About the Project

Resources for Education and Action for Community Health in Ambler (REACH Ambler) explores the history, environmental health, and community identity of Ambler, Pennsylvania, through a partnership between the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine and the Chemical Heritage Foundation.

From the 1880s through the mid-20th century asbestos production was the cornerstone of Ambler's local economy. In more recent years Ambler has grappled with its legacy of material production, including a Superfund site and piles of asbestos in various states of remediation, as well as changes in demographics and the local economy.

Through methods connected to oral history, public history, and science studies, the REACH Ambler project team has collected and contextualized diverse viewpoints and information from Ambler residents and institutions. This research has informed a variety of interpretive pieces that demonstrate how history can help a community define its present and shape its future.

About the Manual

REACH Ambler was conceived as a multi-modal project that could be replicated by communities grappling with issues related to health, environment, and history. As such, this manual seeks to highlight the reasoning behind the project and suggest methods that might be used by communities and organizations of varying sizes.

This manual is broken into four parts, representing the main aspects of the REACH Ambler project. We encourage communities to "mix and match" the various pieces of the project based on local interests and resources.

Oral History

Here you will find basic information about how to conduct oral histories with community members, best practices for permissions and consent, equipment suggestions, and oral history resources.

Online Exhibit

Creating an online exhibit is a low-cost, dynamic way to share oral history excerpts, photos, primary sources, and other materials. Here you will find suggestions for using an editable Google map and a low-to-no cost web platform, with suggestions for using different types of media and things to keep in mind when telling a diverse, multi-perspective story.

Physical exhibit/display and printed booklet

Does your organization have a physical location where people might gather to learn about your project? Here you will find suggestions for creating a small-scale exhibit that combines oral histories and historical research in a (relatively) low-cost format.

Even in the internet age, print materials can be a powerful tool for sharing your community's story. Here you'll find some suggestions for making that happen.

Theatrical performance

Turning oral histories into a theatrical performance can be resource-intensive, but powerful. Here we explain the process a local professional theater took to fictionalize and perform some of the stories presented in our oral histories.

REACH Ambler Partners

University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine

The Perelman School of Medicine is an internationally recognized leader in the creation of new knowledge and therapies to improve human health, and in training the next generation of scientific leaders. The REACH Ambler project is housed in the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health and has links to the Center for Excellence in Environmental Toxicology (CEET) and the Superfund Research and Training Program.

Chemical Heritage Foundation

The Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF) is a library, museum, and center for scholars in Philadelphia. CHF fosters dialogue on science and technology in society. Staff and fellows study the past in order to understand the present and inform the future. CHF collects, preserves, and exhibits historical artifacts; engages communities of scientists and engineers; and tells the stories of the people behind breakthroughs and innovations.

camra

An interdisciplinary collective of researchers and educators from the University of Pennsylvania, camra fosters collaborations among scholars through projects that explore, practice, evaluate, and teach about multimedia research and representation.

Act II Playhouse

Ambler's Act II Playhouse is committed to creating and programming theatre in a venue whose intimacy draws audiences and actors into dynamic interaction. Act II produces new, classic, and contemporary plays and musicals that reflect the highest artistic standards, with a focus on a variety of live performances that are accessible and entertaining.

Community Oral History

Goals

The oral history component of the project provided much of the basis for other products within REACH Ambler. The broad goal of the oral histories was to gather stories from various members of the Ambler community and government institutions to form a larger picture of Ambler's history and identity. The oral histories would allow various voices from Ambler to be put into conversation with each other in later stages of the project.

Initially, the target was to conduct fifteen oral history interviews that were between one and two hours in duration and produce the subsequent interview transcriptions. The interviews also had to provide a geographical and demographical representation of Ambler. There was no intention to provide a statistical representation of Ambler based on the interviewees but interviewing residents of different ages, genders, races, ethnicities, and proximities to asbestos sites was a priority.

Training community members to conduct oral histories was another goal of the project. Ideally, these community members would be able to help identify other individuals that could be interviewed and also conduct interviews. Their ability to conduct interviews would be helpful during the project and also crucial for the continuation of the project in the community setting.

