

## Oral History Interview

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November 15, 2007

SC/MLA Annual Meeting – Charleston, S.C. – Francis Marion Hotel

*(Interviewer: Mary Virginia Taylor)*

**Interviewer:** Hi, Mary Fran.

**Mary Fran:** Hello, Mary Virginia.

**Interviewer:** Would you tell me how you became interested in becoming a librarian and just give me a brief overview of your professional career.

**Mary Fran:** My mother was a junior high school librarian and my grandfather was a country physician. He delivered me and most of the county, so I just kind of naturally gravitated toward that kind of thing. I majored in Biology at the University of Alabama, and at that time Emory had a wonderful medical library program, so I headed there for the medical part.

**Interviewer:** Tell me briefly about your professional career. We'll get more into it.

**Mary Fran:** Let's see, I was in graduate school at Emory, and was a Graduate Assistant there. I had a Mildred Jordan scholarship, which meant I got to work in Emory's library, which, quite frankly, I think was probably worth more to me than the academic part. I married a week after I graduated and Ron and I moved to Little Rock, Arkansas and I worked for Rose Hogan (?)University of Arkansas Health Sciences Center. I was a Serials Librarian in the first year, which was excellent training. I had a technician who spent all day long checking in those journals in the big Cardex (?) and another technician who spent her days gathering for binding. That was back in the day when we did the Union List of Serials on batch cards, so it was a lot of fun. But fortunately for me, a reference position opened up after a year, and I immediately applied and got that one in Little Rock. I loved being a reference librarian, and I was there for a couple of years. And then Ron and I decided we wanted to move to Fayetteville, Arkansas. I really thought I would work for the University of Arkansas when I moved there. They were very gracious and the Director of the library spent all day showing me around. The only problem was, the entire ten years that we lived in Fayetteville, they never had an opening; they only had thirteen professional librarians and they were there to stay. Now, this was back when Bill and Hillary Clinton were teaching at the law school, and my father was at attorney, so I thought, "Well, if I can't be a librarian anymore, I'll go to law school."

So I took the LSAT and was accepted. Somehow, about that time, I found out that there was a job opening at the VA Hospital, and I didn't even know they had hospital libraries

to tell you the truth. But I really liked hospital libraries so I went knocking on their door and was hired. I was the head of the library. Back then, if you were in charge of the VA Library, you were a department chief. You sat in on the Director's meetings. I was a very young department head, but I learned a lot and loved living in Little Rock, and then we decided to move back home. I was from Alabama. So we got as far as Augusta, Georgia. I worked for the VA there for a couple of years and my husband went back to school and finished his degree. Then, I kept waiting for a VA librarian closer to home to retire, and they never did because the Southeast was kind of a fun place to be.

A friend of mine heard about an Army Library that needed a librarian in Fort Rucker, Alabama, which was twenty miles from the town that I grew up in, so I jumped on that in a heartbeat. I was able to live there for 18 years; raised my children near their grandparents, and it was a great job. It was an army hospital, but we also had a school of aviation medicine attached. Since Fort Rucker trained helicopter pilots, our physicians had a mini-residency that taught them how to treat people who flew helicopters, and we also had a component that literally reviewed the medical records of all of our pilots who flew worldwide. So I got to do some really interesting searches on drugs and diseases that would affect a pilot's ability to fly. And I lived through both wars; I can remember Desert Storm; I got to work one day during Desert Storm and ran through all our physicians who were on call. I made sure they all had a Merck Manual, and at the time we had a small red book called "The Emergency War Manual." And of course, ten years later when the same thing came up again – you know, different war, same location – I had CD-ROMs that I could send with them, so it was really interesting to see how that had changed.

Unfortunately, they closed my hospital. Then were spending too much money on the war and they couldn't afford my hospital, so when that happened I went back to the VA in Jackson, Mississippi and was there for a year. Had a wonderful time. Was offered a job in Washington in the central office part of the VA and that was wonderful. I got to work with VA librarians that I hadn't worked with for a long, long time, and got to do some pretty neat stuff there. When I had been there long enough to retire, I did so.

