



History Harvesting: A Case Study in Documenting Local History

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Abstract

As a case study for the practice and application of digital history in a mid-size university history department, this paper analyzes two History Harvest events undertaken in a split-level digital history course. By examining the results of two local History Harvests, specifically through participation of the greater community, outside the university, and the preservation and digitization of the local historical items, we discuss the impact history harvests can have on a community, as well as history students. The primary goal of both History Harvests outlined in this paper was to work with the local community surrounding the university to preserve pieces of local history. This article provides guidelines for conducting a History Harvest including suggestions for community outreach, local university involvement with the greater community, and digitizing issues that might occur while conducting the Harvest.

Introduction

As a component of regional education, a central mission of regional universities is to connect with the greater community surrounding the institution. As a potential member of the future workforce of a community, it is likewise important to provide opportunities for students to engage with people outside the university in meaningful and impactful ways to facilitate the creation of enduring relationships. Community engaged learning is a useful method for introducing and fostering these connections between students and the greater community. One way to accomplish this student-community engagement is to involve the community in the production of their own history through the organization of a History Harvest event. In a History Harvest, members of the local community are invited to bring their artifacts and family histories together in one place for the purpose of creating a historical collection. Usually organized around a particular theme, Harvest materials are typically arranged to create a digital repository documenting the community history based on the theme. 1

This paper explores two History Harvest events hosted by the Department of History at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) [ETSU 2022b], a mid-size regional university located in northeast Tennessee that has been serving communities throughout Western North Carolina, Southwest Virginia, and East Tennessee for over a century [ETSU 2022b]. Approaching this topic through the lens of digital history and community archiving, this paper offers a case study for engaging undergraduate and graduate students in the practice of digital history and community outreach while offering the local community the opportunity to participate in the creation of their history using History Harvest events. The final goals for the History Harvest projects are to share the results with the local community by creating a digital repository which will allow the community as well as scholars to make use of materials collected through the harvests. Some of the items mentioned in this study are also scheduled to be on display in the museum at East Tennessee State University. The long-term goal of this paper is that this case study will provide helpful guidelines to others wishing to involve their community and local universities in preserving their own history and reveal issues that might occur while conducting a Harvest. 2

Defining a History Harvest

The History Harvest movement began in 2010 to serve as an open-access, community-based project. The movement was created by William Thomas and Patrick Jones in the Department of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The goal of a History Harvest, according to its founders, is to “create a new model of undergraduate learning in the humanities that is team-oriented, student-led, community-based and integrated through digital technologies” and to “democratize history by creating public conversation about the materials of history and their meaning, as well as through the creation of an online public archive, which makes available new material — the artifacts of everyday life — for historical study” [Thomas and Jones 2013]. As such, a History Harvest can serve as a way for undergraduate and graduate history students to put the practice of history into action, as well as connect with the greater community. From a pedagogical standpoint, a History Harvest, according to their webpage, can serve as

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an innovative new authentic learning initiative. The collaborative, team-oriented, student-centered and community-based project seeks to create a popular movement to democratize and open American history by utilizing digital technologies to share the experiences and artifacts of everyday people and local historical institutions. [UNL 2022]

The “Harvest” means just that. The concept is that a team of public historians go out into the community and invite members of that community to bring artifacts they wish to share with the greater community. Community members are also invited to share their knowledge and experience with the artifacts that they wish to have shared onto the open-source website where the digital archive of the community collection will in turn serve as an open source for the purpose of public education. Although the movement began in the Great Plains region, the goal of the creators of the History Harvest movement is that the movement would spread across the US, allowing for a national digital archive [UNL 2022]. The digital collections contained on the History Harvest Project website serve as a repository for educators to use in their classrooms as well as a community archive containing the collective memories of local people.

