Japanese American Oral History project links generations
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Cal State Fullerton is participating in the digitization of almost 10,000 documents and more than 100 oral histories about the confinement of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Here's an email Q&A with Stephanie George, archivist at CSUF’s Center for Oral and Public History, about the project.

QUESTION: Can you explain what this project is about?

ANSWER: The Japanese American Confinement Sites grant funded by the National Park Service allows "...for the preservation and interpretation of U.S. confinement sites where Japanese Americans were detained during World War II." According to their website, the grants "...are awarded to preserve and interpret U.S. Confinement Sites where Japanese Americans were detained during World War II. Grants are awarded to organizations and entities working to preserve historic Japanese American confinement sites and their history." The monies received from this particular award will be used to digitize audio recordings and prepare transcripts, so they can be uploaded to the collaborative CSU website. http://csujad.com/

QUESTION: What does this project mean to Cal State Fullerton? What does it mean to Japanese Americans?

ANSWER: The Japanese American Oral History Project Collection was launched in 1972 and over the last 43 years has been one of the most used collections held by the Center for Oral and Public History. In addition to the oral histories held (in several projects), our holdings have prompted several other projects including multiple publications, the Orange County Japanese American Historic Building Survey, an exhibition and exhibition catalog, historical preservation, documentary films, interpretive essays and numerous lectures on the topic. Suffice to say, this has been a high-profile project and, while I can't speak for the university, we, at COPH, are extremely pleased that we'll be able to make our collections accessible to whomever would like to study them.

In addition, there have been countless individuals who have contributed to the growth of the Japanese American collection. I'd be hard-pressed to say just how many students over the years conducted interviews, but it goes beyond just the students. Campus employees and volunteers have acted as editors, interpreters, interviewees and supporters. They'd all be thrilled to see this project move forward, especially since it’s been largely self-supporting throughout its history.

Although I can’t speak for the Japanese American community, it’s been my observation that, in general, they’re pleased that this particular period of time is fully documented and made available. So many Americans are still unaware of the Japanese American confinement, even those living on the West Coast.

QUESTION: What does it mean to families?

ANSWER: Very few of our original interviewees are still with us, but family members of Issei and Nisei generation Japanese Americans have expressed their appreciation, knowing that their family members’ recordings and photographs are saved in perpetuity.

QUESTION: How will this project help students learn about history?

This project isn’t simply for the sake of students, but for the global community who has access to a computer. Materials long “hidden” in archives, requiring those attempting to access these items to visit each archive, will be available online. Moreover, there are lots of secondary source materials that interpret the Japanese American experience.

Now, a good number of primary sources — including the oral histories (both recordings and transcripts) and photographs held in our archives — will be available. How much richer will the story be when one can listen to or read the experiences of working in the celery or sugar beet fields of Orange County or those who spent time in a confinement site like Poston or Manzanar? As far as the oral histories are concerned, these are told in the words of those who actually experienced it.

**QUESTION:** How will the project benefit future generations?

**ANSWER:** Two core functions of an archive are preservation and access. Digitizing these materials will fulfill these directly and indirectly — by allowing us to offer surrogate copies of the materials in digital form, thus prolonging the life of the original (due to less handling). Making them available through this collaborative website improves access (see part of the answer to the previous question) to those who might not otherwise have it. As far as future generations, we’re committed to improving access to these materials by present and future generations who may, at first blush, learn about the sites, but gain inspiration.

Right now we’re encountering users whose first stops in research are Google and Wikipedia. Pushing these items to an online, and hopefully, reliable, environment will provide generations who are used to and expect everything online a good share of Japanese American documents held by the CSU system.

Sometimes it’s difficult to say how these materials will be used in the future, but in the recent past, they’ve been used as evidence in redress (proceedings). What is evident is that they continue to hold research value for the hundreds who have used them and they will probably continue to be valued in the future, whether it’s a fourth grade California History Day project or used in a way that affects change — especially with regard to equal justice — on a national level.

**QUESTION:** Is there anything else you would like to share?

**ANSWER:** The pilot project in which we participated with six other CSUs is live and online right now. [http://csujad.com/](http://csujad.com/) This is the result of a small NEH grant that tested the waters for what this might look like in the future. Because of our own limited resources, being a part of this Japanese American Confinement Sites grant funded by the National Park Service (and we’re currently applying for another NEH grant) provides funding for completing the transcription of our Japanese American oral histories and digitizing images that we might not otherwise be able to transcribe. This helps us, at the local level, by funding the completion of this phase of this project started 40-plus years ago, but in helping us make these items accessible via the Internet.

*Mayra Herrera, a journalism intern at the Register this summer, presented the questions to Stephanie George. Herrera is a junior this fall at Segerstrom High School in Santa Ana.*