

Johnson County's Photographic History on the Web

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>> STUDENT: The men with the guns was another favorite one of mine. I just saw it. It was cool how they're posing with their guns.

>> STUDENT: This is from 1945. I just thought that was really neat seeing how everything has progressed so much.

>> STUDENT: I want to know what was here before me. I like knowing where I live and I like to be proud of it.

>> MINDI LOVE: We applied for a Museums for America grant in 2004 to develop a comprehensive digital history project for Johnson County Kansas. We were interested in expanding people's understanding of our county's history, its influences in the metropolitan and the state of Kansas and so we developed a partnership with the Johnson County Library with really that goal of establishing a comprehensive resource, a one-stop online accessible place that the community could go and do research and access materials.

We have digitized about 30,000 images from our collection that are online at the JoCo History Site.

>> STUART HINDS: Most of the historic pictures came from different kinds of county reports. The Agriculture Department would go and do poultry farm tours and so there were photographs of these ladies out in their dresses looking at these barnyards full of chickens.

There was a mattress program that was initiated by the county in the late 30s, early 40s. The thinking being that if you have a good mattress you're going to get better sleep so you're going to be more productive.

Really fascinating stuff that was just tucked away in some of these reports.

>> FEMALE SPEAKER: The big deal about this time also remember is --

>> MINDI LOVE: The museum is a relatively small organization. We have about 10-12 people on our staff. We don't have our own IT support staff for instance and so there were some resources that we really needed to partner to make happen so that this project could move forward.

We have a close relationship with the Johnson County Library who has a very aggressive online web presence already and asked them if they would like to partner.

>> DONNA LAUFFER: We were really looking outward trying to see how the library could be of service to the community and we were changing from an archive organization to a much more progressive forward thinking library.

It's really creating content in the community and that's what we're after. The museum is after that. The library is after that.

>> STUDENT: I like how on the website when you click on the picture you can zoom in or you can move around the picture.

>> STUART HINDS: You really had to think about how people search and the different variety of users that are going to be using this database for different purposes and trying to address as many of those as possible.

>> MINDI LOVE: There are many small historical societies in our community that have very small staff or no staff at all. They may be all volunteer but they've got some really rich, wonderful collections. For instance the Kansas School for the Deaf, which is located in Olathe Kansas and is our county seat, they have about 2,100 images on the site from their history which dates back to the 1860s.

>> STUART HINDS: When we were developing this project, Web 2.0 was the big deal. I knew we wanted to have some sort of feature that would allow people to provide their own reaction to some of the content that was in the site.

>> MINDI LOVE: It's very comparable to having community curated exhibitions and losing that control or giving up that control to the community to create content that is important to them. I think ultimately if we're going to be relevant in our communities we need to be doing more of that as museums.

That idea of revisionist history is in many ways connected to this in terms of who is commenting on these objects. Who is the authority? Do they have a right to talk about it?

>> DAVE LACRONE: We actively solicit feedback about photos to help us with names, to help us with places and to help us with time periods.

We have a photograph here of a little corner store which used to be very common. Someone sent in this comment. My father and his wife, he names them, owned and operated this store as the Southridge Market from 1927 until closing it in 1940. It had a full line of groceries, vegetables, fruits and a butcher shop.

He made chili and sold that in the meat counter and I still have his recipes for the chili but I can't decipher it. It's written on a torn piece of brown paper and it's just notes to himself. He closed out the store when he heard there was to be a supermarket built nearby. He thought he couldn't compete with the supermarket.

Sometimes a photograph on the site will sort of cause a trip down memory lane for people who visit. If they see a photograph particularly a relative or a place that was meaningful to them, they'll sort of feel moved to contribute just a memory. It's okay to come to our site and walk down memory lane simply use it as entertainment and enjoyment.

In that sense it really fits with the mission of both the museum and the Johnson County Library.

>> MINDI LOVE: Each year the site has been up we've had anywhere between five and eight million downloads. We're clearly reaching our audience at a much greater level than we ever did before.

>> STUDENT: I think this website will last a long time. People later on will be able to look back at pictures of us and think of how much different it has changed from then.

>> KELI HILEMAN: As a history teacher, it's invaluable for me.

>> STUDENT: You can see how much we've changed and how much stronger we're getting and learning from the mistakes of the past.

>> KELI HILEMAN: It's the closest to time traveling in your local community that you can get.

>> STUART HINDS: It really does become an interesting and engaging online center for people to come together and share those experiences with each other, with their children. They can show their children this is what used to be on this corner or this is what it looked like when it was farm land and not a suburban tract housing development.

>> DONNA LAUFFER: There were a lot of cross pollination across both staffs that really enabled it to be larger than any of us ever imagined.