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Archival Collection Digitization: Great Plains Black History Museum

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ALA Core IG Week: Digital Conversion
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Hello and thank you for joining me today as I share about the University of Nebraska's partnership with the Great Plains Black History Museum to digitize their archival collection.

Outline

- Digital collections at University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO)
- Community partnership with the Great Plains Black History Museum
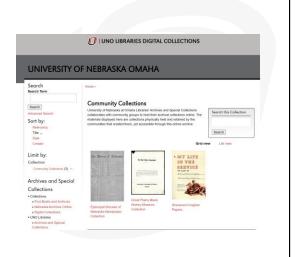- Project design
- Moving forward

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I'm going to share just a brief overview of the digital collections landscape at UNO and then dive right in to the Great Plains Black History Museum digitization project. I'll describe the community partnership we formed, how I designed the digitization aspect of the project, and what things look like for moving forward.

Digital Collections at UNO

- LYRASIS hosted instance of Islandora 7
- Manuscripts, University Archives, Published Maps and Books, and Community Collections
- Community collections digitization and hosting

UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections

UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections currently uses a Lyrasis hosted instance of Islandora 7 to provide access to our digitized and born-digital collections including those from Manuscripts, University Archives, and our published maps and books. In addition to sharing our own collections, we have made an effort to partner with Omaha institutions to help provide access to their materials. We have three of these community collections. One is the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska Newspaper Collection and another is actually a community member whose material we are hosting. While those projects did to some extent inform the project I'm speaking about today, they happened prior to my joining UNO using completely different approaches, which is why I viewed the digitization of the Great Plains Black History Museum archival collection a pilot project for community collection digitization and hosting.

Great Plains Black History Museum Project

- 50th Anniversary of UNO's Department of Black Studies
- Community relationship building
- Collection survey and selection
- Internal UNO grant funds secured
- Transfer of selected material to UNO: processing and digitization

So with that understanding, I can share about the project. In Spring 2021, UNO Archives and Special Collections was preparing in a major way to help celebrate the 50th Anniversary of UNO's Department of Black Studies. In the course of those preparations, my colleagues and I began a discussion of what partnership could look like with Omaha's Great Plains Black History Museum. From prior conversations with museum staff, we were aware that their archival collection contained materials relating to the activities of the Dept. Of Black Studies. The collection was inaccessible to all, due to the lack of online description and being housed at a local public library removed from the museum itself due to space limitations. Our first course of action was to build on the connection established between the director of the archives and the director of the museum, so that we could express our desire to help provide access to their inaccessible materials. With increased communication, my colleagues and I arranged to visit the library to survey the collection. Thanks to the work of a prior grant funded employee, there was a partial inventory that we were able to work with, making the physical survey of the collection more effective. We learned that the museum had just over 100 cubic feet of collection material. Within the collection we found roughly 7 cubic feet of material we thought could best complement the Department of Black Studies anniversary, about 1.25 of which directly documented the department's work at UNO.

In fall 2021, we secured grant funds to support the work that would allow UNO to partner with the Great Plains Black History Museum to help make their archival collection available for widespread use. An MOU between the museum and archives was signed, indicating that the temporary loan of the identified 7 cubic feet would be arranged, described, and selectively digitized by UNO. UNO accepted responsibility for hosting the digital objects and associated metadata on Islandora and also sharing all material with the museum. We transferred the selected materials to the archives and began preparing for a spring project. My colleague who is responsible for all of the physical processing did a great deal of prep following the transfer. I'm skimming over it here, but it does need to be acknowledged as a major task as the preliminary inventory wasn't exactly accurate and she found a fair amount of preservation issues that needed to be dealt with before we could introduce a student employee to the work.

In Spring 2022 my colleague and I hired a grant-funded student employee who would be responsible for processing and digitization. The student began processing and I went on leave for three months, with the hope that we'd be ready to digitize after my leave. The student employee was very efficient and had the 7 cubic feet arranged and described in ArchivesSpace at the folder level; fortunately we were on track to move forward with digitization when I returned to work.

Great Plains Black History Museum Project

- Scanners: Epson Expression 12000XL flatbed, Fujisu fi-7460 sheetfed, Bookeye 4 V1A overhead
- Description at folder level
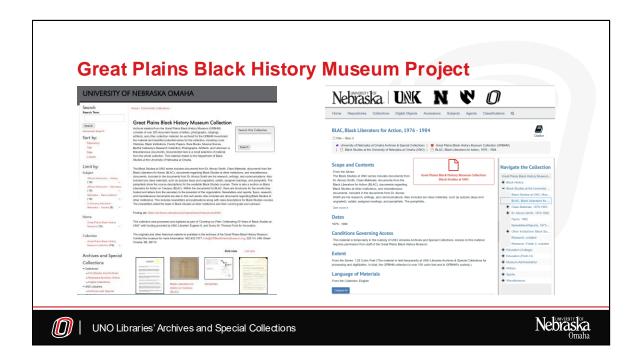- Project prep and specifications
- 24-bit color, 600PPI uncompressed TIFFs

UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections

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We're a relatively small department of 8, and only me and my student employees and interns do project-based digitation work as funding allows, while our assistant archivist does some on-demand scanning for patron requests. We have an Epson flatbed 12000xl, fujitsu fi7460 for sheetfed document scanning, and an overhead Bookeye V4 scanner. This allows us to digitize most material for requests in house, occasionally soliciting the help of our creative production lab for camera capture of oversize items and outsourcing our AV collection as needed. Historically at UNO there was a practice of digitizing and describing material at the item level, but I joined staff in June of 2020 and since then we've only digitized at the folder or volume level for public access. In theory, this gives our virtual users a similar experience as to how they would encounter the physical material in the reading room and it is a sustainable practice as opposed to item level description. So the description at folder level in Archives Space that was performed by the student employee was perfect for our needs.

With the selected bit of the collection processed, I began evaluating the material, taking a closer look at it than during my initial review, to create the project specifications for digitization. Typically, this includes surveying the material, looking at condition and format, determining what equipment needs to be used for scanning,

reviewing the content for copyright and sensitivity concerns, and creating a metadata spreadsheet to track the status of each file. Thankfully the preservation concerns were handled at the time of processing, so I didn't need to worry about mold coming in contact with the scanners. The material did include several different formats, including bound volumes, photographs, and loose papers of all sizes, so I needed to prepare for training the student on our Epson, Fujitsu, and Bookeye. In discussion with my colleagues, it was decided that we would scan the loaned material at a high resolution and in color due to the real possibility that the physical materials would never be available outside of the museum; we wanted to do things well with our possibly one shot. With that in mind, I created project instructions for the student to scan materials in 24-bit color as 600PPI uncompressed TIFFs. With the idea in mind of providing access similarly to how we do in the reading room, and due to space limitations in Islandora, each page is a single TIFF scan that we bundle together to create a PDF of the folder/volume. This allows users to flip through a folder while using less space in Islandora than single TIFFs would require. Access is just much more convenient for users.

Great Plains Black History Museum Project

UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections

I manage our digitization projects using Trello and Teams. All project instructions are stored in Teams and linked to a Trello card where all communication occurs. I documented the project instructions and then completed training with the student. She was responsible for scanning, checking for quality, editing images as needed, embedding metadata, creating production masters from the preservation scans, creating the access PDFs from the production master TIFFs, and embedding metadata within those. The 1.25 cubic feet consisted of 19 folders, generated 1,621 TIFFs and 19 PDFs about 182 GB in size. I then trained her on how to use the metadata spreadsheet to complete the MODS records needed for each PDF; she used a template I created and we worked together to ingest the collection into Islandora. She then linked each digital object in Islandora to the corresponding folder level archival object in ArchivesSpace. We were very fortunate with the quality, accuracy, and efficiency of her work. She was so quick to perform the work with such attention to detail, that we asked the museum if we could continue digitizing beyond just the intentionally selected material. The director agreed and our student kept working and they did so until their scheduling needs changed. Currently, the project can only move forward if we hire a new student employee, but we were successful in providing access to a portion of the museum's archival collection that otherwise would not have been publicly available.

Moving Forward

- Hopeful for additional community partnerships in future
- Complications: temporary hires and CMS/DAM limitations
- Community engagement remains top priority for UNO, so we continue!

This project gave us practice in establishing a relationship with a local cultural heritage institution and working within an MOU that served the non-UNO party while being realistic about what UNO could do for another party. It is a project type we would definitely like to repeat, and I have hopes for connecting with the Omaha's Mexican American Historical Society of the Midlands in the near future. However, there were two major issues we encountered that we're still working on solving that will be critical to future partnerships. Hiring student employees has been very difficult since the pandemic; hiring a replacement for this project will be extra difficult considering the reduced grant funds available and thus a shorter time frame in which we could offer employment. This is an issue we haven't yet solved. Additionally, recently my focus needed to shift to determining a new platform to replace our Islandora instance. Last fall we were surprised to learn that our Lyrasis hosted instance will only be supported until next Spring. So my focus needed to shift from project work to migration research and prep. Part of the research includes determining a solution that allows us to continue and hopefully expanding our ability to host community collections online. No platform has been chosen yet, it is an effort I continue to work on. It is a difficult thing to navigate the complications of temporary funded work and costly digital storage and access solutions, but community engagement is a top priority for UNO and using our resources to help increase access

to collections is one major way to connect. I look forward to being able to use lessons learned from this effort in future community partnerships.

Thank you!

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Criss Libraries' Archives and Special Collections

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