

Mapping oral histories: Augmenting digital audio collections with GIS

Virginia Dressler; Kent State University, Ohio, USA

Abstract

The paper will focus on a project at Kent State University using a local oral history digital collection. The project displays the potential of how the application of an additional layer of geospatial information into an existing digital collection can improve user access and provide alternate methods to browse material (geographically). Transcriptions from the May 4 oral history collection at Kent State University were analyzed and tagged at any point there was a mention of one of the location points of interest. A new website was created where oral histories could be browsed using a historical map from the time period (spring 1970). This paper will outline the project and provide some initial steps for other institutions to begin such a project.

Introduction and Background

The May 4 oral history collection was created in the early 1990s and continues to collect contributions to the collection. The University Archives began to record personal accounts of the events leading up to the May 4, 1970 shootings and aftermath from a wide variety of individuals, mainly from eyewitnesses. The oral histories display a variety of personal experiences and vantage points from a singular shared experience and event. Like many other oral history projects, these recordings are illuminating assets that supplement and enrich research around the historic event, many ridden with raw emotion and conditional to the role of memory and recollection of the interviewee.

To provide some more context around the event, on May 4, 1970, thirteen students were shot by members of the Ohio National Guard who had been called in as result of an earlier student demonstration. Four were killed and nine others were wounded, including one student who was permanently paralyzed. The National Guard had been called onto campus after demonstrations and the burning of the ROTC building on campus, with these events taking place May 1-3, 1970. The student demonstrations had been a response to the announcement in April 1970 by President Nixon that the United States were planning to invade Cambodia.

The Kent State Shootings Oral History Project collects personal accounts of the May 4, 1970, shootings and their aftermath. The Special Collections and Archives department at Kent State University Libraries provides access to both the audio as well as the transcripts to over 100 oral histories via its digital collections website. The oral history project was founded in 1990, and current staff from the department continue to record and receive new accounts into the Narratives and Commentaries Related to the Kent State Shootings archival collection [1].

Many of these recollections are eyewitness accounts from a wide variety of viewpoints. The narrators of the oral history accounts are Kent State faculty, alumni, staff, and administrators, residents of the city of Kent, National Guardsmen, local police,

regional hospital personnel, and other persons whose lives were affected by the events in early 1970 in Kent, Ohio.

The Kent State Shootings Oral History digital collection is hosted through the library's Special Collections and Archives website (Figure 1). The digital collections are hosted on Omeka [2] (Version 2.5.1), an open-source content management system. The digital collection provides users with full transcripts and adjoining audio files from the related May 4 oral history archival subcollection [3]. Users may either search through the digital collection using a keyword search or use one of the browse categories (narrator name, role of the narrator or by subject). Visitors to the collection can hear the oral history through the streaming audio bar within the webpage.

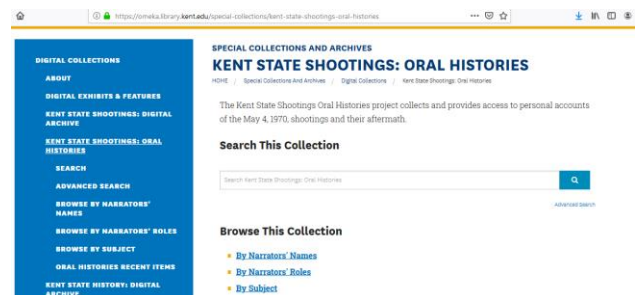


Figure 1. Screenshot of Search and Browse page from the Kent State Shootings: Oral History digital collection.

<https://omeka.library.kent.edu/special-collections/kent-state-shootings-oral-histories>

The transcripts are presented to the user through an item level view of a selected oral history file in a separate pop-out HTML page (Figure 2). The current oral history digital collection website is most conducive for researchers who need to find either a known person or if they have a pre-determined search term(s) to use from the onset of the query. Depending on the nature of the research query, the three existing browse categories may also be useful as well, though the Mapping May 4 project furnishing a different method of navigating an audio-visual collection through the application of geospatial information.

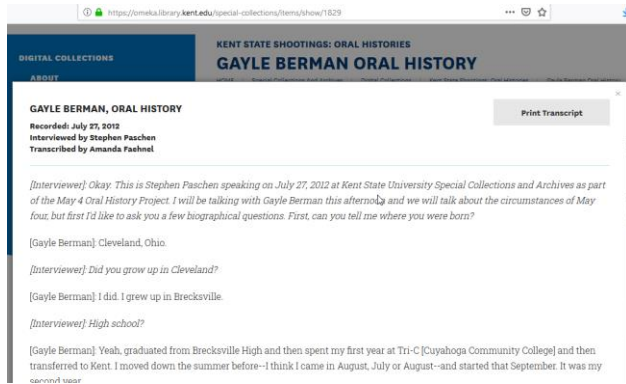


Figure 2. Screenshot of oral history transcript, <https://omeka.library.kent.edu/special-collections/items/show/1829>