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Community Archiving

Defining a community can be a daunting task. The variables are many and membership often crosses the traditional markers such as ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and geography, to include social justice issues. Community, for the purpose of this case study, is defined by geographic location and includes life-long residents and local business owners within Johnson City, as well as those living nearby in the Appalachian Highland region. Conducting a History Harvest allows for the introduction of new members into an existent community, in this instance, university students who may be living in the area just for the duration of their studies, planning to remain within the area after graduation, or are already life-long members of the community. As Richard Cox [Cox 2009] writes, “Community is seen by many to be an asset; to not belong to a community is a problem, a detriment to living out life to its fullest. The point here is that being part of some sort of community is deemed to be a normal part of humanity, and it is seen as an essential objective if one seems disconnected from a community.” Whether the members of the community are temporary or life-long, connection and investment in the community are the essential factors, no matter the duration of membership.

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The term community archive, likewise, is difficult to discern and is often used interchangeably with terms like “local history group, oral history project, community history project, and community memory project” [Flinn 2007]. Other scholars, when defining community archives emphasize, “the community or group’s own self-definition and self-identification by locality, ethnicity, faith, sexuality, occupation, ideology, shared interest or any combination of the above” [Flinn and Stevens 2009]. Community archives are deliberate and careful in their placement and role within an area or region and even their presence within a community suggests their social importance. For archival activists like Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez [Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez 2016], community archives formed as

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alternatives to mainstream repositories through which communities can make collective decisions about what is of enduring value to them, shape collective memory of their own pasts, and control the means through which stories of their past are constructed.

Jeanette Bastian [Bastian 2003] claims, the archives of a community are often a mirror of that society and are therefore

“evidence of the actions and transactions of the individuals within the community but also define the public consciousness of the community itself.”

As a primary component of the two History Harvests discussed in this paper, the goal was to connect history students to the greater Johnson City community through the process of digital history and community archiving to promote enduring connections while documenting the history of the area. The Harvest purpose here is closely related to Rebecka Sheffield’s [Sheffield 2017] point that, “Community archives grow out of the desire to collect documentary heritage that reflects our common identities, experiences, and interests.” As such, students gain a valuable learning experience which offers them knowledge about the practical aspects of conducting public history, history of the region, the value of history to the greater community, and the importance of members of the community giving voice to its own history.

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Purpose of History Harvest

The main purpose of a History Harvest is to preserve local historical items for future generations. The second purpose includes community outreach and community-based education. Thirdly, History Harvests can support and implement education initiatives for students and educators at all levels of learning. Finally, a History Harvest can help a local community connect to the larger American historical experience and explore those connections through the sharing of memory and preservation of history. Ultimately, a History Harvest allows individuals to create and preserve their community history. Faye Sayer [Sayer 2019], defines community history as “the engagement of a community, usually geographically determined, with their local history.” History Harvests encourage communities to participate in the sharing of not only individual history but also the combination of the individual and the local community history to form a more complete historical record.

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The History Harvest Project Scope

The History Harvest projects discussed here centered on two different themes, but with the same goal in mind. The overall purpose and scope of the Harvests was to get students and the local community involved in collecting and preserving local history. The first History Harvest, held in Spring 2017, was a component of an Instructional Development Grant awarded to members of the History department at East Tennessee State University. This Instructional Development Grant is a grant is meant to promote and support innovative teaching projects. The History Harvest project in Spring 2017 consisted of two components, a Digital History Course, and a History Harvest. The Digital History course, which ran in the Fall semester of 2016, offered a hands-on approach to history meant to introduce students to the use of digital tools and sources for the purpose of conducting original historical research, analyzing and interpreting findings, and communicating results.

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The theme of the Spring 2017 Harvest was “Preserving Southern Appalachia’s Tobacco Heritage.” The students from the Fall 2016 Digital history course were invited back to volunteer at the History Harvest by providing the skills and knowledge they learned about collection and digitization of historical items and documents. The second History Harvest in Spring 2019 was part of a larger project in collaboration with the city of Johnson City and East Tennessee State University to commemorate Johnson City’s Sesquicentennial celebration of the founding of the city [JCPL 2022]. The Spring 2019 Harvest’s theme was “Johnson City: Preserving Our Heritage.”

