What Middletown Read: The Discovery

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Rachel Wynn

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Frank Felsenstein

Ball State University
Muncie, IN

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Abstract: In order to create a promotional tool for the project of What Middletown Read at Ball State University, we have joined our talents to bring together a video to illustrate the importance of the project, and to explain to those outside the project what important work is being done. To achieve this, we interviewed members of the researching team and historians to demonstrate the background aspects of the project and the significance it will hold for historians and all potential researchers. Ultimately, we hope that this project will offer a positive and informative view of the project to interested subjects should the team choose to share it in digital form. The video will also be housed as a part of the local history collection in the Ball State Archives and Special Collections for public viewing. Alyssa has used her talents honed at Ball State for filming and editing, as Rachel contributed her visual marketing skills to create the existing look of the video for distribution in addition scheduling and communication.

Acknowledgements:

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August 15, 2007

The honors thesis has definitely been on my mind since the moment I received my acceptance letter for Ball State University. I was thrilled to be accepted to the university and offered honors status, but the requirements of being a student of the honors college were a bit frightening at first. Will my classes be more than I can handle? Will I disappoint my professors and not perform to their expectations? And just what is this thesis that’s required for graduation? It became a dark, brooding figure just waiting for me to reach my senior year, and then it would crush my hopes of receiving an honors diploma for good. I became very anxious when I would hear students discussing what their theses would be in our underclassmen years. How did they know what they wanted to do? I had no clue whatsoever. I did some soul-searching and I always seemed to settle on a creative project, like photography. I have always loved taking photographs, and it seemed much superior to another extensive research project. But just as my majors and my interests throughout college were ever-changing, so was my thesis project.

September 23, 2007

Toward my upperclassmen years, I realized that I actually enjoyed the creative aspects of my major, so why not use the honors thesis as an opportunity to create another visual marketing tool? In a recent class, a team of about 15 students and myself coordinated a promotional video and brochure for the International Studies program at Ball State and I found it to be very rewarding. We laid out a plan of what we envisioned a video for this program to look like. We brainstormed the images that we wanted to associate with the program, like fun and intelligent and world-travelled. It’s important to have an overarching strategic plan for the end product before you even begin. In terms of marketing, the video should portray the image of the subject
that you think will attract your target audience. Videos on almost every subject have to involve some basic parts such as background information and interviews, but if we can present it in a way that will strike high school seniors as interesting and fun, it would be much more successful. I felt like I could apply these same principles to another project that I thought was worthy of endorsing, and also apply more basic business skills to organizing information, interview schedules and people.

October 19, 2007

Now that it’s getting down to crunch time (and not being capable of producing a video by myself), it’s time to actually put this plan into action. I have several good friends that happen to be Tele-Communications majors and one of them happens to be an honors student! I have asked Alyssa if she would like to team up with me for an honors theses and she is all for it! Frankly, in the last video that I was involved in, I was not overly happy with the camera work and editing of our cameraman. I know that Alyssa is creative and a really good worker, so I feel really good about the project we could put together. My part of the thesis is essentially planning and organization of the image portrayed through the video and the coordination of all parts. I will also be the interviewer, co-scriptwriter, possible voice-over talent, and help to find a way of shooting that will produce our desired image. Alyssa will bring her far superior knowledge of all things having to do with production and will bring the image to life.

In one of my jobs here at Ball State, I have been involved in a project called What Middletown Read. Several years ago, ledgers dating from the 1880’s to the 1900’s documenting library patronage and reading selections were found preserved in the current Carnegie Public Library in downtown Muncie. Since this discovery, Dr. Frank Felsenstein has led a team to
document digitally the information found in these ledgers. When all the information is compiled into an extensive database, it will be possible to see “what Middletown read” and draw important cultural and historical conclusions about the people in Muncie at that time. Doing this research (as I know from personal experience) takes a lot of time, hard work and funding. My thought was that any attention that could be brought to the project, even in a humble honors thesis, would be helpful in finishing the project and making this information accessible to the public.