Project

Researchers from the Department of Geography and the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at Kent State University received grant funds to append selected oral history interviews from the May 4 digital collection with geospatial elements. Funding for the project to date has included: Ohio Humanities grant, Kent State 50th Commemoration Fund, College of Arts and Sciences at Kent State, and University Research Council (Kent State University), and has covered the costs associated with the new project website design and certain functionalities particular to geo-spatial projects, as well as some student work. The student worker assisted in identifying interest points within the oral history files, making detailed notes around each oral history and creating coordinates, as will be discussed in more detail below.

The first phase of the Mapping May 4 project [4] has focused on locations outside of the National Historic Landmark area, to include places that were designated as interest points by the project team. The National Historic Landmark area, designated in 2016, includes seventeen acres of land that is located on the campus of Kent State University. Many of the locations selected for the first phase are located in the downtown area, as well as other parts of town that sit adjacent to campus.

The majority of the content from the first phase is from the Kent State University Libraries Special Collections and Archives May 4 Oral History collection. Future plans are to also include oral histories from the Kent Historical Society in the next phase of the project, as well as the addition of more interest points.

Perhaps the most distinct piece of the Mapping May 4 project is the geographic browse feature on the new project website that is not available through the main digital collection archive interface. On the Mapping May 4 website, a user can explore the oral histories by location, using the aerial map to navigate. This is particularly useful if the user is uncertain of a way to search or access the collection using more traditional methods of keyword search or a known name of an interviewee, as provided on the University Libraries digital collection website.



Figure 3. Screenshot of Mapping May 4 website, <https://mappingmay4.kent.edu/>

There is also a different method of engagement that is provided to the end user, where oral histories can be explored by a geographic browse from the homepage. Figure 5 is a screenshot displaying one sample of an oral history. A partial section of the oral history is highlighted when selected from the map, with an embedded audio player in the lower right corner. If the user is interested in the complete oral history, a link is provided to navigate the user to the full oral history on the University Libraries' digital archive.

The geospatial browse feature is particularly useful and powerful within the May 4th oral history collection, as protests and demonstrations took place throughout the three days before the campus shootings. Many of the oral histories span in time to tell the individual viewpoint and experience about the chain of events around May 4. Provision of a geospatial technique to browse illustrates and serves up the oral history audio files in a different manner for researchers is central to the project.

The site is a custom-built application using MapBox [6] and OpenStreetMap [7]. Google Sheets is also used as the central part of the project of data collection and management (Figure 4). Students have reviewed the oral history audio files and noted where certain locations are mentioned. A portion of oral history around place of interest is selected to provide context. The information captured in the shared spreadsheet include: Place name, Hyperlinked Text, Date, Interviewee name, Interviewee role (student, faculty, National Guard, etc), latitude, longitude, and corresponding text excerpt, start and stop times in the related audio, filename of the clipped audio portion, hyperlink to original oral history digital object, corresponding photograph (optional), photograph caption, photograph date, and information about the source of photograph.

	Place	Hyperlinked text	Date	Name	Role	Latitude	Longitude	Story
1								
2	The Commons	the commons	May 4	Peter Jerick	Student	41.50083925	-81.34493225	Yeah that was right, mid-term week. I think just that in my book, I was the 1st in my class... (Interviewee) And do you remember what you said during your speech at it... (Interviewee) Yeah, it was real short. What had happened was... I think and I said, "Come together, we're all here for a national student strike, and go on you want to do it? Should we have a call?" And people who could see... (Interviewee) Did that was right... (Interviewee) Yeah, that was right... (Interviewee) When they opened for? Chapeau VAB... I didn't, I was right... (Interviewee) The walk that I walked up that day is gone... (Interviewee) Yeah, that's what I walked... (Interviewee) Yeah, that's what I walked... (Interviewee) Yeah, that's what I walked... (Interviewee) Yeah, that's what I walked...
3	victory bell	The Bell	May 4	Kean Horneland	student	41.50083925	-81.34493225	Yeah that was right, mid-term week. I think just that in my book, I was the 1st in my class... (Interviewee) And do you remember what you said during your speech at it... (Interviewee) Yeah, it was real short. What had happened was... I think and I said, "Come together, we're all here for a national student strike, and go on you want to do it? Should we have a call?" And people who could see... (Interviewee) Did that was right... (Interviewee) Yeah, that was right... (Interviewee) When they opened for? Chapeau VAB... I didn't, I was right... (Interviewee) The walk that I walked up that day is gone... (Interviewee) Yeah, that's what I walked... (Interviewee) Yeah, that's what I walked... (Interviewee) Yeah, that's what I walked...
4	victory bell	The Bell	May 4	Janice Marie Chapman Vike-Ortiz	student	41.50083925	-81.34493225	Yeah that was right, mid-term week. I think just that in my book, I was the 1st in my class... (Interviewee) And do you remember what you said during your speech at it... (Interviewee) Yeah, it was real short. What had happened was... I think and I said, "Come together, we're all here for a national student strike, and go on you want to do it? Should we have a call?" And people who could see... (Interviewee) Did that was right... (Interviewee) Yeah, that was right... (Interviewee) When they opened for? Chapeau VAB... I didn't, I was right... (Interviewee) The walk that I walked up that day is gone... (Interviewee) Yeah, that's what I walked... (Interviewee) Yeah, that's what I walked... (Interviewee) Yeah, that's what I walked...

