

Oral History Interview

NANCY CLEMMONS

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(Interviewer: Sylvia McAphee)

Interviewer: Welcome, Nancy. Good afternoon.

Nancy: Thank you, thank you.

Interviewer: I want to say I am so excited to be your interviewer today.

Nancy: I'm excited that you are the one interviewing me.

Interviewer: Well, thank you. It's great to see you. Since it's so fresh on everyone's mind, I wanted to say "congratulations" on being the first ever T. Mark Hodges award winner.

Nancy: Thank you. That was just, really, too much. It could have been so many other people. Mark was just a very special person and I just feel so honored.

Interviewer: We were all so happy for you. It was just like he was there with you.

Nancy: Well, actually, he has been here today, and I'll tell you why. You sent me the questions ahead of time, and I printed them out and I put them in my folder to bring. I looked over them, you know, and then this morning I started looking over them a little more in detail and trying to think about some specific examples of things. I could narrow it down a little bit, but I knew that Mark had all the details in that history of the chapter. So at the Internet Café, I went to the chapter website and pulled it up, and filled in a few holes. So it was great.

Interviewer: Wonderful. That's outstanding. Well, I feel it's only fitting to ask you to please describe how you became interested in librarianship and to give a brief overview of your extensive career.

Nancy: Well, let's see. In high school I was a science nerd, and when I worked on my science projects I would go to the library where my father worked, in MonteSanto. There they had Chem Abstracts, and I was just so impressed that this woman knew how to show me how to use it, you know, so knowledgeable. I got all the information I needed for my project, and I just sort of tucked that away in my head. Then, later on, I taught school. I taught seventh grade science. To help the students, I checked in the library for resources,

and the librarian there just filled up the whole library and had everything organized to help the students do their projects. And I tucked that away in my head. (laughter) And then we started to think about what we wanted to do. And I wanted to go to graduate school in something. I was a chemistry major but I didn't want to be in a lab. I needed people. So, I had a good friend who was a guidance counselor. He gave me a copy of *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. And I took it home and I looked at every page. And I came to "Librarianship" and it was just, like, "that's it! That's it!" So I said, "I can keep up with my science, and get the people."

So then I went to graduate school. Let's see. My first job was at Samford University. It was the perfect first job because I had pharmacy and nursing, but I also had government documents, interlibrary loan, the debate team, so I got to sample a lot of different things. While I was there, I would use *Index Medicus* but if somebody wanted a Medline search, I would have to call Lister Hill Library and talk to "the searchers." I was just so impressed, I thought, "Oh, if I could just ever work there."

So then I went to LSU on a one-year appointment and did government documents there, and I met a librarian there – Beth Paskoff (?) – and she encouraged me to do something about the medical librarianship certification exam. And Jane Lambremont was there at the hospital library, and she helped me with my first Medline searches. So I took the certification exam, and then I applied for the job at Lister Hill. And I was the "low" reference librarian. I had a wonderful instructor who was my supervisor, Kathy Torrente. Then, you know, Lister Hill was so good to me, I just stayed as long as they'd let me. (laughter) So that's sort of how it went.

Interviewer: Wonderful, wonderful. Perfect. Now, let's talk a little bit about your Southern Chapter (SC) activities. Do you remember the very first SC meeting you attended?

Nancy: I was looking at the schedule and everything, and best I can tell, it was '82, and it was here in Charleston.

Interviewer: How fitting! That's wonderful!

Nancy: I think that's right. I think that's right, because I didn't remember the ones before that, and since I was the "low" reference librarian, I wouldn't get to travel quite as much. You know, people would take turns.

Interviewer: What do you remember about that first meeting?

Nancy: Well, the first thing I remember was the candlelight tour of homes. Walking around, and it was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. The other big thing was just the people – everyone was so welcoming, and I felt like I'd just been here forever.

Interviewer: That's nice. Do you remember any funny or interesting stories about any SC meeting you attended?

Nancy: Well, I do. (laughter) I may have to censor a little bit! (laughter) Well, when we had the meeting in Birmingham – in '88 or '89, something like that – Ada Seltzer was doing sort of a “roast” for Ted Srygley on his retirement. And she did a striptease.

