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Connecting the Past to the Present: The Tiger Tales Oral Histories Digital Exhibit

Abstract

The Tiger Tales Oral History Digital Exhibit began in 2018 as an effort to promote Forsyth Library's self-service video studio and Special Collections. The project is a marriage of the creative technologies of the library's Learning Commons Media Lab paired with images from its archives to capture the stories of Tiger alumni, students, faculty, and staff spanning generations about their time at Fort Hays State. Forsyth's Outreach Team adds their talents to the project recruiting interview subjects, often in collaboration with the FHSU Foundation and Alumni Office. Over its five-year history, these connections have served to gather first-hand stories from as early as the mid-1930s, and the collection continues to grow. These oral histories serve as unique primary sources complementing the research materials available to our community. Several of the interview subjects have since passed, but we are proud to have their stories preserved for Tigers of the future.

Keywords

Tiger Tales, Digital Exhibit, Oral Histories, Oral History, One-Button Studio, Special Collections, Partnerships, Alumni, Video, Scholars Repository

Connecting the Past to the Present: The Tiger Tales Oral Histories Digital Exhibit

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Introduction

The Tiger Tales Oral Histories is an ongoing project that showcases the rich history and diverse experiences of Fort Hays State University (FHSU) through storytelling. The project was initiated when former Dean of Library Services, Debra Ludwig, had an idea to capture stories of two generous alumni of Fort Hays State University. Ludwig encouraged a team of Forsyth Library faculty members to collaborate to record their oral histories using Forsyth's new One-Button Studio.

Out of this, Tiger Tales emerged as a project that would promote two library resources, specifically the new studio and Special Collections. It would also augment the university archives within Special Collections by capturing these personal stories celebrating "Friends of Forsyth" and notable students, staff, and faculty, as well as strengthen our relationships with key FHSU partners outside the library.

Primary Personnel



Andy Tincknell

Andy Tincknell's experience began in 1994 when he was a student and worked as the assistant to the university's videographer. After gaining some experience as a Commercial Videographer/Producer at a small television station, he was lured back to FHSU to serve in the position vacated by his former supervisor in 2001. He learned a great deal about the people and history of the university, producing videos about the university and being a fly on the wall while recording various meetings and events. These experiences fashioned him into an unintentional historian of the university.

Fifteen years later, Tincknell was looking for a new challenge and applied to become the Learning Commons Coordinator at Fort Hays State's Forsyth Library. During his interview, he pitched the idea for a One-Button Studio; a user-friendly, do-it-yourself video studio based on a model shared by Penn State University where students and faculty could easily produce professional looking videos with no video production experience (Penn State University, n.d.). Once hired, Tincknell was able to build the studio which would become a key factor in the creation of the Tiger Tales Oral Histories digital exhibit.

An FHSU alum, Brian Gribben's interest in collecting oral histories and appreciating both their scholarly value and the inherent need for generational storytelling began the first time he interrogated Studs Terkel's work during an undergraduate seminar at Fort Hays State University. His journey back to the university and association with Forsyth Library's Special Collections, though circuitous, proved serendipitous. He had completed his doctoral coursework in Modern European History when he took a temporary reference position at the library to partially-fund dissertation research. When the former Dean of Library Services offered him the hybrid position of Library Coordinator for Government Documents and Special Collections, he accepted the position in part to refine the Special Collections' content and promote its integration into faculty and students' scholarly endeavors.



Brian Gribben

Goals

The university's history is housed in the University Archives within Forsyth Library's Special Collections. While much of the historical record is expressed in institutional records and publications, having alumni tell their personal stories greatly augments the official record and can illuminate key events and university traditions. Through digital exhibits and collections, we have offered a window into our entire collection. We view this ongoing project as an opportunity to complement these stories with both digital and non-digital content while simultaneously promoting the collections.

