

David M. Bynog and Jane Zhao

# Telling our own story

## Fondren Library's oral history project

On November 4, 2009, Rice University's Fondren Library celebrated its 60th anniversary. The university has been preparing for its centennial celebrations in 2012, so the library's milestone offered an opportunity for staff to celebrate and reflect on the importance of the library to the institution. A task force was formed in July, and members brainstormed ideas for projects to engage the community. Several projects resulted, including two exhibits, a panel discussion, a student party, and the opening of a Cafe-Press storefront. One other concept generated much enthusiasm from library staff: a video project capturing the oral history of staff members.

Video projects have been exploding around the country. In the 2008 Horizon Report, the New Media Consortium acknowledged grassroots videos as one of the key emerging technologies.<sup>1</sup> Fondren Library's Digital Media Center—which supports the use of multimedia in teaching, research, and creative expression by providing tools, equipment, and training for the university—has witnessed this explosion of interest in creating videos for classroom projects or for students' enjoyment. In 2009, two Rice students, Faheem Ahmed and Anish Patel, used resources at the Digital Media Center to create a video that won the "Oscar Correspondent Contest," sponsored by MTV's 24-hour college network and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. While the availability of the Digital Media Center's equipment and resources was a pivotal factor that allowed the library's oral history project to move forward, video projects can

be completed with as little equipment as a video camera, a microphone, a tripod, and a video editing computer station.

### Developing a focus

In addition to the proper resources, the project needed much more to move forward. Library staff had limited experience with video projects and had never organized a project of this magnitude. The first step was to consult with Rice University's manager of education technologies, whose department had completed an oral history pilot project for the broader campus. There were two particular topics that he advised on. The first was to think about how much editing the videos would require. The editing process is very labor intensive and would involve a substantial time commitment. To avoid lengthy editing, one alternative was to ask interviewees a few targeted questions and post the unedited videos. This approach can offer mixed results, particularly since many people have never been interviewed on camera.

His other suggestion was related to how to make the videos available. Video files can take up substantial server space and bandwidth, and a number of lengthy, unedited videos can tax any IT infrastructure. In addition to these two areas, he recommended that each interview be short—ideally five-to-ten minutes.

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After the initial consultation, it appeared that the biggest challenges would be the time needed for the post-production editing and the means to make the videos available online. It also seemed daunting to finish the project in less than three months. The team re-evaluated the motivation—and desired outcome—of this project. Fondren Library has many long-time staff members, and several recent retirees still live in the Houston area.

There was a concern that some of their collected knowledge and history would be lost, so capturing this information on tape was considered the most important goal. With that in mind, the team decided to move the project forward, even though it was uncertain that the project would be presentable in a desired format by November 4.

In addition to the project's historical value, the group also wanted the videos to be entertaining. The team formulated four general questions that were supplied to interviewees beforehand to help frame the interviews:

- What was it like working at Fondren when you first started?
- What major changes did you experience during your time at the library?
- Do you have any fond memories of Fondren to share?

- Do you have any amusing or unusual experiences to share?

## Videotaping

The team set aside two days in late September to schedule interviews, inviting a number of current and former staff members to participate. Parking was arranged for retirees to facilitate their participation. As a result, six retirees and 23 current employees chose to take part. A library study room was reserved as the recording studio and

a Sony HD camera, a heavy-duty tripod, a shotgun microphone, and a wireless microphone from the Digital Media Center were booked for the shooting.

While staff members had done some videotaping, we knew some professional help would make a difference. Assistance was sought from the audiovisual production specialist in the academic and research computing department, who videotapes many events on campus. He brought in his professional lighting kit and advised the setup of the room to create a friendly, supportive environment, which included lighting and props of a bookshelf and a plant in the background. The camera was set up to record in high-definition 1440 x 1080i mode, the wireless microphone was clipped to the interviewee's shirt, and the shotgun



Retiree Rita Marsales, preservation librarian (1959–61, 1963–2004), and Randy Tibbits, document delivery team leader (1983, 1987–present), were two of Fondren Library staff who participated in the oral history project.



