

Notes from Interview with Irene Graham
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by Ada Seltzer

This is an oral history interview for the Southern Chapter of the Medical Library Association with Irene Graham, director and founder of the Rowland Medical Library at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi.

Question: What can you tell us about the founding of the Southern Chapter?

Well, I remember the early, early days of the Chapter, but I was not one of the initial founders. When I came to Jackson in 1955, I had already met most of the members because I was a member of the Special Libraries Association Biological Science Area which was a very important part of medical libraries in those days. When I was right out of graduate school and at the University of Cincinnati as director of the medical library there, the Special Libraries, held their meetings there. In about 1953, I was chairman of the program, and all the people from the South came and we met each other. I do remember those many tales because it was Mary Louise Marshall and Bill Postell who were the founding people of the Southern Group, but it also included Sarah Brown and Mildred Crow when they started out. I thought that they really wanted to always have some social event, have dinner, and discuss [library] things. The first meeting that I attended was in 1953 in Atlanta, and that was Mildred Jordan and the group there, but from then on I don't think I missed a single solitary meeting.

And in the entire time of my career in the Medical Library Association, I think I only missed three, two or three, meetings, one with an acute case of poison ivy, and couldn't go. But, the remembrance of those people was fascinating because you hardly got in town that somebody didn't contact you personally and say please come and so that's my recollection of the kinds of people. And I will always remember Mary Louise Marshall when we would go to different meetings she always insisted that you should never room with the same person, because she said you expanded your friendships by expanding the people you associated with.

Question: What can you tell us about the early meetings, what kinds of programs made up these early meetings?

Well, they were fascinating programs because the librarians at the time were very interested in and were very knowledgeable about the subject matter of what the Southern Medical Association. And in those days it was primarily made up of academic librarians and there weren't as many hospital librarians. And many of the hospital libraries were connected with the larger medical schools too, so it was heavily geared towards that. There was always a scientific program, and in those days the medical profession came to the meetings and they were frequently the major

speakers. And they also attended the social events including the formal banquet, which was a lot of fun because it was a smaller group. And everybody went to these banquets because if you didn't you were out there in Timbuktu all by yourself because it was such a gregarious group of people that where one went everybody went. Even if you got ready to go to dinner someplace why, if you were waiting for somebody in the lobby hotel somebody would come along and say where are you going and if they had already made arrangements everybody would rearrange and they would all go together to someplace. So, it was a very, very social group of people, with a great deal of fun. But the programs were quite serious because they always dealt with something pertinent to the management and organization of the libraries. They also dealt with education of newcomers. There was no such thing as newcomers being separated out from those who had been there. In fact once you were a Southern Regional member it didn't make any difference where you went you remained a Southern Regional member.

Question: What were the librarians role in the scientific program?

"Well, frequently, they would present papers that generally dealt with a pertinent subject like recent research and it would tie in with the library. There was a great deal of close relationship between academic faculties of medical schools and librarians at the meetings. The social life would include the physicians and the academic research people. The primary part of the meeting was held on the campus rather than in town. It was usually in the auditorium and usually included a tour of the library and a question & answer type of thing. So, it was both a learning experience and a transfer between different kinds of librarians and people who librarians dealt with.

My first meeting that if I recall correctly, was in Atlanta with Mildred Jordan, who I always referred to as the Auntie Mame of the libraries, because she was really a fascinating person, very, very interested in young and new people. You never felt isolated no matter where you went when you were with the Southern group or for that matter the larger group, the Medical Library Association. I first met Miriam Libbey when she was Miriam Hawkins, and she was very active in Special Libraries and I met her before she ever came back to Georgia and we developed friendships at that stage. But my first national meeting was in Washington, D.C. and I remember how people met after meetings and after the dinners and after anything and everything. They never really wanted to go back to the hotel and go to bed. There was always these large groups meeting in somebody's room, that sometimes I don't think, Olderson Frye, no matter where he would come south, or north, or east, or west he never went home. So the same would go with all of them, Fred Kilgore, and Miriam Libbey, it was a conversation in hotel rooms that would go on and on and on and on about everything under the sun.