Figure 4. Screenshot of the shared Google Sheets form that is used to coordinate the main data input of the project.

The process is time consuming to search, identify and isolate the mention of a single place of interest, create an audio clip of the

excerpt, associate the location and add into the website (more on this process in the next section). The result, however, provides an alternative type of interaction and interface with an audio collection, adding in another dimension to discoverability. When one of the interest points is mentioned (such as a building name, street intersection, or business name) in an oral history, a geospatial coordinate is noted along with a section of the associated text file.

Figure 5 displays a sample of one selected oral history. A historic map is on the left-hand side of the screen providing an idea of the specific place mentioned in the oral history, and then on the righthand side of the screen is the selected text from the original oral history file, as well as an in-browser audio player and link to the full oral history (hosted on the Kent State University Libraries digital collections, as outlined above).

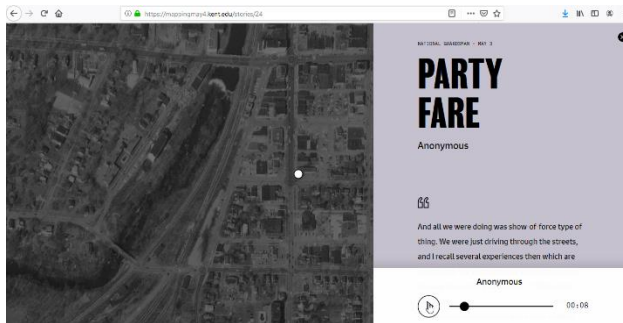


Figure 5. A screenshot of a sample item from the project. <https://mappingmay4.kent.edu/stories/24>

One helpful aspect is that the oral histories were transcribed at the onset of the project. This was a great help to the project to have the audio oral history files already in a text format. While the identification process was still cumbersome, it meant that selected portions of the oral history were already in text format, allowing for easier search capability. The oral histories had been transcribed by members of the Special Collections and Archives department manually, and the accuracy is very high.

Once a text that mentions one of the selected interest points is found, an adjoining audio clip is produced. This is also a time-consuming process, but the start and finish times are noted when the text is selected to help expediate the process.

Navigating through the Mapping May 4 site provides users with a few options. An aerial historical photograph from the same era at the May 4 shootings is used to provide a pictorial view of the selected interest points (Figure 6). In this view, the lower right-hand side has been collapsed down. Alternately, there is a way to filter results, based on date, interviewee name and interviewee role (Figure 7). And finally, there is also a basic search function, by selecting the magnifying glass icon in the upper left-hand side.

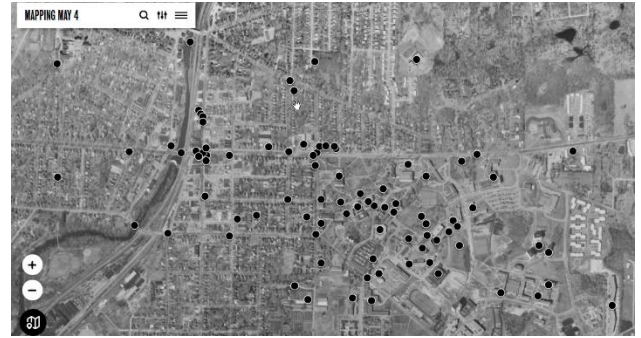


Figure 6. Screenshot of Mapping May 4, aerial browsing viewpoint. <https://mappingmay4.kent.edu>

