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Amplifying Unheard Voices: A community-based approach to preserving Black History in the Inland Empire

Presented by Eric Milenkiewicz at the 2023 Society of Southwest Archivists Annual Meeting

Start [00:00:00]

Slide 1

- Good afternoon everyone, my name is Eric Milenkiewicz and I'm the University Archivist at California State University, San Bernardino (or for short CSUSB)
- Today I'll be talking about a project that I've been working on to better document Black history and culture in the Inland region of Southern California. More specifically, the area east of Los Angeles that includes most of San Bernardino and Riverside Counties locally referred to as the Inland Empire
- This community-based, collaborative initiative is focused on capturing the accounts, experiences, and personal narratives of members from the Black community so that that this history can be represented in our regional historical record.

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- The Inland Empire region of Southern California, centered around the cities of San Bernardino and Riverside, covers more than 27,000 square miles and is home to a diverse population of more than 4.5 million people. Situated just sixty miles from Los Angeles this area has a rich history, but it's often overlooked and at times even consumed by the larger metropolis to the west.
- This gap in coverage widens when it comes to the history of its BIPOC communities who have played an integral role in building and shaping the Inland Empire, but have remained largely absent from its historical record. The history of the Black community, in particular, has been largely ignored and often excluded from the histories written on Southern California's inland cities.
- Longtime Inland Empire residents and community activists, Wilmer Amina Carter, a former California State Assemblymember representing Rialto, CA, and her husband Ratibu Jacocks, a local business owner, decided to take action and re-write the long-established, incomplete narrative of our region by capturing the history of their community.
- In 2007, they launched the first oral history project in the area focused on capturing the accounts, experiences, and history of the Inland Empire's Black community that they referred to as the "Bridges That Carried Us Over". Along with a small group of volunteers, they met with Black pioneers and leaders from throughout the region who contributed significantly to its development, conducting and recording more than 100 oral history interviews with community members over the span of nearly a decade.
- This small grassroots effort documented both the struggles and triumphs of the Black community throughout the years, highlighting histories that had long been silenced in San Bernardino and neighboring cities.
- However, shortly after Ratibu's untimely death in 2015 the project halted and the recorded interviews remained hidden from public view for several years without a mechanism in place to make them publicly accessible.

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- In 2020, faculty and students from 3 of the area's leading universities (CSUSB, the University of Redlands, and the University of California, Riverside) came together with Mrs. Carter and key residents from the Inland Empire's Black community to revitalize the project.
- This group has helped transform the project into a much larger community-based, collaborative initiative branded as the "Bridges That Carried Us Over Project: Documenting Black History in the Inland Empire."
- In addition to conducting oral history interviews, the project has expanded its scope to include work focused on identifying and preserving community-held historical collections and developing a community-centered, participatory Digital Archive of primary source materials documenting Black history in the region.
- Recognizing the need for additional community-based support to accommodate this broader scope, the refreshed project focused early efforts on strengthening existing and establishing new ties within the community.
- In 2021, two open community forums were held, providing local educators, historians, activists, and other allies an opportunity to engage in conversations centered on the current goals and future directions of the project. These forums were instrumental in garnering additional community interest and support, helping to generate a network of 6 community partners and co-sponsors that include local outreach foundations, faith-based organizations, media outlets, and cultural heritage repositories. These supporters provide guidance, assistance, and resources for the project that help to increase its visibility in the community and sustain efforts moving forward.
- This bolstered support network also made it possible for faculty and students from CSUSB, Redlands, and UC Riverside to focus their energies on addressing the major limitation of the original project, which was its inability to transcribe, process, and provide access to the oral histories that were previously captured.
- During the 2021-2022 academic year, faculty from the 3 universities incorporated this work into 6 undergraduate courses in both History and Ethnic Studies. Students were assigned to not only transcribe the original interviews, but also to analyze the content discussed in each by logging key topics, events, and organizations that were discussed in the interviews.
- They also tracked spatial and temporal coverage, documenting the locations of notable neighborhoods, residences, businesses, and other venues in the community mentioned in the interviews along with the time period covered.
- The transcription and analysis work completed by the students helps to expose the content of these interviews and is instrumental in improving the discoverability and accessibility of these histories as we move them into an online environment.

