

Tell Ertl Oil Shale Repository Project, 2006

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Abstract

The Tell Ertl Oil Shale Repository at the Arthur Lakes Library, Colorado School of Mines, houses documents that outline the development of the oil shale industry throughout the world, with emphasis on Colorado and the western United States. Founded in 1989 with a grant from the Tell Ertl Family Trust, it may be the largest single oil shale collection available to the public anywhere in the world. Items of interest to technical and historical researchers include original research reports, personal papers of key oil shale developers, and essential series such as *Synthetic Fuels Quarterly Report*.

Renewed interest in oil shale has revived interest in the Repository. Although the collection is searchable in the Tell Ertl Database, the records are inadequate by present-day standards, and documents are not online in full text. Materials must be used in the Library, which hinders access by offsite researchers. To improve access to information in the collection, librarians at the Arthur Lakes Library are evaluating the following changes to the Repository:

- Separate technical information (e.g., technical reports) from historical information (e.g., newspaper clippings), to help users more easily find what they need
- Digitize key items, when possible, to improve access for all users
- Enhance computer database records, to improve search results.

This project will increase the visibility and usability of the Repository for both local and remote users. Digitization of select, significant items will ensure continued access for both present and future generations of oil shale researchers.

History and Background of the Repository

The Tell Ertl Oil Shale Repository was founded with a grant received during the 1989 Oil Shale Symposium (Heistand 1990) from the Tell Ertl Family Trust. The Repository is comprised of 23 discrete collections, donated by individuals, corporations, and government agencies, with a combined total of over 66,000¹ individual documents (Heistand and Atwood 1988; Heistand 1994). Documents include published and unpublished manuscripts, technical reports, slides, maps, photographs, and personal writings. The collections cover the development of the oil shale industry throughout

the world, although there is a strong emphasis on the Western United States. Housed as a special collection within the Arthur Lakes Library, the Repository provides access to a unique blend of information with historical significance as well as technical information.

The Repository was initially sorted, organized, and indexed by Robert Heistand. Items were placed in archival boxes and assigned a 7-digit call number, which identifies an item by collection, box, and document number. A printed Finding Aid, created in 1993 by Heistand with additions in 1997 and 2003, is available in the Repository. The Finding Aid includes background information on each collection and a general content list by box number.

Heistand's original index cards containing information such as title, author, item type,

¹ A recent donation from the New Castle Public Library has not been processed and is not included.

notes, descriptors, and call number for each item were converted into an electronic database, which was later migrated to the present Tell Ertl Database, available at <<http://tellertl.coalliance.org>>. Researchers can visit the Repository in person, or request copies of items through the Library's Document Delivery service at <<http://www.mines.edu/library/IDS/illtop.html>>. Call numbers are essential to retrieve items from the Repository. There are no full text documents online.

Pilot Project

During 2006, in response to increased interest in the Repository and the information it contains, the authors selected and evaluated a small subset of items in the Repository. Our goal was to assess the general condition of the collection, its individual materials, and the usability of the online database. Findings include:

- Archival arrangement is difficult to use
- Metadata for records in the online database is insufficient for precise and accurate searching
- Systematic problems from the migration of data to the present-day database exist
- Collections contain items not related to oil shale
- Collections include multiple copies of relevant items
- Duplicates exist between the Repository collections and the Arthur Lakes Library collections
- Many items are in poor physical condition and need repair and preservation work
- Non-print formats such as photographs, tapes and slides will need additional review by people with experience in the best ways to preserve and provide access to the information they contain

From the pilot project, the authors gained a better understanding of what would be required to turn the archival collection into a

more useable research collection. We estimated the time and resources needed to expand the pilot project to the entire Repository, and evaluated whether these resources would be justified, using criteria established by Lerud and Dunn (1997) for enhancing access to peripheral collections within a Library.

Criteria

Should it be done? Are the materials in the Tell Ertl Repository unique and valuable enough to justify the time and expense to improve access to them? The Tell Ertl Repository is probably the world's largest single collection of information on oil shale that is available to the public. There are many unique and valuable items including published and unpublished technical reports, *Synthetic Fuels Quarterly Report*, *Shale Country* (magazine), personal correspondences of key figures in oil shale, photographs, and even samples of oil shale.

Should we do it? Is enhancing the Repository part of the Library's mission? The Library's primary mission is to support the educational and research efforts of the Colorado School of Mines (CSM). The primary potential users for oil shale information are predominantly non-CSM. By appearances the Library would not be filling its mission; however, libraries are also responsible for making information accessible and preserving history. In addition, information in the Tell Ertl Repository is related to CSM's earth resources focus area.

