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Interdisciplinary Qualifying Project Summery: Research for the Worcester Writers IQP "City of Words" Website

Abstract

The City of Words IPQ Project group is with the goal of creating a web site featuring writers associated with Worcester. It is based on the web site Worcester Area Writers, which was created by WPI faculty and students some years ago. We are placing heavy emphasis on bringing living writers to the new site, creating a multi-media platform that includes videos of writers reading their works, interviews, audio, and photographs of places in Worcester connected with their work. The group continually seeks creative and original ways to display the site's content. Students are required to produce these materials as well as write biographies and critical analyses of the writers for which they are responsible.

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Introduction

Worcester, Massachusetts is a culturally diverse city with both a rich literary history and an active culture in the literary arts. Despite this however, it is likely safe to assume that this culture is severely understated and relatively unknown to most outsiders. In order to highlight Worcester's rich literary traditions of both the past and present, a group of students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute set out to compile what information on past and current authors that have connections to the Worcester area. The information would be compiled to form a website database that will hopefully serve the duel purposes of providing a place to showcase Worcester authors and their works, while providing an aid for students and researchers curious about Worcester's literary traditions.

A previous attempt at creating a website with a similar purpose was conducted by a past IQP group, with help of Gordon Library faculty. The previous website yielded a site that would serve as a basis for general information and format. It was ultimately the decision of the current IQP group however, to greatly revise and update the aging site. Several issues plagued the old site, including information accuracy and proper copyright use. The specifics of these issues will be expanded upon in more depth in the coming sections. As the new site would be intended for both general use and academic research, the accuracy and quality of the information to be published was paramount to the current group's efforts.

The decision to incorporate several popular forms of multimedia to the revised site was also a priority from the onset of the project. This is in the hopes of creating an accurate and professional database that would be informative as well as highly engaging. Indeed, multimedia incorporation would become a massive part of the group's time and

effort. For each author to be researched, significant effort was made to have a page include pictures, video, audio, and other interactive content, in addition to biographical information and examples of their major works. In no particular order, the major goals of the project can be summarized as follows:

Project Goals

- **Revise old website: Fact-check information, rewrite, discard copyright infringing material.**

- **Update website appearance and layout to be more user friendly, modern-looking, and up-to-date.**

- **Implement creative and engaging multimedia aspects; i.e. video, audio, photography, interactive tools.**

- **Research and highlight new authors, with particular emphasis on contemporary and local artists still publishing material.**

Figure 1: Summery of project goals.

Previous Website, *Worcester Area Writers* Project

More than six years ago, there has been a previous effort to compile a database highlighting writers and poets with connections to the Worcester area. The previously published website, entitled *Worcester Area Writers*, was created during the 2002-2003 academic year by several students at WPI in conjunction with select members of the WPI faculty, mostly from the Gordon Library. The website, which was last updated February 20, 2003, highlighted several prominent authors and poets from Worcester and the surrounding area including Elizabeth Bishop, Charles Olson, Stanley Kunitz, Fran Quinn, Frank O'Hara, Robert Benchley, Robert Cormeir, among several others. Some, such as Stanley Kunitz, are quite well known and influential literary figures both locally and in the nation. Kunitz for example, had been named the Poet Laureate of the United States before his death only a few years ago.

The *Worcester Area Writers* website provided an excellent starting point for the efforts of the current project group. The old site gave the group an idea of what a database of authors should look like on a basic level. Also, there were several aspects of the older website that needed improvement, providing the group with work to do from the onset. The first major issue and point of improvement for the *Worcester Area Writers* website was its appearance. As mentioned above, it had not been updated for nearly 6 years before the current group decided to take a look at its information. Since its creation, the Internet has become a vastly more attractive, user-friendly, and interactive environment. New options with regard to page design, interactivity, and updated content were vast. Included below are a few screenshots of the old *Worcester Area Writers*

website. They show the home screen (Fig.2-1), an example of an author's information

page (Fig.2-2), and finally the information about the website (Fig.2-3).
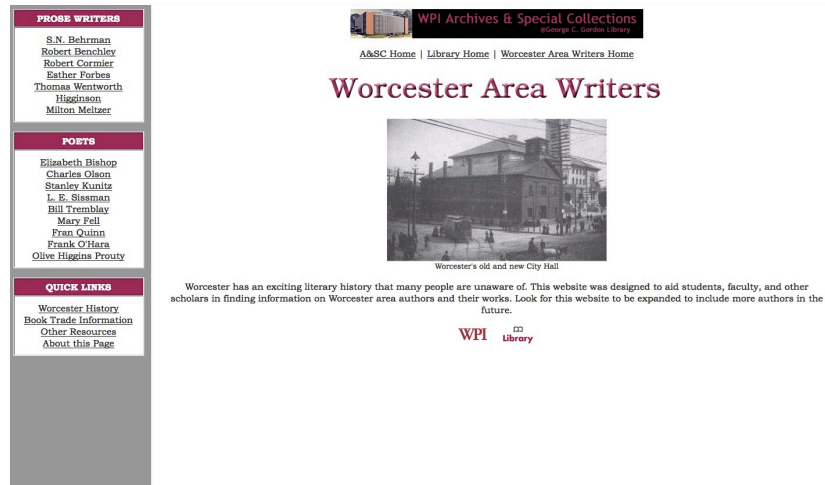