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- The video recordings that were transcribed, analyzed, and processed by the students were used, in-part, to seed the "Bridges That Carried Us Over Digital Archive," a community-centered, participatory digital archive hosted by the CSUSB Libraries in the university-supported Bepress' Digital Commons platform.
- Around 40 oral history interviews are now publicly available for the first time ever in this Digital Archive and this is a resource that will continue to grow as students and faculty continue to conduct interviews.

- Over 25 additional oral history interviews have been completed during the past 2 years. With many recorded remotely using the Zoom video conferencing platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic, like the one shown on the slide of Mrs. Green-Jordan with her virtual background in-place.
- A more structured approach to the interviews combined with the use of Zoom has aided in the transcription of these new interviews. We have actually been able to generate fairly complete auto-transcriptions from Zoom that allows us to more effectively and efficiently process these recordings for online access.
- There are still around 75+ interviews from the initial effort that need to be transcribed, though, and a little later on I'll discuss our plan for completing these.
- To complement the oral histories, we've also started digitizing personal and family historical collections so that digital versions of these materials can be hosted alongside the oral histories in the Digital Archive.
- Over 1,000 historical photographs documenting Black families, businesses, neighborhoods, and celebrations have already been digitized and we recently started to integrate some of these items into the Digital Archive, with geo-tagged locations when possible to provide a visual representation of the areas and communities represented, like the image on the slide from Colton, CA.
- I also want to mention an important component of this work that shouldn't be overlooked, securing Permissions.
- To ensure that we're carrying this work out in an ethical manner we've been granted permission by the interview participants and content owners to provide public access to all materials made available in the Digital Archive.
- Materials where we haven't secured permission are still maintained as part of the Archive, but will not be made publicly available online until we have the permissions to do so

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- With a dedicated support community in place, efforts to capture and process new and existing materials underway, and a digital asset management system now available to preserve and provide access to the gathered content; we've started to direct our attention to some other areas of work
- The first of these has been on Outreach and Advocacy, so that we can begin to highlight and amplify the history of the Black community in the Inland Empire, bringing it into greater public view.
- Programming centered around the project was incorporated into Black History Month celebrations in both 2022 and 2023, primarily in the form of community "story share and scanning days" aimed at capturing brief video vignettes and digitally preserving historical materials at various venues across the Black community.
- The first of these was held at the Moses Schaffer Community Center in Perris, CA in conjunction with the celebration for Mrs. Willie Moses 100th birthday. Mrs. Moses is a longtime civil rights and community activist who has served the Perris, CA community since 1957. This was a great opportunity to not only celebrate Mrs. Moses and her accomplishments, but also a great outlet to meet with community members where they live and help preserve their history in their community.
- A community scanning day was also held this past February at the 10th Annual Pioneer Breakfast held on the CSUSB campus that celebrates Black excellence and honor individuals that have left an indelible mark on their respective communities within and outside of the university
- Additionally, faculty involved in the project have given numerous presentations to promote awareness of the project, and have also used resources from the Digital Archive and from community-held collections to further expose the Inland Empire's Black history by delivering talks in our area on the history of the Redlands Black community and on the early San Bernardino Black Civil Rights Network.

- All of these efforts have led to increased media interest in our project, with outlets such as NBC News 4 Los Angeles, PBS, The I.E. Voice, San Bernardino Sun newspaper, and SoCal Voices podcast all featuring stories on the project, that fore-front Black history in the Inland Empire.