November 28, 2007

Alyssa and I had our first official meeting with Dr. Felsenstein today. We also just had our meeting with Dr. Joanne Edmonds of the honors college to approve the project. I’m very relieved that the honors college and those working on the project seem to think that it is a good idea. My only fear is that there is more information on the project than we can realistically include. Alyssa and I have agreed that, taking into account the subject matter, images available and our limited capabilities, a ten minute video is the most that we can produce. We will attempt to include all information that interested parties would wish to know about the project. To achieve this, I think some background information will have to be conveyed through conversational interviews, as we cannot include all history and information in our script. The script will also have to be flexible until we see what kind of interviews we come away with. But I’m excited that our project is in the beginning stages, and I think Alyssa and I will be able to produce something that the people on the project will be proud of.
January 10, 2008

Alyssa, not being as familiar with the project as I am, came to visit me in the Archives today where I was scanning some pages from the transaction ledgers. I showed Alyssa the transaction ledgers, accession catalogs, and book borrowers register, and we discussed what kind of visuals we will be able to use in the video. As beautiful as old books are, they are not explosively entertaining on screen. We also discussed making a schedule for our project, which will probably be the hardest part of this project for me. College students are not really trained to work on their own schedules and considering the final projects we will both have coming up in April and May, we need to get a lot of the background research and interviews finished as soon as possible. My assignment for next week is to compile the list of interviews and the things that I want included in the video. Alyssa’s assignment is to brainstorm creative ways to enhance the images we have available for the video and creative ways of making the video more visually interesting.

January 28, 2008

One of my major roles in this project is to attempt to keep it moving at a relatively quick pace, to communicate with all those we need to be involved, to work with people’s schedules and to relay any information to the participants that will make the process run more smoothly. When asking for interviews and setting up meeting times, I try to be as courteous and flexible as possible. I have informed my supervisor at work that I may need to take a few afternoons off this semester. I realize that my schedule is going to be one of the hardest to work around this summer, as I am out of town every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for my internship. Therefore I will have to offer the participants the times that I have available, and if these do not work I will
take the time off and make it up whenever possible. Being a super-senior in my last semester at college does not help either, so Alyssa and I are hoping to be through with interviews by mid-March so that we can focus on editing, music and other details toward the end of the semester when we are being bombarded by other projects. The original purpose of this entry was to work out the information that I am going to relay to the interviewees before our filming starts so that we can have as little technical and editing problems as possible. The interviewees need to know to:

1) Look at me instead of the camera, as we do not want them looking straight ahead in the video

2) Try to restate the question briefly in the answer so that interview excerpts can stand alone

3) Not talk to me directly, as the interviewer will not be featured in the video

4) Keep answers somewhat brief as, in editing, Alyssa will be splicing different interviews together for multiple opinions

We also need to make sure that we are handling any paperwork (all of the participants will need to sign a sheet that Alyssa will acquire, saying that we can use their interview for the film) or other details while setting up, because we do not want to take up any more of our interviewee’s time than necessary.

February 1, 2008

I have created a rough list of the interview questions that I would like to ask our interviewees. This list will, of course, be changed slightly for each person, as they have different roles and different perspectives of the project and its importance:
**Interview Questions**

What is the most interesting thing about the project to you?

How did you get involved in the project?

How is the information found from the project going to be used?

How is information found to compile a list of patrons?

Why is it important to look at what a section of the population read?

What does the selection of particular books tell you about a culture or time period?

What are the specifics of how the information is being stored?

Tell us about the different journals that were found and their importance.

How will it eventually be available to the public for search?

Why is it important to preserve these documents digitally?

I have contacted the following people to be a part of our film:

Dr. Frank Felsenstein

Dr. Jim Connolly

Kelly Hacker-Jones

Abbie Hum

Stephanie Mathis

Maria Staton

Manager of Muncie Public Library

Maren Read
Some of these listed are now living too far away to participate in our project, but we have quite a few who have agreed to be part of the process and I hope to invite more to share with us further down the line!

February 6, 2008

Yesterday, we filmed our first round of interviews, so we are really on a roll now! We filmed Dr. Felsenstein first in his office in RB and then Kelly Jones in the library. Dr. Felsenstein had some qualms about us filming in his office; understandably so, because he is a busy professor and he was unsure of how long we would take setting up in his office and if the space would work. Alyssa and I agreed however, that his office would be better, as we are trying to include a visual element of books and learning into each of the shots. Many of the professors’ offices are really visually interesting, with years of books and work on display. We thought this was an ideal setting so we tried to inconvenience Dr. F as little as possible and allow him to continue his work without interruption while we were setting up. The space was small, however, and we did come across a few setbacks. I helped as best I could to help Alyssa arrange the lighting, the camera and Dr. F. Alyssa is, of course, in charge of setting up the shot where she wants it, as she has a lot more experience in that department than me. I will be surprised when I see the interview on film.