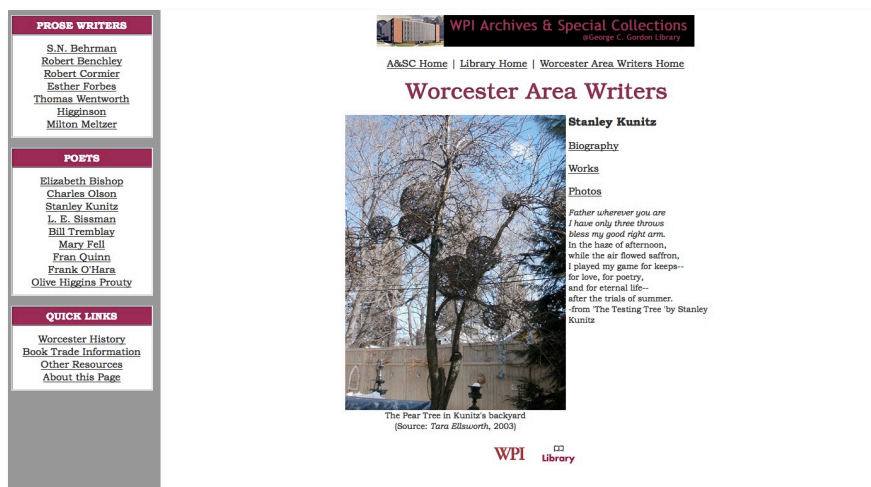**Figure 2-1: Title page of the old website.**

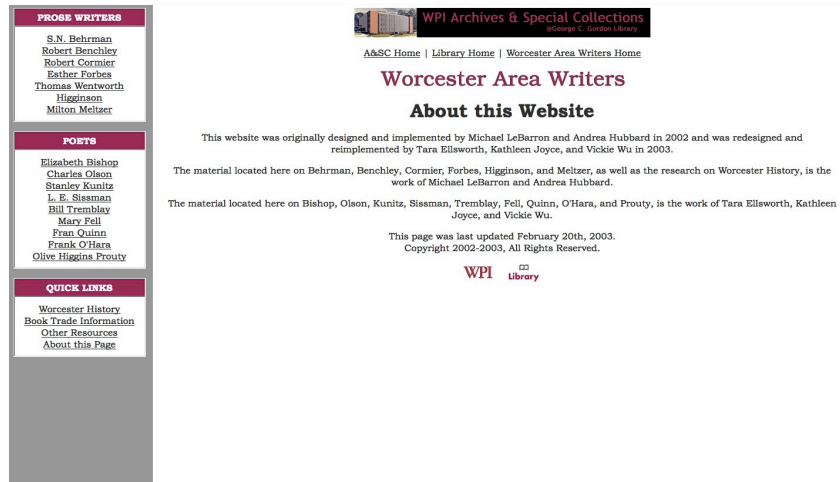**Figure 2-2: An example of an author's page with relevant information.**

Figure 2-3: Copyright and other information found on the old website, includes date of last update.

As it can be seen, much of the old website's appearance is frankly quite uninteresting and dull. There are large areas of unused space within the page, and the color scheme, although made to match that of WPI's own colors, comes across as dull. This provided a goal for the current group to make the new website more engaging and interesting to look at. Despite issues with its appearance, the old website did very well regarding ease-of-use. Navigation throughout its pages was quite simple and straightforward. The information that was made available was presented cleanly and in a manner that made for easy exploration. It was therefore important to the current group to make sure that while updating the old site, there was no degradation in usability. There would be significantly more content and interactive features implemented to the new site, so the risk of making an author's page overcrowded and confusing was a legitimate risk. Atheistic deficiencies aside, there were a host of entirely more serious issues to found within the previous site, which are explained in the following section.

Copyright and Other Issues within the *Worcester Area Writers* Website

Perhaps the largest single issue with the old *Worcester Area Writers* website was the quality and legitimacy of the information it presented. The work of the 2002-2003 group was indeed commendable, however, since its publication WPI faculty and visitors to the Worcester Area Writers site have discovered several issues with content and copyright. The severity of these issues varied significantly. In some cases, parts of the biographical information presented were simply incorrect and needed further fact checking. More issues include: pictures did not correspond to the places and information they were supposed to be representing, dates were incorrect, and other issues along these lines. In other cases, an author's page simply was in need of an update due to the sizable amount of time that had passed since the publication of the original site. By far however, the most severe and pressing issue needed to be addressed were issues of copyright infringement.