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- We've also established a web presence for the project designed to better connect the public to this history.
- A webpage was designed and is hosted by the CSUSB Libraries to both document the project and also direct users to relevant resources on Black History in the Inland Empire.
- Faculty and students have completed several online ArcGIS Story Maps featuring topics such as "Color lines and school segregation in San Bernardino" and the "Redlands, CA Black Community in 1910". Again surfacing history that up until now hasn't been visible to a broader public audience.
- Our students have also launched an Instagram social media campaign combining visual imagery and historical research that highlights the Black Community. Spotlight posts on Instagram like the one on the slide for Alberta Kearney, founder of the Dora Nelson African American Art & History Museum in Perris, CA, are released a few times per week to educate the public on the contributions of Black activists, leaders, and organizations who enacted change in the Inland Empire.

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- With the assistance of our library media staff here at CSUSB I was even able to create a brief promotional video for the project using clips from the oral history interviews and digitized photographs from the community.
- The video even features a rare, original reel-to-reel recording of the song "Joy" performed by the Mu-Tonics, a San Bernardino-based, all Black gospel group from the 1960s, that was discovered in the community and digitized as part of our project efforts.
- Let's take a look at that now.

Slide 8

- Other more recent efforts have included acquiring physical archival collections.
- I want to note that this project is NOT a collecting initiative, though. The acquisition of collections is merely a by-product of the other work that is being completed and we're not actively pursuing collections to acquire. If historical materials and collections can be maintained in the community, then that's where we prefer they stay.
- However, there have been a few instances where community members have reached out because this cannot be done. Typically this is due to aging collection caretakers and a fear that these materials will be lost when they pass.
- The CSUSB Libraries has agreed to steward collections like this and has already integrated a few into its Special Collections and University Archives department including:
 - The personal collection of Wilmer Amina Carter. This is an extensive collection totaling around 130 LF compiled over a 30 year period by Mrs. Carter documenting her personal/professional life along with that of the Inland Empire's Black community. It includes documentation of community organizations such as the National Council of Negro Women (Inland Empire chapter), Westside Action Group, and Inland Area Kwanzaa Group.

- We also have the photographs of John Coleman, a local photographer that documented the Inland Empire's Black community for 3 decades between 1990 and 2020, that contains thousands of print and digital photographs of local events, organizations, and people.
- The records of the Westside Action Group, a community activist organization founded in 1972 to support and advocate for the Black community in San Bernardino, that includes correspondence, meeting agendas and minutes, photographs, and other materials detailing the group's efforts in the community, have also been transferred to the CSUSB Libraries.
- Processing of these collections is already underway, and the CSUSB Libraries is committed to supporting additional collections as the need arises, so that they can be preserved and accessible for the generations to come.

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- Looking ahead, we have some immediate next steps and a few others that are more aspirational at this point
- We've started exploring external funding sources to support various project goals
- The first being funds to support oral history interview transcription.
 - As we all know transcription can be a long and tedious process. Initially to assist the students, we experimented with several automated transcription tools such as Trint and Otter.ai, but they were unable to produce accurate and reliable transcriptions of these interviews due to the nature of the recordings (i.e., poor audio quality, multiple interviewees, numerous interruptions, etc). And while the students were able to transcribe a fair number of interviews over the course of a year, this approach just wasn't sustainable for the remaining recordings.
 - To help expedite this process, I pursued an Archival grant from the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation, a leading supporter of social science research for Los Angeles and the surrounding region.
 - In February, I received word that my proposal was funded to outsource the transcription to a human transcription service and in September we'll begin a year-long project to complete the remaining 75+ interviews.
 - The vendor will complete the transcription, and students will be hired to do the interview analysis and processing work so that these recordings can be added to the Digital Archive
- We're also looking into a grant opportunity funded by the California Arts Council to form an Artists Collective based out of the Inland Empire that uses the project's oral history interviews (and other historical materials that are gathered) to create visual performances, poetry, and artwork that highlights the lives of the interviewees and the themes covered in their interviews.
- Further down the line we hope to:
 - Connect our project's Black history materials with collections from other BIPOC communities in the region to promote an even more inclusive narrative
 - And develop K-12 curriculum using the historical resources aggregated from these BIPOC communities to bring greater historical representation into the local schools so that students can better understand the diverse history of our region.
- So that's our project, where we're currently at, and where we're headed!
- Thank you!

End [00:17:31]