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The items collected from the 2017 and 2019 History Harvests consisted of documents, artifacts, pictures, and oral histories. After participants signed a consent form, the items were scanned or photographed then returned to the contributors with a digital copy of each item. Some items were donated to the Reece Museum [ETSU 2022d] and the Archives of Appalachia [ETSU 2022a], located on the campus of East Tennessee State University. The oral histories were recorded by a History Department faculty member, who followed up with the contributors to finalize the oral histories and submit them to the Archives of Appalachia for long-term preservation.

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Harvesting and Preserving History in Practice

A portion of the grant for the 2017 Harvest provided necessary equipment for the digital preservation of items brought to the History Harvest including a Canon digital camera complete with extra lenses, tripod, and storage case. The other

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items include two external hard drives to store the digital material and a bundle of USB drives used to store contributors' contributions digitally. Each contributor received a USB drive containing a digital image of the items they brought to the Harvest. The 2017 Harvest was held in the document room of the Sherrod Library at East Tennessee State University, which offered wide tables where items could be adequately examined, photographed, and cataloged [ETSU 2022c]. The room was set up to handle approximately 3 to 4 contributors at one time, which helped with wait time as well as flow to the other stations. The stations consisted of sign in, intake, photography, scanning, and oral history intake. The forms, including consent and deed of gift, were provided for the contributors as they moved through the stations. The director of both History Harvests invited students, faculty and volunteers to a training session which included training on the scanners, cameras, and other equipment needed to provide the digital preservation of items brought to the harvests. The labor for the 2017 harvest was provided by the undergraduate and graduate students that had taken the Digital History course during the previous semester as well as volunteers and faculty from the history department.

The 2019 Harvest workload was supported by graduate students, faculty, and library staff. The 2019 Harvest was held at the Johnson City Public library. The library provided a location for the Harvest as well as archivists to help evaluate and scan the items brought to the event. The library also provided two flatbed scanners and laptops for the harvest. The organization and set up of the 2019 Harvest were similar to the 2017 Harvest except for an extra station designated for the Reece Museum at East Tennessee State University. The museum director was present to evaluate the items that contributors requested to be donated.



Figure 1. "Pride in Tobacco" 45 vinyl record collected in 2017 Harvest. Picture taken by Rebecca Woodring



Figure 2. Framed Tobacco knife and braided tobacco collected at 2017 History Harvest. Picture taken by Rebecca Woodring.



Figure 3. Cigarette Pack Display collected at 2017 History Harvest. Picture taken by Rebecca Woodring.



Figure 4. John Sevier Hotel Register Box collected at 2019 History Harvest. Picture taken by Rebecca Woodring.



Figure 5. John Sevier Hotel Keys collected at 2019 History Harvest. Picture taken by Rebecca Woodring.



Figure 6. Railroad retirement watch collected at 2019 History Harvest. Picture taken by Rebecca Woodring.

Challenges/Recommendations

The 2017 History Harvest was supported by an instructional development grant through East Tennessee State University, which allowed for purchasing of equipment that was not readily available at the institution. Although the institution provided most of the needs for the Harvest other challenges arose during the process including issues dealing with the logistics, greater community, technical and operational issues. The largest issue for this Harvest was the timing of contributors arriving at the staging area. The contributors were scheduled for morning or afternoon appointments but on the day of the Harvest, most of the contributors arrived in the morning session, even though they had confirmed an afternoon time slot with the director. The result of this issue was the contributors had to wait in line at the sign-in and intake stations and therefore put more strain on the workflow at the other stations. This problem could have been avoided if some face-to-face appointments, including confirmation of arrival time, were made with the contributors prior to the start of the Harvest.

