to provide while Gerber-Margie was on site, such as providing access to catalog records or finding aids, pulling materials ahead of the visit if possible,

arranging a reasonable amount of space in which to work, and confirming the availability of Internet access.

[MediaSCORE and mediaRIVERS](#), two web-based open source assessment tools developed by Indiana University in collaboration with AVPreserve, were used to record collection-level data. MediaSCORE is designed to quantify the degradation and obsolescence risk factors of physical carriers on a five-point scale. “It is intended to help custodians of audiovisual collections make informed decisions about which of their holdings most urgently need to be reformatted if their content is to survive into the future.” ([User Guide](#), 2015) Similarly, mediaRIVERS uses a five-point scale to quantify the research value and historical significance of the content as a way to establish priorities for digitization and preservation of A/V materials.

Our final inventory in mediaSCORE and mediaRIVERS included information about relevant A/V holdings at 24 different institutions, encompassing 41 oral history collections consisting of approximately 1,700 individual items. Condition and risk level of analog recordings on physical media were relatively straightforward to assess using mediaSCORE. However, the tool is not designed to assess file-based digital media. In order to capture information about born-digital audio and video files, we devised a workaround by classifying digital files in unused format categories within mediaSCORE. Thus, we classified digital audio files as “Pressed 45RPM Disc” format in order to input collection data into the system, and digital video files were classified as “Pressed 78RPM Disc.”

Because it was not feasible to play back the vast majority of A/V recordings identified, and because locally-created descriptive information was often minimal, research and instructional value proved challenging to quantify using mediaRIVERS. We assigned preliminary rankings based on availability of catalog records, transcripts and supporting documentation. But, ultimately, we relied on the Advisory Committee’s subject expertise, not mediaRIVERS rankings, to make decisions about which content was or was not of research value or historical significance.

The Advisory Committee, made up of subject specialists, oral historians and audiovisual experts, met in person as a group three times over the course of the grant and provided input over email. The Committee developed and refined selection criteria, balancing content-based considerations such as historical significance, uniqueness and topical relevance with format-based considerations including condition, risk for obsolescence and other factors impacting the stability and sustainability of the recordings. Individual committee members also provided assistance in designing various aspects of the implementation plan.

Members of the Advisory Committee were:

Ellen Brooks, Oral Historian, *Wisconsin Veterans Museum*

Paul Hedges, Emerging Technologies Archivist *Wisconsin Historical Society*

Erika Janik, Independent author and Producer, *Wisconsin Public Radio/Wisconsin Public Television*

Stephen Kercher, Chair and Professor of History, *University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh*

Susan McLeod, Independent advisor, (*director emeritus, Chippewa Valley Museum*)

Troy Reeves, Head, Oral History Program, *University of Wisconsin-Madison Archives*

Dorothea Salo, Faculty Associate, *iSchool, UW-Madison*

Mark D. Van Ells, Professor of History, *Queensborough Community College, City University of New York*

Relevant content encompassed “Wisconsin residents’ experiences of wartime,” with both elements of that phrase broadly defined. “Wisconsin residents” included men and women not only born and raised in the state, but those who lived through war in other states or countries and later established a life in Wisconsin. “Experiences of wartime” included the stories of veterans of any of the United States’ 20th century military conflicts, civilians who participated in war work such as shipbuilders, journalists and nurses, and other individuals whose lives were directly impacted by war, such as refugees and veterans’ spouses.

Approximately 50% of the items reviewed in the assessment phase were housed on analog formats – audiocassette, micro cassette, MiniDV, open reel audio tape and VHS. The remaining 50% were “born digital” – created digitally with no analog counterpart. The majority of those born-digital files were stored solely on optical media – CDs and DVDs. Both the analog media formats and digital files on optical media are actively degrading and reaching obsolescence. Even the born-digital files stored on servers or hard drives are at risk because they are not actively managed in a preservation environment.