The relationship-building component of this project presents multiple opportunities to cultivate relationships with alumni who might offer material and financial support for the library and the university. Moreover, in capturing their personal stories, the reflections they share augment the historical record available in the library's Special Collections, specifically University Archives.

Partnerships

Tiger Tales productions are made possible by the contributions of several partners. Forsyth Library's Outreach Team, led by Cyndi Landis, recruits subjects and promotes the finished project. The Fort Hays State University Foundation and Alumni Office have the most direct contact with alumni and know the most about their stories and relationships. As such, they provide a great conduit for finding interview candidates.

One of the hallmarks of Tiger Tales is the use of supporting images. While it is preferable to use images from the university's photo collections, on occasion, there are great stories that are best supported by images from other partners, including the Hays Public Library and the Ellis County Historical Society (Ellis County Historical Society, n.d.; Hays Public Library, n.d.). The university's yearbook, *The Reveille*, ceased publication in 2003; therefore, we often rely on photos from other sources for more recent years, including the subject's personal collection and social media or individuals who take photos around campus (Fort Hays State University, n.d.a).



Cyndi Landis

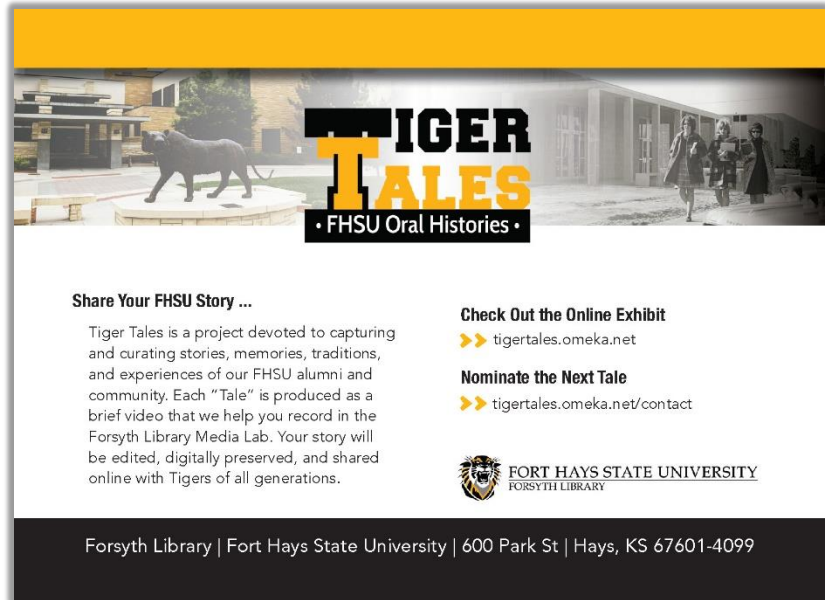
Workflow

Find a Subject

Many steps go into creating a Tiger Tale, the first of which is identifying a suitable subject. Potential candidates emerge frequently through brainstorming sessions with a small group including the Dean of Library Services, Landis (the aforementioned Instruction and Outreach Librarian), and representatives from the FHSU Foundation and Alumni Office,

respectively. Occasionally, conversations with other library colleagues produce additional interview subjects by suggesting retired faculty and alumni who primary personnel may have overlooked.

Nominations are also sought from those outside of this circle. Postcards are made available at a variety of events, especially those focused on alumni. These postcards, created by our internal partners in Outreach, invite people to self-nominate or nominate someone to share their stories. We also target alumni award winners returning to campus at Homecoming. To spread the points of view among all generations of Tiger alumni, winners of graduate and undergraduate awards at commencement are often invited, but so are members of the Half-Century Club, who graduated at least 50 years ago.



Tiger Tales Promotional Postcard

Nominations are added to a list prioritized by several factors. While we have some eras covered very well, there are gaps in university history that require more documentation, such as the 1970s. Unique stories also are more valuable. For instance, several points of view on the flood of 1951 have already been documented, so they are no longer of high priority. Finally, accessibility to the subject is a factor. Faculty retire and move away, or nominees become too frail of health or die. Four alumni who have had their Tiger Tales recorded have since passed away.

