BRINGING A SMALL ARCHIVAL COLLECTION TO LIFE ON THE WEB: REMEMBERING THE REAL WINNIE

SALLY WILSON
sally.schmieder@ryerson.ca

WANDER MORGAN
wander.morgane@ryerson.ca

THEREALWINNIE.RYERSON.CA

THE PROJECT

Remembering the Real Winnie: The World’s Most Famous Bear Turns 100 is a collaborative, interdisciplinary project that focuses on a unique chapter of Canadian history from WWI. It is based on the Colebourn Family Archives, a collection of photographs, diaries, images, books, and objects, which has been lent to Ryerson University for the purposes of this project. The exhibit (November 5 – December 7, 2014) held in the Ryerson Image Centre, focused on the role of photography within the archive while the collection websites present the complete contents of the collection along with browseable diaries, dynamic maps, and interactive 3D objects. The interactive experience website, created by recent graduates and Ryerson students, tells the story of Winnie through interviews, soundscapes, imagery and motion graphics with photos from the exhibition.

THE STORY

Harry Colebourn was a Canadian veterinarian who, on his train journey from Winnipeg to Valcartier to join the Canadian troops heading to Europe at the beginning of WW1, purchased a bear cub in White River, Ontario. This cub was the mascot for Colebourn’s regiment and was eventually donated to the London Zoo when the regiment deployed to France. While at the London Zoo, Winnie, named after Winnipeg where Colebourn lived, became popular with the public in general and with Christopher Robin Milne in particular. Christopher Robin called his teddy bear after Winnie, giving it the name Winnie-the-Pooh. This bear was the genesis of the Winnie-the-Pooh story books by Christopher Robin’s father, A.A. Milne.

THE COLLECTION

The Colebourn Family Archive was lent to Ryerson University by Lindsay Mattick, the great-granddaughter of Harry Colebourn for the purpose of this project. It comprises photographs, diaries, letters, articles, a scrapbook and several items of ephemera. Most of the collection dates from the early 1900s, but the scrapbook, along with some letters and articles are more recent additions from the 1980s when Harry Colebourn’s son, Fred was researching the history of Winnie.

CHALLENGES

Many challenges were encountered during the course of this project. In all the project was well managed and run, but the complexity of working with multiple stakeholders and the changing scope of the website portion of the project resulted in several challenges.

In creating the website we were working from a purely digital copy of the collection. This made it difficult to check for inconsistencies and missing information within the data. To consult the archival collection required making an appointment to have the collection removed from the storage vault in another building.

Our inexperience with 3D scanning and its complexities resulted in our underestimating the amount of time required for this portion of the project. All of the items that we wished to scan were highly reflective which is problematic for scanning as the light used to make the readings is reflected from the object. We were able to solve the reflectivity problem by using an aerosol spray to coat the reflective objects. This allowed us to capture accurate readings of the geometry of the object, but considerable post-scan clean up was required to map the surface materials back onto the scan.

We also experienced considerable challenges with organization of the collection and the descriptive metadata. Omeka is organized with collections, items and files. We determined that a diary would be an item which worked well for creating flipbooks, but didn’t work well for the transcriptions which we eventually created as separate html pages and not within the item metadata. We also experienced some difficulties with the Excel spreadsheets of metadata as they were created by someone without any Dublin Core knowledge and required clean-up before they could be ingested into Omeka.

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE & IMPACT

Through the creation of an online collection, this project has successfully brought various expertise together to explore innovative pedagogical practices. It provided the opportunity for students to gain experience in their fields of study and for librarians to contribute their expertise in designing an online environment for the preservation and analysis of photographs, texts and historical artifacts. This collaborative effort involved cataloguing, metadata mapping, digitisation, and website design.

Because the Remembering the Real Winnie exhibit ran from November 5 – December 7, 2014 a limited number of people were able to access the collection. The Omeka website ensures that the entire collection is available to a much broader community for a longer period of time. The scholarly, online collection promotes research, teaching and learning and demonstrates the value of including the library in this type of collaborative project.

OMEKA

Omeka, zemek), a freely available open-source web-publishing platform that can be used to describe and display small collections of digital objects. Omeka uses Dublin Core metadata, the most widely adopted metadata standard that offers users the greatest flexibility. Data for the project was input into the library in the form of an Excel spreadsheet with multiple workbooks. Extensive corrections of the initial data were done to ensure both compatibility with Omeka software and the Dublin Core Metadata Standard and consistency across the collection.

METADATA IMPLEMENTATION

Omeka uses Dublin Core metadata, the most widely adopted metadata standard that offers users the greatest flexibility. Data for the project was input into the library in the form of an Excel spreadsheet with multiple workbooks. Extensive corrections of the initial data were done to ensure both compatibility with Omeka software and the Dublin Core Metadata Standard and consistency across the collection.

3D SCANS

Many of the items in the Colebourn Family Archive are three-dimensional objects including Harry Colebourn’s hat bag and its contents. A collaboration with the Department of Architectural Sciences at Ryerson enabled experimentation with scanning some of the contents of the hat bag and the bag itself, first with a handheld WUSON scanner, followed by Geo-Magic Capture scanner mounted on a tripod. Since Omeka doesn’t deal with 3D files natively we loaded the files to SketchFab, a YouTube-like service for 3D scans, and embedded links to them from within Omeka.

FLIPBOOKS

Harry Colebourn kept several diaries during WWI. In the exhibition these diaries were only able to be displayed open at selected pages. By using the Internet Archive BookReader plugin in Omeka we made the entire contents of the diaries browsable. As part of the digital archive we were supplied images of double-page spreads of the pages of the diary. To make the pages of the diary turnable we split these images into individual pages. Transcriptions were also made of the diary entries so that the content would be fully accessible to search engines both within Omeka and on the web.

The BookReader, developed by the Internet Archive and open source contributors, is licensed under a GNU Affero General Public License v3.0.

GELOCATION & MAPPING

Omeka’s geolocation plugin was used to geolocate photographs with known locations on a map. An external mapping interface was also used to create enhanced customized maps. Location information from Colebourn’s WWI diaries was geocoded and used as a basis for creating additional maps.