

HEARD BUT NOT SEEN:

Making the audible visible
at the Martha's Vineyard Museum

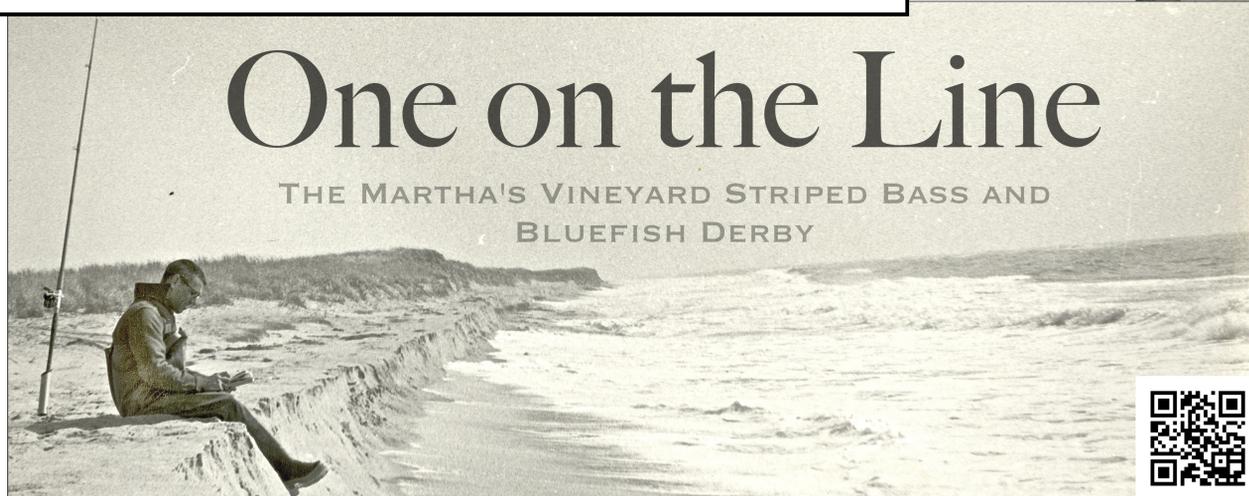
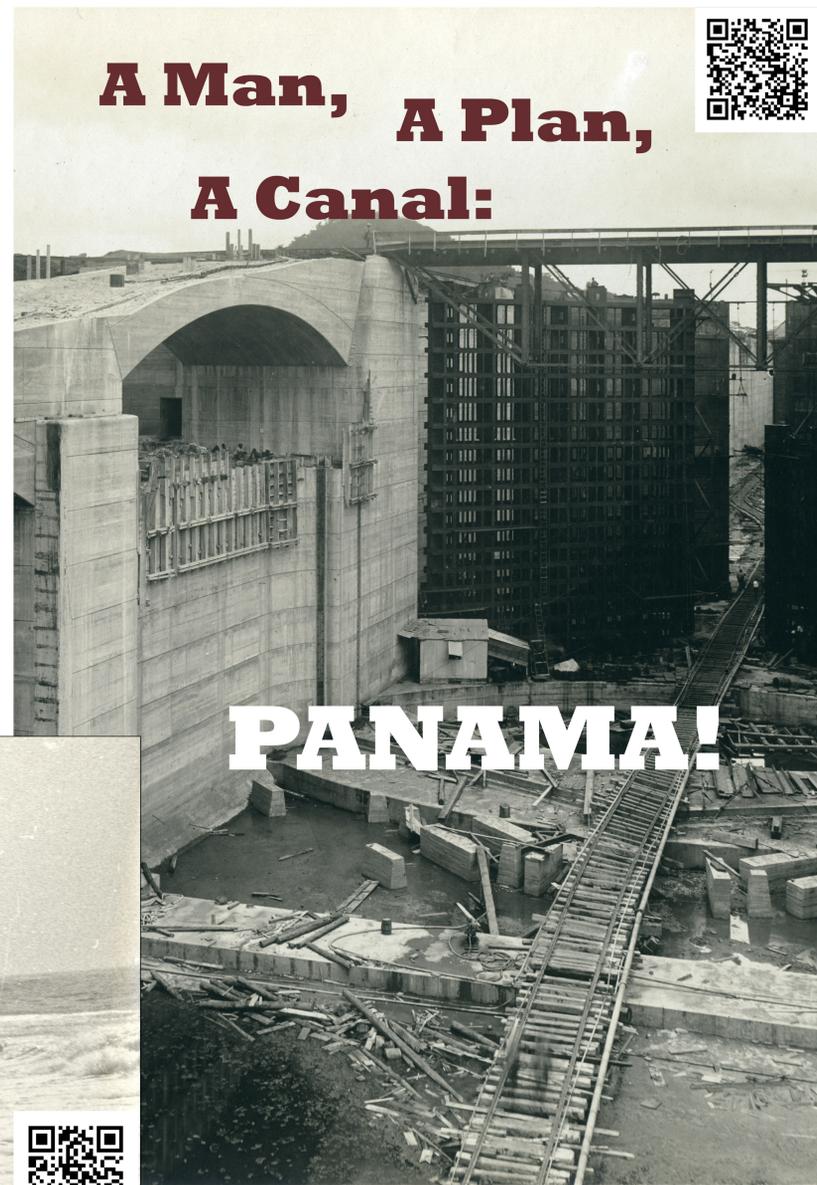
Introduction

The Martha's Vineyard Museum's oral history collection contains over 1,400 individual recordings. At the onset of the project, the main problems were as follows:

- Inventory existed only in a number of excel spreadsheets and did not have a central location.
- Exhibits, when using oral histories, often used only text.
- Because of this, budgetary decisions prioritized as-needed transcriptions over providing description and properly maintaining the inventory.

These problems had the following effects:

- Exhibit design was weighted towards objects because they were more easily discoverable by non-oral history staff.
- Inventory maintenance and record descriptions often fell to volunteers.



CROWDSOURCING PROJECT

One example of a reimagined volunteer project is a crowdsourcing project. One volunteer breaks the interviews into five-minute segments. These segments are then sent to other volunteers who listen to the five-minute segments then write a brief description of the clip. When they send back their description, the next segment is sent to them.

The format of this project allows volunteers with schedule constraints more flexibility and provides off-site options for volunteers. The serialized descriptions make the experience more podcast-like for the volunteers while simultaneously making it easier for museum staff to hone in on particular sections of untranscribed interviews.

Solutions

The museum adopted the Past Perfect museum database software so that disparate elements of the collection would have a unified catalog. The entire oral history collection was inventoried and cataloged into Past Perfect, replacing the previous inventory with a centralized catalog.

- Updating and centralizing the inventory made it easier for both museum staff and researchers to identify useful items in the collection.

Preservation and access copies of digitized sound recordings were arranged according to this new records management system. Recordings that had not previously been digitally preserved were digitized, and the files placed in a central location.

- Increasing accessibility and improving organizational arrangement facilitated the use of "audio-only" interviews for both exhibits and research. Volunteer projects were reimagined to fit varying skillsets and time commitments.
- Creating projects that were not out of volunteers' "comfort zone" cut down on volunteer training time, better descriptions, and happier volunteers.

The new cataloging procedures were documented in an oral history processing manual specifically designed for the museum's collection, in accordance with other procedures and policies at the institution. The QR code to the right links to the manual.