Now I am in Charlotte, N.C. I'm the Assistant Director of the AHEC Library at the Carolinas Health Care System. It's 32,000 employees, 9 hospitals.

**Interviewer:** Now let's talk about some of your Southern Chapter (SC) activities. Do you remember the first Southern Chapter meeting you attended? What details can you remember?

**Mary Fran:** Well, I'm going to back up just a tad. I was introduced to Southern Chapter when I was a graduate student at Emory because, as I mentioned previously, I was very fortunate in being allowed to work in Emory's medical library. At that time, Miriam Libby was the Director of the Library and, man, she was the "grand old lady" of the Southern Chapter; that's all there was to it. The RML was at Emory at that time, and Mark Hodges was in charge of the RML, and Judith was in my graduate school class. Eloise Foster worked for Mark, and it was just a grand old time. And Miriam taught the

medical library course and really got it through our little heads (and came from all over the SE to take that course because she taught it in the summer) how important the RMLs were, how important the structure of NLM was. Miriam had come to Emory from the National Library of Medicine. She was a Georgia Girl – she had gone to Agnes Scott. Southern Chapter was just part of who she was and what she did, and so when I graduated I just assumed I'd always be in Southern Chapter. Went to Arkansas and that was great; Miriam had talked to Rose and I got the job, and I hadn't been out there six months when Rose Hogan, in Little Rock, had the first meeting of the South Central Chapter. Arkansas broke off, and so I was a charter member of South Central. So it was 10 years before I got back to Southern Chapter.

I'd been in Alabama for awhile; I'd been pretty busy. I was the solo librarian and had young children. I had been involved in state activities but hadn't really been involved in chapter activities. They were having a SC/MLA meeting in Memphis, TN, and I had a friend up there by the name of Mary Virginia Taylor (ha, ha!) that I'd worked with in Arkansas and hadn't see her forever, and I thought, "Well, I'll just go to Southern Chapter and see Mary Virginia." And I did, and she introduced me to all these SC people and I've been working with them ever since.

**Interviewer:** I was thinking that when we both worked at Arkansas, that Arkansas was South Central, but you're right. So actually your first SC meeting...

**Mary Fran:** ... was in Memphis. It really was.

**Interviewer:** Can you think of any funny or interesting stories about SC meeting that you attended?

**Mary Fran:** The most fun I ever had at a SC meeting was the Tri-Chapter meeting that we had in New Orleans. Honestly, I can't even remember the other chapters that were with us, but the part I do remember: Janet Fisher was our Chair, and Lynn Fortney was the incoming Chair, and Lisa Traditi was the Chair of that other chapter; it must have been one of those Midwestern chapters. If you've ever seen Janet, she does love to entertain, and so does Lynn. They decided (I don't remember why) to be Elvis impersonators. Lisa joined them and they put on quite a show.

**Interviewer:** Sounds like it was fun. Can you talk about your observations on how the SC has evolved through the years?

**Mary Fran:** Well, like I said, even though I didn't get to attend a lot of the early meetings, I was pretty well-rounded just because that was what Ms. Libby talked about, and I think that in the early days the epitome or the basis of SC was the grand old ladies that we had as directors of the medical libraries then. Apparently they were very professional and I even got that in Arkansas, because in my opinion they were SC, too; they just kind of went with that other group. I remember when I worked for Rose, we were expected to go to the state meetings, chapter meetings, and the annual MLA meetings. There was no question. I remember I hadn't been working for Rose very long

and we had a staff meeting and she was talking about the MLA meeting in Kansas City. I was kind of shy, and after it was over I said, “Ms. Hogan, I just graduated from Emory; do you really think I need to go to MLA? Do you really think there’s anything I can learn?” And with a straight face, she said, “Oh, yeah, Mary Fran, I think there’s something you can learn.” So I think there was that culture where they were just very gracious and it was just something you did; there was no question about it.

**Interviewer:** It’s true; they were growing young librarians back then. In your opinion, what sets the SC apart from other professional library associations?