In some cases within the old website, content was simply taken from other sources without consent or citation. This content mostly included digital pictures and old photographs that were often included in the "media" section of each author's page. Because these pictures were subsequently never cited, it was very difficult to quickly remedy this situation when the current group began its work. Since *Worcester Area Writers* had been online, there had also been a sizable number of requests from other institutions and organizations outside of WPI to use some of this material. Unfortunately, it needed to be explained that WPI did not have the right to give out permissions for this

material, as WPI did not have legal ownership. This is quite obviously a serious problem for not only those wishing to use material from the old website, but it is especially a concern for the institution of WPI itself. Although it was highly unlikely to happen, the material published without copyright consent in the old website could have drawn legal issues for the school, as these are after-all examples of copyright infringement. Remedying these issues has therefore been of central focus of the current group's efforts.

To begin to understand the specifics of how and why the old website was in violation of internet copyright law, a presentation was given to the IQP group by staff from the Gordon Library over the course of several meetings during A-Term of the 2008-2009 academic year. It was the group's hope that, given a better understanding of the complexities of copyright use, the process of updating and remedying the issues within the *Worcester Area Writers* site would be more productive. The group as a whole soon realized the magnitude of the problem that the old site's material presented. Copyright law however, is inherently quite complex. For example, content such as photographs and paintings could be used without the need to receive copyright permission if these were more than eighty years old, but this was of little use if there was no information stating where the material came from. In addition, there are several sources online, such as the National Archives, that can be used for information without infringing on issues of copyright, but communal media sites such as YouTube.com, which often have interesting content, can frequently use material improperly. Simply pulling content from a random source on the web or from a source found externally, would quite obviously be copyright infringement, and in some cases, it is suspected that this is precisely what the previous group had done when making the old website. The current group soon realized that the

task of fixing all the issues of copyright would consume a disproportionate amount of the project's time and effort. Much of the old content was incorrect and served little useful purpose to the website's accuracy anyhow. In the end, it was a consensus of those about to begin their research that making an effort to avoid getting caught up in copyright and permissions, if possible, would be the best manner in which to progress. This meant that for group members researching current authors, such as myself, most of the information that would be gathered would be done so first-hand. This would give all ownership of collected material to the site and to WPI. Citing sources when needed in a correct and legal manner would still be a priority for the group. In the meantime, to immediately make progress, much of the media content from the old website was taken down.

An Updated Vision for Interactive Content and Website Quality

The decision to avoid almost all issues of copyright infringement by gathering information first-hand meant several quite exciting things for the direction in which the new site could be taken. Because very few outside sources would be used, most biographical information would be gathered from in-person interviews with the author, if this were possible. All photography to be included on the author's page would be taken by a project member on-site, using equipment owned by WPI. If an interview could be arranged, it was suggested that the experience be filmed and edited into an interesting and engaging piece of content to be posted along side the author's information. The audio from these interviews would be recorded as well, and clips of the author reading their own content and telling of their personal experiences would provide highly engaging and valuable content for the new site. Not only would this mean that all information gathered

would theoretically be of the highest quality and accuracy possible, but all the complications of obtaining copyright information and permissions-of-use that are inherent when using external sources could be avoided. This would save time and effort, but also meant that rather than being a compilation of information that was already available, the new site would provide information that was truly unique and exciting. Producing original content, suitable for both general and academic use, would fulfill one of the initial goals of the project. While planning this updated direction for the new site, it was also decided that the old site's title, *Worcester Area Writers*, would be replaced by the title *City of Words: The Worcester Writers Project.* Included below is a simple graphical representation of how media content would compliment each other on each author's page in the new *City of Words* website (Fig.3).
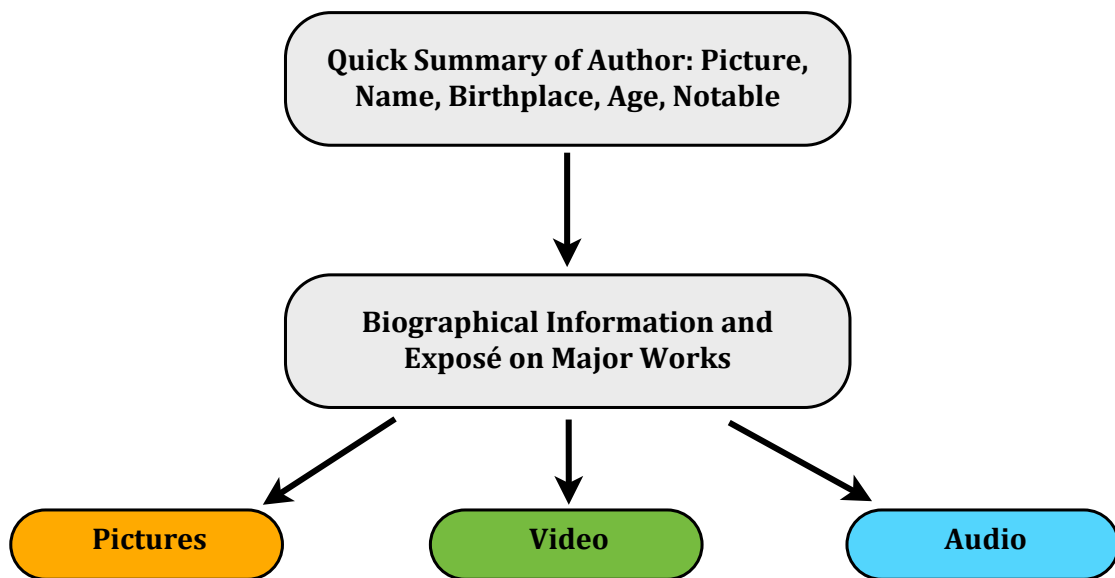

