

[work-in-progress]

Texas Legacy

David Todd, Conservation History Association of Texas

Since 1997, after a career as an environmental lawyer, I have led the Conservation History Association of Texas in documenting the lives and contributions of veteran environmentalists in Texas. Our collection now contains over 400 hours of streaming videos and audios, representing interviews with more than 220 individuals involved in environmental stewardship, including scientists, activists, ranchers, farmers, politicians, ministers and others, hailing from 60 communities in Texas. The archives of the project may be found in digital form at www.texaslegacy.org, or in print form at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas.¹ In addition, a collection of excerpts will be published by Texas A&M University Press in fall 2010 as *The Texas Legacy Project: Stories of Courage and Conservation*.

The oral history approach is well-suited to the collection of fine-grained, locally-focused, long-term, first-hand information about complex issues, including environmental concerns. A variety of oral history efforts have been made to successfully chronicle perspectives on nature, activism for environmental protection, and work for ecological restoration.² However, oral history, whether for environmental or other applications, has long struggled with a particular shortcoming. Oral history's very strength in the detail and complexity of its first-hand stories in turn creates problems with finding relevant information. Oral history suffers from the proverbial "needle in a haystack" problem. A given oral history project may have hundreds of hours of recordings, on a variety of subjects, contributed by a diversity of interviewees, collected on a multiplicity of dates, at a slew of different sites. How can a user then sort through all this diverse material, and successfully find, collate and collect useful items of interest?

¹ A Guide to the Conservation History Association of Texas, Texas Legacy Project Records, 1981-2008, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utcah/00514/00514-P.html>, accessed 11 September 2009.

² See Sierra Club Oral History Series regarding leaders in environmental advocacy, <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/subjectarea/natres/sierraclub.html>, accessed 11 September 2009, and "Environmental Transformations in North Carolina," <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/environment.html>, accessed 11 September 2009, regarding highway and transportation impacts. Also, Hugh A. Robertson and Tara K. McGee, "Applying local knowledge: the contribution of oral history to wetland rehabilitation at Kanyapella Basin, Australia," *Journal of Environmental Management* 69 no. 3 (November 2003), 275-87; and Charles H.W. Foster, ed., *Twentieth-Century New England Land Conservation: A Heritage of Civic Engagement* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009).

This searching problem was difficult enough with historical texts, particularly in hard-copy versions. However, the searching challenge has become even more frustrating with audio and video. For years, a video or audio user has had to physically visit the archive site, arrange and wait for the cartridges, tapes or reels to be retrieved, and then face the possibility that those recordings had become unplayable due to media corrosion and/or player obsolescence. If the recordings were accessible and usable, and even if general metadata for the particular reels proved initially helpful, then finding the exact time slot when the relevant words were spoken could still prove to be very slow and trying.

The Texas Legacy Project tackles these access and search problems, and seeks to open up the promise of the text and database files, as well as these A/V materials, that provide the full meaning of our oral history recordings. With a good deal of trial and error, we found several solutions that helped our project. Our starting point, like that of many of our colleagues, has been to digitize our material to allow it to be posted publicly on the Internet, to access Web-based tools, and to provide for easy replication and storage in-house. Our recording's text files, html pages, *.jpg and *.png images, *.mp3 and *.wav audios, raw *.dv videos, and compressed Real Media and QuickTime *.mp4 h.264 videos are held on 18 pairs of duplicate hard drives. They are also posted on our website and are gradually being converted to backup tape. These duplicate and easily replicable files give us comfort that the information will be available for the long term, even as storage devices may wear out or become obsolete.

Once the recordings are digitized and mounted on an Internet site, a number of great search tools become available to public users. While posting indices and metadata for an archive's holdings is helpful, we would urge posting the actual files, whether as streaming or downloadable records, in order that users can have immediate access to the raw materials of your collection. Simply having this high level of web access is perhaps the most important step toward having better search capabilities.

Sometimes, the first level of search is a crude one – to find the gist of an interview. While reading and recapping a transcript will certainly work in this regard, it is also interesting to see what a more mechanical and objective summary might yield. For this, we have had success with the Java-based word cloud generator developed by IBM,³ which presents words that appears in a given text by their frequency. The word cloud below is for an interview with an oceanographer, as you might guess from the larger-font words:

³ Word-Cloud Generator, <http://www.alphaworks.ibm.com/tech/wordcloud>, accessed 12 September 2009.

At a more in-depth level, we have developed a method of drilling down into the archive by using a SQL database, converted from an Excel spreadsheet containing an extensive (over 17,000 lines and 15 variables) log of our interviews.⁵ These searches differ from the Google-driven explorations in that they are keyword-driven, more conceptual and interpreted in nature.

Narrator: Narrator Interview Logs Search Engine

Career: The Conservation History Association of Texas logs each interview we conduct, marking the narrator, reel, time, place, topic, and a short description for each one- to two-minute passage in the interview.

City:

Topic: Please use the search fields to the left to help explore the interviews, and find out more about these narrators' lives, their views of the Texas environment and their contributions to conservation work.