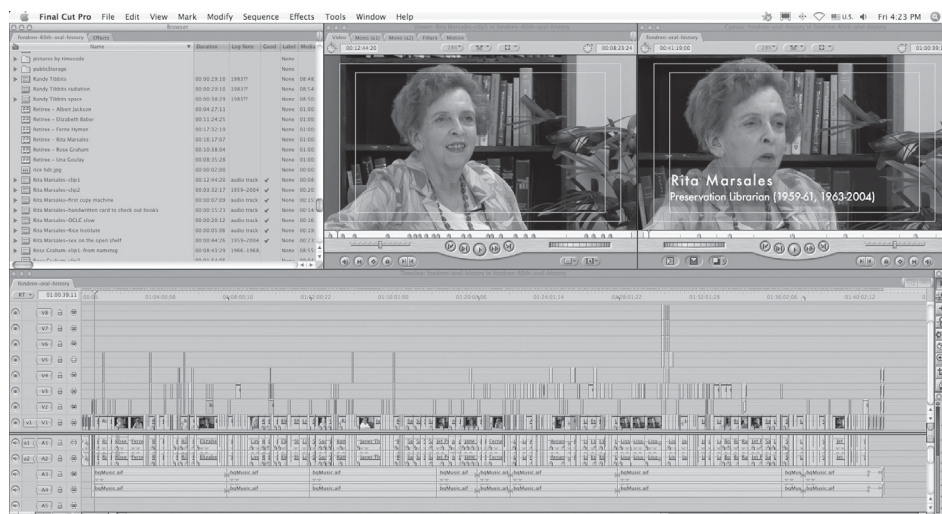
A recording session in progress.

microphone was placed three feet from the interviewee on a table. Each microphone recorded sound into a separate audio channel so that there was a backup if one of the microphones experienced a problem. The audiovisual production specialist was hired for five hours of videotaping on the first day, and library staff participated in all of the videotaping sessions to learn techniques, including microphone placement, the formulation of questions and areas for follow-up,

the recording. They felt comfortable in the recording scene and talked very naturally to the interviewers, which made the recording atmosphere very pleasant.

### The editing room

The taped interviews exceeded expectations in all aspects—the video was well exposed, the audio was clear, and the content was rich. The committee sensed that editing the raw footage into an integrated piece of



A final look at the project within the Final Cut Pro workspace.

and techniques to draw out responses from the interviewees. These techniques were useful for the portions that library staff were to film the second day.

The interviews were scheduled at 15-minute intervals, and 29 interviews were conducted over the course of two days. Each participant was asked to sign a release form before the recording session, which would allow us to use and edit the videos as needed. When a recording session started, the participants had the option to talk by themselves or answer questions from committee members. Most of the participants were amazingly well prepared for the interview. Not only did they dress appropriately, wearing colors that displayed well on film, but they came with organized thoughts (some even with their stories typed) for

video would be worth the effort. The initial thought was to produce a short, five-to-ten minute video that would not only include segments from the interviews, but also photos and other supporting media to enhance the story. The content was so abundant and captured the history of the library from the late 1950s to the present so well that we decided to go beyond the time limit, focusing on a chronological story not bound by any preconceived limit.

We asked committee members to review the raw footage and mark specific sections that were of historic interest or were entertaining, noting the timecode on the video. Next, staff at the Digital Media Center used the video editing software Final Cut Pro to capture all of the footage to the computer to begin editing. After watching the raw footage

several times and taking all of the notes from team members into account, a rough cut of a list of “talking heads” was put together. The rough cut story unfolded chronologically ranging from the early days, when books were checked out using handwritten cards, to the present, when patrons can search for and view materials online at their desktops. This time-consuming process took about two weeks to complete. A rough cut screening was called to see if the tone and flow of the story was right. It took another week to fine-tune the video and add still pictures and supporting media to enhance the story.

### Reception

The video was screened in its entirety in high resolution QuickTime movie format by staff on October 30, 2009. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive, with many staff unaware of much of the early history that was presented. The videos have been made publicly available via the library’s YouTube channel, posted to our Web site, and added to our digital repository. The high-definition original tapes and their corresponding down-converted standard definition DVDs were sent to our Woodson Research Center to be added as part of the university’s archives. The project was shaped by the very short timeframe, and it was completed through the dedicated efforts of many staff and students. There was a wonderful synergy from the project, which is what brought the project to completion.

### Experiences learned and shared

Our preliminary literature searching on oral histories did not offer many results, so we relied heavily on members of the Rice community with experience in video projects. For libraries who might be interested in a similar project, we hope that sharing our experiences will prove beneficial.

