

Eric Chrisp and Jay Sokolovsky

"Bus to Destiny" Locals Teaching Local History

"If the people of any race have no record of their past...that race becomes a drone in the community and is treated as a nonentity.... We should learn to record our doings, or we will be unprepared for the future examination and remain a nonentity in the great universe in which we live."

Samuel DeBow and Edward Pitter 1927, as quoted in Taylor 1994:2

The "Bus to Destiny" Web site opening page flashes several photos before resolving to an integration-era school bus. Web site and screen capture by Rochelle Lavin.

This is a story of collaboration among an African-American community, two African-American owned multimedia companies, and faculty and students at the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg. A two-year effort is culminating in the creation of a CD-ROM, entitled "Bus to Destiny," which captures aspects of the community's history. Originally envisioned as a way to preserve important cultural resources, the CD-ROM concept has been expanded to function as a digital museum, a powerful tool for engaging youth, and a model for a Web page that will extend the project's reach.

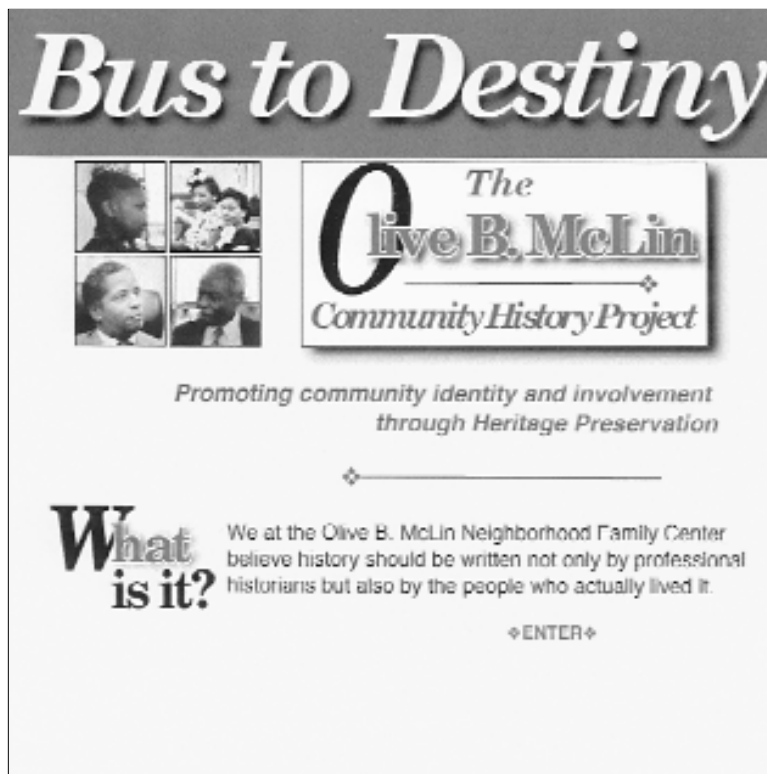
The Olive B. McLin Community History Archive Project counters stereotypes of what some communities are able to afford, or likely to value. We believe our experience challenges traditional notions of community development and shows that multimedia humanities projects can have significant impact if the collaboration is honest and the locus of control remains in the community.

The story begins in the south-central area of St. Petersburg, Florida. Like many historically black urban areas, this neighborhood has been neglected in favor of downtown development, severed by interstate construction, and affected by lack of economic opportunity and high crime. Only a few blocks from the St. Petersburg Campus of the University of South Florida, the neighborhood became the focus of growing university attention in the form of an urban initiative. Relationships have been building among faculty members, community developers, and residents over the past decade.

In 1996, we were introduced to the organizers of the Olive B. McLin Neighborhood Family Center (NFC). It seemed an ideal place to start a community development project because the center's namesake was a local educator and historical figure in her own right. The NFC saw the project as a way to stimulate involvement in the center and as a means to bolster pride—two important ingredients for self-determination in community development. The archive was partially modeled after a long-standing community history project at the Intertribal Friendship House in Oakland, California. The cornerstone of this new archive is a small collection of 40 oral histories collected by graduate student Eric Chrisp, assisted by youth and adult volunteers whom he trained. Over 45 volunteers have been involved in the project, collectively logging at least 60 hours per month. By training community members to collect oral histories, we put the tools of documenting and controlling cultural resources in the hands of the community itself. The process energized our young volunteers; they gained an opportunity to see a connection to their history missing in public schools.