Methods

Background research

Background research on the history of Ambler was required before oral history interviews could be conducted. This was done mainly through reading secondary source material and newspaper articles. From this background research we were able to complete a timeline of major events in Ambler that covered factory openings, EPA activity, and community activity among other things. We also used census data to get an understanding of the past and current demographic characteristics of the community.

Identifying people to interview

It is good to begin by making a list of people who are actively involved in the issue you'd like to gather stories about. For example in this project, since we were interested in experiences in a town facing toxicity and thoughts about the current risk assessment, we invited residents who were active members of community organizations and the EPA, who were involved in organizing around the asbestos site. Potential interviewees were initially identified by looking for individuals who appeared in local newspaper articles expressing an opinion and ongoing interest in the issue. Later interviewees were identified from connections made through some of the initial interviews. It is best to talk to interviewees one at a time. Group interviewers can be dominated by particular individuals and more opinionated interviewees can influence the memory of others in a group setting.

Consent and release forms

It is important that release forms are tailored for each project so that the content of the oral history interviews are properly transferred to those conducting the project and that the interviewees are aware of the potential uses of the interviews.

In the case of the REACH study, because we partnered with the University of Pennsylvania and our project was a federally funded study, special human subjects release forms were required through federal regulations for human subjects research. As a result, the release or "consent" forms were reviewed by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Writing an interview guide

An interview protocol was created prior to each interview based on the background research and research related to the interviewee. This was not a question list but rather a list of discussion topics designed to guide the conversation taking place in each interview. The background research on the community provided a general understanding of the physical layout of the community with important buildings and streets, the local political climate, and the role of local civic organizations. Interviewees were asked to comment on many of these topics and their relationship to them.

Conducting an oral history interview

Conducting an oral history interview can be a difficult undertaking for both first time interviewers and seasoned oral historians. Below is a list of important things to remember while acting as an interviewer. For a more complete guide of the oral history interviewing process please see the *Community Oral History Toolkit* (Nancy Mackay, Mary Kay Quinlan, and Barbara W. Sommer, *Community Oral History Toolkit*. Left Coast Press, 2013).

- Before an interview begins the interviewer(s) should introduce themselves to the interviewee and establish a rapport. It is important that the interviewee feel comfortable with sharing their stories and experiences with the interviewer. The interviewer should also familiarize themselves with the audio and/or video recording equipment prior to the interview in order to minimize technological difficulties.
- Hold the interview in a location with minimal background noise. Audio recording equipment will pick up a surprising amount of background noise. Air conditioners, other people, and outdoor noises such as birds and airplanes can all be distracting noises or make the interview audio difficult to use later. Place the recorder in a place that can easily pickup the voices of both the interviewer and interviewee.
- It is important to build up to difficult or controversial topics and not lead off with those questions first. Ask broad questions such as, "What was your childhood like?" or "What can you tell me about your family?" These questions will get the interviewee more comfortable and will hopefully make them more likely to answer difficult questions later. Before an interview begins, interviewees should be made aware that they can refuse to answer any questions or request that any answer be stricken from the record. Interviewers should look for signs that the

interviewee is getting tired. Ask if the interviewee would like to take a break or if another interview session is necessary.
- Avoid asking "yes or "no" questions. These can disrupt the flow of an interview and can make it difficult to get interviewees to provide more detailed information. Occasionally, interviewees will be reluctant to provide full details of events. Listen carefully and be ready with follow-up questions to help illicit more detailed answers. These questions can simply be something like, "Is there an example that would help explain that?" or "What was that like?"
- Interviewer(s) should not interrupt interviewees. Interviewers should not be afraid of silences. Silences can give interviewees time to think and have their memory jogged. Don't be too quick to move on to other questions or topics if you think the interviewee may have more to say about the current topic. Interviewees may provide insight into an important topic that was not part of the interviewer's interview protocol. The interviewer shouldn't be afraid to diverge from the interview protocol to ask about important topics introduced by the interviewee.
- Visuals can help interviewees open up and reveal memories about particular locations or events. Old photographs of locations and people, newspaper articles, and objects can remind an interviewee of a memory or event that they had not thought of sharing.
- It is important (especially after an interview about a difficult or controversial topic) to end the interview on a high note. Allow the interviewee to end with a positive thought by asking questions like "How would you like your community to be remembered?" or "What was your favorite memory from your time there?" or "What accomplishment are you most proud of?"