Figure 3: Graphical representation of the planned layout for an author's page.

Choosing an Author and Beginning External Research

With clear set of objectives, each group member next chose an artist of interest to research. From this point on, most of the work for the project would be done individually. Some group members chose to update pages of authors that had been featured previously on the *Worcester Area Writers* website, and others, such as myself, chose to start from scratch with a completely new author. Local Worcester resident, poet, and Holocaust survivor Gertrude Halstead was chosen to be the subject of research.

Gertrude Halstead turned out to be an interesting and promising choice to research for a number of reasons. To say the least, she is quite an influential and well-known figure in Worcester's literary culture. Gertrude has also lived an amazing life before becoming a well-known poet though. As a survivor of the Holocaust during World War II, Gertrude's biography would be valuable to visitors interested in her experiences during the war along with her many literary successes. Gertrude has published two collections of poems to date, and has had her poetry set to originally composed music during a recent film highlighting her life [3]. She currently holds title as Worcester's first Poet Laureate, a position granted to her by Worcester's mayor in 2007. She has also been nominated twice for the prestigious Pushcart Prize in Literature, and was recently the recipient of a 2008 Cultural Council Fellowship Award.

The first task to be completed was to become familiar with Gertrude's work as a poet. Through the Gordon Library's Interlibrary Loan program, a copy of Gertrude's first published collection of poetry entitled "Memories Like Burrs"[1] was obtained. Gertrude's second collection of poetry, "Space Between"[2], took more time to find as it was published very recently in 2008 in limited numbers. A copy was eventually obtained

from Professor Eve Rifkah, an adjunct professor of English Studies here at WPI and a close friend of Gertrude. Eve would later be instrumental in setting up an interview with Gertrude. Along with reading and becoming familiar with her work, time was spent looking for already published information in external sources. It soon became clear that, although there were many brief descriptions and short interviews with Gertrude done since she started gaining attention in the Worcester area in 2006, there was no concise and well-organized description of her life and her works. Although this meant gathering information about her would be slightly more labor-intensive, it would mean that the finished product on the *City of Words* website would provide the first organized source to find information on this local author.

**Figure 4: Gertrude Halstead posing for a photo during the
Worcester Writers IQP interview in 2009.**

Interview with Gertrude Halstead

Through Eve Rifkah at WPI, Gertrude Halstead's contact information was obtained shortly before the end of B-Term of the 2008-2009 year. Gertrude was contacted by phone at her home on Salisbury Street, not far from the WPI campus. Shortly after classes resumed in C-Term, an interview with Gertrude Halstead was scheduled. The WPI Academic Technology Center (ATC) was contacted for a camcorder, microphones, tripod, and digital audio recorder to be used during the interview. Accompanied by Eve Rifkah on January 30, 2009, Gertrude Halstead was interviewed by Jarred Raymond of the Worcester Writers IQP. The interview went smoothly and provided plenty of material that could be used on the site. Not only was the event filmed, but audio of the entire interview was obtained. Gertrude was also kind enough to read a poem entitled "The Sloping Meadow", which mentions Worcester heavily. The audio from this reading would provide valuable unique content for the site. Below is a photograph of the interview, taking place at Gertrude's residence (Fig.5)

Figure 5: Eve Rifkah (left), Gertrude Halstead (center), and Jarred Raymond of the Worcester Writers IQP (right) during the interview on January 30, 2009.

Figure 6: The two published collections of poetry by Gertrude Halstead.

