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## Learning How to Digitize Community Histories in Horry County

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## Learning How to Digitize Community Histories in Horry County

### Abstract

To learn more about creating a Digital Studio, we digitized the history of our library system and produced a short documentary in celebration of our 70th anniversary. The production offers an example of the services we will be able to offer families and communities interested in preserving local histories.

At Horry County libraries, we are proud of the impacts public libraries have made in our communities. We are also excited about fresh, new initiatives that cultivate community access to free quality education. In celebration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the HCML system in 2019, we hoped to communicate our pride and excitement and incorporate community memories of the library and visions for the future. When we began researching our history, we uncovered local stories that had been lost in time and found a few significant surprises along the way.

Gazing across 70 years of our library's history, one of the first discoveries we made was that our notion of "innovative" thinking in public libraries could actually be traced back to our roots. The founding documents of Horry County libraries reflect the same vision and mission of education for ALL that we champion today. In a 1949 report, Horry County's first librarian Mary Parham wrote:

The Library is the one agency that directly serves each person, regardless of age, race, interest, or educational background. It not only serves the schools but provides for that self-education of the citizen beyond school age on which the welfare of a democracy is dependent. *It is the people's university* [emphasis added].

The report goes on to list myriad ways the library fulfills its education mission that reach well beyond formal schooling and into the daily lives of every citizen:

Horry County Memorial Library should offer:

- information service to individuals who want help on a particular problem, such as repairing a tractor, refinishing a piece of furniture, or tanning a hide; to students who want additional material for some classroom unit; to club members who need help in planning yearbooks and club programs
- reading lists on a particular subject or subjects in which the individual or group is interested
- courses on any requested topics
- discussion forums for social change, farm problems, new books, community problems, and governmental affairs
- technical and vocational materials to business and industry, to workers, and to professional men and women
- service in problems of childcare, nutrition, health, budgeting, and recreation
- children's services directed toward fostering good reading habits in order to develop an adult population that knows and appreciates books
- materials on questions of the hour, in local, state, national and international affairs
- meeting rooms for discussion groups, story hours, book clubs, civic and religious organizations, film forums, and music listening

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we call these educational opportunities "DIY," "skill-building," "networking" or "civic engagement," but the facilitating role that libraries perform remains essential. Parham concluded her report by reiterating this central purpose of librarians within their communities: "The Horry County Memorial Library should be staffed by librarians who are educators in the broad sense, not custodians of books."

We were both humbled and exhilarated to uncover this thread that runs back through the decades into the postwar civic-building era. Our new initiatives in 2019 matched up perfectly – from personal finance to cooking to business solutions to 3D printing classes, we are focused on delivering free and quality public education for ALL! Rediscovering the roots of this mission grounds us in the historically significant role that libraries play in a healthy democratic society.

Since those mid-century days, that society has grown healthier and stronger through education, which points to a second lesson we learned about ourselves. It is only through education that awareness is raised, wrongs are addressed and equality is advanced. Even with the progress made since the 1950s, we still carry the weight of the past, and that weight is truly felt when you begin to notice the stories that are missing. As a research specialist who assists with local history and genealogy inquiries, you know there's an awful imbalance of available information. For people of color, particularly our African American communities, their stories were neglected, never recorded or intentionally erased from history, and it is difficult to help those families and communities find the resources they need to trace their heritage.

This shortcoming became abundantly clear as we traced our institutional history and failed to uncover photos and stories that should have belonged to our Black communities. The starkest contrast exists between the quaint, cheery photos preserved in digital archives and the absolute absence of black and brown faces. Not until those 1980s photos we unearthed in old storage boxes does the story begin to change and diversify.

In the absence of photos or documents, we turned to community members willing to share their stories in interviews, and we learned that we only had to ask. We learned the story of the library's first Black student worker in the late 1960s, who was simultaneously piloting the local high school's integration. We learned how scared she was to walk down the beautiful downtown streets from the school to the library a few blocks away. We learned about her joy at having access to the books and her gratitude for the safe space the librarians created for her. We were educated about the role of the bookmobile in Black communities, when the beautiful marble-floored, Doric-columned library building was inaccessibly located on the other side of the race line that was dangerous to cross. We learned about an entire generation of people who found in books the stories of perseverance and achievement that fueled their courage to be firsts in everything.

Perhaps most significantly, we learned of a need in our communities that we may be able to help address. It becomes clear that many, many stories needed to be told and preserved in order to fill in the gaps in our recorded local history. Our conversations have morphed into a community-driven initiative to record and archive those stories, especially those stories we will lose soon as a generation begins to pass. We are now discussing the logistics of funding oral history backpack kits and archival databases to house those stories that are missing from our histories. Without some courage to face the emptiness, we may not have connected to the community-driven archival work that libraries around the country are doing to address this imbalance.

Lastly, this project gave us the opportunity to learn valuable new skills that we can now share with our communities. We acquired the organizational and technological skills to sort through the dusty boxes pulled from the attic, conduct and preserve interviews, research and organize the bits and pieces into stories, and preserve our history in digital and video format. With one librarian, two research assistants,

a scanner, and a borrowed MacBook with iMovie, we learned how to create a touching and professional documentary that tells our HCML story – where we have been in the past and where our future leads.

Our goal now is to learn from “digitization stations” in other public libraries and equip ourselves to offer services and training for our communities to preserve and share their own stories. Gratefully, what began as a simple addition to a day’s celebratory events evolved into an authentic educational experience that we can now share with our local families and communities. The “people’s university” is alive and well at HCML, finding ways to increase learning opportunities every day!