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**Examining the Oral History Collection at the
Nelson Poynter Memorial Library**

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Archival Management

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The establishment of an oral history program can do many things for a library, museum or cultural heritage site. Oral histories are primary source documents that can be used by students and scholars to glean information from. An essential element in using oral histories, as a primary source material is that there are verbal and nonverbal cues; this can provide researchers with additional information that might otherwise have been lost. By providing scholars with additional primary source materials, oral histories can enhance the learning pleasure by allowing a voice or video to help establish an emotional connection with the past. This can be an important step in creating a more interactive and enhanced learning experience for students and scholars.

There are many challenges in creating, preserving and accessing oral history materials. These problems are not unique to oral history programs but also plague those working with audiovisual materials in any archive. These problems include, but are not limited to, access to audiovisual players, media deterioration, managing multimedia formats, corresponding paper documentation, and the legal issue of consent. Nearly each of these problems could derail a project. The most obvious complexity in archiving audiovisual materials is the deterioration of materials and obtaining a player on which to play the audiovisual material. The consent of both the interviewee and interviewer is an essential element in allowing others to access their interview. The consent form is both complex and straightforward but is required by law. The lack of consent or improper consent can restrict usability. Another aspect of the complexities of managing an oral history archive is the type of media the interview was conducted on. As time moves forward, new media formats

are created and older ones dumped by the wayside. The storage and player needs must still be met by the archive or library, which generally leads to having several procedures in place to process media.

The implementation of procedural methods for the processing oral history collections helps in the organization and communication of both materials and individuals. Because there are so many different facets and individuals working on an oral history project it is easy to lose track of the stages in the process, as well as materials. With donated collections, this process becomes even more complicated due to the fact that the donors themselves many or may not have communication issues and personality quirks, which could inhibit the processing of a collection. Similar to a collection development plan, an established workflow can help with controlling the demands of possible donors. The outrageous expectation of donors is often something that many oral history programs and projects have faced. In addition to assisting with donor communication, workflows also allow for standardization within the department.

The act of transcribing an oral history is one of the least complicated aspects of processing oral histories, however, it is often the most time consuming. Because it requires listening and typing it is often subjected to a high human error rate and should be re-listened to by an individual who is not the transcriptionist. This part of the process is called the audit edit. The final stage of the transcription process is the final edit. The final edit is the last review process and should be completed by a third individual (if available) or the original transcriber. There are additional resources that can be to the transcription process that help with find ability and

consistency. Time codes can be inserted to help identify where in the transcript material located in the corresponding audio. Controlled vocabulary is another additional resource that can be used to help in maintaining consistency throughout the document. Once the transcription is complete, the next phase of the process is one of the most essential elements in providing access. The library's catalog and cataloging process is a time consuming and technical process and is usually completed by the technical services department of the library.

Each analog format requires a different process, materials, and complications. Workflows should be established to help manage these differences. In addition to providing a proper workflow for converted materials, interviews that were born digital also have challenges. The challenges that converted materials and born digital materials face are in many ways drastically different from traditional archives, however, some of the challenges are the same. One issue that traditional and digital archives face is storage. One advantage to digital storage is that an institution can purchase more without worrying about the constraints of physical space. The cost of digitization and processing can be very expensive, especially when outdated technology is required.

The oral history materials that are located at the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg (USFSP) are located in Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) on the third floor of the library. The majority of the collection consists of materials created by students in Dr. Raymond O. Arsenault's courses. They formed the basis of an initiative known as the Oral History of Modern America, launched by the Poynter Library in the early 1990s.

These oral histories focus on a variety of local subjects including but not limited to: the Civil Rights Movement, race relations, facets of Pinellas County history, and the social history of St. Petersburg. These interviews provide depth to the collections that are already housed in SCUA. Each of these oral histories is conducted on a physical format and generally have accompanying paperwork to correspond to the interview, including deeds of gift, papers or other documentation that places the interview in context, and occasionally photographs.

While the budget, staff, and support are limited, many implementations have been created for both the physical and digital archive. The most impressive aspect of the oral history collection in USF St. Petersburg's Special Collections is the overall organization of the materials. A critical component in any archive is having the knowledge of what exists and where it is stored; this element is critical when a patron is requesting material. USF St. Petersburg has been able to establish a system so that each type of material may be accessed quickly. This has been achieved by the implementation of accession numbers and the development of a systematic process of shelving and storing interviews. One challenge, however, is that much of the institutional knowledge of the oral history collection is maintained by a single person, James Anthony Schnur. Currently the special collections librarian, Schnur served as a graduate student assistant in the Poynter Library during the early 1990s and became involved with the oral history initiative at its beginning.

In addition to having a great physical organization, USF St. Petersburg has developed a highly organized digital repository. Although the collection has not

been digitized, the implementation of a system that can manage audiovisual materials has great foresight. Once digitization begins, the structure will be there to help store and organize those digital files. Schnur states that transcription of some interviews has already started, though the final location of these interviews within a digital archive has not been determined. They may become part of the USFSP Digital Archive (DSpace), a separate instance of DSpace, or another platform, such as CONTENTdm.

Since special collections materials are part of the library, the department must use the services that are provided to them within the context of the needs of other units. Specifically, the technical services department within the library is the area of most academic libraries that catalogs library materials. However because there are limited staff in technical services the required cataloging cannot be completed in a manner that enhances access. Staffing challenges do make it difficult for students and researchers to access the collection.

Technical services are not the only department to have personnel issues. Special collections also has personnel issues. The department staff is comprised of one individual. If that one individual is ill or unavailable, the entire department will cease to exist. Schnur mentioned that library staffing has become an important consideration for many projects, since staffing levels within the building have not grown in a way comparable to academic units on campus. Also, since obtaining separate regional accreditation in 2006, USFSP can no longer rely upon certain services from other USF System units in the same manner, while, at the same time, SCUA has taken responsibility for archives and records management issues that

once were assumed to be the responsibility of departments at USF Tampa. Like most institutions, the lack of funding has prevented the department from providing the services it would love to provide. Such shortages prevent the department from providing basic archival preservation of materials.

There are many ways in which the Poynter Library at USF St. Petersburg can improve their functionality and productivity, many of which are cost effective. When dealing with donors, specifically donors who work closely with the library staff, packets can be developed to help manage the documentation of paper and physical media. This only costs the price of the materials as well as the cost of the labor. As for the transcription process, there are many products available for free download as well as for purchase. The first free product, Express Scribe, is transcription software that allows for easy stop/play functionality and is widely used by oral history programs and transcriptionists. For time coding, two products are used. If operating a Mac, Keyboard Maestro, which costs approximately twenty-five dollars, is used to generate time code. However, if one is operating a PC, then Macro Express (which costs approximately forty dollars) is used.

The digitization of audio in cassette format is a process that involves very few materials. A cassette player with audio output, 3.5mm Stereo to RCA Dual Audio cable, a computer, and an audio editor such as Audacity is all that is required. The cable, which varies in cost, is the most essential piece of equipment. The free version of Audacity allows for basic audio editing and recording, and postproduction editing.

The efforts that have been established by the faculty, staff and students at the USF St. Petersburg Library have truly been remarkable given all the complexities that are involved in preserving, processing and accessing oral history materials. This summary reviews the present initiative and sees great potential as Special Collections and University Archives looks towards the future.