Background

The 'Voice of Time' oral history project was produced as a Bicentennial project in Coffs Harbour between 1986-1987. $82,000 in grants were used to complete the original project.

150 interviews were produced, totalling over 160 hours of audio. Material produced consisted of 2-track audio cassettes, interview summaries (most with photographs of the interviews) and topic indexes.

Three copies were made: master copy held by Coffs Harbour City Council; copy held by the Library, and another copy held by the Coffs Harbour Historical Museum. Unfortunately the master copy was lost, possibly in the Coffs Harbour town centre flooding in November 1996.

The copies of the original documents are of a reasonable quality except that all the photos are photocopies and have not reproduced very well. They have all since been scanned and added to the online database.

In establishing a Local Studies collection at the Library several years ago, it was decided to digitise the oral history collection for preservation purposes and to improve public access. Making the material accessible on the web was an early objective in regards to public access.

Digitisation

The digitisation project began in 1999, with research conducted into current literature on the topic - in particular, what digital audio formats to use.

In 1999, there wasn't a large amount of information published on the topic and there was a lack of consensus at the time on the best formats to choose. The best technical advice at the time came from the Oral History section at the National Library of Australia.

Volunteers were selected and began converting all of the interview summaries into standard Microsoft Word format.

Converting the audio from analogue to digital would have to wait though, due to the costs involved – grants were sourced to fund this process.

Audio digitisation began in 2001, on receiving $1,500 in funding from the Royal Australian Historical Society.

It was decided to convert the tapes to CD format, as this was so widely used and allowed for simple playback for anyone that had a CD player. 2 CD-format copies
were to be made (one for public use within the library and the other as a master copy). The supplier was also contracted to insert tracks every few minutes to allow for quick navigation within the interview recording. Each track was also to be converted by the supplier into MP3 files and also copied onto to CD for future use on a web server for network access.

The MP3 audio file format was chosen for web access due to its growing widespread popularity and because it is based on a quasi-Internet standard - MPEG (layer 3). In retrospect this turned out to be a very wise decision considering the huge use of this digital audio format nowadays!

Quotes were obtained from local sound studios to undertake the work and a supplier was selected. It was decided to use a local studio as it would make communication easier, provided for better security of original cassettes in-transit, and it supported the local community.

Further funding to continue with the audio digitisation was received in Local Special Projects Grants from the Library Council of NSW; $4,500 in 2002 and another $4,500 in 2003.

Audio digitisation was completed in 2004. This left making the material available online via the World Wide Web.

**Web access**

Three options for web access were originally considered:
1. Web-site using static web (HTML) pages.
2. Web-site using database-driven content (dynamic web pages).
3. Use existing Library Management System database (Web Catalogue) with some static web pages.

Option 3 was selected for the following reasons:
- Uses the existing Library Management System - Spydus (Civica Pty Ltd), no additional software or hardware required – immediate cost savings.
- Database-driven content based on library data structures with Web interface (public web catalogue).
- Web Catalogue interface is very effective.
- Can be reasonably customised – at a cost.
- Uses MARC record format for interview summaries, with extensive use of the note fields (5XX tags) for summary info.
- Allows for full keyword searching and the use of hypertext (web) linking of headings (eg. topic headings).
- Library staff were familiar with the system allowing for them to easily assist in data entry.

Converting the interview summaries into library catalogue records, linking them to selected MP3 audio snippets and accessioning all of the material was going to take considerable technical effort though.

The Library was successful in obtaining a Library Development Grant from the Library Council of NSW at the end of 2005 for $10,500 to complete the project. The

bulk of this funding was needed to pay part-time librarians to catalogue the interviews into our Library Management System and physically process the tapes and CDs. It also allowed for the Library’s online catalogue to be customised and a special ‘Oral History Database’ search interface created. A portable CD player was also purchased for use within the Library.

The cataloguing work was completed earlier this year and the remaining ‘odds and ends’ completed in September 2007. Following the official launch of the ‘Voice of Time’ Online by the Mayor of Coffs Harbour, Cr Keith Rhoades AFSM, on 20 Sep 07, the material will be fully accessible to the community.

To access the Voice of Time Online visit: www.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au/citylibrary

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