**Mary Fran:** Well, as I said, I was a charter member of South Central, and they were great, they really were. Johnny Shea and May Drake from Louisiana, and – oh, my goodness! - and Sam Hitt from Texas – they were a great bunch. Now I’ve been a member of MAC for a couple of year, and they’re good folks; in fact, about a third of them are here at this meeting. But I just don’t think any of them compare to SC. I think there’s a graciousness – of course, Lynn will tell you in a heartbeat that we have more fun than anybody else. But I think we get a lot done, and we’re certainly business-oriented, but I do – I think there’s an underlying graciousness and just an enjoyment of one another that I have not found in many chapters.

**Interviewer:** Have you ever been a SC officer?

**Mary Fran:** Yes, I was Chair of the Hospital Libraries section and that was a lot of fun. And I was also Chair of Southern Chapter which means you’re also the Program Chair one year. And then Chair of Strategic Planning.

**Interviewer:** What committee have you served on?

**Mary Fran:** Well, I was on the Hospital Library Committee and Professional Development.

**Interviewer:** How has the SC impacted your professional development throughout your career?

**Mary Fran:** Well, when I was in Arkansas I was with the medical school, and so I had a director and other people to kind of mentor me, and tell me which way to go and even with the VA we had such a wonderful network. That was back before email and computers, but we had something called FTS. We all talked to one another quite a bit, and at that time we had a lot of direction from central office in Washington. So, honestly, it was not until I moved to the southeast and was working by myself in that little Alabama army library that I was really kind of on my own. I didn’t have a lot of direction. That’s where SC came in. As I became more involved in SC, I found people in other libraries who would help me out. One, in particular, was Judy Burnham. Bless her heart, she was Associate Director at University of Alabama Library in Mobile, and we go to know one another – first working in the Alabama Health Science Library Association. Jett McCann was the other one. Bless his heart, I’d worked in Augusta, GA

for a couple of years, and he was at MCG and I was at the VA across the street. For some reason, once I started going to SC meetings... I'll never forget they were having one in Birmingham and I happened to have one of the first CD-ROM products for patients. It was one of the health products that had come out, and I had found it in a little bitty public library in one of the Alabama towns and just thought it was marvelous. Jett called me one day and he said, "Look, we're having SC in Birmingham and I want you to present on this product." I said, "Jett, I've never done that, I'm a hospital librarian; I can't do that." And he finally convinced me that it was for the good of the order. As all hospital librarians are, I was thrilled to share anything I had discovered with other people, so I remember my kids were little and I got them off to school that day and I hopped in the car and I drove up to Birmingham, and it was at the Winfrey. I gave my little talk and I was so frightened – it's not that I hadn't spoken; I spoke to my clients and I gave orientations all the time – but this was the first time I'd ever spoken to professionals and I thought, "You know, if I screw up, they're gonna know it." I was so frightened and somehow I got through the talk and when it was over I really thought I was having a heart attack. But I lived through it and got back in the car and got home in time to pick the kids up from school and take them to soccer. But Jett and Judy and people like that – even though I was not part of their institutions, it really didn't matter because SC was just one big, happy family and they just kind of helped me to develop and to do different things.

**Interviewer:** That's great. What are the names of some of the people who have contributed to your professional development?

**Mary Fran:** Well, I've already named Judy and Jett and Miriam Libby, as far as people I've kind of looked up to – and Mary Virginia, because she was my friend, my buddy. Honestly, there have been a lot of people. It's hard to name everybody.

**Interviewer:** What do recall about some of the big MLA meetings that you attended?

**Mary Fran:** Well, the first one I attended – as I said, I was still in Little Rock – and our director convinced me that, yes, I did need to go and we all drove up together from Little Rock to Kansas City. We took a state car, and we got to Fayetteville, Arkansas and the brakes gave out. So we went to the airport and rented a car and made it to Kansas City and we stayed at the Bulebock (???). There were five of us in a room. We were so crowded that we had to put up the little cot that I was sleeping on so that we could open the drawers and get to our stuff. Even though I was with other people from my own institution, they knew everybody and I didn't know a soul. And they were really nice to introduce me to people, but still... I was so glad I had a suite-mate – her name was Julie McGowan – so I ran into Julie and then Ms. Libby who was the director of the Emory Library, and they gave me a big hug, and then it was OK, or a lot better. But I always remembered what it's like to be new, so I've kind of always enjoyed looking for new folks and trying to at least talk to them a little bit and make them feel at home. I also learned, though, that the best thing to do is to get involved, and so after that I always made sure that I volunteered for the Scholarship Committee, because you got to work in the booth and you go to see people, and you were kind of part of things. And honestly,

that's why I started volunteering to be on committees in MLA, just so I'd have a structured activity to attend and get to know people.