Recording and Transcribing Interviews

Each interview was recorded with audio equipment and most were also filmed by a videographer. A typed transcript was then prepared for each interview. Although creating typed transcripts can be time consuming and they are not a necessity, they do make searching through interviews and comparing multiple interviews easier, so they can save time later when reviewing the interviews (by allowing them to be read and reread more quickly).

Identifying Themes

After an initial round of interviews CHF staff began meeting as a group once or twice a month to review the oral histories and identify reoccurring themes. Some of the themes that interviewees frequently touched on were community events (specifically relating to plant closings, superfund sites, park closings, and high-rise construction), public health, and identity politics (relating to geographical and socio-political community tensions). These themes went on to inform the content of the website, plays, and exhibit.

To help identify themes we developed a list of questions when looking at the growing number of oral histories. This list included questions about the relationship of the interviewee to various community and government organizations, their attitudes about the community, their relationships with community locations, and their hopes for the future. These questions helped to break down the content of the interviews, identify the themes mentioned above, and build upon these themes to tell a more complete story.

Most of the initial interviewees were part of the EPA Community Advisory Group and voiced similar opinions. By identifying themes that arose from the first group of interviews we were able to see gaps in

the story and the voices that were underrepresented. This led to further rounds of oral history interviews that reflected the diversity of opinions in Ambler.

For more information

Community Oral History Toolkit is a good resource for learning more about the process of preparing and conducting oral history interviews for community projects.

Results

Twenty-three interviews were conducted over the course of ten months by one interviewer. Each interview was between one and two hours in length and a full interview transcript was created for each. A digital audio file was created for each interview and digital video files of most interviews were created by a videographer for future use in other facets of the project.

Successes

The oral history interview process was very successful and many individuals agreed to be interviewed. The initial goal was to interview fifteen community members and government employees, and we ended up with twenty-three interviews. We received a lot of cooperation from the community and the oral histories were able to provide a larger picture of the different issues and solutions in the Ambler. The interviews successfully represented the different perspectives, experiences, and opinions in the community and the demographics of Ambler. Putting the various perspectives, experiences, and opinions in conversation with each other occurred in subsequent parts of the project but this was possible because of the successful gathering of these oral histories.

Challenges

Preparing for and conducting the oral histories presented several challenges. We struggled with a self selection bias when looking for potential interviewees. This challenge is common among many oral history projects. We could only interview people who agreed to be interviewed. Those community members who were more invested in the issue and had more interest in discussing their perspective were more likely to agree to be interviewed. It was difficult to find interviewees that felt less invested in the issue. The interviews mostly resulted in helpful information although not all of the interviews were able to be used in other stages of the project.

As the initial interviews progressed it became apparent that certain stories were being brought up by various interviewees. While this was helpful to know there were shared experiences that could be asked about in future interviews, it became a challenge to avoid asking leading questions that would have influenced how an interviewee recalled their experiences or perspectives.

Interviewing employees of the EPA was an important part of the oral history part of the project but it presented interesting challenges. Because of the sensitive nature of the topics being discussed some government employees requested pre-approved question lists and even requested that they be involved in the editing of transcripts. These requests had to be balanced with our internal process and this conflict prevented one of the interviews from being completed.

One of the goals of the project that wasn't realized was the training of community members to conduct oral history interviews. During the course of conducting background research on the community and proceeding with the initial round of interviews it was determined that members of the community were too close to the issues being discussed to be unbiased interviewers. There was a risk of interviews turning into confrontational debates instead of a forum for storytelling. This resulted in abandoning this goal of the project.

Online Exhibit

Introduction

In creating a map-based online exhibit, we intended to present the diverse, multilinear story of Ambler that grew out of oral histories with residents, activists, and officials. Using projects like HistoryPin as models, we set out to "map" these stories onto Ambler's landscape.

