

IRENE GRAHAM

Date of Interview: September 22, 1994

Interviewer: Ada Seltzer

Irene Graham attended graduate school after WW II. She studied medieval and ancient history and international law and came into the medical library profession in 1951, a time of fantastic expansion of medical libraries. Schools, hospitals, and research programs were developing and the National Library was exploding. At the time many librarians, particularly women for whom advancement in academia was limited, came into librarianship through backgrounds in the biological sciences, chemistry, mathematics, physics or history. From graduate school Irene was hired as director of the medical library at the University of Cincinnati. The Special Libraries Association – Biological Science section held their meeting there in 1953 and Irene was chairperson of the program. “All the people from the South came and we met each other. It was Mary Louise Marshall and Bill Postell, Sr., who were the founding members of the Southern Group, but it also included Sarah Brown and Mildred Crow. I attended their first meeting in Atlanta with Mildred Jordan, who I always referred to as the Auntie Mame of libraries ...and the group there.... And from then on I don’t think I missed a solitary meeting.”

Programs of the early meeting were fascinating, involving close relationships between academic faculties of medical schools and the librarians at the meeting. There was always a scientific program, usually presented by the medical profession. The social events would include the physicians, the academic research people and the librarians. The primary meeting was held on campus and included a tour of the library. Average attendance was about 50 but there were some meetings with seventy five or a hundred or more. “Remember this group never forgot somebody who was ever a member and this group extended to New Mexico. Some of the marvelous meetings were when we went to Galveston and we would frankly go visit people in their homes.”

Recalling associates early in her career, Irene Graham “learned through close associations, rather than just professional ones.When we went home (from meetings) we stayed in contact.... I was a telephoner... Miriam Libbey and I talked constantly, as I did with Buz Sawyer, Mildred Langner..and Sara Brown....Many people were pretty much from the same economic and social circumstances.”

In 1955 Irene Graham came to Jackson, MS hired by the University of Mississippi to establish and direct the Rowland Medical Library. Al Brandon at the University of Kentucky at Lexington was the chairman of the first meeting of the Southern Group held in Jackson. It was held at the old medical school before the present library was built. The Vice Chancellor at the University of Mississippi Medical Center greeted everyone. The program included a discussion on certification and the classification systems of the Library of Congress versus the old Boston Medical library. Jay Majors sponsored a marvelous party at a downtown hotel. The banquet was a formal sit down dinner and a physician from Vicksburg, entertained everyone with stories about the south. Everyone interested had an opportunity to tour the military park in Vicksburg.

As the National Library of Medicine organized along regional lines, there was pressure for the Southern Regional Group to breakup and reorganize “along these lines, which I always thought was a sort of a mistake. This meant that at first everybody tried to go back and be members of both groups, but you just can’t do it because it requires time and money. I think that the Southern Regional group lost a little bit of its spark.” There was great reluctance within the membership to choose one regional group over the other. The Southern Regional Group lost its home, New Orleans, where our group was founded. “I don’t know of any other group that lost its home”. Bill Postell, Jr. joined both groups so he could be chairman of the Southern group. His family was originally from Charleston, SC., where his father had been a founder.

There were other changes as the Southern Chapter evolved. With the new structure there was more pressure to recruit members and in particular to attract hospital librarians. The meetings were always held in the spring and nobody stayed at home. Some thought this was too close to the National meeting and as medical librarians became more integrated into the faculties of medical schools, it was difficult to be absent around Memorial Day and graduation. The regional and national groups were closely integrated. “It is difficult to separate the two because the camaraderie between the groups was so close.” Gertrude Annon and Louise Darling came and went until the secession.. There were peculiarities, For example, Bill Postell, Jr. came and served as president when he was already out of the southern group. The meeting in Louisville was sad. Mildred Crow Langner had gone through Atlanta to see Mildred Jordan at the hospital and she brought us the news that Mildred was dying.

The Southern Chapter is known for its social aspects because southerners love to tell stories, and they know everybody, everybody is kin, and they love to gather like families to eat and be social.” One of our wildest meetings was when we went to Gainesville during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Mildred Jordan sat on one side of the speaker and Fred Bryant sat on the other side. More than 100 people had gathered for the sit-down dinner, which quickly was reorganized to be a buffet because the waiters had to disband to join the Cubans in their fight.

The association was very important for our personal development as a medical librarian and for the development of our library. “The closest scientific library to me in Mississippi was 175 miles away.” Within the association there was a great exchange of information and people always volunteered to help. They searched you out to serve in the Association. “By the time I had been here (Jackson) five years, I had already been on several committees and then was recommended for positions at the national level. I served 2 terms with Miriam Libbey on the certification committee.

Irene reflects that Bill Postell, Sr. contributed greatly to her professional development. “He was articulate, wrote beautifully, had a fantastic sense of humor and we shared a natural interest in history.” There were other important influential librarians: Mildred Langner, Sarah Brown, Gertrude Annon, Ralph Esterquest and Olderson Frye, Scott Adams, Mary Louise Marshall and Louise Darling. “We thought of them as personal

friends, associates who helped us and we helped them in an exchange of ideas and information.”

In the early days the Medical library Association had sections on history, bibliography, and academic research. Presented papers were major and they did not have the short contributed papers. At the meetings everyone was interested in learning the same things, because large staffing of libraries was not common. Irene recalls becoming interest in personnel administration, personnel charts and job descriptions. The nature and development of the collection was a major issue. There was a great deal of sharing and the exchange lists were popular and heavily used. Later Irene got involved in the big issue of building and designing library space.

Irene attended her first national library meeting held in Washington, DC. Dr. Dorist, Dean of the Medical School at Cincinnati advised her “enjoy yourself... you will learn as much from people as you will from going to meetings.” At this meeting rumor had it that Joan Tittley Adams was to receive an award for her scientific paper. Joan had bought a beautiful black evening gown for the formal banquet event. Indeed, she won and received an award for \$100.00. When she was asked what she was going to do with the money, Joan said: “Pay for the dress that I wore to accept it.”

Helvi McCall Price
November 6, 2007