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An Examination of
The Alberta Folklore and Local History Collection:
A Digital Library

Project Background

The Alberta Folklore and Local History Collection (or AFLHC), located at <http://folklore.library.ualberta.ca/>, is a wonderful example of what can be done with a digital library (DL). The materials which are displayed on the website are all housed in the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library, which is part of the University of Alberta. Therefore, this project was conceived as a way to both digitally preserve, globally share, and logically organize the physical resources which can be found and accessed at a real library. While hard copies are certainly not a necessary prerequisite for DL creation, the AFLHC is a sturdy bridge between the physical and digital worlds, and displays strong potential for the future of DLs.

The AFLHC was begun as a project under the umbrella “Our Future, Our Past: the Alberta Heritage Digitization Project” (ADHP). Funding for the AFLHC comes from its parent project, and both were created by the University of Calgary Press, in partnership with several other museums and archival associations. The digitization project was begun in order that “historical materials, some previously difficult for the public to find, are placed on [the Alberta Heritage Digitization Project] web sites to further historical research by scholars, students, and all interested in Alberta’s rich and diverse history” (University of Calgary, 2008).

In recent years, the project directors have seen a strongly increasing interest in local history across Canada. Thus, the goal of the Digital Local Histories Project (a Canada-wide initiative, which includes the ADHP) is “helping Canadians to better understand our nation’s diverse history” (University of Calgary, 2002). To this end, all content is freely accessible to the public.

Significantly, the project material is also vetted by a panel of experts for content and reliability; this is in line with the guidelines put forth by NISO (2011). Curation and verification are important aspects of any digital library, as the public should be inclined to value the resources of a digital library as equivalent to those in a brick-and-mortar one. Researchers, students, and casual viewers of the materials can rest easy knowing that the resources they are examining are historically accurate and appropriate to the collection.

Organization of Resources

The AFLHC materials were collected in the mid-1940s, and are now being digitized for preservation and presentation purposes. The collection includes tall tales, humor, stories, and other histories of Alberta. These come in the form of manuscripts, stories, plays, poems, radio scripts, periodicals, school yearbooks, photographs, and other materials (AFLHC, n.d.; AFHC, 2000). The collection can be accessed through various organizational structures, which include Creator or Author, Genre, Geographic Name, Subject, Contributor, Source Publication, or Title. It should be noted, however, that within any of the categories, the materials are to be browsed, not searched for; all subsections are organized alphabetically to make location easier. If one desires to perform a search on the materials, the site does offer both “Simple” and “Advanced” searches (these will be discussed in more depth the “Service Features” section).

To organize and describe all of its materials, the AFLHC utilizes a modified version of the Dublin Core metadata elements. These include the basic identifiers expected for any resource (Title, Author/Creator, Subject, Contributor, Date, Source-Bibliography, and Coverage – both spatial and temporal). While the AFLHC is not a publication of the United States, use of the Dublin Core metadata tags is in line with American standards for encoding (METS, 2008; DLF, 2004). Additionally, there are University of Calgary-specific keywords which give the cataloger space for notes, target audience, physical object location, and ISBN/ISSN (Our Roots, 2002). These special metadata tags further help to identify the source materials and the scope of the project.

Service Features

As noted above, the DL's materials are organized so that they are accessible through a variety of entry points; the user can choose to narrow the scope of the materials by Creator/Author, Genre (the type of the source material), Geographic Name, Subject, Contributor, Source Publication, or Title. This allows a lay user to access the project and simply browse the contents, even with no ultimate access goal in mind. However, there may be some who access the site in order to find specific information; for them, the site provides a search function. The basic search allows the user to type in keywords; the advanced search allows the user to narrow the basic search by limiting it to specific organizational fields (e.g. Subject, Genre, or Source Publication) and by indicating whether all, any, or the exact words entered in the search box should be included in the results. While not the most sophisticated search, the inclusion of a search option is a great aid for one who is visiting the site with a specific keyword in mind.

Once materials are accessed by following one of the may link route options, the user is presented with an entry page into the resource, which displays an image of the first page (all materials on this site are written work) and those metadata elements important to research. If the user chooses to click on the image, they are taken to a navigational page which allows the user to examine all pages or aspects of the material more closely.

To ensure that its data remains stable, the AFLCH performs spot-checks on its media on a regular basis (Our Roots, 2002).

Technologies

The AFLHC DL uses proprietary software to display and organize the images on its website. The interface is coded in Active Server Pages 3.0, and the majority of the scripting is done server-side wherever possible. In the background, the project is organized using the Microsoft Database Engine as its core database, and it also employs SQL Server and Microsoft Access where needed. The site and its files are hosted on a Windows 2000 Advanced Server, which includes ten 73 GB SCSI drives for storage. Search capabilities are made possible through TextDB, a full-text indexing product (Our Roots, 2002).

The scanning of materials is done using Windows 90/2000 workstations outfitted with Adobe Photoshop, Cerious ThumbPlus, NameWiz, and OCR software, and connected to Ricoh 450 and HP 6300 Page Scanners, or the project's Wicks and Wilson 4100 Microfilm scanner (Ibid).

In order to ensure the data's preservation, the AFLHC stores its files on CD-Rs, and makes sure to format everything in standard, non-proprietary formats (e.g. the TIFF format with LZW compression for images). Duplicate copies of all backups are made so that one set can be

stored on-site and another remotely. Overall, to ensure the best possible survival for its materials, the AFLHC and its parent, the AHDP, “employs standards consistent with academic and industry practice for digitization of paper documents” (Ibid).

Evaluation

The AFLHC is not a large digital library, so its functionality as a whole lends itself well to the amount of materials it encompasses. The organizational categories break the resources down into small enough pieces to be easily digested by visitors. The search function works quite well, as all the materials are indexed according to keyword, author, and title. Perhaps it could be improved by also including the option to search the full-text OCR scans of the materials. However, my belief is that the majority of this site’s users will be casual browsers, who will not be searching for specific materials, but simply interested in viewing historical documents about their hometown or area.

My biggest issue with the presentation of the materials is that clicking on the image of a document to view further pages is not very intuitive. There is no indication that the user must do so in order to read the multiple pages; if I had not noticed that the metadata included in its “Contents” description the number of leaves, I would not have even thought to click for further viewing options. Luckily, the design’s saving grace is that most visitors will probably want to view the materials at a larger scale than that shown in the preview, and therefore they will attempt to click the image to see a closer view. Once that is done, hopefully they will then notice that there are multiple pages and a handy navigation tool.

The project might also be improved by adhering to the Open Archives Initiative guidelines (DLF, 2004; Liu, 2004). Additionally, it does not explicitly make any claims to

accessibility for those with disabilities (NISO, 2011). However, it is unclear whether the project is or is not following these guidelines.

The scope of interest of this project is perhaps limited to those who reside in Alberta or Canada, but this is a large group of people, and the government of Canada has clearly found enough interest in the project to fund its implementation.

Conclusion

The AFLHC is a very promising digital library, although it appears to still be in the earlier stages of its development. The Canadian Initiative on Digital Libraries (CIDL), which encompasses the AFLHC, has several ambitious plans to make its online digital history collections even more user-friendly and educational. Enhancements are in development which include better search capabilities and research and learning tools of which site visitors can take advantage (University of Calgary, 2002). Overall, however, even with minimum functionality, the digital library is an excellent one. It is clearly organized, largely intuitive, and presents the visitor with some great artifacts. Since the AFLHC makes certain to follow digital preservation standards, it is doing its best to ensure that its resources are available for the global public both now and into the future.

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