- **Use the best equipment available.**

The equipment we used consisted of a Sony HVR-Z1U camera, a Libec H37 fluid head tripod, an Azden WMS-Pro wireless microphone, a Sony electret ECM670 condenser

shotgun microphone, and a Kino Flo 4 bank fluorescent one light system. It was the best set we could get, and the equipment worked well together. The camera recorded excellent video, and the microphones recorded clear sound; this really made the final product stand out.

- **Bring in a professional touch when possible.** Although an audiovisual specialist was hired for only five hours of work, the professionalism he brought in made a huge difference. In one problematic example, we discovered after recording that a retiree’s hearing aid interfered with the wireless microphone we used, which made that sound track unusable. However, since there was a backup shotgun microphone connected to the camera recording into a separate channel, we were still able to use that precious footage. Without this experienced setup from the professional, that piece of footage might have been wasted.

- **Just do it.** At the very beginning, it seemed impossible to finish the project in such a short period of time. However, once the engine was started, things moved forward, sometimes at a speed you can’t imagine. As a result, we filmed about six hours of footage on seven tapes, and edited it into a 42-minute movie.

- **Group effort.** When a group of people work together, nothing is impossible. The volunteer hours that many staff and students devoted to the project truly brought the project to completion.

- **Tight time and limited budget.** Even with tight time and a limited budget, you can still make your project happen. The whole project took three months from planning to final movie delivery. The only monetary cost was the amount paid to the audiovisual specialist. Even if you need to invest in renting—or purchasing—equipment, this project is still very manageable.

### Reflection and future projects

Reflecting on the project, we feel it was a success even beyond the finished product.

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that the examples used by the librarian helped clarify the material.

- 82 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the worksheet that guided them through the research process was helpful.
- 79 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the instruction helped them write the biographical research paper and subsequent assignments.

The evaluation instrument asks students to describe the most beneficial part or parts of the session in their own words. Students have consistently identified these program benefits: the introduction to the variety of resources available through the library, the opportunity to do research for a paper with librarians present, and the tour of the library. Students also frequently say that the things they learned in these sessions helped them do research for other classes, and that they learned that the librarians are there to help them.

Students are also asked to identify any way in which the sessions could be strengthened. Students provided limited suggestions with two appearing most frequently: One, there are too many sessions, and two, there are not enough sessions. This response suggests that a three-session information literacy

program is appropriate for the information literacy objectives of the course.

## Conclusion

Framing the information literacy sessions around a biographical research paper allowed the librarians to create one lesson plan that works in each of the radically different sections of the FYE course offered every year.

This strategy ensures that all of the first-year students at Westminster are provided with the same foundation in information literacy and are introduced to the same types of resources, research strategies, and evaluation techniques, regardless of the theme of their particular FYE seminar.

Because the course instructors both choose the people their students will be researching and grade the resulting paper, the vast majority of students see the information literacy instruction as a helpful part of the Inquiry course—not unnecessary or a waste of time. And their evaluations indicate that they recognize that the skills they have developed in this course will be built upon throughout their college experience. Or as one student put it, “It taught me the basics of what I need to know for three more years.” *ZZ*

*(“Telling our own story” continues from page 243)*

Library staff came together for a cause that was both fun and significant, and it instilled a sense of pride in working at the library. Staff learned new skills, not only working with video equipment, but also with scanning and editing photos, project planning, and more. Additionally, a request for photos and other memorabilia to supplement the project yielded previously unknown historical material that we have added to our archives.

The edited oral history video as it stands represents only one possible outcome from the original interviews. The library will continue to investigate ways to use the existing footage, perhaps remixing other sections

into shorter videos, possibly for publicizing the work of individual departments. We view this project as only a beginning, and we hope to film more staff at a future date as we continue to tell our story.

## Resources

Fondren Library’s YouTube channel, [www.youtube.com/user/FondrenLibrary#](http://www.youtube.com/user/FondrenLibrary#).

Rice University’s Media Release Form, [edtech.rice.edu/Documents/MediaRelease.pdf](http://edtech.rice.edu/Documents/MediaRelease.pdf).

## Notes

1. New Media Consortium, *The Horizon Report: 2008 Edition* (Austin, TX: New Media Consortium, 2008), 10–12, [www.nmc.org/pdf/2008-Horizon-Report.pdf](http://www.nmc.org/pdf/2008-Horizon-Report.pdf) (accessed October 29, 2009). *ZZ*