Ambler's story, like many stories of environment and community, felt inherently spatial. Community participants often told very different stories about the exact same place, and these stories provoked different emotions based on the person's perspective. For example, some people saw Ambler's BoRit Superfund site as a contaminated dump, while others remembered the playground that used to sit there. Still others connected the Superfund site to their neighbors who once lived in close proximity. By placing these stories next to one another on a map, we encourage visitors to see a familiar place through new eyes.

Goals and Methods

Choosing the Stories

With twenty-two interviews of one to two hours in length, we were swimming in stories of Ambler's past, present, and future. Including all of the interviews in full would have made the website almost impossible to use – there would be too much information! In order to choose which stories to highlight from your oral history interviews, keep a few things in mind:

- Themes and events: What overarching themes do interviewees discuss? What stories get told over and over?
- Diversity (of perspective): Are you telling stories from one person's perspective, or from the perspectives of people with similar points of view? Or are you including counter perspectives that challenge the main narrative?
- Diversity (of demographics): Do you have a good mix of genders, ages, ethnic background, education levels, etc., based on the community's makeup and the interviews gathered?
- Number and length of clip: Are your excerpts too long? You don't want to give people more than a brief paragraph or two (or more than two to four minutes of audio/video) per excerpt.

Choosing the Artifacts

We also supplemented the stories told through our oral histories with historical documents and artifacts. Contact your local historical society, public library, college, or university to find out what sorts of archives they have that relate to the stories you want to tell. Some resources may be online, but you will probably need to visit the archives as well. Newspaper articles, scrapbooks, historic photographs, and local government documents can make great sources for telling your community's story. Here are some things to think about when looking for and choosing artifacts to highlight:

- Oral history themes and important events: What themes and events do your interviewees talk about? Can you find complimentary objects or documents (newspaper articles, mementos, photographs)?
- Missing themes and important events: Are there any important parts of your community's story that your interviewees don't address, but you still wish to highlight? Does the story of your community stretch back further than human memory? Perhaps your local archives have articles or documents that relate to these events and ideas that your oral histories do not cover.
- Items from interviewees: Do your oral history participants if they have photos, scrapbooks, or documents related to their stories? Ask if you can make copies to use in your project!

Choosing the Platforms

Your oral history excerpts (and any other content you would like to feature) will need a place to "live" online. You will need to build your online exhibit in two parts: one using a map tool, and the other using a website publishing platform where you can include additional information about your project.

There are many kinds of platforms out there to choose from – free and paid, open source and proprietary. Here are a few things to keep in mind when choosing what works best for your project.

- Budget: Some platforms cost a lot of money. Others are free. Web platforms exist for any budget, and it's good to think about how much you are able to spend.
- Skills: Do you have (or can you hire) a professional web designer? A coder? What web platforms are your staff already familiar with? Choose something that matches your skills.
- Flexibility: In general, the less knowledge a web platform requires, the less flexible it is going to be. Think about how much control you want to have over the look, feel, and functionality of your website, and choose a platform that fits your needs.
- Community: There are a few website and map platforms out there that were specifically made for community and history projects. For example, Omeka is an open-source platform made specifically for digital archives; HistoryPin allows users from all over the world to "pin" images and media to map. Do you want your project to be integrated into pre-existing communities like these, or do you want to stand apart?
- Type and amount of media: This may be the most important thing to consider. What kind of media will you include on your website, and how much of it? Most web platforms have some kinds of restrictions on the amount of storage they offer. Others might not allow you to easily host images, video, and/or sound files. Check these restrictions before choosing a platform.

Results

Content

The final online exhibit presented forty brief stories of Ambler's past, present, and future, told by past and current area residents, as well as EPA officials with ties to the two Superfund sites. Of the twenty people who told stories, about half had grown up in or around Ambler. Others had moved to Ambler in their adulthood, and/or had become connected to the community through their work in government, activism, or development. Twenty-six locations in Ambler, from municipal buildings to former parks, were highlighted by these stories, as well as contemporary and historic pictures and documents.

In addition, we included a small image gallery of additional historical artifacts related to the history of Ambler, but did not easily match to a particular location. The artifacts highlight ranged widely and included newspaper articles, personal photos of interviewees, government documents, and photos of asbestos products manufactured in Ambler.

