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8. Coming of Age through Digitization: The Oral History Programme at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

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History of the Program
The Oral and Pictorial Records Programme (OPReP) was established in 1981 at the University of the West Indies to gather historical data on Trinidad and Tobago. OPReP is the second such initiative in the English-speaking Caribbean; the Social History Project at the University of the West Indies at Mona being the first. The program has three main functions: conducting and storing voice-recorded interviews with participants or witnesses in significant historical and cultural events; collecting photographs of people, events, and buildings of historical importance; and identifying other similar repositories of historical materials.

The program is currently converting the recordings from their original analog format to digital format. This process, which is taking place at the Alma Jordan Library, the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, is the focus of this paper.

Organization
When OPReP was established in 1981, it was deemed necessary to identify themes or topics that “could fill the gaps in historical knowledge.” Among these topics were emancipation (which was declared in 1834), Indian Arrival Day, the development of calypso and steel band, early oil exploration, general elections, and sports (cricket in particular). The next step was to identify and interview notable persons with intimate knowledge of the various topics. Among the early participants were the historians C. L. R. James and Sir Ellis Clarke. Early on, special attention was paid to the St. Augustine Campus in view of the fact that it was established in 1960 when the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (I.C.T.A.) and the University College of the West Indies (U.C.W.I.) merged. Anyone who was involved with the establishment of the campus and who was available was interviewed including the first campus principal, the first campus librarian, and holders of the first professorial chairs.
A more recent and noteworthy effort has been the partnering with the university’s Centre for Creative and Festival Arts, whereby students taking courses in steel pan history and development have contributed their interviews with members of the national steel bands, pan tuners, and arrangers.

**Recordings**

To date, 144 interviews have been conducted and recorded using standard cassette tapes. At the outset, these interviews were transcribed though on a limited scale due to lack of personnel and as requested by researchers. In 2001, additional personnel were hired to transcribe the backlog of interviews, and by 2003 a total of 109 interviews had been transcribed. The next step is the conversion of the transcripts to Portable Document Format (PDF) files.

**Digitization for Preservation and Access**

Digitizing the OPReP audio recordings and transferring the digital information to the library’s managed digital repository was seen as the most feasible channel for maintaining access to this valued content over the long term. The library has recognized the fact that the audio cassette magnetic tapes on which the recordings were stored would eventually become prone to degradation, and that technical advances would soon make the analog material and its associated players/readers increasingly obsolete. In addition, more recent oral history interviews have been recorded on digital media, thus making the development of an appropriate methodology for archiving material in digital formats a requirement. The need to digitize the older OPReP recordings was largely driven by the necessity of preserving the audio material, and therefore was a priority.

A by-product of digitization is the opportunity for enhanced access, and the library was keen not just to digitize for the sake of preservation, but also to facilitate improved and more efficient access by the institution’s stakeholders. The recommendation here revolved around providing a web interface for delivering streaming podcasts of the digital oral history interviews. The archival copies of the digital files would be stored on optical disks and external hard drives, while the access copies would be housed in the institutional repository that was being deployed by the library at the time.

**OPReP Conversion**

Deliberations on the acquisition of suitable equipment for the conversion process began in 2004 and continued into 2005 as efforts were put into sourcing a device that would link the analog tape player to the computer via a USB port and also software that would capture and enhance the sound recordings, many of which were already in poor condition. When these two were eventually sourced, it was discovered that an amplifier for boosting the signal from the tape player to the computer was also required for the workflow to occur as
planned. Eventually, the necessary equipment and software were deployed for the program to begin its fledgling efforts.

Digitization efforts were boosted in 2008 when, through the generous donation of former University Librarian Mrs. Irma Goldstraw, the Digital Library Services Centre (DLSC) was established. With the acquisition of specialized equipment and the procurement of additional staff, the DLSC was able to collaborate almost immediately with OPReP on the project to digitize and reorganize the oral history recordings. Conversion of the OPReP tapes began in earnest and, to date, two hundred cassette tapes representing a total of 119 interviews have been converted to digital format. The interviews are backed up on DVDs and are also stored on one of the Alma Jordan Library’s servers.