**Interviewer:** How has the Medical Library Association impacted your professional development throughout the years?

**Mary Fran:** Well, as I said, I started volunteering to be on MLA and SC committees just to get to know people, and when they started the Academy – the AHIP program – at the time, I was browbeating a son into being an Eagle Scout, and I thought, “if I can quit doing that, I can do this AHIP thing.” Always before, as long as we got enough CE course, that was pretty much it; we were credentialed. But for the first time, we were encouraged to do things for the profession. So, really, this was a huge benefit for me; again, it encouraged me to not only serve on national committees, such as the Continuing Education Committee (that's when I got to know Priscilla Stephenson) and the Books Panel that was probably my all-time favorite because we actually had a product – we produced things. It also encouraged me to serve as an officer and that's how I ended up being the Chair of the Hospital Libraries section of MLA, and to just do things that probably (because I'm a shy, withdrawn kind of person) I wouldn't have done by myself. But with this encouragement, I ended up publishing a few things, and it's just super. So, I personally think – and through the years, different hospital librarians have said, well, why bother? We're not tenured, we're not trying to get faculty status – but I think for that reason along, it pushes you to do things you wouldn't ordinarily do. Lisa Traditi taught the class that I took earlier this week, and she's from Dennison in Denver, Colorado. I told her to tell a friend of mine out there “hi.” It was Catherine Ryder. Catherine and I got to know one another years ago when we both served on MLA's Books Panel. You know, people I never would have known otherwise. It's been a lot of fun.

**Interviewer:** What offices have you held in MLA. I know you were Chair of the Hospital Libraries Section.

**Mary Fran:** That was it. I think I was Secretary of the Federal Libraries Section, and I worked with NARS (??) and with CAPHIS as editor of the newsletters. As far as Hospital Libraries Section, though, I started working with them a long time ago and I was on their Publications Committee forever because I just liked it. And back then (maybe 20 years ago), Mary Jarvis – a lot of the Texas people were very active in the Hospital Libraries Section – so we just rocked along for the longest old time. Eileen Stanley was at Baton Rouge then and she was Chair of the publication, and we oversaw the newsletter of the National Network which was really, really good. Finally, Eileen decided to move on to other things and asked me to chair the committee, and I never even thought about doing such a thing. Eileen is very persuasive and finally talked me into it, and years later, I said, “Eileen, why me?” and she said, “Mary Fran, when I would email the committee and say ‘what do you think?’ you're the only one who ever responded and had an opinion, so you were the one.” But again, very much like SC, those folks were just super. Eventually I ended up serving as chair and got to know a lot of people throughout the country who have been very helpful.

**Interviewer:** How has the medical library profession changed during your career?

**Mary Fran:** Well, as you and I both know, when we started out in – let’s see – I started in ’72, when I graduated from Emory. While I was at Emory, they actually came out with the first version of Medline, because I can remember our reference librarians getting it and just being so excited; they were just thrilled. I got to look at it, I don’t think they let me touch it, but I did get to look at it. So my first job was with the University of Arkansas Medical Sciences Campus, and we got it there. I can remember the Head of Reference being so excited. Before we got it, though (I’d been there for several months at the reference desk) and we had the huge Index Medicus behind us, and we’d pull out those very heavy volumes and we would make check marks by the citations that were relevant, and put little 3 x 5 piece slips in there, and then the technicians would actually type up the search results. So we were thrilled when we got Medline, but we only used it for extremely complicated and complex searches; certainly never for just a one-term search because it was so expensive – the meter was running. Then, three years later, by the time I got into the hospital library environment, they were letting hospital libraries have Medline, and so I was probably one of the first hospital libraries to have it. So I’ve always said that I’ve literally grown up with Medline. But I was very proprietary; I was very proud of the fact that librarians had research skills and that doctors and nurses had to come to us for the information. I remember when they first came out with the searchable versions of Medline, and – oh, gee – I think maybe the first one might have been called Grateful Med. And I was not a happy person; I did not think that it was a good idea to let physicians do their own searches. And it took me awhile to come around and realize that probably it was a good thing. That was one thing that I really got from Lisa’s Evidence-Based Medicine class this time around, because right now I supervise five librarians who are very active instructors in Evidence-Based Medicine. And as I told Lisa, I’m just trying to catch up with what they’re doing; I don’t intend to do it, but I want to know what they’re doing. Apparently the way you do it now is: you try real hard to teach people to search for themselves, but you let them know that you’re still the expert, and there will still be times when they need to have you.