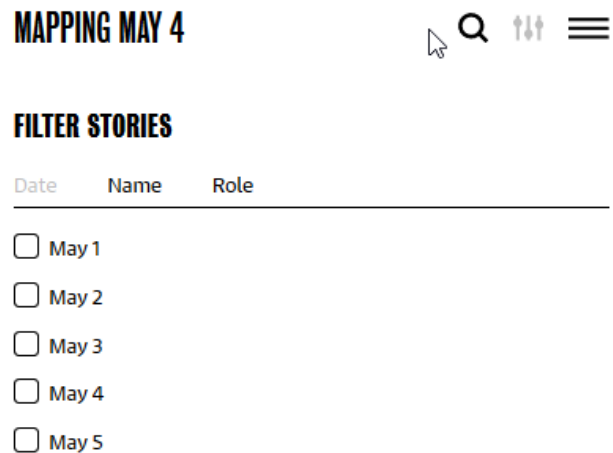


Figure 7. Screenshot of filtering options on Mapping May 4 website. <https://mappingmay4.kent.edu>

An oral history relies on the recall and memories of the individual interviewee, oftentimes years or decades after an event(s) has passed. While oral histories can be quite imperfect in nature due to the shortcomings and fallibility of memory, Frisch stresses the importance of these artifacts to add to a collective historical memory, one that is “personal and historical, individual and generational” [5]. Additionally, when there is a collection of oral histories centered on one event, researchers can find both the commonalities of memories of a particular event (or chain of events) as well as the discord. Supplementing transcriptions with geospatial information allows for this intersection to take place in a different manner than the more straightforward user interface that many are accustomed to within many digital collections.

Process

Once the locations were decided on, oral history transcriptions were searched to find matching points of reference. When a location is found in an oral history transcription, information was recorded into the project spreadsheet. The fastest way the project team found to record coordinate was to bring up Google Maps. Most of the locations in the first phase are places that are already marked on Google Maps. Once the location is found on

Google Maps, coordinates are provided by right clicking over the location and selecting the “What’s Here” option. Coordinates for the location will appear in a small pop-up box just below the location. If the desired point is not already identified on Google Maps, it is very straightforward to create a new point.

An excerpt of text around the interest point is made to provide some context for users from each oral history. These excerpts range in length, from a few sentences to a few paragraphs. The goal of the excerpt is to provide a story from original oral history that provides some detail about an experience from the selected location.

Next, the student identifies the start and end times of the selected excerpt and notes them in the project spreadsheet. This information is helpful when editing down from the full run audio track. Once the information from the spreadsheet has been reviewed and approved, it is inputted into the administrative side of the Mapping May 4 website.

Future plans for the site include additional oral histories from the Kent Historical Society as well as expanding the points of interest to include locations within the historic landmark and other places in town. The Kent Historical Society recently received a small grant in 2019 from the Ohio Historical Records Advisory Board to complete transcription on their oral history collection. These files and transcriptions have been shared with the researchers from the Mapping May 4 project. This collection is currently housed on the Ohio Memory website [8].

The oral history collection from the historical society is not centered around May 4 as the topic, but rather a more broad, inclusive collection around regional history. Many of these however touch in part on the topic of May 4, and by and largely represent the local resident perspective. The addition of new oral histories will be a good test to measure how scalable the project is, and provide some guidance for future digital projects looking to incorporate GIS at our institution.

Usage and Analytics

The Mapping May 4 website launched in the Fall of 2019, and usage has been tracked using Google Analytics since early November 2019. The early data collected from this time period (November 2019 to mid April 2020) indicate that the average time

spent on a page is much higher on the Mapping May 4 website rather than the library website May 4 oral history collection (5:08 as compared to 1:49, comparatively). Further data collection and study will be needed of information around usage to ascertain if the trend continues.

Conclusion

The Mapping May 4 website demonstrates a way to augment an existing digital oral history collection through the integration of simple geospatial information. The culmination of the project is presented in a geographically browsable interface, permitting for a different mode of discovery and access. New avenues of exploration are provided to virtually travel through past city streets through the imperfect lens of collective human memory.

References

- [1] Narratives and Commentaries Related to the Kent State Shootings archival collection, Special Collections and Archives, Kent State University Libraries, <https://www.library.kent.edu/special-collections-and-archives/narratives-commentaries-related-kent-state-shootings>
- [2] Omeka, <https://omeka.org/>
- [3] May 4 archival collection list, <https://www.library.kent.edu/special-collections-and-archives/kent-state-shootings-may-4-collection-contents>
- [4] Mapping May 4, <https://mappingmay4.kent.edu/>
- [5] Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany: State University of New York Press, pg. 188. (1990).
- [6] MapBox, <https://www.mapbox.com>
- [7] OpenStreetMap, <https://www.openstreetmap.org>
- [8] Ohio Memory, <https://ohiomemory.org>

Author Biography

Virginia Dressler is the Digital Projects Librarian at Kent State University and has worked in academic libraries since 2008 managing digital initiatives. Her specialty areas are project management of digital projects and reformatting analog collections for digital collections, including overseeing the digitization of the daily student newspaper. She holds an MLIS from Kent State University and an MA in Art Gallery and Museum Studies from the University of Leeds.