Interviewer: Wow!

Nancy: It was *quite* an event! I don't think anyone could believe it. (laughter) Of course, she had on her exercise clothes underneath, but, I mean, she did a great job. And that was funny. That was funny. The other thing that was a lot of fun was at the joint meeting that we had with the MAC chapter one year. They had a musical revue with dancing and everything. It was just the most fabulous production you've ever seen. They dresses up like Broadway or Las Vegas-kind of clothes and it was fabulous.

Interviewer: Sounds fun!

Nancy: Hmm, what else? The other thing I was thinking about was when we were trying to find a logo for the chapter. I don't know if you were around when that was going on.

Interviewer: I'm not sure. I think that might pre-date me a little bit.

Nancy: It was just so difficult to find, you know, a symbol. We'd think of a good one for one state, but they didn't really fit the rest. I think the quilt, you know, has been perfect. And the sunshine is good. But we went through this “Kudzu” thread on the discussion list, and it just went on and on (laughter). Anyway, that's just a funny little thing that sort of stuck in my head.

Interviewer: That is wonderful, wonderful. What about your observations about how SC has evolved through the years?

Nancy: I guess I was thinking about how the meetings have evolved. It's been so good to see the research projects recognized through the years. Now we're seeing posters. It just seems like everything just keeps getting better and better – even the Membership Directory that we get, everything. It's like we have some members who are just happy to spend their time making things right for the chapter. Also, the chapter members really recognize and appreciate each other. It's just a very encouraging environment for a librarian. Would you agree with that?

Interviewer: Oh, definitely. I love SC. I look forward to many, many more years of bliss. (laughter) What, in your opinion, sets the SC apart from any other professional library organization?

Nancy: Yeah, I've talked about that a little, and I don't know that I've been a part of other chapters enough to know. But I just feel, within our chapter it's just a real sense of family and just love of each other and just wanting each other to succeed. You never

need to feel embarrassed. I mean, you can ask anything. I think most of us don't take ourselves too seriously; we just, we work hard. We work hard. We work a lot harder than some people, but we enjoy it. I retired a little over a year ago, but it's like some of my best friends are here, so I want to come back, and people look at me like, "why?"

Interviewer: I think it's wonderful to see you. Please continue to come back.

Nancy: Well, I'll keep coming as long as I know somebody. And if I meet somebody at each meeting, I guess they won't run out.

Interviewer: That's what I was going to say; you always know somebody, Nancy! You have a wonderful, warm personality. As they announced this morning, I know you've been a SC officer several times. Which committee do you think you loved the most? Which was set apart from all the rest?

Nancy: Let me look at my list. I just enjoyed doing anything that allowed me to go to the Executive Committee meetings. I just really enjoyed any of them. The Program Committee is a lot of fun. You know, you get to brainstorm about things – it's a lot of work but still a lot of fun. They always say that Past Chair is the best (laughter). I don't know that I have any real favorites, but it was all wonderful. I feel a little out-of-touch now, because every year I knew what was happening. But it's good. It's good.

Interviewer: Wonderful. Can you tell us anything about the founding of the chapter, or any chapter event of historical significance?

Nancy: I don't know about the founding; I wasn't there in the beginning. I can shortly after the division, or the rearrangement. It used to be the Southern Regional Group that went over to Louisiana. So there was some juggling there. But regarding historical events, I still remember the first really big strategic plan and the sessions that we had. I guess this came from MLA, best I can remember, and then the chapters were supposed to develop the strategic plan to go along with that. But Martha Watkins and Suzie Burroughs and Linda Garr Markwell and a group of people, and then the committee chairs that first year. We met, it seems like it was at the MLA meeting and we stayed up pretty much past midnight, it felt like, and we were all just so tired. But we kept on going, we kept on going. I remember Martha Watkins cracking the whip. So that was a big deal. So we worked on that for years.

Interviewer: How did the SC impact your professional development throughout your career?

Nancy: Well, I was extremely fortunate to be able to go to as many of the chapter meetings as I could, and I was always able to take some sort of a CE course. The timing of those courses was always just perfect, you know. When I was in reference and I needed to know about a particular database, I could take the toxicology or the copyright or the interlibrary loan – you know, just the right CE course at the right time. And then later on, marketing was available, so it was good. And the chapter meetings were less

expensive than the national meetings, so it was easier to do that. The CE courses, and meeting people, so that I could call them later when we were working on different situations (laughter).

