



The Oral History Project: Digital Access to US Forest Service Lore



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The Project

The United States Forest Service has a long history of caring for the land and serving people. A significant part of that history are the foresters themselves: their memories, experiences, and stories. Every National Forest has a Heritage Program and for decades, volunteers and foresters have been collecting oral histories from retirees, volunteers, and their families. Some interviews were written down, others recorded in a variety of formats. The challenge? How to approach the preparation of these materials for storage and public access at the National Museum of Forest Service History (the Museum).

We worked with the Gifford Pinchot National Forest (GPNF) and the Museum to assess current resources and develop a sustainable process for digitization, storage, and public access. In addition to the immediate needs of the collection, we also wrote internship and volunteer handbooks and developed the business case to help sustain ongoing work at both the local and Museum levels.



Digitization

Standard audio cassettes, micro-cassettes, reel tapes, and VHS tapes are all possible formats for oral history recordings, however the bulk of the collection is comprised of audio cassette tapes. We designed our plan to be cost-effective and easy to implement:

- Two separate budgets detailing the necessary equipment and procedures for converting the primary audio cassette format to digital formats.
- Full instructions to help with the storage and transcription of interviews.
- Recommendations for specific recording hardware and software acquisitions.
- Suggestions for the ongoing recording of histories.

By giving them multiple options, the Museum and GPNF will be able to transition their collections into digital formats in a way easily adopted by Heritage Programs nationwide.

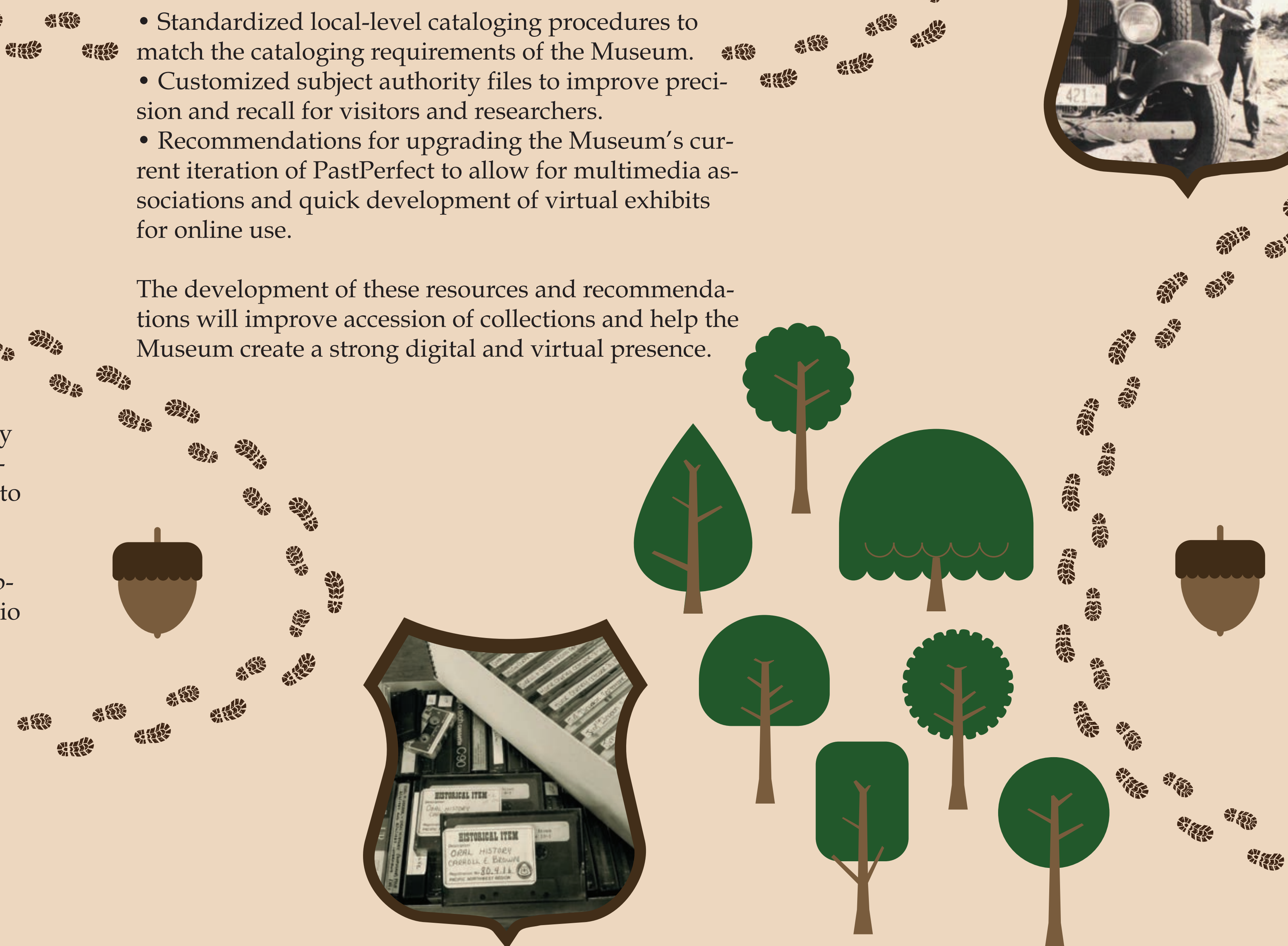


Access

Once the existing collections have been digitized, we have to address streamlining the cataloging and indexing of both the legacy and digital formats. We analyzed the existing processes and resources to develop the following recommendations:

- Standardized local-level cataloging procedures to match the cataloging requirements of the Museum.
- Customized subject authority files to improve precision and recall for visitors and researchers.
- Recommendations for upgrading the Museum's current iteration of PastPerfect to allow for multimedia associations and quick development of virtual exhibits for online use.

The development of these resources and recommendations will improve accession of collections and help the Museum create a strong digital and virtual presence.



Interns & Volunteers

To help maintain project momentum beyond our involvement, we developed a comprehensive intern and volunteer program comprised of three handbooks (one each for the hosting institution, interns, and volunteers):

- Hosting institution guidelines to cover all aspects of establishing, managing, and assessing an internship program.
- Intern guidelines to cover all aspects of the internship, from expectations and policies to detailed work plans setting the primary goals of participation.
- Volunteer guidelines are a less technical rendering of the intern guidelines to cater to a wider audience.

Combined, the handbooks form a comprehensive product that will allow the Museum and the Forest Service Heritage Programs to conduct successful internships and volunteer opportunities tailored for oral history preservation.



Sustainability

Ongoing support of this project cannot rely solely on the efforts of interns and volunteers. To help drive support financially, we developed the business case to justify ongoing investment. The documentation includes:

- Detailed description of the opportunity as presented by GPNF and the Museum and supported by our analysis.
- In-depth assessment of the existing collection, including stakeholder needs analysis.
- Financial assessment of implementing the program as designed with the potential for nationwide expansion.
- Risk assessment of existing and future issues facing the oral history preservation and access program.

Given the aging state of these representative collections, the ongoing recording of new histories, and the current enthusiasm for the project, we unanimously recommend the project be funded and implemented as soon as possible.