Having a prioritized list does not mean that opportunities are not seized upon when they become available. Some just show up on the doorstep. Our oldest Tiger Tale subject, Alson Bondy, dropped in at the Alumni Office on a trip from Minnesota to see the sites of his youth one last time. A staff member had the presence of mind to call the library to see if it would be possible to interview him. During a Homecoming alumni meet and greet event, Brandon Penny, a Young Alumni Award winner and graphic designer for Sax Fifth Avenue, showed interest in a Tiger Tales display and agreed to sit down for an interview.

Some prospects are already “Friends of Forsyth,” whose contributions to the library can be recognized through their storytelling, though their generosity can sometimes overshadow the alum’s FHSU story. The first Tiger Tale was created, in part, to recognize Larry and Lyn Fenwick for their gifts to the library. Their Tiger Tale struck a balance between sharing their story as FHSU undergraduates and their financial and in-kind support. However, other interviewees who have donated rare and unique items to Forsyth Library’s Special Collections devote much of their interview expounding on the items shared with the library and less so reflecting on their FHSU experience. These testimonials are still of great value, but perhaps should be packaged separately as stories focused on their donations.

Forsyth Library’s Outreach Team typically makes first contact with prospective interview subjects. Their people skills are greatly valued at this stage of the process. They ask if the prospect is willing to come into the studio for an interview and, if they agree, manage the scheduling.

Research

Soon after an invitation is accepted, the research process begins. In most cases, this involves reviewing *Reveille* yearbooks searching for the subject's name, major, and any personal relationships we are already aware of. This provides the interviewer context to create prompts specific enough to capture key elements of the subject's story while are also open ended, allowing the subject freedom to share other memories unmediated. We also take note of images we find along the way to start a list for Forsyth's Digital Curation Librarian to gather.



Interview

On the day of the interview, the subject arrives and is greeted by their contact from Outreach, Alumni Office, or Foundation. The goal is for this person to be someone they are familiar with to make sure they are comfortable through the process. The subject is presented with a gift basket and a bottle of water to keep their voice fresh through the interview. They also sign a consent form for us to use their stories and image.

Next, they are introduced to Tincknell as the interviewer who seats them, checks audio and framing, and explains the interview process. They are asked to speak in complete sentences since Tincknell's voice will be removed from the final product. It is also important that they are careful with their use of pronouns so the viewers will have a full understanding of what or whom they are speaking about. While we welcome their Outreach, Foundation, or Alumni Office liaison into the studio to continue helping them feel comfortable and add questions occasionally, we explain that the interviewee should maintain eye contact with Tincknell while answering questions.

The first interview questions focus on key information such as their current name, the name they used in school, major, how they came to Fort Hays State and their first memory of the university, and key dates, such as years of attendance or employment. Collecting dates continues to be important throughout the interview to make it easier to find images to match the story during the editing process. We use questions and prompts generated during the research phase to assist in guiding the conversation but prepare for a more organic stream-of-consciousness from the interviewee, lest they feel constrained by the prepared prompts. We are also prepared with a list of more general prompts, such as favorite university traditions, professors, events, and classmates.



A Tiger Tale Interview

At the conclusion of the interview, the interviewer thanks the subject for their time and provides information on next steps. We try to give them an approximate timeline for the completion of the video and inform them we will let them see it before it goes public. This is also a good time to ensure that we have accurate contact information, especially an email address for sending the video. Often, as the subject continues to visit after the interview is over, they will offer additional stories, which

can be frustrating. There have been a few occasions when we've asked them if they would mind sitting back down to tell the story on camera, keeping to Yankee great Yogi Berra's maxim, "It ain't over till it's over."