We found that relationships between the university and the community had to be built one person at a time. To facilitate resident involvement, we established a Community Advisory Board (CAB) and planned a community history day to showcase the multimedia history archive. Monthly meetings with the CAB proved critical in discovering how to best use computer-based technologies.

It was initially thought that a professor of anthropology and a graduate student could easily build the CD-ROM with university-based technology. After further study, we concluded that it was unrealistic for us to produce anything more than a



mere electronic catalog of historical tidbits. We sought help from two African-American multimedia contractors in the local area. One, a specialist in CD-ROM production, combines digital skills with 15 years of television production and experience teaching public school kids poetry and music. The other is a journalist with experience designing and maintaining Web pages for a major newspaper. Working with these contractors allowed us to collaborate with individuals who could add their own cultural experience to the exacting technical needs of our efforts. Also, we wanted this historical resource project to help promote neighborhood economic development.

One of our challenges is to offer computer technologies that communities can actually learn from and access. The project's CD-ROM is being produced using the Tool Book II® software package which allows easy integration of images, video, audio, and interactive lessons and games. Producing video on the typical home computer is the greatest challenge; ours utilizes MPEG1 compression with 256 colors and 16-bit format. Since most home computer users access the Internet with low speed modems, the issue with Web production is to judiciously use high-tech bells and whistles so that a Web site is brought to users' screens before they lose interest. For example, our Web site uses an animated GIF file of historical local photos within a simple but quite elegant design—you can view it at: <www.gate.net/~lavanon/mclin/>. While our site contains a multitude of graphic images, there is seldom more than one per screen and each page is kept to less than 40 kilobytes of space. Conceptually, the CD-ROM and Web site are designed to interest viewers in local history and then entice them to explore the many layers of text, visuals, and sound within.

To assist residents in recording their own history, we developed a handbook for training community members. The youth, however, were more responsive to individualized attention; regular meetings were held to train teens on a range of information collecting techniques. They were given the opportunity to use their skills through a weekend program called the "History is Now Expedition." On one expedition, teens interviewed, videotaped, and photographed a jazz musician and music teacher who had been a World War II Tuskegee Airman. The interview took place in front of the former Manhattan Casino, a segregation-era nightclub frequented by jazz geniuses such as Count Basie. Later, the teens helped select sound bites and images to be included on the CD-ROM and Web page.

The Web extends the reach of the project by advertising upcoming events and hyperlinking to related Web sites such as the local Council of

Neighborhood Organizations. A community history chat room provides a place for users to swap stories of local lore. The Web site will also provide a testing ground for materials which can be transferred to future copies of the CD-ROM. The CAB will regularly review the work of a team of youth trained by the Web page contractor to write basic HTML code. These teens will soon showcase their own efforts at cultural resource management.

The first edition of the CD-ROM will be available in June 1998. It will include a virtual heritage trail, a quiz game on local heroes, several photo exhibits, family and oral histories, and a guide to collecting local history. The technology of both the CD-ROM and the Web offers a distinct advantage over history books by linking keywords through "hot spots." When users view our "Heros of Our Heritage" photographic exhibit over the Internet, they can instantly leap to more information about a given photograph. The CD will be distributed free to St. Petersburg's community centers, public museums, and city libraries.

This ongoing CD-ROM and Web project forms a flexible platform for passing heritage between generations and meeting the needs of a community actively engaged in reshaping its public image. A cutting-edge technology is being utilized in a community which has historically been denied equal representation. It is often said in this community, "We can't know where we're going if we don't know where we've been." This community is now entering the technology-based future with a greater means of preserving its past.

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The authors wish to acknowledge generous funding from the Florida Humanities Council, the City of St. Petersburg, the *St. Petersburg Times*, the O.B. McLin, J.B. Sanderlin, and Enoch Davis Community and Family centers.