The original grant proposal laid out an ambitious plan for promoting the project to students, educators, researchers, and the general public, which proved to be unrealistic for our timeframe and scope. The main audience for the planning project was not the general public, but the staff and volunteers at small and mid-sized Wisconsin libraries, archives and museums that held potentially relevant content. Other than the compiled directory of collections, the products of the planning grant were not intended to be immediately useful to “end user” audiences.

We publicized the project to the library, archives, and cultural heritage communities in Wisconsin through a number of channels. Gerber-Margie blogged about her visits to communities around the state on the Recollection Wisconsin website. She gave presentations about the project’s methodology and goals to the Recollection Wisconsin Governing Board and Steering Committee, WiLS staff, the Wisconsin Council for Local History’s annual Local History and Historic Preservation conference, and the annual meeting of the state’s fourteen WHS-affiliated Archives and Area Research Centers. She also shared information about the project and the ways in which it leveraged her archives background for the Introduction to Archives course at the UW-Madison iSchool. We also reported on the project in an article in the Midwest Archives Conference (MAC) newsletter and a presentation at the Digital Public Library of America’s annual conference, DPLAFest.

Accomplishments

- 1) *An inventory of oral history collections documenting Wisconsin citizens’ experiences of World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf War, held by Wisconsin libraries, archives, historical societies, museums, schools and other cultural heritage institutions.* A directory, [Wisconsin’s Wartime Oral Histories](#), was compiled and made available on the Recollection Wisconsin website for use by researchers and educators. The directory includes collection names, abstracts, institution names and contact information, for 35 collections from 25 repositories.

- 2) *Compiled best practices for small cultural heritage institutions related to the creation and dissemination of oral histories.*

Prior to the planning grant, conversations with cultural heritage organizations across the state

indicated that many institutions were actively creating new oral history interviews with veterans and other community members. Due to limited resources and limited expertise, this content is typically not produced to professional standards, accompanied by useful metadata, or created with an eye towards future preservation and access. Moreover, the copyright status of these recordings is often ambiguous, as standard release forms are frequently absent. In order to help bridge this knowledge gap, Gerber-Margie worked with Advisory Committee members and oral historians Ellen Brooks and Troy Reeves to draft a set of basic guidelines and recommendations sheets for small Wisconsin cultural heritage institutions developing oral history initiatives.

The result was three two-page handouts covering questions to consider in planning, recording and sharing an oral history project; best practices for collecting veterans' oral histories; and a resource list pointing to websites, tutorials and other readily-available resources for beginners, including sample legal releases for interviewers and narrators.

Guidelines and Recommendations for Oral History Projects:

- a. [Part 1: Questions to Consider](#)
 - b. [Part 2: Best practices for collecting veterans' oral histories](#)
 - c. [Part 3: Curated Resource List](#)
- 3) *A prioritized list of collections and identified technical requirements and methodologies for future digitization.*

We worked with Bertram Lyons, Senior Consultant for AVPreserve, to determine technical requirements and workflows for reformatting audiovisual content and to identify strategies, tools and metadata for preservation of the selected content. WiLS distributed a Request for Estimate to five leading vendors specializing in audiovisual reformatting. Documents created during the planning process – selected collections and their formats, project budget and timeline, staffing needs and position description, metadata schema and sample record, and a Memorandum of Understanding for participating repositories – were all included with the implementation grant application package submitted to NEH in July 2017.

- 4) *Strategies and partnerships for digital preservation, access and interpretation.*

As part of the planning process, we established a partnership with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum to provide long-term digital storage for all content selected for reformatting. If the proposed implementation project moves forward, two copies of all preservation master files, as well as all access files, metadata, transcripts, MoUs and other project documentation, will be deposited with the Museum and maintained by its parent institution, the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs.