Question: How many people attended these early meetings, about?

I would say fifty because you see, you would also have people that would bring their family members, also some of the people from the medical schools would attend. Now remember this group never forgot somebody who was ever a member and remember this group also extended [to New Mexico]. I can remember when there were meetings when there were seventy five or a hundred or more. But remember, we went all the way west, I think they thought that we were going to conquer California. If we could have gotten across the mountains we would have gone. Some of the marvelous meetings was when we went to Galveston, and we would frankly go visit people in their homes. They would always have something that would be...it was indeed a learning experience, but it learned through close associations, rather than just merely [professional] ones.

Comment: Really close networking.

Yeah, close, close, close, close. When they went home they stayed in contact. There were just constant conversations and I was not a letter writer, I was a telephoner and I would just call everybody so we would call and just chit chat and talk to each other. I guess Miriam Libbey and I talked constantly, as did Buz Sawyer and Mildred Langner. Mildred Langner and I still keep in close touch so do Sara Brown and I. I guess the thing I really remember is how the people who had been in the group early on always went out of their way naturally to include and looked for all newcomers. They were always at the door to greet you. They never let you sit off by yourself, they encouraged you to participate. They also encouraged younger people to participate on committees, to participate in programs, to use it as an apprenticeship almost to go on to the national level.

Question: Do you think this had to do with the personalities of the early founders Postell, and Mary Louise?

Well, I'm not so sure. I think that maybe things were a little less complicated in many instances. Many people were pretty much from the same economic and social circumstances. Also, I was in graduate school after World War II, and then came into the medical library profession itself in 1951. And that was a time of fantastic expansion of medical libraries. So, things were growing very, very rapidly. Schools were developing, hospitals were developing, the research programs were developing, the National Library was exploding, and so a lot of that kind of thing, I think that it possibly, even the educational background of librarians in those days might possibly be a little different. Many came into the field through backgrounds in science. Fact is I had an advisor in library school who was a Ph.D. chemist as well as a master degree librarian and she was there, and she used to say, because she intended to teach in an academic institution. She was told very bluntly that she would never be more than an assistant professor [in chemistry]. So were many, many women who had biological science backgrounds, or whose family were physicians. I noticed reading in the most recent survey of backgrounds of librarians that today they have

social sciences and in business management. But back then it was usually in the sciences, the biological sciences, chemistry, physics, mathematics, history, great deal of people interested in history. Also, a knowledgeable interest in the literature of the field itself. And remember back in those days you did the searching, you didn't put in a term you [and let the computer find it. Somebody said that after technology came in you didn't have to know the meaning of anything. If you could spell it, you just put it into the computer.

Question: Do you remember the first meeting held in Jackson, and what can you tell us about that meeting?

Al Brandon was the chairman, and at that time he was at the University of Kentucky at Lexington and it was the same general program that we used. By the way, in those days, the really top people at an academic institution usually came and greeted everybody. So the Dean [at Mississippi] came to greet everybody. It was out to the old medical school before the present library was built. There was a slide presentation and then we had a panel group dealing with education. Back then people were very interested in certification, and we reviewed the programs for certification. [I remember one discussion was about] the old Boston Medical Library classification or the Library of Congress classification. People discussed that this was not adequate and they were looking at some new way that they [could catalog material]. And then we had a beautiful, marvelous, pre-dinner party at one of the big hotels downtown, and Jay Majors, as usual in those days, was the sponsor. It was stupendous, I mean it was everything under the sun. And then the bank, it was a sit-down formal dinner party and the speaker was a physician from Vicksburg, who collected southern stories. You know southerners always tell stories, and he had, in fact this was his hobby. He entertained everybody by talking and telling stories about the south and I think if I recall correctly, it was called, The South ain't South Anymore, or something like this."

I believe that we went to Vicksburg, to tour the park. That was also part of all the other programs, there was always opportunity depending on the kinds of things you were interested in there would be a chance to visit the gardens in Jackson and the park in Vicksburg.