Kelly’s interview was fun, because we got to try out a new location that Alyssa had scouted out. I think the angle of Kelly against the bookshelves is going to be a neat addition to the shot. Some slight problems came up during the filming process, like the bells outside of Dr. F’s office ringing during one of his answers. We inevitably had to redo this answer so this was not an ideal situation. Dr. F and Kelly also had a few moments when they would talk directly to
me, as a researcher. This is not a big deal, as it was usually not to an extent that we cannot edit out. It seems that all kinds of people become a little nervous in front of a camera and hence, the interviews are never going to be perfect. It’s a good thing that Alyssa is so practiced at editing and post-production!

**February 8, 2008**

One more interview down! As this was only our second day of interviewing, we were still a little nervous. To add to this, Alyssa had forgotten the film at home by mistake. Luckily, we noticed this before Maria arrived and were able to call a wonderful friend to bring it to us before we started. The people at the Genealogy Center were very accommodating and let us film in a lovely spot by the fireplace. I think it will turn out to be a good shot. Maria was great to interview. She’s really excited by the process, even after working on it for years now! She gave examples of how the database could be a personal tool to find out about things you are interested in, or even family members from Muncie. I altered the usual questions a little bit, as Maria has more knowledge of the accession catalog and what kinds of book were being checked out at the time. Alyssa and I think these will be good points to include, because tying specific literature to the time will make it easier to relate to. Since the genealogy center is a public place, and a busy one, we did have some problems with noise. Some patrons were requiring some assistance, and we had to start and stop some interview questions a few times. I hope that it was not too irritating for Maria to have to wait until we thought it was quiet enough.
February 18, 2008

I am getting a little nervous for the project to be moving along, as it has been awhile since we have filmed an interview. Scheduling conflicts are arising at every turn, so hopefully we can get things rolling again soon!

February 31, 2008

A few days ago, we finally got to another interview. We interviewed Dr. Connolly a few days ago and everything went really well. Alyssa had a run-in with a parking garage meter and was delayed a little while. This is just something that’s going to happen with any meeting you schedule and I tried to make sure Dr. Connolly was not upset by it. He was very nice about it, though, and had some good answers for us on the importance of the project. Dr. Connolly’s role in the project is somewhat more technical and managerial than some of the researchers, so the details of the ledgers and entry work were not his forte. I tried to ask him more open-ended questions on how historians would be able to use this information and what the findings at this particular time period tell us about the culture. Alyssa was sick today, but I’m glad she braved it and came in so that we are one interview closer to finalizing our project.

March 30, 2008

A few days ago, we filmed our last interview! I had attempted to get in touch with the librarian at Muncie Public on more than one occasion and am sorry not to have her interview, but Alyssa assures me that we will have plenty of information to more than fill the time limit we had set. Our last interview then was with Dr. Bruce Geelhoed. Dr. Geelhoed is the chair of the history department at Ball State and the former Director of Middletown Studies. Alyssa and I had
wanted to get a historian's perspective on the time period and the importance of the project, and Dr. Geelhoed was recommended to me by many of the WMR team. With each interview, it was difficult to know beforehand how much the interviewee knew about different aspects of the project. I realized that Dr. Geelhoed was far removed from the project, as he has been away from Middletown Studies for quite some time. From him, we were looking for an overall view of the time period, but as I am coming to realize, and as Maria stated in her interview, there is a lot that we don’t know about the small details of everyday life in this period. That’s part of why this project is so important, because we can get a glimpse into how people were receiving their information and their entertainment.

Dr. Geelhoed did have good insights on why Muncie was a perfect place for this information to be found. It is just one more level of study since the Lynds came here in the 1920s and Muncie, representing a typical American small town, is a great place from which to extrapolate data and deduce the way of life for many people across the country. Dr. Geelhoed, being the chair of the department, is a very busy man, but took as much time as he liked because he wanted Alyssa and I to understand the gravity of this study and the Lynds’ studies and the importance of Middletown. Some of the interview was spent talking directly to us about information he thought we should have for our project. I think we have a great chair of the history department here at Ball State and he must be a very enjoyable professor.

April 14, 2008

Last night, Alyssa and I viewed a rough editing of the video. It’s coming along pretty well. I have been in contact with our musician, and as soon as Alyssa finishes the rough cut, it will be exciting for him to start to create music for our project! Alyssa and I have discussed it,
and we both feel that the commonly used fast-paced music of informational videos will not work in this case. I would like to have a somewhat classical feel to the music and I think an instrumental music score would add a lot to our visuals. We have added some photos from the time period, acquired through the Ball State Archives and Special Collections, and I do not want the music to feel anachronistic against this setting. Trevor is an intelligent and professional musician, and I feel that he will be able to create the right mood for us. Alyssa, having more technical knowledge than me, needs me to convey to Trevor that the music must swell and ebb in certain portions of the video, especially toward the introduction and conclusion. I can start to see the video coming together and I think it is going to be really exciting.