Platforms

We chose to host our [map](#) using a customizable Google Map. Of the various mapping platforms out there, it was the easiest to use, requires no coding knowledge, and is free. It has fewer "bells and whistles" than some other map platforms, but that allowed us to focus specifically on the stories without the temptation to add additional functions that might be distracting.

Here are some things you can do with Google Maps
- Add location pins, lines, shapes, which can be divided into "layers."
- Each pin/line/shape can be given a pop-up window with a title, caption, and ten pieces of media.
- Media allowed: any video on Youtube, any image uploaded online (you cannot upload images to Google Maps itself, just link from elsewhere.)

Here's what it cannot do:
- Add videos from any source besides Youtube. There is also no option to include sound-only files.
- Add links, formatting, or any HTML to captions
- Adjust size or shape of pop-up windows
- Options for changing "look" of map (including fonts and color scheme) are limited.

We hosted the rest of the website, including a small image gallery of related artifacts and documents, on [Squarespace](#). We chose Squarespace for its flexibility, ease of use, and clean aesthetic.

Squarespace's advantages:
- It is very low-cost (about $9/month for a basic membership)
- There are a wide variety of clean, adaptable templates.
- There is a large user community online with lots of tips for adapting templates further.
- Sites created by Squarespace are more mobile-friendly than other out-of-the-box web tools.

- You can link your site to your own domain for free.

Its disadvantages
- Many similar web platforms (like Wordpress or Omeka) are free. These platforms do not have quite the same level of functionality, but if you are looking for a very basic landing page for your project and are working on a small budget, you may want to explore a free platform first.

To explore the exhibit in its final form, visit reachambler.chemheritage.org.

Successes

Community Response

Community response to REACH Ambler's online exhibit was overwhelmingly positive. Said one site visitor, "Your videos were the first time I heard voice given to the socio-cultural pain and disconnection that I've experienced first hand." Another, a professor of industrial hygiene, noted, "I can relate to and share [REACH Ambler] with my students so that they can understand how regulatory decisions and public response can change and potentially improve and prevent the need for future Superfund sites."

Challenges

Community Participation

One of the goals of REACH Ambler's online presence was to continue to grow, with community residents submitting stories that would then be added to those already on the map. A fillable form appears below the map on the website, asking visitors to the site to submit their story. Four months after launching, only one such submission has emerged. A handful of additional people have contacted the REACH Ambler partners about people they believed should be interviewed, but none have submitted their stories in writing, even when directly encouraged to.

It is important for community-based projects like this to have a continued life, but requesting additional submissions takes significantly more structure than was built into REACH Ambler. Communities interested in doing something similar might want to team up with an organization primed to collect story (perhaps a teacher or a community center), stage an in-person event, or more aggressively advertise the opportunity to submit stories.

Technical Knowledge

Mapping stories and historic documents onto an online map is an increasingly common interpretive tool, and REACH Ambler opted to use a map in what is probably the simplest and most straightforward way. With a little more technical knowledge (and a more robust map platform), our map of Ambler's stories could have done much more. Similar projects have layered historic maps and photos on top of current ones, showed change to a community over time, and used data visualization to connect concepts or ideas that might not have been obvious at first glace. Unfortunately, these possibilities proved too complicated to execute.

But simplicity has its place! The straightforward nature of the final product ended up serving the project well. When thinking about more technically complicated avenues to explore, think about what technical skills you have available, as well as what would serve the project best. The most cutting-edge tool is not always the best – especially if it's difficult to use and takes away from time spent on the rest of the project.

Booklet and Physical Exhibit

Goals

It was important that this project incorporate an element that bridged the gap between the research being done in the community and the artistic representation of that research in the form of the theatrical performance. This is where the booklet and physical exhibit fit into the project. The booklet was intended as a way for quotes from the oral histories to be paired up with images to help tell the story of Ambler. The goal was to create a short booklet/newspaper insert that could be distributed locally to Ambler residents.

The physical exhibit started out with general goals and the specifics of the exhibit changed as the project evolved. The physical exhibit was intended as a way for the research to have a physical presence in the local community. We wanted the physical exhibit to be displayed at a gathering place within the community to maximize visibility.