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The 2019 History Harvest did not have the scheduling issues of the previous Harvest, but did experience issues related

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to production and workflow stemming from lack of proper equipment. The public library was the venue for this Harvest as well as providing most equipment needed to scan and digitize the items brought in by contributors. The library provided two flatbed scanners to use for the digitization of documents. Unfortunately, the equipment was not up to date enough nor quick enough to offer efficient workflow. This issue, as with the first Harvest, caused a backup of intake and processing stations, which led to the contributors waiting to get their items scanned and examined. Most of these issues could be resolved if the Harvests were done more traditionally. Most History Harvests do not digitize the items contributors bring to the harvest at the time of collection. The items are dropped off/collected, or donated, (donation can sometimes be a requirement) then the digitization process takes place later in a more controlled environment. The advantage this Harvest had that the 2017 Harvest did not have was the availability of two professional archivists from the public library to help scan and evaluate the items brought in by the contributors. The addition of the archivist freed up the director to manage other issues if they arose during the Harvest.

Discussion

The implications of collecting and preserving local history have been presented, but it is also imperative to discuss the goals of the project that pertain to transferable skills, student and community collaboration, as well as community outreach. Students enrolled in the digital history course learned transferable skills like scanning materials, uploading/saving files, preservation techniques, organizational and technical skills. The students that came back and volunteered to work at the first Harvest gained experience with community outreach and collaboration with local businesses in the community. They also were able to apply the technical skills they learned in the digital history course while learning organizational skills pertaining to public history and archival studies. The Harvests themselves brought together people of the local community, which extended to neighboring states. The first Harvest contributors came from neighboring states of Tennessee to share their experiences of growing and selling tobacco, like Western North Carolina and Southwest Virginia. This allowed the contributors to interact with new people and some they had not seen in years because they were brought together by their love of tobacco.

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The goal of the second Harvest was to bring together the local community surrounding the university to collect items pertaining to the city's 150th anniversary. Community outreach was the most important skill learned from this Harvest. The contributors were residents of the city, and some had a connection with the university. But the connection between the contributors was not seen in this Harvest like it was for the first Harvest. The contributors brought mostly family related items that in some way connected to the city. But other relationships were formed between the community and the university, as well as between university departments. Through the outreach process of the Harvest, businesses in the community contacted the director of the Harvest to see if the university would be interested in not only digitizing the material they had, but also wanted to form a collection in the university's archive. The university archive, Archives of Appalachia, acquired a large collection of photos from the local electric company that had been taking pictures of sites they had worked on since the early 1900s. Internal university departments also forged new cooperative relationships. The history department reconnected with the archives and the museum on campus to work together on the second Harvest which resulted in more collaboration and new exciting ways the departments could create other collaborative events.

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It is the hope of everyone involved in these projects that harvests and the engagement of students with the Digital History course can continue with help of the university and the local community. Future plans for the material collected in the 2017 and 2019 include displays in the Reece Museum, located on the East Tennessee State University campus, as well as a possible traveling exhibit. There are also plans to create an online exhibit so students can have access to the materials as examples for future collections plus allow the local community to enjoy the collections. Making the Harvest materials readily available to the public as an open-source platform is also a primary tenant of the conducting a History Harvest we wish to honor. The cases presented in this discussion were a unique experience in collecting and preserving local history. Although both cases had their own successes and complications, they both provided a connection between the university and the local community that will continue to grow into the future and hopefully be a shining example of community outreach and collaboration.

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Conclusion

Conducting a History Harvest combines elements of community archiving and the practice of digital history, creating a powerful dialog for future generations to build upon. As a component of pedagogy and best practices, the relationship generated between university students and members of the greater community facilitate community engagement and community-based learning experiences. In addition, the type of community-based learning a History Harvest creates gives students the opportunity to practice history. Since students at the Harvest are responsible for gathering memorabilia and hearing stories from members of the community as they share their heirlooms, the sharing of authority, according to Fien Danniau [Danniau 2013], allows discourse between historians and “the experiences and interpretations of the public.” The practice of digital history, when intertwined with tenets of community archiving offers “ways for communities to make shared, autonomous decisions about what holds enduring values, shape collective memory of their own pasts and control the means through which stories about their past are constructed” [Caswell et al., 2017].

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