April 23, 2008

Throughout the semester, I have not reflected very much in my journals about the actual project. First, I will discuss my history with the project. Two years ago, I was approached by my HNRS 390 professor, Dr. Felsenstein, asking if I would be interested in interviewing for a research position on a project he was working with. He approached me and a fellow classmate, Stephanie, because we had completed assignments early and relatively well in his colloquium discussing William Shakespeare’s works, and he thought we would be reliable and competent workers. Stephanie and I began doing research working with the Book Borrower’s Register (BBR).

This was one of the larger ledgers that was found in the attic of the current Carnegie Library in downtown Muncie. This ledger is important because it noted down the patron number, name, address and name and address of guarantor. A guarantor was an existing patron that signed with the applying patron, reaffirming for the library that he or she was an upstanding
citizen. Stephanie and I would separate portions of the years that we were working on and do research separately, though we usually traveled together to the downtown Genealogy Center, which housed some of the research material we would need. We would begin by taking down the names and addresses of the patron from the BBR and search for them in the city directory from the same year. If the patron name could be clarified (sometimes the handwriting left a lot to be desired) or reaffirmed, we would move on to finding more information. With Ancestry.com, we would search for the patron name once again, and take down information such as gender, race, marital status and occupation. This kind of information is important to collect, because eventually, this can be applied to sociological questions. Historians will be able to examine readership through gender, for example.

When we had gathered all of our information, time was then spent back at the Middletown Studies office, where we would input all of the data into the Access database created for us. Eventually, this database can be cross-reference with other aspects of the project, like the listing of book titles from the accession catalog, or the transactions recorded in the multiple transaction ledgers. When searching for a certain patron, you can see all the books that they have checked out. If searching for a particular book, you can view how many times it was checked out and by whom. This kind of information is incredible. The research can be applied to multiple areas of study and can tell us a lot about the ideas that were being shared in a small town at the turn of the century. Like a lot of the team relayed in their interviews, we do not know a lot about the everyday thoughts and actions of the people in this time period.

I think this project can give us a glimpse into what was going on in Muncie, and by comparison, many small towns across America, in this time. As many of the interviewees related, the information can be used by several groups of people. Individual genealogists can
research their family’s literary past in Muncie, sociological historians can research what social
groups were frequenting the library and the kinds of ideas they were reading about. They can
also look at readership by race, by color, by immigrant communities, by gender, by income, by
vocation, etc. The opportunities for insight from the database that will be established is great. I
hope that this project will soon be available to the masses, as it is the first project of its kind and
will be immensely valuable. Few studies have been done where this kind of historical
information was available, and what makes this project even more rare, is that such a volume of
information was found. It is truly one of a kind and I can’t wait to see the end result!

April 27, 2008

Alyssa and I are finalizing many details of the video today. This morning, we printed out
the inserts for the DVD cases and the labels for the DVDs themselves. Today we will be adding
the final music and burning all of the DVDs. The final details entailed in this project are time
consuming and have had us incurring a bit of a financial cost as well. We can only provide as
many copies of the DVDs as are completely necessary as we are limited by these financial costs.
Headaches arise when technology does not operate at the level that you think it should. We had
many difficulties with printing this morning, and from a packet of label paper, were just able to
come up with enough satisfactory copies to include when turning in our project. Alyssa has
incurred many technical difficulties, and the difficulties continue today with the programs used
to create the video. The music has now been added and it adds a lot to the video. The music is
accented at points when important new subjects are coming up, and the music builds toward a
high point when he video starts wrapping up. We are very pleased with it. We are still
encountering some small errors that will need to be fixed before we can burn the DVDs later today.

April 27, 2008 (continued)

Copies of the DVD have now been burned and it is really exciting to have this project finished and ready to hand in! I hope that the team of What Middletown read will be pleased with it. Alyssa and I put a lot of work into the project and it is gratifying to see the final product. Alyssa and I will both be graduating in less than a week and I am glad that we got to do this project together. Alyssa is very talented and I think we produced something pretty interesting that will be a benefit to the project. The provider of our music, Trevor Frohberg, also happens to be the brother of my boyfriend, Andy, so this project has been a personal one and a joy for me to work on. We will be handing in our final video shortly, and if the team of What Middletown Read feels fit to use it in any form, we will be extremely flattered. If not, anyone interested can view it in the Ball State Archives and Special Collections and we will always be glad that we got the opportunity to produce it. I would like to again thank everyone who participated. I wish the team well and hope that the project will be well received and widely utilized when it becomes publicly available in 2010!