1-2017

Online Collections in Local Historical Societies: A Case Study Project

Veronica Johnson
Wayne State University

Assistant Editor: Joanne Kaczmarek, University of Illinois. Contact Joanne at jkaczmar@illinois.edu
if you would like to guest author a column or have a good idea to share.

Online Collections in Local Historical Societies: A Case Study Project

By Veronica Johnson, MLIS Student, Wayne State University

Historical societies, both local and state based, have been a driving preservation force in the United States since the late eighteenth century. As museums and larger archival repositories are steadily moving their collections online, many local historical societies, particularly smaller ones, have fallen behind and are not taking advantage of the Internet to increase access to their collections. Local historical societies tend to focus on collecting and preserving their items rather than on providing online access. Cities and states could be in danger of losing a record of their culture if historical societies do not make materials accessible to the general public in an online platform. In this article, I present my observations from a case study involving the Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society (GWB) in Michigan and its efforts to create an online presence.

Making Hidden Collections Available to a Larger Audience

A review of the literature uncovered very little information about historical societies and their online collections. Authors tend to focus their research more on museums and libraries providing web access to users through various means. One article that proved useful in understanding options for online collections of historical societies focused on implementing PastPerfect for the Special Collections of the Kentucky Library and Museum. The Kentucky Library purchased PastPerfect software to accession and catalog incoming acquisitions and to reach a broader audience by providing online access to its materials. The goal for the library was to make its hidden collections available to clients in a single, easy-to-use database.[1] The software proved to be a good fit for the library as it had the flexibility needed to handle the range of materials housed in the museum, and it allowed for description at all levels opening the collections up to the public.[2]

Created in 1996, PastPerfect provides collection management software for museums and historical societies. It has six main components: Accessions, Objects Catalog, Archives Catalog, Library Catalog, Photographs Catalog, and People Biographies. It can track loans, exhibits, volunteers, and fund-raising campaigns. The software has a number of built-in report capabilities, and the Archives Catalog is further subdivided to provide for the cataloging of maps, music, oral histories, archives, and manuscripts. Finding aids can be generated easily and quickly for patrons in-house or as stand-alone web pages at any point during processing.[3]

The Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society of Michigan

The Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society of Michigan (GWB) offers a number of resources to the local community including tours to Apple Island and a variety of events promoting its collections and exhibits, both in the museum and through online resources. A great deal of community involvement and interest in the history of West Bloomfield exists, and yet a shortage of volunteers and staff makes it difficult to enhance the society's online presence. The GWB decided to present its collections online to promote them to the local community and the general public because of its limited museum hours. (It is only open to the public one day a month, the second Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m.) The GWB uses the Dublin Core data structure standard for collection and object descriptions in its database.

The director of the GWB explained that 7,000 of the society's photos were digitized and added to its website over five to seven years ago. The previous president of the society developed a website and had a majority of the photos scanned, but the only information available to include about them was that on the back of each photo. The donors of the records provided no additional information. The metadata schema for the object records only included the object ID, collection title, subject, and date. Some of the photos have more metadata than others such as the photo of a retirement party that thoroughly describes the photo and gives the date, the collection title, and the category. A lot of the metadata that does exist for the items may be incorrect. Metadata about the GWB collections are not stored in any specific database but added as custom posts through WordPress. A museum collection index lists the various archival collections categorized by schools, cities, and other areas specific to Keego Harbor, Orchard Lake, Sylvan Lake, and West Bloomfield, but provides no other information.

While the GWB collections are online, they still lack some of the necessary elements needed to increase usability.

Missing elements include in-depth metadata and online finding aids. In-depth metadata help make items searchable beyond the organization's website. Online finding aids provide for browsing and discovery of the collections. A reliable database and repository are also necessary to support catalog information for the digitized items as well as storage for the digital images. With this in mind, the GWB decided to convert its entire collection from its old database to PastPerfect to create better access for users.

In 2004, the GWB board of directors purchased Past-Perfect version 3 and transitioned all collection metadata over to the software. In 2013, they upgraded to version 5. In 2015, the board of directors approved a budget to purchase PastPerfect Online to support online searching.

The process of moving the existing digital images to PastPerfect as well as completing the scanning process for items not previously digitized has proven to be difficult for GWB staff. At the time of this writing, only about 100 items out of over 7,000 have had their metadata entered into PastPerfect. The GWB also acquired 1,000 photos from its School History project, an ongoing project to document the history of area schools in West Bloomfield Hills. Another 134 photos of the West Bloomfield tornado in 1976 were also donated to the society.

Recommendations

The GWB will need to seriously consider putting together a specific migration plan to move the items online. The Kentucky Library and Museum faculty developed a PastPerfect Task Force to design objectives and develop guidelines for utilizing the software for its collections. The GWB should consider doing this and also seek out advice from other local historical societies that have implemented PastPerfect Online. The Leelanau Historical Society and the Tri-cities Historical Museum, both in Michigan, are just a few local historical societies that have deployed PastPerfect Online. Potential partnerships between larger historical societies and GWB would be beneficial because it could aid the society in its goals of continuing to preserve historical items and having an online presence for its collections. The larger historical societies could team up with volunteers from GWB and show them how to use PastPerfect and demonstrate ways in which they could market their archival materials to a larger audience. Also, acquiring grants from local organizations or utilizing fund-raising techniques such as those presented by the online fund-raising website Kickstarter[4] could help GWB get the funds to support the work needed to transfer the items from its current database to PastPerfect.

Overall, the Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society has a long way to go in terms of successfully transferring its digitized items into the PastPerfect online database, but it is taking steps in the right direction. The director reached out to Wayne State's School of Library and Information Science to find an intern to help with transferring the images to PastPerfect. The help of interns throughout the next few years could expedite moving the items online. Once interns are hired to work on transferring the images, they might also serve as guides to teach the volunteers more about metadata management and creating online exhibits.

Conclusion

It is crucial for local historical societies to get help to make their collections accessible online. Fewer people are taking the time to physically visit local historical societies and instead prefer to view and research archival materials online. Web marketing is a crucial factor in the success of many organizations, and local historical societies are no different. Therefore, adding an online platform for a society's archival materials can only reinforce the value of the historical society by making a city's culture more accessible to a broader audience. But doing so should be undertaken in a thoughtful manner to best understand the collections and, ultimately, local history.

Notes:

1. S. Lathrop, S. L. McDaniel, and N. Richey, "Exposing Ourselves: A Case Study in Collection Management Software Implementation," *The Southeast Librarian,* 58, no. 1 (2010): 3.

2. Ibid., 8.

3. PastPerfect Online, www.museumsoftware.com/online.html, accessed October 24, 2016.

4. Kickstarter Online Fundraising, www.kickstarter.com, accessed: October 24, 2016.