Prior to the interview date, a rough draft of Gertrude's biography was made from information that was available through external research. A copy was given to Gertrude to fact-check at her convenience on a later date. Shortly following the interview, Gertrude phoned in her revisions. Luckily, the research done before the interview was accurate, and only very minor revisions had to be done. These revisions from the author herself were then compiled into the biography's final draft, which also included information gathered during the interview. Next, the video and audio gathered during the interview would need to be edited and exported in useable forms.

The Editing Process: Video, Audio and Photography Finalization

Of all the steps related to publishing content on an author's webpage, the post-production process was by far the most time consuming. In total, there was more than 90 minutes of audio and video media to transfer, edit, and export in a professional looking and useable format. For ease-of-use, all multimedia editing was done on a personally owned Macintosh in the Mac OSX operating system. The applications Garageband (used for audio editing) and iMovie (video-editing) were used for their user-friendly environments and professional feeling product quality. Below are screen-shots of the multimedia editing process done in the Mac OSX environment. In all, it is estimated that more than 20 hours were spent producing the final video interview for Gertrude's page, while nearly 10 hours were spent editing the audio and photography content. Screenshots of the audio and video editing processes are shown below (Fig.7-1, 7-2).
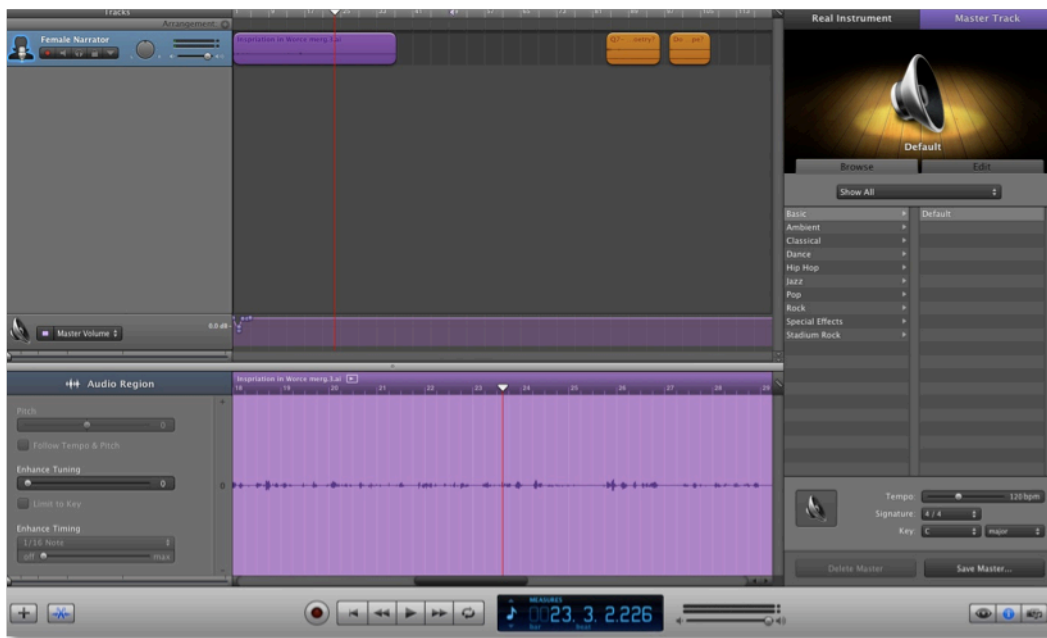
Figure 7-1: Audio editing in the GarageBand application.
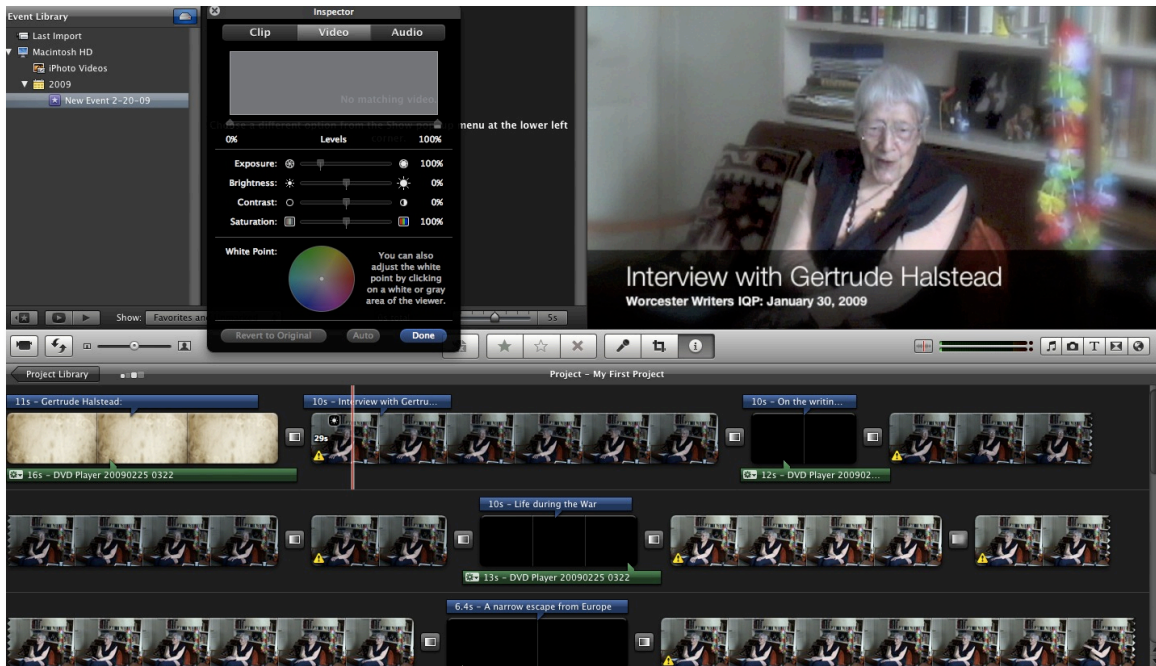
Figure 7-2: Editing interview video clips into final form in iMovie application.