Methods

The booklet was created closely alongside the project's website and they were both based in the oral history interviews conducted with Ambler community members as part of this project. Chemical Heritage Foundation staff worked closely together when choosing the stories and quotes that would be used in the booklet and the website. Quotes were chosen that gave voice to a wide range of perspectives on Ambler history and issues. These quotes became the basis for the story of Ambler as it was told through the website, booklet, and physical exhibit.

Originally the booklet was thought of as a more poetic expression of the research. Early edits of the booklet were organized with images of the community captioned by short quotes from the oral histories. Many of the images used came from the personal collection of community members interviewed and from local historical societies. Absent from this initial version was narrative text that gave broader context to the story of Ambler and the stories of the quoted community members. Later edits shifted the booklets to a more direct story that used narrative text interspersed with quotes from the oral histories to highlight images. The story of Ambler as told in the booklet was divided into four sections. Each section focused on a different aspect of the story and highlighted important moments from Ambler's past and present.

It was important to us that the quotes from the community members still drive the story but we had to decide which stories made it into the booklet. We wanted the booklet to fairly represent the diverse stories gathered from the oral histories but we also wanted the booklet to convey particular themes. The story of Ambler can be seen in many ways as bleak, but we wanted the booklet to contain several of

the success stories that help give hope to Ambler's future. The first step in identifying quotes to use in the booklet and exhibit was to read through the oral history transcripts and sort quotes into different categories based on the topic being discussed in the interview. This helped us identify themes present across many interviews. From there we went back and sorted those thematic quotes into more specific categories based on tone and perspective. Thought patterns began to emerge from the quote categories and quotes were then chosen for the final products that represented the widest range of views and ways those views were expressed.

The quotes and stories used were chosen by individuals working on the website and booklet and an outside editor provided feedback on drafts of the booklet and website. The editor acted as an advocate for readers of the booklet and website, providing feedback that anticipated audience reactions ands needs. Most of this feedback came in the form of copy editing and formatting, but there was also useful feedback about improving the clarity of the story we were trying to tell. The editor was selected based on previous work they had done with CHF. The booklet was sent to the *Ambler Gazette* and printed as a newspaper insert. An advertisement for the performance at Act II Playhouse was included on the back page of the booklet.

The physical exhibit went through many changes before final implementation. Initially, it was thought that the physical exhibit would be more object oriented. This led to several concerns including having the necessary security in place to protect objects. The Act II Playhouse left its doors open during the day and there wouldn't have been someone to watch the objects or welcome visitors. More secure casings were considered but those proved expensive and impractical for this project. This was also complicated by the fact that the artifacts available for an exhibit were primarily ephemera of asbestos production and company history or 2D documents related to land use controversies. These artifacts were important but only conveyed part of the story we wanted to tell. After reviewing these complications it was decided that the physical exhibit would take the form of the more poetic quote/image format that was originally conceived for the booklet. The images and text would be placed on large banners and there wouldn't be any physical objects. The banners were distilled from the images and quotes used in the website and booklet and the formatting went through several drafts and edits. Eventually the four sections of the booklet were edited down into three banners and acted as teaser versions of the information in the booklet.

Results

The booklet was printed as a ten page newspaper insert that was distributed with the *Ambler Gazette*. Copies of the booklet were also provided at the theatrical production and remain available to people interested in the project and the history of Ambler. The physical exhibit consisted of three banners that measured roughly six feet high by three feet wide. The banners were displayed in the lobby of Act II Playhouse starting on the night of the performances and remained there for a month.

Successes

The booklet and banners contributed to the larger project goals of contextualizing the experiences of community members in a larger history and communicating that story through multiple mediums. The booklet helped generate interest in the project, history of the community, and the ongoing environmental concerns in Ambler among community members who saw the booklet as an insert in the local newspaper. It also provided a way for those involved in risk assessment and community planning to place individual stories and multiple perspectives inside a larger community context. CHF staff received

a lot of positive feedback about the booklet from community members that attended the performances at Act II Playhouse. One person said, "I wanted to tell you again how truly impressed we were with the work presented at the playhouse and how much we appreciated its neutrality."

