Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists

January 1991

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Project Jukebox: An Innovative Way to Access and Preserve Oral History Records

Gretchen L. Lake

Project Jukebox is a multimedia workstation which brings audio, written, and photographic records to the researcher at the click of a computer mouse.

This article will introduce oral history curators, archivists, librarians, researchers, and others interested in the preservation and accessibility of oral history recordings to a fascinating project at the Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Project Jukebox is an exciting, unique approach to age-old problems of preservation, storage, and retrieval of oral history records. Using state-of-the-art technology, Project Jukebox allows a researcher to find an appropriate interview, to listen to the interview, to look at historical photographs relative to the interview, to locate the
site of the interview on a map, and when available, to read a transcript of the interview. The original records are not subject to damage from handling because the patron works from a digitized record on the computer.

The Oral History Collection

The Oral History Collection of the Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, contains over 6000 tapes onto which the stories of Alaska’s rich history have been recorded. The breadth and depth of this collection is best illustrated by some examples:

(1) Much of the history of Native Alaska is not written, but oral, passed down from generation to generation by the telling of stories. The collection contains over two thousand tapes representing all of Alaska’s native groups: Tlingit and Athabaskan Indians, Inupiaq and Yup’ik Eskimos, Aleuts, and others. It is the most extensive collection of Alaska Native oral history in the world.

(2) The collection contains the recordings of the Alaska Native Review Commission hearings.

(3) Tapes included in this rich collection contain recordings of many non-native pioneers, some of whom are still living (or were living until recently).
The collection contains recordings of politicians, miners, business persons, military personnel, pilots, nurses, teachers, and others who have helped to build Alaska's history.

(4) The collection includes the recordings of delegates to the constitutional convention held on the University of Alaska campus in 1955 prior to Alaska becoming a state in 1959. It also contains interviews with participants in the statehood movement.

The curator of oral history continues to seek out those who should have their stories or recollections preserved on tape. Grants from British Petroleum and others and the fact that many researchers now deposit copies of their field work interviews in the Rasmuson Library enables the collection to grow. Efforts have been made to identify collections at other institutions so that researchers can be referred elsewhere. The collection is a gold mine for the researcher. However, as with many oral history collections, problems lie in the access to these tapes and in their preservation.

What is Project Jukebox?

Project Jukebox is a multimedia workstation which brings audio, written, and photographic records to the researcher at the click of a computer mouse. The original idea of the project was to digitize the audio tapes onto a
compact disk, much as music is now recorded. Once the information was in a digitized form, computer programs could be written to allow access to and retrieval of the digital information. Next to the computer would be a stack of compact disks, and as the computer needed a particular disk, it would be read into the computer—just like the old phonograph record jukeboxes. It all sounds rather simple; however, it is not.

The idea for Project Jukebox came from the facile minds of two friends, an imaginative engineering management graduate student, Felix Vogt, and an energetic but understaffed curator of oral history, Dr. Will Schneider. Schneider told Vogt of his frustration in overseeing an ever-growing collection of oral history tapes (6000+) which were slowly deteriorating and not easily accessible. Vogt took those problems and turned them into his master’s degree project, "PROJECT JUKEBOX: Using Modern Technology to Preserve Endangered Recordings: A Feasibility Study." This study became the basis of a successful proposal for a 1990 Apple Library of Tomorrow grant.

Apple Computer, Inc.'s Apple Library of Tomorrow grant program assists libraries by giving them the hardware and software to make their creative, technological dreams come true. Five hundred libraries submitted proposals in 1990. Of the thirteen libraries which received grants only four were academic libraries. Project Jukebox was one of the projects funded.
Problems with Oral History Collections

Presently the preservation of audio tapes is labor intensive. Patrons listen to copies of the original tapes, in order to prevent wear on the original. Unless the tapes have been previously copied, the researcher must wait for a copy to be made.

In order to slow the deterioration process, the tapes must be physically turned (rotated on the shelf) annually. Since the deterioration of the tape itself and the magnetic data on it is inevitable, the tapes must be copied periodically onto new tapes. Each time a copy is made, a little of the original is lost, much like making copies of copies of photographs. This is the way of analog recording and copying.