Can we do it? Are there available funds and staff to carry out the project? What impact will it have on the library, and on other planned projects? The Library has to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each allocation of resources. Because of several factors—increased interest in oil shale, increased use of the Repository, librarians with the interest and skills to handle the project—improving the Repository has become a higher priority of the Library.

Is the timing right? Are there current events that increase the value or use of the collection? Are the events a lasting trend or short term occurrence? Coloradans and

others involved with the oil shale industry know its cyclical nature from experience. Of late, interest in oil shale has increased. New processes are being developed, and old technologies are being reexamined. The 2006 Oil Shale Symposium was well attended. All these factors suggest that this is a good time to begin improvements to the Repository.

Project plans

The authors, working with other library staff members and with feedback from members of the oil shale community, constructed a plan to implement the desired improvements. The plan consists of steps to organize the materials in the Tell Ertl room to increase the usability of the collection and to enhance and expand the metadata in the online database to increase the relevance of items retrieved.

All items in the Repository are presently in archival boxes. Technical items (e.g., reports, books, journals, government documents) are easier to access if they are together on a shelf; for example, the complete run of *Synthetic Fuels Quarterly Report* is presently spread among several boxes. Historical items (e.g., newspaper clippings, photographs) cannot easily be set on a shelf and are best left in archival boxes. Because of the nature of the items, it is logical to separate them.

During the separation phase, call numbers and notes on item locations will be maintained, so that research access to the Repository is not interrupted. At the end of this phase, all technical information will be housed on shelves in one area of the Repository and all historical information in boxes in another. Technical information will receive new call numbers, and historical information will be renumbered.

Technical items have the highest priority for enhancements to records in the online database. By adding metadata, researchers will be able to retrieve more relevant items from searches. The largest improvement will be the addition of industry-specific subject terms for processes, locations, plants, etc.

An additional priority is to perform basic conservation and selective digitization. In order to ensure that future historians, scholars, and oil shale researchers can continue to access items in the Repository, efforts to preserve items in poor physical condition are needed. Digitization of select, key items (Figure 1) will allow access for remote researchers as well as future generations. Any digitization project must take into account copyright law, digital rights management, and donor agreements.

Secondary priorities have also been established. Notes will be taken for future preservation and digitization efforts. Duplicate items will be assessed and removed unless the item has unique value, such as personal notes and additions in the margin. Items will be assessed to determine their relevance to the collection, and irrelevant items

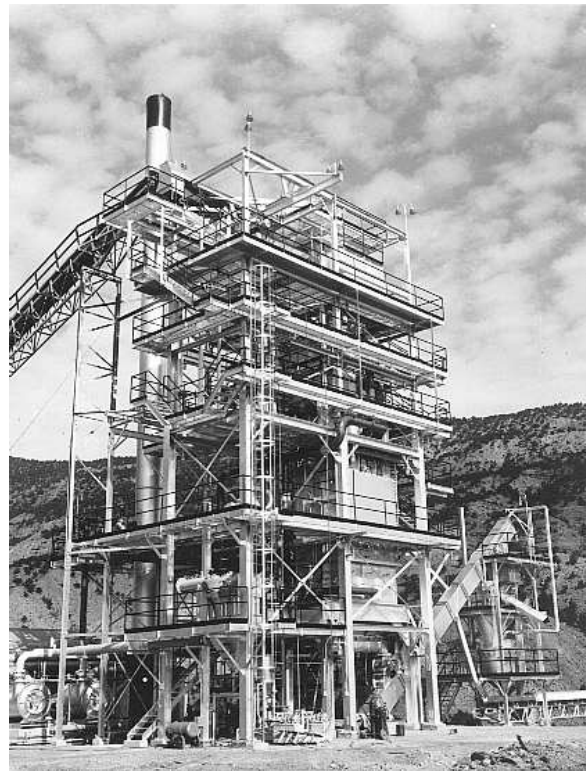


Figure 1: Anvil Points Research Facility, constructed by the federal government in 1947; owners and operators included the U.S. Bureau of Mines and the Colorado School of Mines. Many items in the Tell Ertl collection relate to the construction and operation of this facility. Source: <http://www.co.blm.gov/gsrw/documents/textanvilpoints.pdf>

will be removed.

The project is time-intensive for the librarians and other staff involved. External funding would speed up the project. Endowing the collection is also an option, which would create a stable funding base for the future. The Information Center for Ropeway Studies at the Arthur Lakes Library is an example of a special collection that has been endowed by industry.

Conclusion

The Tell Ertl Oil Shale Repository is a unique, valuable collection, and due to the renewed interest in oil shale and the support of the Arthur Lakes Library it will receive a major makeover. The end result will be a more organized and easier to use collection for both local and remote users, and an improved database. The intent is to make the Tell Ertl Oil Shale Repository a strong player among the various oil shale repositories described at the 2006 Oil Shale Symposium.

References

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