Although they made for a somewhat unconventional physical exhibit, the banners successfully conveyed the themes found in the oral histories, website, and booklet by using short quotes and images from Ambler. An object-free exhibit design also meant that these banners are extremely portable and can be used by community organizations and teachers looking to share the story of Ambler. Making the banners easily accessible in the future was not an initial goal of the project but was a benefit nonetheless, allowing opportunities for the banners to be used in classrooms, or otherwise easily shared among locations. The banners were also based on fairly simple formatting which could be easily replicated in programs like Microsoft Publisher and sent to a banner printing business.

Challenges

The booklet and the physical exhibit went through many changes over the course of taking them from visions to final products, and we encountered many challenges along the way. Some of these challenges were already described in the methods of creating these products, but it is worth mentioning them again here.

The physical exhibit was originally thought of as a more traditional object based exhibit. This presented a problem as the story we were trying to tell was driven more by the oral histories and less by objects that could be physically displayed. Concerns over security and the high costs and risks associated with safely displaying physical objects eventually gave way to the creation of the banners.

The banners were installed in the theater lobby on the night of the performances and we received great feedback at that event. The banners remained there for a month and it was very difficult to understand the impact the banners had in the community during that time. There was not an easy way to measure how often they were seen or what visitors' impressions were over the course of that month.

A big challenge with the banners is that they assume the reader has some background knowledge of Ambler and its history as the banners provide little of this information. The banners work best in conjunction with the booklet which provides more information that would be useful to an audience unfamiliar with Ambler's history and the town's ongoing environmental and health struggles.

The booklet was generally well received for its ability to convey the story of Ambler, but it was also designed to spread awareness about other facets of the project including the play. A short advertisement for the performances at Act II Playhouse was put on the back of the booklet as a marketing tool. Unfortunately, it was difficult to understand how much of an impact this had on the attendance of the play. The play was attended by many community members who were already aware of the project and involved in varying ways. The effectiveness of the booklet as a marketing tool was largely speculative.

Navigating organizational and community partnerships while designing the booklet and physical exhibit was also challenging. The process of designing the booklet and exhibit involved changes made to the themes and objectives of the products along with edits to text and formatting. As a result, it was more difficult to show work as it progressed and receive feedback from our partners at the University of Pennsylvania. It wasn't until the booklet and banners were close to completion that there was anything

of substance to show. This meant that general descriptions and goals were all we could submit for feedback most of the time.

Although this was a project about a community, it was not a community-based project in the sense that it was not building off of work already being done by the local historical society or a project created by community members. Instead it was a study of a particular community conducted by people that did not belong to that particular community. This created a set of challenges on balancing relationships between project partners and community members. The local historical society had very limited staffing, time, and resources which made partnering with them impractical when considering the timeline of the project. A stakeholder committee of twenty-three community members was formed as a way for the community to be involved in the design process of the project, but this proved to be challenging as scheduling conflicts often prevented the group from meeting despite a great interest in participating. Ultimately, the input of the community was through their stories and perspectives as recorded in the oral histories.

Theatrical Piece

Goals

It was important that the products of this project utilized the extensive background research and oral histories to engage the community of Ambler. The Act II Playhouse, located within Ambler, provided a unique opportunity for the Chemical Heritage Foundation to partner with a community institution to bring the research of the project to the community. The Act II Playhouse also provided an opportunity to achieve the general goal of communicating the research done for this project using a variety of methods.

Act II Playhouse did not have a lot of external goals set upon them by the Chemical Heritage Foundation or the University of Pennsylvania. They were free to follow their own process with the goals of creating a theatrical piece and a quality theater experience. Additionally, they decided to create several short pieces instead of one longer play. This would better suit the oral histories as Act II Playhouse wanted to produce a theatrical piece that reflected the wide range of stories and perspectives being told by community members and the desire to remain true to the spirit of the community members being represented. They set a goal of creating between six and eight short plays that would be performed on the same night at the Act II Playhouse.

