

## The Importance of Digitizing Oral Histories By Deborah Hendrix

I am both a volunteer and part-time employee at the University of Florida's Samuel Proctor Oral History Program. I donate my time and expertise because I understand how oral history can enlighten the present generation, but, more importantly, can serve as an educational tool for future generations.

Conducting, maintaining, and preserving oral history interviews all represent long-term investments. Few people outside academia will ever have time to read through multiple transcripts. We live in an electronic age where we want answers fast. We must take advantage of the possibilities offered in today's digital revolution. These ongoing, rapid, and ubiquitous changes in information technology fuel how we choose to gather information, as well as how information is acquired. Electronic application to oral history is now a necessary part of the "Information Highway."

Thoughtful preparation is the key to successful oral histories. There is no replacement for traditional background research to prepare for an interview. But, in addition, a plan should be in place for user access. Interviews should now be recorded on digital recorders that are capable of capturing high quality audio. The resulting audio files would then be instantly available for transcription using a computer software program. Because we will then have high quality digitized raw audio files, those files become immediate archival material, perfectly poised to take advantage of yet-to-be imagined storage techniques. In short, more options come from a digitized format, such as increased overall productivity and output and the assurance of having a copy of the recorded audio interview safely stored in several places.

Digitized video files—versus audio files—are much less versatile because of file size. That lack of versatility, however, is sure to change as technology advances. The good news is that because video is now digitally recorded on tape, the problem inherent in analog video recording (resolution loss) in successive copies is all but extinct. We can maintain original quality with each copy.

Once digitally collected, audio interviews are easily converted to different formats and devices, including: a simple pocket flash drive, an mp3 player such as an iPod, an audio CD, a server's disk space, voice-over narration for a documentary or movie, or on a home computer. Obviously, these exciting possibilities exist only for the already digitized works. It is imperative that the existing analog recordings be digitized as soon as possible before their loss is permanent. We must not lose the voice behind the words.

An immense advantage in converting the interviews to a digitized form is access from a remote location via Internet connection, enabling unlimited potential use. The benefits of this access speak volumes. The archives of this Oral History Program alone could provide a researcher a lifetime of scholarly work—and be conducted off-site, perhaps thousands of miles away. Existing audio tapes, files, and the recent addition of video

recordings could provide a media documentarian the same opportunity but for different outputs. Even casual access by an interested Internet user fulfills the purpose of the archives: offering use to everyone. Who knows what digitized seed will be planted where? What is important is that these seeds exist. Text, images, and audio in digitized form, combined with a wide application of tools, allow creative format migration. From these digitized sources spring forth ideas created in the minds of its users. It is all here for the taking.

The archives of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program offer a wealth of knowledge that has not been paraphrased by those with impressive credentials. Oral histories speak directly to us in an undiluted form. Digital access is the key to illuminating our past for the future. We are in the position to pass on, intact, this recorded experience for future generations—information that will not be available anywhere else. We are working diligently to preserve these words, and that is why I volunteer at the University of Florida's Samuel Proctor Oral History Program.

<http://news.ufl.edu/2009/05/08/superior-accomplishment-awards-honor-top-uf-staff-and-faculty/>