Audio clips from the interview were trimmed and mastered into short segments and exported in .mp3 format. In total, four audio clips were exported for publication on the *City of Words* website. These include: a short segment where Gertrude tells of her life before coming to Worcester, a short description of her own poetry's style and comments regarding the unique spacing she implements, a discussion of her thoughts on being an author in the Worcester area, and finally a reading of "The Sloping Meadow", an original poem.

Production of the video content gathered was far more extensive and went through several editing and creative changes before a final version was exported. During the initial editing sessions, it was found that simply posting a 'raw' copy of the interview would not be engaging to an audience. During the interview, the camera was left in a single position focused on Gertrude. To make the content more interesting and viewable, the entire interview was split into sections. These were then arranged so that the

interview progressed on film in an organized and linear manner. This was beneficial, as topics during the interview did not progress linearly; often, relevant topics of discussion were broken up by other answers and general dialogue. Minor editing was done to the video itself as well to increase contrast, color balance, and sharpness. In the final version of the video, Gertrude's answers to the questions asked in the interview are edited together to highlight the most valuable and interesting content. To break the monotony of the camera's static position, each new topic is then foreshadowed by a short transition. During the last stages of video production, a title, conclusion, credits, and music were all added. The final interview video is 9 minutes and 18 seconds in duration. It was exported in both high-quality and low-quality versions to be easily streamed from the website depending on a visitor's connection speed and available bandwidth. Below are screenshots from the various sections of the final interview video, progressing in chronological order as they appear in the final video if the interview (Fig.8).
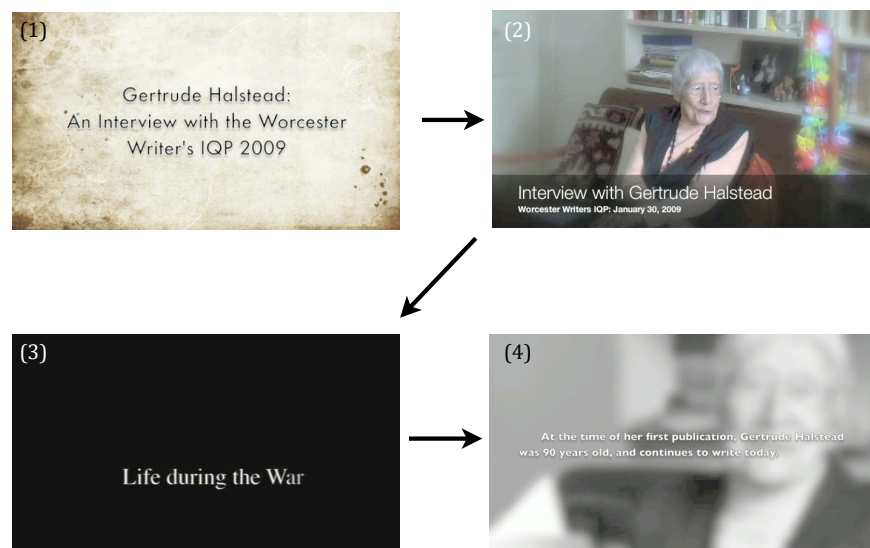
Figure 8: Stills from the final edit of the Gertrude Halstead interview video, presented in chronological order; (1) Title sequence, (2) Gertrude answering interview questions, (3) Topic transition screen, (4) Conclusion section with some final words about the author.