We also established a partnership with the Wisconsin Historical Society to provide ongoing public access to the content. If the proposed implementation project is funded, full audio and video recordings, as well as available transcripts, will be made freely available online in partnership with WHS. Three platforms will be leveraged in concert: Kaltura MediaSpace, to host streaming media; Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS), to create time-correlated interview transcripts or indexes; and CONTENTdm, for organization and discovery of interview-level descriptive metadata.

Audiences

The project audiences were, primarily, the staff and volunteers of small and mid-sized cultural heritage institutions in all parts of the state, including public libraries, academic libraries, archives, museums and veterans memorial sites. See Appendix A for a list of the 22 repositories that will contribute content to the proposed implementation project.

Evaluation

A formal evaluation of the planning project was not undertaken. An informal internal evaluation identified two main weak points in the project design and execution:

- 1) Lack of diverse voices from underrepresented groups
Although we aimed to be inclusive in the types of stories and collections we uncovered, we did not head into the project with a clear strategy for achieving diversity and equity of representation. This is in part a reflection of the typical collecting practices of the institutions we worked with – underrepresented groups are underrepresented in these repositories, and thus were underrepresented in our survey. Nonetheless, more time spent on our part on engaging with underrepresented populations could have resulted in a more diverse list of content. Actions we could have taken to approach diversity, equity and inclusion more effectively include spending more time to foster relationships with tribal libraries, archives and museums, more proactive engagement with community groups such as Hmong cultural associations, and including representatives from tribal or community archives on the Advisory Committee.

- 2) Unrealistic public outreach goals
As stated above, the original grant proposal laid out an ambitious plan for promoting the project to students, educators, researchers, and the general public. This proved to be unrealistic due to the nature of the project – as a planning initiative, few of the project outcomes were immediately useful or relevant to general audiences.

Long Term Impact

The Wisconsin Oral History Network is a small, informal group of Madison-based oral history practitioners that began meeting on a regular basis in the months leading up to the Foundations grant. This group continues to collaborate and plans to remain in communication with the repositories identified during the grant, in order to share best practices, training opportunities, etc. The group also intends to start building a bigger network of members both in Madison and throughout the state.

We believe the strategies developed for this Foundations project can be adapted and leveraged by WiLS for other collaborative statewide initiatives. The approach to collections identification and assessment could be used to surface other types of at-risk content held by small and mid-sized cultural heritage institutions, such as films, manuscripts or artwork. The road map for digitization, access and preservation created during the grant period can be repurposed in the future in order to build digital collections of oral histories around other historically significant themes.

Appendix A: Participating Repositories

Repository Name	Community	County	Institution Type
Amery Public Library	Amery	Polk	Public library
Bong Veterans Historical Center	Superior	Douglas	Veterans center
Cadott Community Library	Cadott	Chippewa	Public library
Carter Memorial Library	Omro	Winnebago	Public library
Chippewa Valley Museum	Eau Claire	Eau Claire	Museum
Highground Veterans Memorial Park	Neillsville	Clark	Veterans center
Jewish Museum Milwaukee	Milwaukee	Milwaukee	Museum
Kinnamon School Museum	Hayward	Sawyer	Museum
Langlade County Historical Society	Antigo	Langlade	Historical society
Lawrence University	Appleton	Outagamie	Academic library
Lester Public Library	Two Rivers	Manitowoc	Public library
Marathon County Historical Society	Wausau	Marathon	Historical society
Neville Public Museum	Green Bay	Brown	Museum
Oshkosh Public Museum	Oshkosh	Winnebago	Museum
Richland County History Room	Richland Center	Richland	Public library
Sauk County Historical Society	Baraboo	Sauk	Historical society
Taylor County Historical Society	Medford	Taylor	Historical society
UW-Eau Claire Archives	Eau Claire	Eau Claire	Archives
UW-Green Bay Archives	Green Bay	Brown	Archives
UW-La Crosse Archives	La Crosse	La Crosse	Archives
UW-Stevens Point Archives	Stevens Point	Portage	Archives
Wisconsin Maritime Museum	Manitowoc	Manitowoc	Museum
