Digital oral history: Using the Web to give history new life

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Between 1959 and 1985, Becker Medical Library recorded more than 50 oral histories of Washington University’s faculty on reel-to-reel audiotape. Although the audiotapes were transcribed, nothing else was done with them and the oral histories were essentially forgotten – hidden away in archival boxes. During the past year, the oral histories have been digitized and presented, with their transcripts, on the Web. Being able to hear the voices and see pictures of the interviewees has given new life to Becker Library’s oral historical materials and led to new interest in medical history in oral format.

### Analog to Digital

- Sound waves are converted through sampling into bits.
- Sampling rate of 44.1 kHz at 16-bit resolution using Cool Edit (now Adobe Audition)
- Saved as uncompressed WAV files
- Converted to compressed MP3 files for Web delivery

### Conversion of analog resources into digital resources:

- Provides increased access
- Allows universal distribution using Real Player, Windows Media Player, or QuickTime
- Preserves your unique resources in a mutable format

### Interviewees include:

- Medical librarian Estelle Brodman
- Nobel Laureate Carl Cori
- Nobel Laureate Joseph Erlanger
- Nobel Laureate Daniel Nathans
- Brigadier General Crawford F. Sams

### Considerations:

- Cost in time and money – Transcription is time-consuming
- Word-for-word transcription – How essential is verbatim transcription?
- Copyright, permissions, privacy issues

### Future Enhancements:

- Add new oral history interviews
- Add videotaped interviews
- Make audio podcasts available
- Add search functionality
- Further linking to related resources

### Results:

Interest in the history of Medicine is growing at Washington University. Since this project started, six new interviews have been conducted. Three more are scheduled, and at least five more prospective interviews are being negotiated.