The transcripts of many of the interviews have also been submitted to the institutional repository, UWISpace, deployed by the library in August 2008 using the open-source DSpace platform. Dublin Core metadata records have been created to improve discoverability of these files via the web-based repository. The collection of transcripts can be browsed at http://uwispace.sta.uwi.edu/dspace/handle/2139/6340/.

The next step in the digitization project is to add audio clips of these recordings to UWISpace. It is anticipated that these will be made available to researchers once intellectual property rights and other legal issues have been clarified. Currently, the library offers two options for the assignment of literary property rights to materials in the oral history interviews: (a) the literary property rights may be retained by the interviewee until such time as he or she deems it appropriate to assign them to the library; (b) the literary property rights may be assigned immediately to the library. When literary property rights are assigned to the library, permission of the interviewee to quote it is not required, but the source must be acknowledged/cited by the researcher.

Publications

*Spoken History*

*Spoken History* is the original print guide to the material collected by the Oral and Pictorial Records Programme. Published in 1997, it was the product of the collaboration between Margaret Rouse-Jones, OPReP coordinator between 1983 and 1994 who created a legacy in building the program, and Mrs. Kathleen Helenese-Paul. The guide has been described as an “indispensable tool for researchers who need to be aware of this rich archive.”

*OPReP Newsletter*

The *OPReP Newsletter* is an extension of the program. Its publication began in 1988. It appeared quarterly up to 1994, and then bi-annually until December 2005, when it ceased due to staff constraints. Each issue of the newsletter carries a set format: there is a feature article, transcript excerpts
of an interview relating to the article, and other miscellaneous items. The newsletter reported on the activities of the program and therefore served as a graphic reminder to the academic community and contributors that the program should be embraced for its role of “adding to the pool of historical and oral evidence about Trinidad and Tobago.”

In 2006, all the newsletters from 1988 to 2004 were scanned and became available on the library’s webpage at http://www.mainlib.uwi.tt/divisions/wi/collmain/oprepweb/oprephome.htm. Here again there was a shift from a printed product to an online product, the 2005 publication having been issued only in an online format, thereby enhancing accessibility and visibility.

Lessons for Caribbean Libraries

There are many libraries in the Caribbean and elsewhere with similar collections of cassette tapes since this has been the standard procedure for gathering oral records. The digitization of oral history archives has to be well-thought-out. A digital laboratory, however rudimentary, with basic equipment and the required staffing is important. Apart from technical staff, there must be sufficient catalogers who can attach the metadata to the records in a timely manner, thereby facilitating their accessibility. Equipment needs to be versatile so that not only audiocassettes but videotapes and mini audiocassettes can also be converted. To a great extent, researchers are driving the process of moving to a mostly digital environment because with the advent of continually advancing technology, recordings are now created digitally. Appropriate software must also be taken into consideration and it is well advised to search the Internet for free software such as DSpace, which is an open-source tool.

This paper sought to give some insight into the process of converting one of the library’s special collections from an analog to a digital format. There are many challenges but they are not insurmountable, and efforts continue to be unflagging in order to ensure that the initiative remains strong.

NOTES

1. Margaret Rouse-Jones and Enid Brown, “Documenting Cultural Heritage: The Oral History Collections at the University of the West Indies,” in Documenting Movements, Identity and Popular Culture in Latin America: Papers of the Forty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials, ed. Richard F. Phillips (Austin, Tex.: SALALM Secretariat, 2000). This paper explores in detail the history and development of the oral history programs at the St. Augustine and Mona campuses of the University of the West Indies.

2. The Main Library at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, was renamed the Alma Jordan Library and marked by a ceremony on February 28, 2011.


4. Sir Ellis Clarke was the second and last Governor General of Trinidad and Tobago and the first President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 1976. He died on December 30, 2010.
5. Bridget Brereton, foreword to *Spoken History*, v.

6. Jamaica has two similar programs: the Social History Project, which is coordinated by the history department of the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica; and the Memory Bank Project out of the Institute of Jamaica.