So I think that’s probably the biggest change that I’ve seen. When I got into this field, we were the only way to access the literature. Now, not only do they make it free, for one thing – I remember when it became free and available to physicians, and then – heaven help us all! – when they let consumers have it. Now, the advantage there, though, was that the VA had a huge tradition of patient education back in the ‘70’s when I worked for the VA in Fayetteville Arkansas, we were in the mountains, 250 would be at the hospital. The patients would come in and they would stay for months at a time... big wards – they would play and they would remember the “good ole’ days” when there were WWII vets and it was really a fun place to be. But even then, we had patient libraries in the VA, and patient education was a huge part of what we did. I think it came from WWII, when our librarians were involved in patient therapy and bibliographies and those kinds of things. So, by the time I got into the VA they were toning down on the recreational part, but they were really honing in on the patient education part, and I can remember our patient library was somewhat removed from the hospital; it had a long tunnel. We were in with the recreation room and the pool hall and all that. We had a

nurse practitioner for COPD and one for diabetes, and they would literally push their patients in their wheelchairs to my patient library. Back then a good video cost maybe \$500 but we had lots of videos and books, and they would bring those patients in and they would line those people up and they would teach to them. But back then, it was a top-down kind of thing; the health care professionals were the experts and they just lectured to the patients and there was really no buy-in; there was no shared decision-making. And in all honestly, the people that I dealt with who cared most about what they were being taught were the patients' wives. They really wanted to know how to look after their husbands and how to give them the kind of diet and activities they needed to get well. So by the time I got to the Army in the '80's, they were not doing patient education in their libraries. In fact, I can remember the head of the Army library program said, "Now, Mary Fran, I know you're coming from the VA and they're really involved in patient education, but we don't do that here. In fact, at that time, if a patient wanted to get into a medical library in the Army, they had to have a note from their doctor, which is really scary. But of course I hadn't been there two weeks until a social worker came dragging one of their patients who had just been diagnosed with Lupus, and I found out very quickly that no matter what the head of the program was telling me, my customers demanded it and I was so thrilled that I had the VA background. So I was able to develop the program there, and have been thrilled to see things change – that it is truly now a shared decision-making process and to see that patients are much more compliant now that they are involved in what's going on.

I was very fortunate, when I was in SE Alabama, they started the graduate school of Library and Information Science in Tuscaloosa, and they taught a medical course, and there weren't many hospital librarians at the time, and they would let me come up as an adjunct. I used to have a ball. I taught two things: one was consumer health, and I'll never forget – I had this little PPT program – it was very new – outside the VA, it was very new for hospitals to be involved – and I said why should you do consumer education, and I said: Number one, because it's the right thing to do, because I'd seen so many patients and their wives be so appreciative of the information that we were able to give them. I'll never forget one couple who came and he had been diagnosed with cancer. When I got through, he said, "Why didn't my doctor tell me this?" And I remember, too, the doctors at the Army hospital used to say, "How are you able to give these patients the information that they need so well? You always give them exactly what they want." And I said, "Well, that's not a problem. I have children who see doctors, I have parents; I'm a patient too, and I just give them the kind of information that I would want if I were in their shoes."

**Interviewer:** That was fascinating, what you mentioned earlier about the two wars that you were involved in, how the first time you sent them off with books, and the second time you sent them off with CD-ROMs.

