



# HISTORY BYTES

BY TIM GROVE

## Going Beyond an Ordinary Online Database

Over the years since the Web exploded into our technological toolkit, it has gradually become an everyday resource, transforming the history field in many wonderful ways. It allows us to engage new audiences with our content and to share our collections with the world. Yet website developers and designers, content providers, administrators, and others continue to struggle to define the medium. Like all technology, it changes, transforms, and morphs into new iterations. The rush of technology can sometimes seem overwhelming. Sometimes it is worth stepping back, taking the time to think critically about the medium and the materials we put online. How is the Web different from other media? What are its strengths? How can we use it to further our organizations' missions?

This column often highlights websites that best demonstrate an understanding of the medium and can serve as examples to the rest of us. One site that recently came to my attention, <http://discovernikkei.org>, won "Best Research Site" in the 2007 Best of the Web awards, an annual competition organized by the Museums and the Web conference. Developed and maintained by the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, the amazing site captures the essence of why the Web works so well with history content. One judge described it as a "wonderfully eclectic use of the Web and its capacity for interaction and knowledge/understanding building." The site's mission is "to promote cross-cultural understanding and to foster greater linkages between peoples throughout the world by making accessible resources and materials related to the Nikkei," people of Japanese descent who have migrated and settled throughout the world.

*Discover Nikkei's* features take it beyond a mere database into the newer realm of interactivity—users also contribute to the

The following websites received Leadership in History Awards at the 2007 AASLH Annual Meeting:

**Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum**  
Wethersfield, CT, for *Silas Deane Online*  
[www.silasdeaneonline.org](http://www.silasdeaneonline.org)  
online curriculum

**Georgia Humanities Council**  
Atlanta, University of Georgia Press, Athens, and the University System of Georgia, Atlanta, for the *New Georgia Encyclopedia*  
[www.georgiaencyclopedia.org](http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org)  
online resource

**Johnson County Museums**  
Shawnee, KS, for *JoCo History*  
[www.JoCoHistory.net](http://www.JoCoHistory.net)  
digital collection

**Lucia Knoles and the American Antiquarian Society**  
Worcester, MA, for *Northern Visions of Race, Region, and Reform*  
<http://mac110.assumption.edu/aas/default.html>  
digital collection

**Michigan Technological University and Erik Nordberg**  
Marquette, MI, for *An Interior Ellis Island*  
<http://ethnicity.lib.mtu.edu>  
digital collection

**Missouri State Archives**  
Jefferson City, for the *Missouri Death Certificate Database*  
[www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/deathcertificates](http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/deathcertificates)  
digital collection

**South Carolina Confederate Relic Room and Military Museum**  
Columbia, for *Write From the Front*  
[www.wftf.sc.gov](http://www.wftf.sc.gov)  
digital archive

**The Center for History and New Media**  
Fairfax, VA, and The University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA, for the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank*  
[www.hurricanearchive.org](http://www.hurricanearchive.org)  
digital archive

**Wisconsin Historical Society**  
Madison, WI, for *Turning Points in Wisconsin History*  
[www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints)  
digital collection

site. The site includes a community forum comprising user-contributed articles about the Nikkei and a bulletin board featuring news and events, with the option of posting a question or comment. Another section of the site, titled "Real People," is a YouTube-like video clip archive to which users can contribute. The resource page is searchable through a list of topics or databases. Topics include arts and design, business and work, and education, while databases include collections from all over the world. For example, a biographical entry in the subheading "photographers" under the "business and work" section features materials related to photographer Frank Matsura. It includes links to his image collection at the Washington State University Libraries and to the Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History. The searchable databases include encyclopedias, video archives, lesson plans, the Japanese American National Museum collections, and sites devoted to

the Japanese musical tradition of taiko and to the Japanese American military experience. The final component is a good example of the user-generated material of Web 2.0 (or social media). Called "Make History," the page offers advice on how to conduct oral history interviews, how to preserve and store archival materials, and how to analyze objects. Users are encouraged to contribute materials to the Nikkei Album, a growing archive.

Once a website debuts, its developers sometimes find out that their largest audience is not the same as their intended or targeted audience. Such was the case for *Discover Nikkei*. According to Vicky Murakami-Tsuda, web manager at the Japanese American National Museum and project manager of *Discover Nikkei*, the original target audience for the site was professors and young (college-age or slightly older) individuals interested in Nikkei history. The audience that now uses the site most frequently is older

adults ages thirty to sixty, who are helping build the site by sharing their stories and resources. Since the site debuted in March 2005, the developers have shifted the focus somewhat, prioritizing content and changing outreach strategies, resulting in an increase in visits and contributions to the site.

One challenge of developing the site was its far-reaching scope, which encompasses the Nikkei culture in the United States, Canada, and throughout Latin America. The site is available in four language, quite an ongoing challenge for the museum. Users can contribute materials in any of the four languages, which must be an ongoing challenge for the museum.

The foundation for the site was the International Nikkei Research Project which included more than one hundred

scholars from ten countries and fourteen participating institutions and whose goal was "worldwide discovery and preservation of and access to Nikkei resources located in disparate cultural communities and educational institutions."

Support from the Nippon Foundation in Japan allowed the project team to work carefully for three years to develop the concept and build a network that allows for such a broad variety of archival materials.

The site seems to maintain a good balance of both scholarly and user-generated content. Murakami-Tsuda says that the team is still in the process of expanding the site, including the community network, content, and updating or redesigning many of the site's tools. Two full-time staff at the museum are dedicated to

the project, with other staff contributing as well.

Many cultural diasporas are represented in American history and world history, and this site should serve as a good example of how to bring diaspora history to life on the Web with archives, activities, and video. While many large databases of archival materials are already available to researchers (two state archives-sponsored sites, Maine Memory Network and Ohio Memory, are examples), *Discover Nikkei* has moved a step further by allowing users themselves to contribute to online collections. ●

**"History Bytes" is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at grovet@si.edu.**

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