Final Site Design, Other Media Additions, Project Presentation

   The final design and coding for the *City of Words* website has been almost entirely handled by group member Julia Berg (IMGD '09). Once all the multimedia for each author had been completed and was ready for publication on the newly designed website, it was uploaded to the project group's SharePoint account. The nearly final layout for the new *City of Words* website is vastly more attractive than the previous site. A screenshot is included below (Fig.9).
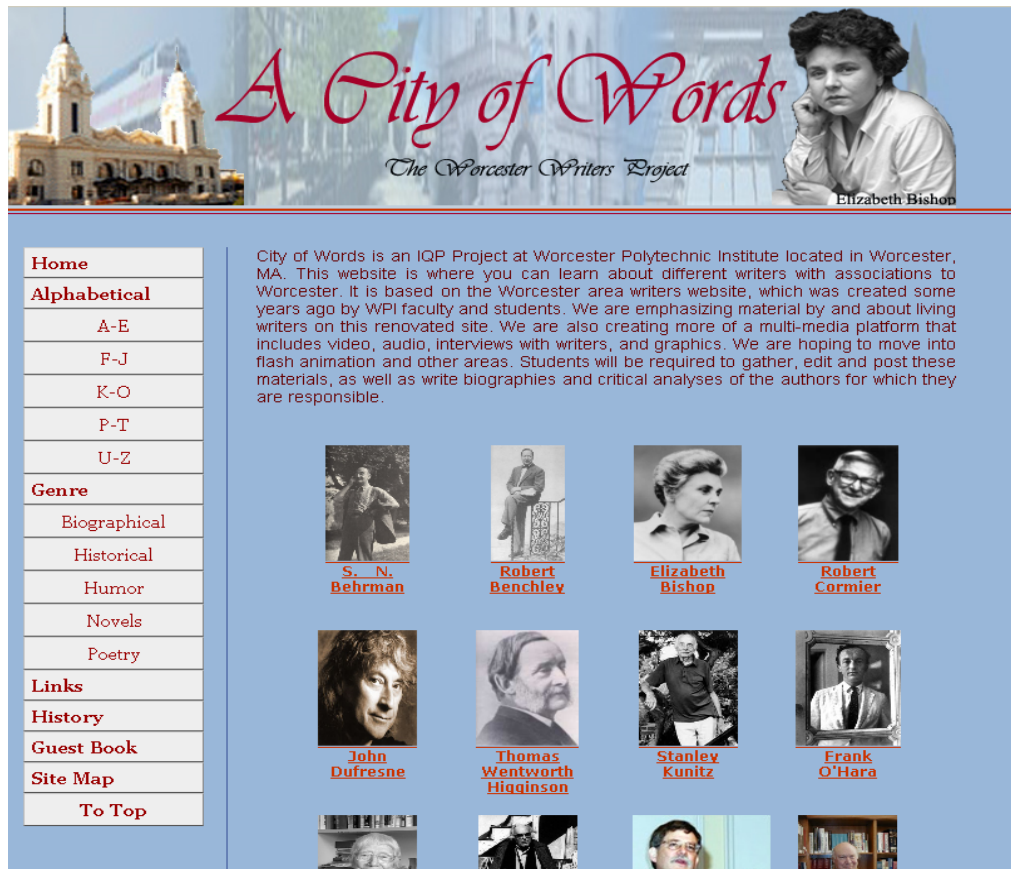
Figure 9: Screenshot of the final design version of the new *City of Words* website.

During the final stages of the project, the idea was had to include even more

interactivity to an author's page by using an interesting feature found in Google Maps. As

can be seen from the screenshot below, Gertrude Halstead's progress through Europe

during World War II is pinpointed on a fully interactive map. Clicking on each waypoint

produces a text-box to appear with a short description of what is being represented. While

not only being user-friendly and providing an interesting companion to an author's

biographical information, this feature is made available for public use at no charge, and

shows all the needed copyright information embedded within the map's lower right-hand

corner. Exporting the map for use on the site was done quickly and easily. An option

provided by Google compiled and exported the needed HTML code automatically.

Screenshots of interactive map made using features in Google Maps are included below