**Mary Fran:** Oh, that was the huge change, and not only CD-ROMS but at that time we had an Army librarian by the name of Anne Potter and she was fantastic. When the first databases started coming out in 1994 when the Internet first developed, Anne jumped right on it, and she was probably one of the first people who did the consortial type

purchases. So the Army libraries always had the latest and the best, so when they had that second war, not only was I able to give them CD-ROMs, but I just made sure that their passwords were up to date. They would email me from the desert and I would send things to them. But I'll never forget – that first war, when I was trying to make sure they had Merck Manuals, that was when they were most concerned about the mustard gas and all those poisons. I was trying to look after the doctors, and one time I got paged and called out, because another component of our facility had been asked by Washington to come up with whatever we needed to do to combat the poisons that they thought they'd be facing. So I spend several days gathering all the information that was available.

Which kind of reminds me of another thing. When I was in Alabama, my children were in school, and one time my fourth-grader came home and said, "Mom, we were having career day today, and the teacher was asking us what our parents did." And his daddy was a coach, so he had no trouble telling them what his daddy did, but he said "I don't really know what my mama does when she goes to work every day, but I do know that at the end of the day, she has saved thousands of lives." So that was true then and it's true now and I was so pleased that my kids knew that and I've always felt that way – I've always felt that we really do contribute. Today we heard one of the physicians tell us that we do make a difference, and that what we do does relate to patient outcomes. I was glad to hear a physician verbalize what I've always felt.

**Interviewer:** What advice would you give new medical librarians?

**Mary Fran:** Well, I love new medical librarians. One of the great joys of my attending these meetings, quite frankly, is meeting the new ones. Partly, it's because I remember how scared I was at my first meeting and just feeling like everybody else had friends and I didn't. For years, I was so involved planning and putting on meetings I really didn't have time to take CE's and this time is probably the first time I've had a chance to take a CE. To me, one of the best parts of it is you really get to know the people in your class. We had in our class a person who is working in Interlibrary Loan at the University of Georgia as a technician; he is working on his Master's, will graduate in May, and just cannot wait to be a medical librarian. And it's been great fun to see him day after day.

Anyway, what I would advise new librarians today is to do just what this young man has done. Right now I'm supervising a library technician who is working on her Master's and will soon graduate from FSU's program, and I advised Beth to do the same thing: get involved while you are still a student in professional activities. N.C. Health Sciences Library Association gives a scholarship, so Beth was able to attend the MAC meeting and NCHSLA paid for it, and she just came back so enthused and joined as a student member. But to get involved from the ground floor. And that's what I was telling Todd. He said, "I want a job." I said, "Well, you're doing all the right things. You're getting to know the people." I saw him today, after he's been here for several days and he said, "You're right. I really have a much better idea now of what's going on. Even my classes make more sense now; I can see the relevance of why they were having us doing some of the things we were." So my advice to new librarians is to get involved – just as involved as you can be. And one thing that I still (even the old-time librarians; I sat with some

librarians from Georgia today) at breakfast... I was very fortunate last spring I got to talk to this group when they had their annual meeting. They have a Miriam Libby lecture in honor of Miriam Libby and I was so glad that they finally let me talk to them because I'd always admired Miriam. And I told them then and I was telling them again today: hospital librarians, in particular, are so busy, and it's so hard to find time to do anything else, but it's also so important. And this particular group in Atlanta – in Georgia they've always had wonderful groups and meetings and sometimes they let it stop right there and sometimes they don't look at the chapter level. So I also encourage the older librarians as well as new librarians to get involved on the national level. Because there is so much beyond anything you're doing, and even when you cannot afford to attend a national meeting of MLA, there are many committees, particularly the scholarship and award committees, that you can be on and never have to attend a meeting. All the work is handled through email. You still get to know people and you still get to see what people are doing and be a part of it.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any final comments?

**Mary Fran:** (laughing) My final comments are that I am so glad that the Oral History Project is going full-speed ahead. I appreciate everything ya'll are doing, and I can't wait to see what everybody said. And I just wish ya'll the best of luck.

**Interviewer:** Thank you very much.

*Transcription by Laura Kane  
March 2008*