There is also a problem of access to the information on the tapes. Patrons and staff have problems deciding which oral history tape is the one needed. Access to the tapes has been by an index which, although recently computerized, is cumbersome to use. Descriptions of the oral history tapes are being entered into a regional bibliographic database, WLN (formerly the Western Library Network). The index and WLN provide access at the tape level, that is, somewhere on this tape will be a reference to the subject the researcher wants. The researcher must still listen to the tape to find the information. Tape listening is an analog process. Unless there is a transcript of the tape giving the researcher the approximate location of the sought after passage, the researcher must listen to the tape from the beginning until he hears the needed passage.
Digital recording and copying, however, is different. Once a recording is digitized, each copy of it is as true as the original. There is no degradation from generation to generation. Project Jukebox takes advantage of that technology. The project's computer specialist, Daniel Grahek, wrote programs using the software provided by Apple Computer, Inc. to access the digital information. He also developed the screen and menus which the researcher uses to access to material.

As the project developed, other information was added to supplement the oral recordings. Outlines for the interviews or actual transcripts of the oral interview, historical photographs from the rich collection in the archives, and maps relating to the areas covered by the tapes were scanned onto the compact disk. When the interview is with a person who speaks an Alaskan native language, or any other foreign language, the transcript will be in both the original language and in English. Not all transcripts have been translated at this time, and there are not transcripts for all the tapes, but the capability to show both transcripts on the screen is available. With the addition of transcripts and outlines, historical photographs, and maps, the researcher could read the transcript or outline, see the interviewee, locate the area of the interview on a map, and hear the voice of the person interviewed. All the computer specialist had to do was make it all work.
Grahek used a variety of hardware and software products and developed programs of his own to make Jukebox work. A Macintosh IIX computer with a Digidesign AudioMedia card, an Apple Scanner, and erasable optical disks provided the main development tools. Apple Computer, Inc. gave the computer specialist access to their software design engineers and the use of their latest discoveries. The computer specialist used Hypercard, Freetext, and other software to develop the programs which would provide a user-friendly interface for the end user.

The workstations consist of a Macintosh SE/30 or Classic II computer, CD-ROM disk drive(s), and a Style Writer printer.

There were some administrative problems to solve as well. As holders of the trust of the donors of materials, the persons working on the project had to be certain that the rights of the donors were respected, and that any restrictions on the collections would be observed. This was accomplished in two ways. First, on the computer Grahek designed a release form which appears on the screen and requires that the researcher "sign" that he or she has read and understands the conditions (see Figure 1); the computer is programmed to keep a record of the signed release form. Second, the copy of the photograph used is only a "reference" copy, used much as a photocopy. If the researcher wants a better copy, he or she must order one from the archives or from the personal collection cited.

A fantastic jump into space age technology awaits the user when he or she sits down before the Jukebox workstation (see Figure 2). The computer screen asks what
type of search is desired (see Figure 3). Depending upon the answer given, the computer screen will show a list of index terms, a list of names, a list of places, or a series of photographs to view (see Figure 4). Using the computer mouse, one will "click" on those items of interest, and Jukebox will do the rest of the work to bring to the user the voices, photographs, and interview transcripts (see Figures 5 and 6). The photographs have captions to identify them, and when one "clicks" on an individual person in a group photograph, the image of the person is highlighted and a separate caption identifies the person (see Figure 7). A "click" on the map icon shows the geographic area in detail (in some cases one inch to the mile) (see Figures 8 - 12).

The Future of Jukebox

One year after the project was funded by Apple Computer, Inc., a prototype workstation was in place and being demonstrated to interested persons. The National Park Service became interested in Jukebox-type stations as a means of describing two of their Alaskan parks to visitors, residents, and employees. The Park Service funded a multi-year grant for the production of stand-alone workstations. The workstation for the Yukon-Charley National Park was being tested and demonstrated during the summer of 1992.

The North Slope Borough, which has its headquarters in Barrow, Alaska, became interested in using a Project Jukebox workstation to preserve and make accessible the
oral traditions of the natives in this northernmost region of Alaska. The borough funded a pilot project to access a portion of their collections. The Fairbanks Native Association and the Tanana Native Council (Tanana Indian Reorganization Act Council) have also made arrangements for using Project Jukebox technology to preserve oral histories from their region.

Unfortunately, most of these new projects do not address the problem of the 6,000 tapes in the oral history collection which are not being put on to CD-ROM disks. As funding becomes available, these tapes need to be copied to digital tape for long term preservation and access.

Dr. Schneider has demonstrated Project Jukebox to the National Oral History Association, the Smithsonian, and federal government funding agencies. However, in these times of fiscal restraint, there is less interest in awarding grants for reconversion projects than in new recordings. In other words, Schneider may be able to secure funding for new Project Jukebox workstations for other national parks, but not for the very necessary preservation work needed for the 6,000 tapes in the collection.