Interviewer: Speaking of people, can you recall any names of people in particular who you feel contributed to your professional development?

Nancy: Well, I do. Lucretia McClure – now, this was a national meeting – but she taught me the first two CE courses I attended: reference and a combination of interlibrary loan and copyright. It was perfect timing because they had just changed the copyright law and there I had it from the expert. So Lucretia would be way up there. Ada Seltzer has just been a role model all the way through. She’s taught CE courses, and just watching her manage huge tasks was just inspirational for me. Other people (I tried to jot down a few of them): Lynn Fortney. I met her when we both were baby librarians. But she was just so confident and, you know, she could just handle anything; still can. It just amazed me, so it just gave me a little incentive to try harder and say, “well, she’s working it out; maybe I can, too.”

Um, Mark Hodges. Aaah. He did so much for everyone. He was just always there showing us the right way to do things. We loved his wit, I mean, he could instruct you, and make you a better person, and then we’d all just enjoy the moment and laugh. He was great. And Scott Plutchak (laughter) made it possible for me to participate in so much of the chapter activities. And just watching him manage Lister Hill Library – that was an all-day, every day CE opportunity. That was great. I’ve already mentioned Kathy Torrente and Beth Paskoff, Jane Lambremont. Sarah Brown, of course, who hired me, and actually in a very direct way, she helped my professional development because she had made professional development and continuing education so important at Lister Hill and she convinced the administration there that she needed money for that for her staff. And so that tradition continued, and it’s still there. And it makes a difference; I think you can see that it was a good investment.

Interviewer: Yes, definitely.

Nancy: So those are the ones that come to mind; I’ll probably go home and think of ten others.

Interviewer: That’s wonderful. The legacy is just wonderful. We’ve talked about SC. What can you recall about MLA? Anything particular you can recall about any of the MLA meetings you attended?

Nancy: Well, I remember my first meeting. It was in Anaheim, California. Disneyland. I thought, “well, this is a cool job. I can have fun with reference on my job, and every once in a while I get to go to a neat place.” I think that was when I met Jan LaBeause and some of the Memphis librarians. And we just had a ball at Disneyland. Through the years we’ve stayed in touch. Jan is another inspiration. It was fun, I was always learning, there were so many opportunities on the committees, I mean, you could always

learn something no matter what you volunteered to do. It would always lead to something else. Again, the professional development is just such a huge part of the reason I wanted to be a medical librarian because I said, “You know, they have the certification and they have their act together.

Interviewer: Wonderful. It’s amazing – I’m so privileged to do this because I always wondered how you started your career, what inspired you. Now I get a chance to know before everyone else – it’s exciting! Well, how has the medical library profession changed during your career?

Nancy: Oh, my goodness. Well... computers. The electronic resources... I still remember when they were talking about the very first... Mosaic or whatever. I remember being so excited to watch the computer terminals speed up. It was a big ordeal to write the justification for the first microcomputer in the library. Jack Smith was very instrumental in getting that first PC so it’s been so much fun, and even now things just keep getting better and better. But I’m glad I was there in the beginning with the print world, too, because *Index Medicus* – I can remember doing hand searches for professors. They’d have a topic, so you would look for some very broad categories sometimes and you’d have to scan pages and pages to pull out the ones that seemed to pertain to the rest. So you could really appreciate when things got better. I remember in the beginning you couldn’t combine a subject term with neoplasms ... well, you could do it if you were willing to wait for three weeks til something was mailed back to you. You’d have to request an offline print. But you had to be so careful because you wouldn’t know until much later if you’d messed up. And you would have to pay per page for the printing and if you really goofed up and didn’t narrow in the right way, you’d get this printout like this (3 inches thick) and you’d think, “Oh, no! They’re gonna fire me!” (laughter). So it was just heaven to do your search and to get an immediate response and see what you needed to adjust. It was all fun. What else? Google. I couldn’t have predicted that Google would come, or anything about social networking – it’s amazing. Fun.