Editing

Once the interview is completed, it is time to package it in a way that prospective viewers will want to watch. In an age of short attention spans, the goal is to tell more stories in less time. To date, Tiger Tale videos are usually between five and fifteen minutes long. Videos are made more interesting in a variety of ways. For example, it is usually best to establish the face of who is talking and then cover the video with images as often as possible. This adds context to the story and makes it more interesting, but it also allows more edits in the audio track, removing "ums," "uhs," stutters, and repetitions. Segments are also rearranged to make the story flow better, and the interviewer's voice is removed.

Additional images come from a variety of sources. Some of the most useful are the *Reveille* yearbook, the Special Collections University Photographs Collection, the Wooster Photo Collection, video footage saved from Tincknell's tenure as university videographer, and alumni magazines (Fort Hays State University, n.d.b; Fort Hays State University, n.d.c) There are also a few publications profiling the history of the university such as *Lighthouse on the Plains*, by Dr. James Forsythe and *Into the Future*, which chronicles the first two decades of Dr. Edward H. Hammond's presidency (Forsythe, 2002; Fort Hays State University Office of the President, 2007). More recent images often come from personal photo collections and social media.

Review and Revise

Prior to publication, Gribben and other invested library colleagues review a draft to make sure it flows well, delivers the best story available from the interview, and is free of errors. We also send a preview to the interview subject for their stamp of approval regarding the finished project. Interviewees sign a release before the interview, so we can use what we want, but these tend to be celebratory pieces and we want to make sure they are not upset with us when we are done. Inattention or not being considerate of the subject's input could obviously dampen a burgeoning relationship, compromise existing ones, or depict the subject, university, or Forsyth Library in an unflattering light. Suggestions and corrections are then relayed back to Tincknell for revisions and a final draft is rendered.

Distribution

Formerly, we utilized the Omeka platform to showcase the finalized Tiger Tale video and supporting images and documentation. Initially developed by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, Omeka provides libraries, museums, and other institutions with a web-based publishing platform to display their digital collections and narrative exhibits. Given the limited scope of this project, we decided to utilize the hosted version of Omeka rather than install its open-source software because the former was user-friendly, offered flexibility in arranging project components, and was relatively inexpensive ("Omeka," n.d.). However, even subscribing to the Omeka.net Gold Plan, the pre-installed design plugins, available layouts, and aesthetics were limited, prompting us to consider other publishing options as they became available.

Partnering with our Digital Curation Department, Special Collections has made great strides in recent years in expanding our online profile by making certain collections available in a Scholars Repository utilizing the BePress Digital Commons platform. As Digital Commons has become more adept at presenting compound objects, we have begun transferring digital exhibits from Omeka onto Digital Commons. As of this writing, the Tiger Tales project is transitioning into our Scholar's Repository. The individual Tiger Tales videos are also published on the library's YouTube Channel.

Promotion

At this point in the process, the baton is passed back to Outreach to find an audience. Tracking statistics suggest that social media remains a powerful driver for user engagement. Outreach personnel and library leadership also promote the exhibit at alumni events such as Half-Century Club luncheons and Homecoming.

Value

Over its five-year history, the connections that create the Tiger Tales Oral Histories digital exhibits have served to gather first-hand stories from as early as the mid-1930s, and the collection continues to grow. While Tiger Tales tend to be celebratory pieces rather than critical examinations of Fort Hays State University's past, they still provide a framework for student-centered oral history projects and, aligned with the Boyer Model, serve as examples of the Scholarship of Integration. The project has also been successful in fulfilling its original goals of promotion of services and fostering donor relationships. We invite readers interested in the Tiger Tales project to view these oral histories on Forsyth Library's YouTube Channel

(<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL21r8bd1JSWYKd160jBYJouanw1hPER88>) and look for the revamped digital exhibit on the FHSU Scholars Repository's Archives Online (<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/archives/>) when it becomes available.



Tiger Tales Thank You Note

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