

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Lehman College

2017

20th Century Bronx Childhood: Recalling the Faces and Voices

Janet Butler Munch
CUNY Lehman College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/le_pubs/309

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

20th-Century Bronx Childhood

Recalling the Faces and Voices



Janet Butler Munch

Professor and Special Collections Librarian, Lehman College, City University of New York, Bronx, New York, janet.munch@lehman.cuny.edu

Abstract A popular photographic exhibit on childhood, originally featured in the Lehman College Art Gallery in the Bronx, New York, was brought to life two decades later through a library digitization grant. The website *Childhood in the Bronx* (<http://www.lehman.edu/library/childhood-bronx/home.htm>) features 61 photographs of boys and girls with family or friends, at play, on streets, and in parks, schools, shelters, hospitals, and other locales. Oral history sound excerpts about their childhood, not heard in the original exhibit, complement the 18 vintage photographs shown. The combination of images with the spoken word enhances the user's sensory experience with deeper meaning and enjoyment. This article discusses how the project was accomplished and what can be learned from the Lehman digitization team's experience.

The exhibit *Childhood in the Bronx* was a special initiative of the Bronx Regional and Community History Institute (Bronx Institute) at Lehman College. Funded in 1982 by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the institute's mission was to document the history of the Bronx. To give some sense of context, the Bronx is the northernmost of New York City's five boroughs. With an estimated population of 1,455,444 in 2015,¹ the Bronx, by itself, could rank as the seventh-largest city in the United States—surpassing San Antonio, San Diego, Dallas, and Indianapolis.² The exhibit, with its attention to children of the Bronx, captured personal recollections and documents from longtime local residents. Underscoring the significance of this work, former Bronx historian Tieck observed, “Local history deals with people as they live, the markets they shop in, the drug stores they go to, the movies they attend, the churches of which they are members . . . the stuff of their daily lives and concerns at work and play.”³

Individuals were interviewed from 1982 to 1990 on tape recorders by institute staff, faculty, and even students, often in the comfort of their own homes.



Figure 1. Home page for the *Childhood in the Bronx* website. The photo below the tabs is one of six rotating site images. Courtesy of Lehman College, City University of New York, Leonard Lief Library.

Interviewees spoke of their lives in the various Bronx neighborhoods and often recalled details of their childhoods. They generously shared their experiences and loaned photograph albums so that their stories and precious images could be captured for research, study, teaching, exhibition, and other scholarly purposes.

In 1986, *Childhood in the Bronx* was a well-received on-site exhibition featured in the Lehman College Art Gallery. Drawing on the archival collections of the Bronx Institute, this exhibit contained 16- by 20-inch framed vintage and modern photographs, accompanied by the text of oral history descriptions about the decades of the 20th century. The vintage images shown (pre-1923) were donated by its oral history interviewees and copied for display. In addition to the vintage images, the exhibit featured 40 contemporary images of Bronx children captured from 1979 to 1983 by the project photographer, Georgeen Comerford.⁴ In all, 58 images were shown in the original exhibit. They showed children at play, with family or friends, on streets, in parks or school yards, and at various local institutions.

After a successful six-week run in 1986, the *Childhood* exhibit was taken down and was just a memory. Some two decades later, however, digitization offered the chance to share more widely the Bronx childhood photographs. In ad-

dition, content unavailable for use in the on-site exhibition could be incorporated in the digital display. Therefore, grant opportunities were sought to fund the digitization and digital dissemination of the on-site exhibit and additional content.

Institutional Review Boards

The City University of New York requires that all grant-funded and research projects be reviewed by its college's institutional review boards (IRBs) in the interest of protecting animal and human subjects. This meant that before proceeding with any grant submission, the project director had to first have the digitization plans approved.⁵ All permissions and rights to the interviews and images were in order, and we received an expedited review. Ours was seen as "more of an artistic project" than one that would neither produce "generalizable knowledge" nor constitute "regulatory research." Once we received IRB's endorsement, we proceeded with our grant submission.⁶

Implementation

Childhood in the Bronx was not our first digitization project. Two earlier digitization grant projects set the stage for this newer initiative. The first project, *Bronx Business for Everybody* (<http://www.lehman.edu/provost/library/BronxBusiness/index.htm>), was funded in 2005 by METRO⁷ and provided an Epson XL 10,000 scanner, CONTENTdm software, and extensive free workshop training in its use and in digitization essentials. A 2006 grant⁸ from the New York State Education Department funded our contracting with a vendor to digitize 200 of our Bronx oral history interviews, reformatting the original audiocassettes to master reel-to-reel tapes (then the accepted archival preservation format) and generating user CDs. While oral history text excerpts had been featured in the original exhibit and *Gallery Notes*, the actual voices of adults recalling their Bronx childhoods were not heard. Our hope was that by using CONTENTdm software and creating a project website, the original *Childhood in the Bronx* images could be enjoyed by a new audience who could also hear some of the oral history testimony.