Methods

The oral histories provided the foundation for the production of the Act II Playhouse theatrical piece. After the oral histories were conducted and transcribed, CHF made them available to Act II Playhouse as a resource. Act II Playhouse decided to commission twelve writers and each writer would create their own short play although only six to eight of these plays would be chosen for the final performance. Act II Playhouse did this because they knew that the oral histories represented a wide spectrum of opinions

and the creation of more plays than needed would provide choice when attempting to fairly represent the voices in the community.

Each writer was given and asked to focus on three of the oral histories as they wrote their plays. They had access to all of the oral histories for further research but most of their writing was based on the three oral histories originally given to them. By focusing on a few oral histories the writers were able to create a personal connection with the people in the community. The three oral histories given to each writer represented people from various organizations, demographic groups, and perspectives. The oral histories were also assigned to writers based on what the interests of the writers were. A two hour tour of Ambler was organized for the writers so they could familiarize themselves with the community spatially, visually, and historically.

Although Act II Playhouse had the freedom to pursue their own goals in terms of producing the theatrical piece of the project, collaboration was crucial to the success of the plays. The writers went through rounds of drafts which included feedback from the Chemical Heritage Foundation and University of Pennsylvania to ensure that the plays struck a balance between staying true to the stories told by community members and the alarmist themes that could overpower the individual experiences of community members.

Due to the level of resources available to Act II Playhouse, it was decided that the plays would be performed on only one night at the Act II Playhouse. The exhibit produced by CHF was also displayed in conjunction with the premiere of the plays. This served the purpose of tying in the different ways of communicating the research on Ambler to the community.

Results

The theatrical piece developed by Act II Playhouse was titled "The White Mountains" and was performed on April 25, 2015 in the intimate 130-seat Act II Playhouse theater. The evening began with a reception which offered a chance for people from across groups in Ambler who had themselves been interviewed for oral histories to gather and interact with organizers of the project. The performance consisted of seven short plays that were chosen from the twelve originally commissioned. The seven short plays were eighty-five minutes in total and they were followed by a post-show discussion with the community members that attended the performance.

Successes

"The White Mountains" was considered a great success by the Chemical Heritage Foundation and Act II Playhouse. The show was sold out and many of those in attendance were community members who were both involved in the project and who were interested in learning more. The overwhelming response from the attendees was that the plays were both informative and helped communicate the experiences described by people in the community through the oral histories. One attendee wrote, "Thank you so much for doing this. It was very, very well done. Much appreciated."

"The White Mountains" also won the 2015 In Real Life Project of the Year Award at the Philadelphia Geek Awards. The project continues to play an important role in the story being told by the community members of Ambler and it has also proven to be impactful for a larger audience outside of the geographical boundaries of Ambler. The scripts have been made available to area high school teachers

and are available to others on [request](#). We have heard from EPA staff that they share the project with communities at other Superfund sites, as ideas and insights to consider elsewhere.

Challenges

The creation of the plays presented several challenges to both Act II Playhouse and the twelve writers that were commissioned to create the plays. As noted in the section of the guide on the community oral history, the oral histories were conducted in different rounds. The initial oral history interviewees were people closely connected to the issues in Ambler and those that were willing to voice their opinions. This lead to later rounds of interviews that incorporated other people of various opinions, affiliations, and in differing demographic groups. Writers looking for different perspectives didn't have access to the full collection interviews until later in the writing process.

The writers also had to balance their personal connections to the community and community members with an accurate factual representation of the source material. Some of the writers tended to gravitate towards alarmist themes that focused on the horrors of asbestos which overshadowed the themes of hope and progress that we found in the community. These writers needed to be steered back towards the balance, in order to showcase the full range of experiences conveyed in the oral histories. This also tied into the writers being challenged to incorporate feedback from Chemical Heritage Foundation and University of Pennsylvania reviewers who also wanted to steer some writers away from alarmist themes.

Act II Playhouse also had some challenges as an organization. They had the general challenge of completing the project within a limited timeframe and with limited financial resources. While the goals of the theatrical piece were achieved within these constraints, greater finances could have expanded the scope of the project, allowing for additional performances and greater production values. They also had the challenge of treating the twelve writers fairly despite that only seven would end up being included in the final production. Act II Playhouse decided that compensating each writer despite whether or not their plays were picked was a solution to this problem.