Robert Wolf

Wading Into Digital Waters

Recently our library had inherited some 40,000+ photographic negatives from the estate of the former University Photographer. It was decided that these images needed to be preserved digitally and made available to the public. I was asked by our special collections staff to assist with the development of this project. Our special collections staff took a few months and sorted the images into meaningful subsets and assigned what information they could to each of the slides. (Once the images are available to view online we plan on asking the community to help identify people and places.) Next we needed to scan all 40,000+ negatives. We had neither the equipment nor the personnel for this, so we outsourced the digitization to an outside vendor. A number of months and many headaches and miscommunications later we finally received 2 terabytes worth of TIFF images on a number of external hard drives.

We needed to find a way to manage our digital images and present them to the user in a meaningful manner. Unfortunately, our technical and hardware resources were very limited so we would require a third party content management system (CMS) to develop our collection. Initially we were also limited in our ability to host said CMS. This limited our options to a CMS that offered remote hosting and storage space. We eventually settled on CONTENTdm due to its lower long term cost when compared to other out-of-the-box systems, and OCLC's ability to offer remote server space, albeit at a significant cost. As time went on we were able to work with our IT department to purchase and maintain a server for our collection, hence eliminating our need for a service offering remote server space and reducing our hosting cost. However we were already committed to CONTENTdm at this point.

I decided I needed to know more about digital collections and began to look around the web. As part of my education I looked at what other North Carolina libraries are doing with digitization. It was then that I discovered the multitude of resources already provided by North Carolina universities, colleges, and public libraries.

I expected to find maybe fifty or so collections and I assumed they would mostly come from the larger institutions and the state library. What I found was over 270 collections from 38 different college and university libraries, and the public library system, not including the collections by academic departments or historical societies. While the larger institutions had the largest collections, North Carolina State University, Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill having 111 of the 270+ collections, there were also a number of smaller libraries with impressive collections. I was amazed to see the diversity of these collections. While many dealt with local or regional history, as I assumed they would, they covered a broad range of topics from the arts and music to insects, medicine, postcards, and even Siamese twins. These collections also varied in size from thousands of items in a single collection to as few as five.

One thing I found slightly problematic was the multitude of search interfaces, ranging from intuitive to frustrating. While many allowed you to browse the collections, others only allowed a keyword search, which, if you didn't know much about the nature of the collection, often returned zero results and could be quite frustrating. I found the best collections allowed both browsing and keyword searching, which incidentally all the CONTENTdm sites I came across did.

The following institutions all use CONTENTdm for some or all of their collections:

- State Library of North Carolina
- Appalachian State University
- North Carolina Central University
- University of North Carolina Chapel Hill
- University of North Carolina Wilmington

Below are samples of collections from each institution:

NC MOSIAC *(State Library of North Carolina)*
This collection tries to bring together state and local government information available in other collections in one convenient place.
http://www.mosaic.ncdcr.gov/

Moonshining in Burke County: The Career of N.C. ABC Officer Fred Hennessee
(Appalachian State University)
A scrap book of moonshine and drug busts in western North Carolina in the early 1970's.
http://contentdm.library.appstate.edu/docapp/moonshine/index.html

A Digital Collection Celebrating the Founding of the Historically Black College and University
(North Carolina Central University)
This collection is actually part of a larger collection exploring the founding of Historically Black Colleges around the country.
http://contentdm.auctr.edu/cdm4/browse.php?CISOROOT=/nccu

Historic Moneys
(University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
This collection archives the various forms of currency used in North Carolina from the 1600's until the end of the Civil War in 1865. The collection also includes numerous bills of credits and IOU's or debenture bills.
http://www.lib.unc.edu/dc/money/

Museum of World Cultures
(University of North Carolina Wilmington)
This collection of over 350 artifacts from around the world includes pottery, artwork, figurines, masks and more. Many of the items shown here are also on exhibit throughout the campus. The collection can be viewed by location or by category. My favorite is the Dance mask of the Bushoong people of Africa. http://library.uncw.edu/museum/index.html

After reviewing the many collections available throughout the state I realized how much work we have ahead of us. We are only at the beginning. Maybe creating a collection of 40,000+ images is a little too ambitious. Happily I'm only the technical guy, not the special collections librarian, so once the system is in place my involvement should be pretty limited.

I would advise those with an interest in digital collections to browse some of the many collections available. You might be surprised with what you find. Finally, I'm left with two questions. How come there isn't a site available which lists all the digital projects in the state instead of having to hunt through each institutions web site to find them? Also, why isn't there a state sponsored or initiated CMS which would allow some of the smaller libraries to have collections of their own? We hear plenty of talk about how we need to be more centralized in other aspects of library functionality. This seems like the perfect area for institutions across the state to pool resources and provide visible results.