In discussing funding for preservation of oral history tapes with the author in June 1992, Dr. Schneider said that "this raises a critical question of priorities: How should funding agencies balance support for recording and preservation." He argues that "it is a disservice to everyone if we do not put our major support into preservation of what we already have that is valuable." He thinks that "a common point of agreement may be that all projects to do
new recordings should include funds for processing and
development of computer based user workstations."

The years ahead look promising for Project Jukebox
because it uses the new technology of tomorrow to make
the past more accessible to present and future generations.
While doing this, it is also doing the extraordinary work of
preserving the past in a form which guarantees
reproduction with integrity for time immemorial.

If you are interested in more information about Project
Jukebox, please call or write Project Jukebox, Oral History
Collection, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E.
Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks,
Fairbanks, AK 99775; 907-474-7261.

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Sources

The author wishes to thank Dr. William S. Schneider, and
Daniel Grahek, Oral History Collection, Alaska and Polar
Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library,
University of Alaska Fairbanks for sharing their expertise,
notes, and reports with her.


Return to Audio Card

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS
The Elmer E. Rasmuson Library
Fairbanks, Alaska 99775-1005

ORAL HISTORY
GIFT AND RELEASE AGREEMENT

I, Donald D. Chase, Box 64, Eagle, AK 99738, transfer to the
University of Alaska Rasmuson Library my title, interest, and copyright to
the interviews recorded with me on Aug. 26, 1991, to be used for scholarly
purposes.

[Donald D. Chase]
signature
8/27/91

(1/90)

Figure 1. Release screen (National Park Service).
Figure 2. Example of the welcoming screen (North Slope Borough).

Figure 3. Screen giving choices on how to search Jukebox (North Slope Borough).
Figure 4. Having chosen the "People" category, this screen shows all fifteen native elders interviewed for the project. "Clicking" on Greta Akpik will bring her interview to the screen (North Slope Borough).

Keywords:

1) how her family traveled on seasonal rounds when she was young, seasonal rounds, hunting, trapping, whaling, food preservation, Barrow

2) her earliest memories of camps, Ikpikpak, Mada River, Peyugvik, camps - Brower's, Alaqtar, Tashipak, Lake

3) her father's mother, and how her sister often stayed with her grandmother, Ulavuk, games - cards, diseases, rheumatism

Biography:

Greta and Walter Akpik lived in Atqasuk and both have had a lifetime of associations with the inland river systems. As a little girl, Greta recalls traveling with her parents on the rivers (Tape 1, Pg. 2) (Tape numbers refer to the numbering system utilized in Arundale and Schneider, 1987). She remembers the site of Alaqtar near the

Figure 5. The first screen of the Greta Akpik interview showing a photograph of Greta Akpik, the keywords to use to search through the interview, the transcript,
Greta Akpik - Atqasuk
March 14, 1982
Interviewed by Wendy Arundale
Cathy Demientieff, Transcriber and Translator of Transcription
Tapes 1 and 2

Wendy: This is Wendy Arundale and I'm talking to Greta Akpik in her home in Atqasuk on March 14, 1982 and we're going to talk a little bit about Greta's life and some of the things that happened to her when she was younger. Shall we start out and talk about some of the first things you remember as a little girl?

Greta: Yes. Should I talk Eskimo or talk in English a little? Maybe you won't understand me when I talk in English. I talk funny.

Wendy: No, that's fine. Maybe you could put it in Inupiaq and then kind of tell me what you've said so that I can know what to talk to you about next.

But I think that it would be nice to have some of it, at least, in Inupiaq.

Greta: You starting it? Oh, it's running. The first thing I remembered when I was a girl. We never stay in town, Barrow, because my father was a whaler and trapper. He never stay in town all the time, he always try to go hunting by boat, by dogteam. He usually had dogs, six or seven, all the time. He go not much, saving dogs. But he likes to hunt. He don't want us to be hungry all the time. He didn't raise us with money, with big money, he just raise us with hunting animals. People, those hunters never stay in one place all

Figure 6. The second screen of the Greta Akpik interview showing the transcript (North Slope Borough).

Figure 7. Example of a person being identified within a group photograph. The caption refers to the person highlighted (Demonstration Project).
Figure 8. "Places" screen showing the large map of the Barrow area (North Slope Borough).

Figure 9. Detail map of the Lower Chipp and Ikpikpuk Rivers area. The placenames are shown in Inupiaq and English. "Click" on a placename, and it is
Figure 10. "Places" screen showing the larger area. Eagle has been highlighted (National Park Service).

Figure 11. Detail map of Eagle, Alaska, at a scale of one mile to the inch. This screen also shows interviews available relating to Eagle (National Park Service).
Figure 12. Map of Jukebox sites. The numbers indicate the number of tapes included in each project.