(Fig.10-1 and 10-2).
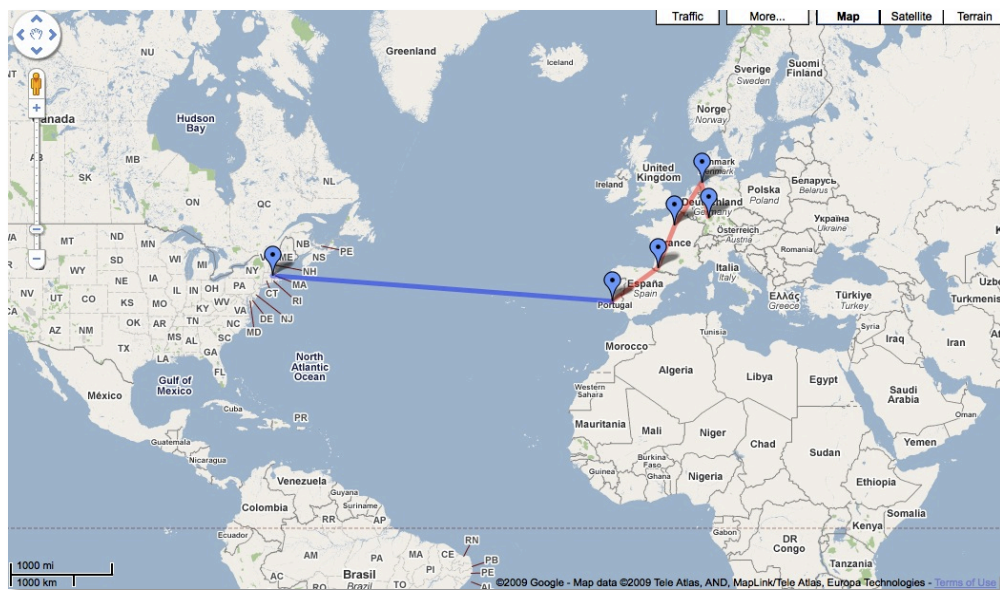
Figure 10-1: Interactive map made using Google Maps. The map shows Gertrude Halstead's pathway through Europe (red lines), and her journey to the United States (blue line).
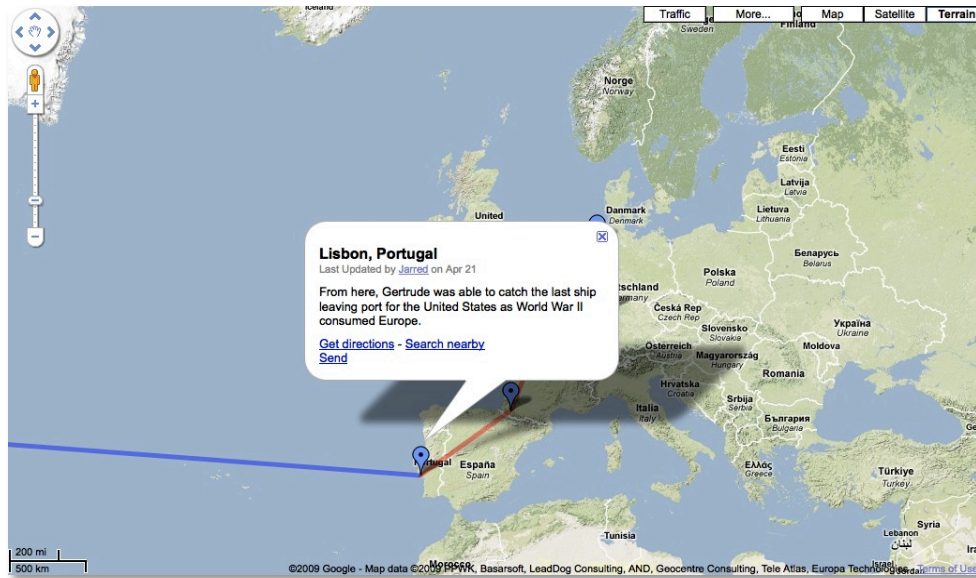
Figure 10-2: When a waypoint marker is clicked, a text bubble appears showing location name and the information relating the location to Gertrude's biography.

Finally, on April 21, 2009, the newly designed *City of Words: Worcester Writer IQP* site was presented to Gordon Library staff and other WPI faculty. It was received well, with much interest and excitement for future continuation of this project's efforts. Support for the website and research is currently being planned for an IQP group in the 2009-2010 academic year.

Conclusion and Future Direction of the Website

As the 2008-2009 IQP group wraps up their efforts, it has become clear that the project has provided the opportunity for much future development of the *City of Words* website. One of the major lessons learned during the duration of the project was the importance of time-management and clear goal setting. There are many authors yet to be highlighted in the Worcester area with the same amount of depth and professionalism that Gertrude Halstead was. Therefore, it is planned that the project will continue into the 2009-2010 academic year under the guidance of a new group of students. It is hoped that the lessons learned during this group's efforts, mostly from trial-and-error and experimentation, would give a clear idea for the next group on how to progress efficiently. As the website's construction will progress, *City of Words* will become a place where well-known authors are highlighted alongside up-and-coming authors, providing valuable exposure for their works. As multimedia immersion on the internet has become extremely popular, future groups should not only continue the efforts that the current group has made, but should also find new and exciting ways to make the *City of Words* site interesting and engaging.

References

[1] Halstead, Gertrude. <u>Memories Like Burrs.</u> Published by Adastra Press, East Hampton, MA, 2006.

[2] Halstead, Gertrude. <u>Space Between.</u> Published by Allbook Books, Selden, NY, 2008.

[3] "Memories Like Burrs: A Song Cycle of Gertrude Halstead's Poetry", Directed by Peter Swanson/Global Visions. Produced by Poetry Oasis Inc., Worcester, MA, 2007.

Table of Figures