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Online Digital Exhibit With the Tippecanoe County Historical Association

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and Rajan Dalal, *College of Science*

Student Introduction

We first came into contact with the Tippecanoe County Historical Association (TCHA) through the fall 2016 honors course “Digital Histories,” led by Dr. Jennifer Bay. Our course project was to create a digital exhibition for the TCHA with a service-learning grant provided by Purdue University. In this collaboration, we were able to put into practice the theories and processes we learned in the classroom and gain both a working knowledge of archival techniques and an understanding of the relationship between the institution and the community. The exhibit “Planting Our Roots: The Immigrant Experience in Tippecanoe County” is the result of our blended interests: curation, community engagement, web development, and education.

Community Partner Description

The TCHA is a nonprofit organization dedicated to collecting and preserving information and artifacts related to the history and culture of Tippecanoe County, Indiana, and its citizens. It oversees the Frank Arganbright Genealogy Center, the Tippecanoe Battlefield, and Fort Ouiatenon. The association serves the entire community, hosting the Feast of the Hunters Moon every fall and coordinating with local schools through specialized presentations on county history. Their family history resources are available to historians and genealogists for private research.

The association functions with only four paid staff members and the efforts of volunteers. The archives,

in particular, are understaffed with one person trained to handle archival materials, leaving her with an overabundance of work. At present, there is a backlog of collections to be processed, and a list of processed collections is not readily available to the public. Moreover, the TCHA is in the process of building a new website. As a result, projects that the TCHA would like to enact have been put on hold, including those to generate community interaction with the archives.

Activities and Impact

We believe that a lack of knowledge of local histories leads to a lack of belonging. In particular, we saw a lack of representation of immigrant narratives within the TCHA collections and more generally within the greater community. We concluded that now would be the perfect time to start such a repository to foster acceptance between the immigrant community and Lafayette. Additionally, the exhibit would draw attention to the archives and encourage more visitation.

Jinghong Zhu analyzed the documents, collection guides, and other relevant details, constructing an interactive timeline to serve as the centerpiece of the exhibition. Kathryn Math ran communications, connecting with cultural centers and clubs at Purdue University and in Lafayette to ask for submissions to the project. Rajan Dalal was the mastermind behind the architecture of the online exhibit. All three students reviewed documents within the TCHA collections and collaborated with curator Kelly Lippie to digitize a handful of collections for the exhibit.

We created an exhibition on the immigrant experience in Tippecanoe County, which is historical but also timely, as immigration and culture clash remain contemporary issues; we collected various stories and worked to present them to the public in a relatable manner. Our

inclusion of modern stories and documents conveys the continuity of the immigrant experience. Thus, this exhibit attempts to connect with recent immigrants and integrate them into the community, while also presenting their independent narratives and experiences within the larger tapestry of Tippecanoe history.

Reflection and Conclusion

“Planting Our Roots” not only benefits the TCHA by attracting collaboration and visitors, but also the authors through the experience of creating the exhibit, as well as an often silenced minority by offering a space for them to have their stories be told, shared, and preserved. The digital exhibition will be integrated into the new TCHA website, and the born-digital nature of the submissions amounts to minimal processing time and therefore little burden on staff members. The indefinite nature of history means that the immigrant experience will always be changing, requiring the addition of new narratives to the exhibit. In essence, this exhibit will always be a relevant tool to the community.

Acknowledgments

To Dr. Jennifer Bay for her assistance in orchestrating the project, TCHA Curator of Collections Kelly Lippie, and the TCHA itself.

Author Bio Sketches

Kathryn Math is a recent graduate of the College of Liberal Arts with a dual major in anthropology and art history, and a minor in classics. Her future plan of study includes pursuing a master’s degree in museum studies, focusing on indigenous American art. She hopes to secure a position in museum collection management.

Jinghong Zhu is a senior with a major in mass communication and minor in theater. His future academic plan is to get a master’s degree in media communication. Zhu has engaged with the community by volunteering periodically with the Purdue Alumni Association of Tippecanoe County.

Rajan Dalal is a senior in the College of Science with a major in computer science and minors in history, physics, and mathematics. He hopes to continue research into machine learning through a master’s program. He has taken part in various service learning and volunteering events at WIC, Almost Home, and others.