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Nancy McMenemy-McColm
Reference Librarian
Belmont Public Library



INDUSTRY

- Local Government - Libraries

LOCATION

- Belmont, Massachusetts

CHALLENGES

- Staff time spent assisting patrons with physical microfilm and reader printers
- Deteriorating microfilm threatened the long-term viability of the newspaper archive
- Inability to quickly search and find articles and photos across the entire newspaper archive

BMI PRODUCTS & SERVICES

- Microfilm scanning at BMI's secure facility
- Digitally converted records hosted at BMI's data center, avoiding need for IT support
- Web-based app that resembles a reader printer for easy access to digital newspaper archives

BENEFITS

- No IT staff requirements because the digital files and Digital Reel app are accessible from the Web
- Online access avoids requirement to work with physical microfilm
- Image enhancement enables article and photo optimization

Case Study

BELMONT

PUBLIC

LIBRARY

Overview

The Belmont Public Library serves the 25,000 citizens of Belmont, Massachusetts. The Library aims to provide a center for information and discovery through innovative programming, robust collections, and responsive services.

When grant money became available, the Belmont Public Library decided to fund a newspaper digitization project. The historical Belmont newspaper archive consists of seven different titles dating back to 1889 that were archived on physical microfilm. The goal was to make the newspaper archives easily searchable and help preserve the information long into the future.

Peter Struzziero, Library Director, states “We went to bid for this project and found BMI at the ALA Conference. We selected Digital Reel over the other offerings because it offered a complete solution: the microfilm scanning at a secure facility, hosting of our records and a simple, elegant interface for online search and retrieval.”

Challenges with Newspaper Archives on Physical Microfilm

Staff time spent helping patrons with microfilm, information retrieval problems, and deteriorating microfilm were the biggest drivers for the Library to digitize the newspaper archive. McMenemy-McColm says “Using a physical microfilm reader is daunting for many people and it takes much longer to search and retrieve information on microfilm versus modern web-based search methods.

180 Microfilm Rolls Digitally Scanned & Hosted at BMI’s Data Center

The Library archived seven local Belmont newspapers on 180 rolls of microfilm, which were then stored in cabinets. Struzziero explains, “One of the questions we had as a team were the logistics of sending our microfilm records from Boston to BMI’s Silicon Valley-based scanning facility. However, there are customers nationwide using Digital ReelL and the lines of communication were open throughout the entire process. We also regularly had face time with our Account Executive at multiple library conferences throughout the Country.”

Easy, Online Access to Local Historic Titles

McMenemy-McColm notes, “We still plan to keep the physical microfilm and one of the two physical readers, but patrons have been excited to learn they can search and browse on the computer instead, and for the portion of the collection available over the Web even do their research at home.”

“I love being able to conduct research from my desktop,” says McMenemy-McColm. “If someone asks for an obituary, I can quickly find the article, and send it via email. What used to be a lengthy process with microfilm is now a five-minute task using Digital ReelL.”

Additionally, McMenemy-McColm says that Digital ReelL enables users to quickly enhance articles and photos. “This feature has been especially useful to us. Our physical microfilm was in very poor quality and those images were transferred over into a digital format. Digital ReelL enables us to optimize them in a way that we couldn’t before when the archive was on physical microfilm.”

Lessons Learned During the Solution Design

“Now that we’ve gone through this conversion process, I’d recommend that other libraries consider the quality of their physical microfilm”, states McMenemy-McColm. “As you plan for a newspaper scanning project, work as an organization to locate all copies of the records. Secondary microfilm copies, if you have them, are usually in better condition because they are not used daily.”

The quality of the physical microfilm has a direct impact on the quality of the optical character recognition (OCR) technology that enables full-text search of the digital files. Any library that starts to think about digitally converting a newspaper archive may want to find out if and where the second copy of the newspaper microfilm archive is located.

Conclusion

McMenemy-McColm concludes, “Overall, we’re very pleased with the outcome. Our colleagues are impressed with Digital ReelL’s modern approach to legacy newspaper archives. Patrons outside the library are able to access these archives on the Web and I am able to answer more patron queries, because I can search a much larger time period, much more quickly.”