Interviewer: What advice would you give to a new medical librarian?

Nancy: Well... volunteer. Just get out there and try it. I remember as I was graduating from Library School, there was someone who had been president of the Alabama Library Association and he came to visit the graduates. And he was trying to tell us about participating in professional organizations. He said, “Just volunteer for something. Maybe the Bylaws Committee, or something not everyone wants to do, just to become kind of familiar. Once you do something and you do a good job, they’ll be looking for you to do something else.” There’s just so much variety in librarianship. Just do something, and it leads to other paths, and they are all interesting.

Interviewer: That’s true. Now I’m going to take you back – something I’m dying to talk about that you probably didn’t even think about. I graduated in 1995. In the beginning of 1996 I started as a temporary worker at Lister Hill Library, and I worked for Christina Ilgin (?) and Jay Harris. And I remember I was applying for a full-time, regular position. And Christina pulled me aside, and she said, “Listen. The only way to get into

Lister Hill is through Nancy Clemmons. If you mess up that interview, you won't be able to work here, so you need to do well."

Nancy: Oh, no! How funny!

Interviewer: I remember like it was yesterday, because someone else was being interviewed before me. I was so nervous, because you were down in the reference department, in the reference area. I remember I sat out in Cathy's cubicle, waiting. And when I met you, you were so sweet and so kind, and you could tell I was nervous. I thought I was going to pass out, I was so nervous. And you said, "Listen, don't worry, it's going to be fine, just take your time. Just answer what I ask; It's gonna be fine." And you were so sweet and calm and you made me feel so welcome. It was the best interview I've ever had in my life. I enjoyed myself so much."

Nancy: I'm glad to hear that, and I'm glad you stayed with us.

Interviewer: Yes. Because you were so great; you always encouraged me. You just were – and still are – just a terrific person. You always are so encouraging. And you can make anyone believe they can be *anything*.

Nancy: You just have to try it and do it.

Interviewer: Very encouraging. Very encouraging.

Nancy: (laughing) Thank you. That makes me happy to hear that.

Interviewer: I have a special request. Someone was interested in finding out about Suzie. Was it your plan that your daughter would be a librarian too?

Nancy: Never. Well, I'll tell you. In my brain I always knew that she would be a wonderful librarian. But I also knew: you don't push Suzie. You don't tell her anything. She has to decide that that's what she wants to do. So I just tried to, you know – not drop hints about *her* doing it, but I would always express how happy I was with what I was doing; maybe sometimes compare it to other things. You just really have to want to go to work in the morning; that's really important. She learned how happy I was with my career. And so she tried things – she tried sociology and public administration, and they were all good preparation. And then, one day – and I kept this email – she emailed me and asked, "Is there such a thing as a social sciences librarian?" And where would I have to go to school. I said, "All right! Here's an opportunity." I said, "well, of course there is, and you don't have to go to a special place ..." you know, the same kind of spiel that I give to others who show interest. So she really started thinking about library school then. So then she had to hurry to get admitted to school and it all worked out. Then she just started asking questions about medical librarianship and whether you had to have a science degree or something. "Oh, no," I said. "Some of the best medical or health science librarians we have their degrees in English... Scott has his degree in philosophy... that doesn't matter. You learn what you need and you know how to go

find out more once you are a librarian.” So, no, I did not push her. She discovered, I guess by watching my career how neat it was. I’m very happy, and she is very happy. Although she’s not in a health science library, she is the liaison to the health science department. She loves it, she loves it. You know, a lot of times they ask people “would you let your child be whatever you are – a doctor or a lawyer?” And I would definitely want my child to be a librarian because it’s a good fit for her.

Interviewer: That is great. Outstanding. Do you have any final comments or words of wisdom you’d like to relay to all of us?

Nancy: I’m just very grateful. I’ve had such a fulfilling career. And I just can’t imagine anything better. And I just would wish that other people could find as good a fit – as happy a life as I have.

Interviewer: Well, it’s been a pleasure doing this interview and I hope to have a wonderful, illustrious career as well.

Nancy: Well, you are well on your way!

Interviewer: Thank you so much.

Nancy: Thank *you*.

*Transcription by Laura Kane
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