For our *Childhood* project, the general feeling was that operating systems and software capabilities made Apple a better choice for sound than our Dell Pentium PC. So we ordered an iMac. For sound conversion, we also ordered DigiDesign's MBOX 2 (with Pro Tools software). Since METRO recommended that we start moving our digital projects to a networked environment, we ordered a MiniStorage Vault to attach to the library server. This had the added advantage of further ensuring the integrity and preservation of our digital files.

Knowledgeable personnel were our biggest need in creating the *Childhood in the Bronx* project. We started with four paid staff: a technical adviser, a sound engineer, an oral historian, and a student assistant. The technical adviser worked with the project director in mapping Dublin Core metadata fields in CONTENTdm and linking and uploading digital images, text from Microsoft Word, and metadata from an Excel file. He also designed and created the website. The sound engineer trained us in using DigiDesign and Pro Tools and sensitized our ears to select for display the clearest sound for master AIFF files. The oral historian knew the interviews best, especially since she had captured so many of them from the project's inception in the early 1980s. She edited interview excerpts and synced the transcribed oral history text with the digitized sound clips selected. The smaller MP3 files, generated from the AIFF files, were uploaded with the vintage photographs.

The expertise of a college student assistant, who worked in both the library's Special Collections Division and the computer lab, handled the unframing and scanning of the original framed photographs.

Using the Epson 10,000 scanner, he created high-resolution TIFF images and JPEG derivatives. In a few cases, the original photographs were unavailable. Fortunately, we had their backup slides, and they were scanned as TIFFs and JPEGs for this project. The student assistant also helped with word processing selected oral history transcript excerpts for eventual upload to the website.

The project director wrote the grant application, hired the necessary personnel, handled all requisitions, and prepared all budgetary and narrative reports. She determined the resource identifiers for the images, prepared all descriptive metadata and website text, and helped generate local newspaper publicity with the college's Office of Media Relations to bring attention to the project. A customized project postcard, created by a vendor, included one of the vintage photographs on the front and the website URL and contact information on the back. This was distributed throughout the college community, to our Friends of the Library, and to area libraries and organizations. Other publicity venues included the City University of New York, Lehman College, and the Leonard Lief Library websites as well as internal magazines, newsletters, news wires and listservs. Externally, we used BronxNet (cable television), Twitter, Pinterest, and METRO's librarian listserv.

Later, a college webmaster was hired, with funding from a separate research grant. He joined the project team to assist in resolving lingering problems with website access via multiple browsers as well as the presentation of sound-synced text.

Website Features

The website has a clean and relatively simple design. The home page shows the "Five in a Canoe" image. Prepared for the home page in Photoshop, it carries

the website title. Six rotating exhibit images, enabled by Flash, show elements of selected vintage and contemporary photographs. This essentially previews the other images contained in the body of the website. METRO funding is acknowledged, and office contact information for the project director, at Lehman's Leonard Lief Library, is provided. A toolbar near the top of the home page includes the links for Background, Credits, Enter Exhibit, Project Staff, Feedback, and Lehman College.

The "Background" section discusses the original 1986 exhibit, how it came about, how the photographer worked, and how all the early work that went into the physical exhibit could be repurposed through digitization. The "Background" section also includes links to the project poster and to the *Art Gallery Notes*, where extensive oral history text excerpts recalling Bronx childhoods can be read. Knowing about how the photographs were presented earlier is essential to an understanding of the current digital exhibit.

The "Credits" section relates to the original Art Gallery exhibit and all the individuals and funding organizations that made it possible. Further information



Figure 2. "Credits" acknowledges those involved in the original installation and profiles the career and exhibition of Georgette Comerford's photography featured in galleries and publications. Courtesy of Lehman College, City University of New York, Leonard Lief Library.

