A guest post by Jo David, Library Officer Dapto District Library

The role of public libraries has been experiencing rapid change in recent years with the digital world knocking on our doors. The demand for instant information and arrival of self-service has led to our function as library and information technicians to also change. This transformation can be a little frightening, but also exciting as it allows us to venture into new areas of skill and expertise.

At Wollongong City Libraries we put our heads together to come up with a project that would create a collection of interest to many current users, while also remaining relevant into the future and our role as archivists.

Storytelling has endured with us for as long as life itself, and in an attempt to collect, protect and store those stories that may well be lost to future generations, we have developed an Oral History Project that will do just that.

Titled Illawarra Stories, our oral histories are being recorded by local community members that have memories of what life was like in their district during their childhood and early years. These recollections are not necessarily historically significant nor totally accurate, but they do put a human face to times gone by, helping to complete a picture of the community through their stories, voices and vocabulary. These oral histories will be an important component to our local histories collection.

Where did we start?

Firstly, we recognised an interest in history around one of our local suburbs, Dapto. When we held a Remember When … open day last year at the Dapto District Library branch, the amateur historians came out of the woodwork! So our crops were there, we just had to harvest them.

Oral History research and training was next, using the Oral History Association website and training through the NSW State Library. Oral historians love to share their knowledge and experience so it wasn’t hard to discover the best equipment and approach to set up our project.

After the purchase of recording equipment (a TASCAM DR-40) and a number of mock interviews, trialling various locations and environments, we felt ready to reach out to prospective participants.

With old photos from our local history collection, our marketing team put together an attractive poster billing the project and inviting contributions. These were posted in house and on our website. Slowly they created a conversation within the library that eventually extended out into the community, finding the relevant people by some form of osmosis! Something that is still a slight mystery to us today … but it worked. They began to come in, first tentatively with just an enquiry and then with little or no encouragement, were signing up to record their memories!

Once confirmed, each participant is asked to fill out a basic information form stating family names, address, date and place of birth and subjects, events and/or occasions they would like to speak about in their interview. This is accompanied by a consent form which gives the library the permission to reproduce, edit, distribute and store the interview and photos. The paper work can be a little daunting and time consuming, but once drawn up and explained, it is a simple step that assures our contributors of their rights and obligations. In all cases so far, interviewees have agreed and felt comfortable with the arrangement.

To date, Illawarra Stories has 12 contributors for the Dapto area, each with at least one 20+ minute interview, short grab and profile photo. Some find one interview is not enough to cover everything they wish to share, so they are invited back to record further memories. There is also the option to share old photos, which they can bring in for us to scan and add to their profile.

Generally, we have our contributors come into the library where we conduct the interviews within our study room. Although, this is not always ideal and in the case of one 96 year old, we travelled out to her property to record the interview in her family home.

We have also had a few cases where a couple wanted to be interviewed together. For some it seems to work well.
They are introduced together and chat about themselves, with one partner quite often reminding the other of a particular occasion or memory. The few times we have attempted this method it has worked well and produced a very entertaining session!

The final component of the project is the storage and distribution of our oral histories. Originally we considered simply adding them to our catalogue for download. It is a straightforward matter of using BLIS software to convert the interview MP3 file. But as we gathered more interviews with wonderful historic photos, we decided we needed to showcase our project in a more accessible and attractive way. So our wonderful digital media team got to work on a platform through Wordpress and came up with our Illawarra Stories website [2]. Here anyone can listen to interviews and look at contributors’ photos with the added options of short grabs and keyword searching to make study and personal interest more easily available.

So, from what started as a humble idea to record a few local memories for future generations, we now have an extremely accessible and attractive collection of oral memories, stored and displayed in an easy to use and appealing format.

After a mere six months we were able to hold a launch, inviting all our participants, family and friends to view the Illawarra Stories website and gifting them a hard disc copy of their interview. This provided us with the chance to thank everyone who took part, instruct them on the use of the website and within a comfortable and relaxing afternoon tea atmosphere, encourage others to sign up and add their memories to our collection.

Oral histories can be an important asset to our collections and with technology making it easier than ever to gather such memories, it becomes beholden to us libraries to do just that. Our only enemy is time itself, so our advise is to get yourself a recorder and start today!
THE DAPTO ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

RECORDING YOUR MEMORIES OF DAPTO

Everyone has a story, help us share your memories of Dapto.

We welcome your contribution, see our staff to learn more.

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