Transcribing and Digitizing Mississippi Community Cookbooks: A Summary of Grant Activities

Southern Miss is home to the largest culinary collection in Mississippi and one of the largest in the American Gulf South. The archives house over 8,000 published and manuscript cookbooks as well as the papers of a number of food writers and cooks. But at the heart of the collection is the historic community cookbook archive. Today, we have over 240 unique titles published before 1970. Although we do not have every known Mississippi community cookbook, we are working on it, and we are discovering previously unknown titles all the time.

Funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council through the US-UK Food Digital Scholarship network+ has made it possible to increase the number of Mississippi community cookbooks available online by 57% from approximately 86 to 135. Newly digitized cookbooks are made available in our Digital Collections as soon as they are scanned with the last books included in October 2020. In addition, employing a combination of OCR technology and transcribers, the project has dramatically increased the number of cookbooks with transcriptions from 5 to 51. These transcripts are searchable via the [digital collections.](#)

Southern Miss has a well-established [digital lab](#) and [digital collections](#). The challenge has been to provide transcription services, since community cookbooks do not follow simple formatting guidelines, and each cookbook transcription needs to be reviewed individually. To facilitate the process, we developed simple transcription guidelines (for both texts that had first been electronically processed [OCR] and those that were handwritten and had to be fully transcribed). These were simple rules about page breaks, page numbering, marginalia, and advertisements (all were transcribed) and we addressed exceptions on a one-to-one basis. Transcriptions are reviewed before they are published to ensure accuracy. Southern Miss's Digital Collections are powered and hosted by Preservica. Preservica provides a standards-based (OAIS ISO 14721) active preservation software that makes access relatively easy for patrons from around the world.

Promotion

In addition to scanning and transcribing cookbooks, we also promoted the grant and our work through talks to local groups. In the COVID era, we have been able to reach audiences virtually including talks to the Columbus Lowndes Public

Library and Singing River Genealogy and Local History Library. In addition, Dr. Andrew P. Haley gave his annual cookbook talk (*The Proof is in the Politics: Women, Cookbooks, and Cultural Power in the Early Twentieth Century*) highlighting three Mississippi community cookbooks. With all of these efforts, Andrew Haley and Jennifer Brannock (funding recipients at the University of Southern Mississippi) acknowledged the importance of funding from Arts and Humanities Research Council and the University of Sheffield on the work that we have accomplished.

Further, the increase in online holdings have made it possible for us to shift the focus of our outreach from collection building to collection use. In the past, we have focused on the need for donations. While donations will continue to play an important role in developing the collection, the Arts and Humanities Research Council grant has created opportunities to promote the resources we have and encourage new scholarship. We have also used this opportunity to begin conversations with regional partners on how we might better share our resources. While these conversations are in an early stage, they are promising.

Finally, while we could not have foreseen this at the start of the project, the Arts and Humanities Research Council grant better prepared us for the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, allowing us to forge ahead with a greater emphasis on the digital collection. Digital collections were a luxury when we started; we now consider them a necessity.

Stats at a Glance

49   Cookbooks digitized.

51   Cookbooks transcribed.

20   People scanning and transcribing cookbooks.

1,479   Hours spent scanning and transcribing.

57%   Increase in fully digitized cookbooks available online from 86 to 135.

900%   Increase in cookbooks transcribed from 5 to 51.

Andrew Haley and Jennifer Brannock