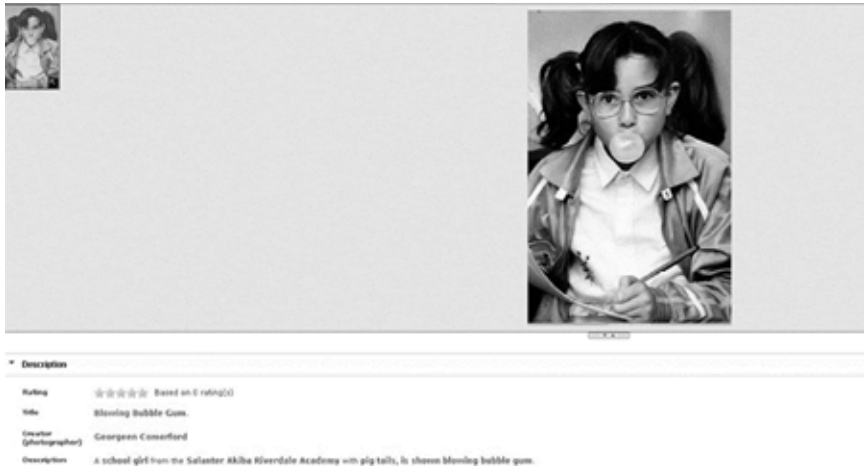


Figure 3. A 1985 photograph screenshot showing Blowing Bubble Gum, as displayed in CONTENTdm along with a portion of its metadata. Courtesy of Lehman College, City University of New York, Leonard Lief Library.


is given about photographer Georgene Comerford, her training, and the locations of museums and galleries that have exhibited her work.

The “Enter Exhibit” tab is the heart of the website. Here, all of the *Childhood in the Bronx* images can be seen as presented in CONTENTdm along with the full descriptive, structural, and administrative metadata. Among the most essential 14 Dublin Core metadata fields we used are Title, Creator, Description, Dates, Format, Identifier, and Source.

Two separate links on this “Enter Exhibit” page are for the vintage and contemporary Flash photograph albums. Both albums show full images and accompanying text. Miniaturized images in the albums are below the larger image shown and a red highlighted border indicates the active viewing window. The vintage album has the added feature of oral history sound excerpts. To activate, the user simply clicks the Play audio megaphone button to the right of the full image.

“Project Staff” includes all those working directly on the digitization process, as well as other college and METRO employees whose support was crucial. “Feedback” offers users a chance to communicate their thoughts on the digital project—how they found it, its ease of use, and their purpose in using it and whether they are a student, teacher, or Bronx resident. To encourage free communication, personal information is not requested. The final link back to “Lehman College” balanced the toolbar while also offering users a chance to explore our educational mission and programs.


Vintage with Audio View all photos



Play Audio Stop Audio

Sledding Along the Grand Concourse, 1916.
Source: Fred W. Schwartz Collection.

"We would have the snow coming in the windstorm. We would be packed. There would be hundreds of kids and parents, adults on the hill. Afternoons, early evenings, going down the hill, snow melting, going to the lake to ice skate. These were things that we just looked forward to and couldn't get enough of as long as the snow would arrive or the cold weather."



Background

This website is based on the "Childhood in the Bronx" exhibit originally featured in the Lehman College Art Gallery from October 23 - December 14, 1985. The exhibit took four years to research and create. By using both vintage and contemporary images, along with oral history text excerpts, the exhibit focused on the experiences of childhood in the Bronx from the early decades of the 20th century into the mid-1980s.


About the Project

The Leonard Lief Library "Childhood in the Bronx" digitization project was supported in part by funds from the Metropolitan New York Library Council (M2YLC) through the New York State Regional Bibliographic Database Program.

[Read More »](#)


Figure 4. A photograph of Sledding Along the Grand Concourse, 1916, as seen in the Vintage album. It includes the text of the oral history sound clip that is enabled by clicking the megaphone icon. Courtesy of Lehman College, City University of New York, Leonard Lief Library.

Contemporary View all photos



The Dare Devil on a Bike Ramp, 1984.

A boy takes a daring bicycle ride on a ramp, created out of found materials, at Courtland Avenue. His play area is a vacant lot behind an abandoned building.



Background

This website is based on the "Childhood in the Bronx" exhibit originally featured in the Lehman College Art Gallery from October 23 - December 14, 1985. The exhibit took four years to research and create. By using both vintage and contemporary images, along with oral history text excerpts, the exhibit focused on the experiences of childhood in the Bronx from the early decades of the 20th century into the mid-1980s.