Narrator	Career	City	Date	Reel	Timecode	Topic	Description
Stahl, Carmine	Teacher, Botanist, Minister	Houston	1997-02-23	1003		water pollution	subdivision sewage treatment plants dumping untreated waste into creeks
Suter, Pat	Chemist, Teacher	Corpus Christi	1997-03-02	1006		water	first became active over TX water plan; defeated in vote; Choke Canyon dam, Texana
Suter, Pat	Chemist, Teacher	Corpus Christi	1997-03-02	1006		water	dam releases of water into Nueces Bay & shrimp production, shrimpers organize!
							current drought

A fourth tool is provided by the MIT open software Exhibit,⁶ which has allowed us to build an environmental history timeline, and show its searchable results, in a clear graphical way.⁷ The timeline is very useful in hitching particular interviewees' experiences and comments to the historical context of the era, and in teasing out the causal relationships between larger historical forces and causes, and individual lives and projects.

⁵ The Texas Legacy Project: Narrator Interviews Log Search Engine, <http://www.texaslegacy.org/txdb/chatlog.php>, accessed 12 September 2009.

⁶ Exhibit: Publishing Framework for Data-Rich Interactive Web Pages, www.simile-widgets.org/exhibit, accessed 11 September 2009.

⁷ The Texas Legacy Project: Environmental History Timeline, http://www.texaslegacy.org/bb/timeline_sort.html, accessed 11 September 2009.

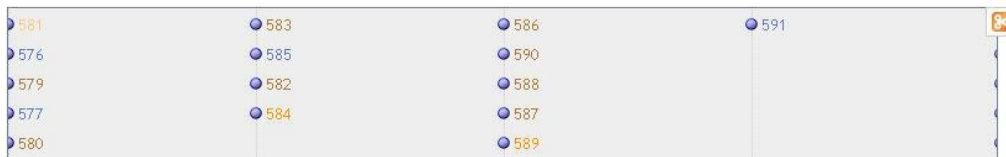
ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY TIMELINE

This timeline summarizes important economic, technological, political and natural events that have influenced environmental events in Texas, the U.S., and globally. The timeline allows you to filter and sort by time, event, and region. Please explore!

Search and Sort Features

Region	Topic	Time
119 International	5 Treaty	1 1388
3 International, United States of America	12 Water	1 1640
230 Texas	1 Water Pollution	1 1681
2 Texas, United States	1 Water Pollution, Technology	1 1690
14 Texas, United States of America	3 Water, Agencies	1 1729
6 Texas, United States	4 Water, Dams	1 1735
	1 Water, Dredging	1 1739

Scrolling Timeline



A fifth tool for searching the archive is geographical, using MIT's Simile software, tied in with the Google Maps resource, to show the locations of our various narrators, and to provide some metadata about those interviews.⁸ These geographical searches are very useful, showing the connections among narrators who might share a river basin, airshed, or ecozone.

NARRATORS BY LOCATION



Al Brothers ([link](#))

label: Al Brothers

type: Narrator

URI: <http://www.texaslegacy.org/bb/item#Al%20Brothers>

address: Berclair, TX 78107

subject: Wildlife manager

addressLatLng: 28.542565,-97.624807

⁸ The Texas Legacy Project: Narrators by Location, http://www.texaslegacy.org/bb/regions/regions_narrators.html, accessed 11 September 2009.

Finally, the sixth and perhaps most powerful search tool that we have been able to put to use is the Glifos rich media program. Glifos allows us to merge Flash-served video or audio with keyword-driven databases, word-for-word interview transcripts and interactive maps. In this way, we manage to retrieve the gestures and inflection found in video and audio, the topical search strengths of metadata's keywords, the verbatim search abilities of text, and the important aspects of place.⁹ Further, Glifos is a password-protected, multi-platform, wiki-based program, allowing large yet directed, collaborative efforts on annotating video. Cooperation in this way is perfect for oral history projects, where an interviewee, interviewer, transcriber, editor, teacher, or other user is now able to edit or make comments on numerous recordings.

Reel 2283 Interview with Marvin Legator

Layout: [] [] [] []

Transcript

ML: Yeah, it was amazing b...
that time you could walk int...
embryology dep...
was in charge i...
about chemical...
and, yeah, yea...
hands. They h...
We were very f...
Phocomelia and...
such a rare thir...
up by a clinici...
and we could p...

Places

- University of Texa... Galveston, Texas
- Shell Oil in Modes...
- Food and Drug Ac... Bethesda, Maryla...
- Dow Chemical in f...
- Brown Universit... Island
- Texas City, Te...
- Pasadena, Te...
- Brin Refining...

Contents

- Interview and reel 2283 start
- ⊕ Career
- ⊕ Genetic toxicological research
- ⊕ Assistance to industrial neighb... affected by toxic exposure
- ⊕ Toxicologic research issues
- End of reel 2283

12:42 / 62:55

Mark Video Segment: begin 00:00:00 end 00:00:00 play

& Share Mail Video Copy Bookmark more...

Transcript, places and table of contents annotated by David Todd, June 12, 2009 - J

We hope that you might find some of these tools useful in making your own oral history work more accessible. Please contact me at dtodd@wt.org with any questions, or with your own insights on how to better search and use oral history.

⁹ The Texas Legacy Project: Video: Rich Media, <http://www.texaslegacy.org/bb/richmedia.html>, accessed 11 September 2009.