

Duncan Oliver:
PRESERVING HISTORY WITH DRAGON

Once upon a time, putting newspapers on microfilm was a good way to preserve content. In the digital age, though, microfilm presents all kinds of challenges, as the Historical Society of Old Yarmouth (HSOY) discovered when it wanted to put together a book of articles that had appeared in the weekly Yarmouth Register newspaper between 1960 and 1980. Unfortunately, the Yarmouth Register doesn't have a digital archive.

HSOY member Duncan Oliver, who spearheaded the project, explains that trying to scan the microfilm versions of the articles into optical character reader (OCR) software resulted in a success rate of only about 70%, which wasn't any faster than retyping them, once time spent correcting errors was factored in. The society also couldn't afford to hire a transcriptionist.

Stymied, Oliver mentioned the situation to his tech-savvy daughter, who surprised him with a copy of Dragon NaturallySpeaking for Christmas 2010. After training the software to recognize his Cape Cod accent ("Pahk your cah in Havahd Yahd," he quips) and some unique spellings (Thacher with no "t" before the "ch," for example), Oliver was able to quickly and easily read the articles and create digital copies of them for inclusion in the book.

"I read 80 stories into it in less than one-and-a-half months," Oliver notes. "I type with one finger, but speaking the articles was more than twice as fast as the fastest typist at the historical

society. Our proofreader was amazed that there were so few corrections necessary." With each article running 1,200-1,500 words, that equals a book of more than 200 pages, and the speediness of using Dragon means that "Capturing Cape Cod History: Earlier Years" will be on store shelves in October and ready for 2011 holiday gift-buying.

Continuing to Preserve History With Dragon

The Yarmouth Register's roots stretch back to the 1830s, and the Historical Society of Old Yarmouth has been publishing monthly pieces in it for decades. Oliver notes that the subject matter has ranged from an overview of herring runs to profiles of interesting people to a license plate war that erupted in 1928.

The authors of many of the articles that were published between 1960 and 1980 have passed away, so Oliver says that the HSOY book offers an opportunity to "keep history alive and help others learn about their rich historical heritage." The book is a sequel to an earlier tome compiling articles published between 2001 and 2009 – those pieces, of course, already existed in digital form.

Now that Oliver has completed his work on "Capturing Cape Cod History," he has found Dragon to be useful for other things too. "Someone gave us notes from a speech they gave 15 years ago, and I was able to speak it into the computer and have it ready for our newsletter in 15 minutes," he says.

Two other people in the society are using Dragon too, one who lost a finger in a saw accident four years ago and who uses it for HSOY emails, and another who employs it while working on the society's newsletter. Oliver says: "All of this came about because a retired father told his daughter about a proposed project and the impossibility of transcribing these newspaper articles, and then he found Dragon NaturallySpeaking under the Christmas tree."