About the Project

The Leonard Lief Library "Childhood in the Bronx" digitization project was supported in part by funds from the Metropolitan New York Library Council (M2YLC) through the New York State Regional Bibliographic Database Program.

[Read More »](#)

The Lehman College Art Gallery hosted the

Figure 5. The contemporary photograph Children in Playground, 1985, as presented in the Contemporary Album using Flash and Word. Courtesy of Lehman College, City University of New York, Leonard Lief Library.

Organizational Strengths and Technological Obstacles

The project had full college, METRO, and CONTENTdm (technical) support. We were fortunate that our technical adviser worked with us on our first digital project, was skilled in creating websites, and understood CONTENTdm.

Our sound engineer was campus based, and his easy proximity was ideal. He came over when needed to help with setting adjustments, monitoring sound quality, and providing instruction for Pro Tools.

The oral historian worked on equipment in the library's Special Collections Division. This made ongoing access to the oral history transcripts and CDs easy and allowed for direct interchange with the project director. The student assistant also worked with the oral history text and image scanning in Special Collections under the direction of the project director.

While there were some issues with the use of CONTENTdm, especially during its software upgrade, things went smoothly overall with the photographic and metadata uploads. We had backups of everything in either Excel or on CDs—text, image, and sound. This made reloads easier when needed.

Dealing with the sound and its presentation was the most complex part of this project. This was true because CONTENTdm was not able to handle the multimedia type of display (photo, oral history sound, and text) in one screen that we wanted. We spoke to CONTENTdm's technical support at length, but none of their recommendations gave us a satisfactory solution. We could get text and image in one display or sound and text—but could not get all three elements (images, text, and sound) to display at one time. This came as a surprise to all of us, including the tech support team.

Settling for only hearing sound and reading the text on one screen but not seeing the image at the same time would have defeated an essential goal. Our solution was to create a PowerPoint presentation of the vintage images with embedded sound excerpt and text. PowerPoint gave us the display we wanted, and the results were stunning. The files, however, were memory hungry—even when compressed. Worse yet, Mozilla Firefox was the only reliable browser.

New Solutions

Since the vintage PowerPoint did not work, we needed to find a workable solution. Our grant had a specified deadline that gave urgency to the process. By working with the college's webmaster, we ultimately found a better solution for the display of the images, text, and sound by using HTML and Flash⁹ to create an album. This approach drew on the original PowerPoint but had the distinct advantage of smaller file size and access via multiple commonly used browsers beyond simply Mozilla. Equally important, by using Flash's Action Script, we were able to better control sound as we advanced to hear the audio for each subsequent vintage image. Once

the more complex vintage album was completed, creating a second album for the contemporary images was relatively easy and provided another display option beyond what was seen in CONTENTdm.

Lessons Learned

Based on our digitization experience, we can share some observations:

- All digital projects begin with an idea and thinking through what is needed to do them.
- Securing grant funding takes preparation time and a commitment to its management.
- Digitization can create new audiences for previous analog displays.
- Digitization can add content that may not have physically fit in a previous exhibit.
- Not all oral history sound is of sufficient quality to present digitally.
- There is a learning curve for mastering new hardware and software.
- Software and hardware instructions do not always employ consistent terminology or directions.
- Books or other sources can sometimes better explain incomprehensible instructions received.¹⁰
- Everything needed to meet your project goals may not come out of the box.¹¹
- Redundancy for all files is essential when creating digital projects.
- All project files should be secured on reliable storage devices.
- OCLC listens to its CONTENTdm subscribers and strives to improve its capabilities.¹²
- Don't settle for what you don't want.
- There is always another solution, even it requires more time, software, or expertise.

The Childhood Project Today

Our *Childhood in the Bronx* project was designed to include *only* Georgette Comerford's contemporary photographs and the vintage images she copied from

interviewees in the Bronx Institute's oral history initiative. We enhanced the display images on our project website with oral excerpts from the interviews. Doing so helped us gain a level of competency with digital sound—selection, editing, splicing, and modulation. It also forced us to look at alternative methods of presentation when CONTENTdm failed to provide the multimedia display we were trying to achieve.

The digitization of materials, such as our oral histories and photographs, provides faculty and students with access to primary source materials. This facilitates their research, reflection, critical thinking, and generation of new knowledge. As an educational institution, creating a project that has curriculum relevance is a desirable outcome.

Users tell us, through our “Feedback” link, that the website has been used in student writing activities, in social work assignments, and in teacher training education course work. Elementary schoolteachers have also told us they used the images and sound excerpts in class discussions among their young students. We had considered hiring an education professor to prepare activities for K–12 students as part of the *Childhood* website, as we did with our *Bronx Business for Everybody* website. Our grant budget did not allow for this, however. Additionally, newer technology presents more display options today than when our website was created. Despite this, we have no compelling need to revisit or change the original configuration and have moved on to other pressing projects. Beyond full access to all images, sound, and text in our *Childhood in the Bronx* project website, the contemporary images are also hosted today among the 36 projects in METRO's website *Digital Culture of Metropolitan New York* (<http://dcmny.org>). So, too, they are among the 281 institutional collections hosted at <http://nyheritage.nnyln.net/cdm/search/collection/p128401coll5> in the Empire State Library Network's *New York Heritage* site.

Our vintage and contemporary images attest to the universal identification with the experience of childhood. Their viewing offers us a chance to pause and remember ourselves having fun, reading, playing an instrument, swimming, bicycling, or talking with friends. We see, too, children at home and in schools, shelters, hospitals, or parks. Some images have a poignancy that touches us in a personal way. The images foster an intergenerational appreciation and a sense of empathy for the human emotions revealed—ranging from joy to sadness. Response to this project inspires us to seek even more opportunities to promote and share our rich community oral histories, images, and archival collections on the Bronx.¹³

Acknowledgment

This article was originally presented by the author under the title “Childhood in the Bronx” at the Researching New York: Perspectives on Empire State History Conference at SUNY Albany held on November 18, 2010.

Notes

1. American Fact Finder, U.S. Census, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk.
2. "Largest Cities of the United States by Population," Ballotpedia, 2013, https://ballotpedia.org/Largest_cities_in_the_United_States_by_population.
3. The Bronx Regional and Community History Institute (flier).
4. Georreen Comerford is an associate professor in the Department of Photography at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. As the Bronx Institute's project photographer, her work went well beyond her childhood images. She took many other photographs used in Bronx Institute exhibits, publicity, and publications.
5. Some IRBs have been criticized for overreaching, claiming nonexistent risks to human subjects in their vetting of oral history and historical studies. Historians have asserted that a review process originally intended for biomedical and behavioral research did not consider the nature of historical studies or stated values already in place. Examples include the Oral History Association's *Principles for Oral History and Best Practices of Oral History* (revised 2010), <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices>, and the American Historical Association's *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* (updated 2017), <https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-and-standards-of-the-profession/statement-on-standards-of-professional-conduct>.
6. The National Coalition for History has long championed the scholarly history community's contention that history projects should not be subject to IRB review protocols. In a 2017 press release, the coalition announced that a new federal rule will exempt oral history from IRB review effective January 19, 2018. See <http://historycoalition.org/2017/01/19/new-federal-rule-exempts-oral-history-from-irb-review>.
7. *Bronx Business for Everybody* was based on digitizing photographs, scrapbook entries, articles, and minutes from our Bronx Chamber of Commerce Collection. This was our first experience in using CONTENTdm.
8. New York State Education Department Conservation/Preservation Discretionary Grant, 2006 Bronx Oral History Reformatting (project).
9. With the availability of the more robust HTML5 (introduced in 2014) and its updates, we would be less inclined to use Flash today.
10. We came to rely on Andrew Hagerman's book *Pro Tools LE 7 Ignite! The Visual Guide for New Uses* (Boston: Thomson Course Technology, 2008).
11. We had to order and pay online for a downloadable software MP3 option to use with Pro Tools 5.01.
12. CONTENTdm continues to work on enhancing its media display. See *CONTENTdm December 2016 Release Notes*, <https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/support/release-notes/contentdm/2016/CdmDec2016ReleaseNotes.pdf>.
13. For further information about the Bronx Institute Archives, see Janet Munch's article "Libraries of New York: The Bronx Institute Archives of Lehman College Library," *Urban Academic Librarian* 7, no. 2 (1990): 66–72. Sample full-text oral histories from our collections can be read in Emita Hill and Janet Munch's book *Bronx Faces and Voices: Sixteen Stories of Courage and Commitment* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University, 2014). Photographs by Georreen Comerford, including some from the *Childhood* website, also appear in the book.