Question: Can you share with us your observation about how the Southern Chapter had evolved over these years?

Well, I think by fact of the rapidly expanding sizes of collections and also the leveling off of staff that interest has sort of shifted towards organization and management of information. I think it was Scott Adams used to quote T.S. Elliot and said Whatever happened to the information in knowledge? or Where's the knowledge in information? I think that things became a little more hectic and you couldn't belong to so many associations like Special Libraries Association, ASIS, Southern Regional

Medical Library Association, and the Medical History Society Group. So, I think that you became so thinly spread that people had to begin to select more particularly in the associations that they were doing. Then I also think that the Southern Regional group lost, I'm serious about this, a little bit of its spark when MLA insisted that we break up. I think a lot of it had to do with the relationship of the Regions to the National Library of Medicine. And it was more or less everybody should organize along those lines, which I always thought was a sort of mistake. Then, 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, it requires money.

The other thing, now I haven't been attentive to either the association on either a national or regional level for the last two years but, for a while, I saw that apparently only the executive groups of the libraries went. The heads of libraries and I think that some people were not encouraged down at the staff levels. It was no longer an apprenticeship for participation in the region before moving to the national level. I guess also, somebody had to stay home, but in the old days nobody stayed home. In the old days too, the meetings were always held in spring. We didn't move into the fall meetings until it grew and a number of new people came in and protested the idea, or thought our meeting was too close to National meeting. We usually, because we liked that fun business of being able to go on parties and go and see the gardens, and see the dogwood, and Atlanta, and ride the boats in New Orleans, and tramp down through the quarters, and visit the beach shore at Galveston, and see the ocean in Miami, and this kind of thing. As medical librarians became more integrated into the faculties of the medical schools, and were expected to participate in graduation events, and whatever, they were rather reluctant, if you want to know the truth, to give up a holiday. They didn't really like being gone on Memorial Day. I also recall that I had been absent three graduations in a row and I had a note from the chancellor who said in a nice little chatty note that said, Irene, we are very proud of the fact that you are attending and participating in your national programs, but we would like sometime this year if you could arrange to be present at graduation. I figured that was a command performance. But I know that I talk about National, the Medical Library Association, [like I do] the regional group, but it was so integrated. I mean it is difficult to [separate the two because of] the camaraderie between the groups was so close. [People from MLA] visited back and forth, and they knew each other. Gertrude Annon was originally in this. Louise Darling was one of the early members of the Southern Regional. A number of other people came and went, and came and went, and never, never stopped coming until the secession. I think people might remember that even when we divided up we had a peculiarity. Bill Postell, Jr. was supposed to be the president of the Southern Regional group and he was already out of it when he came back and served as president. Going back quickly to the Al Brandon, who was the chairman at the time that I came to Jackson, it was interesting that I was chairman in the same state that Al had come from when he came back. That was the year that Mildred Jordan died. It was a sad meeting because Mildred Crow Langner had gone through Atlanta to see Mildred at the hospital and she

brought us the news in Louisville that Mildred was dying.

Question: I would like to make a follow-up question here about the split. Can you tell us what effect you saw illuded to the fact that we lost our spark?

I think that there was a great reluctance within the membership [to choose one regional group over the other.] As you well know, right now when you are trying to get people to come into the southern group to make your chapter what it is supposed to be there aren't as many libraries in certain parts of the south as there are in other parts. That in itself meant, I think, a hardship to recruit. Now one thing it did, it probably increased the academic librarians and others to put a little pressure on groups to formulate hospital librarians, and to educate, and to encourage young people to go into the field of hospital librarianship. In that sense I guess it was a good thing, because in searching for the members they wanted to bring in these people. But the other part of the thing, remember is that we were actually founded in New Orleans. I don't know of any other group that lost it's home. I mean, here it was, it was sort of like, you know somebody pitches you out of your home and says well go make your own living, do it yourself, and whatever. I think New Orleans, always looked at itself as being coastal, deep south, and coming in this direction and everything. And, even the travel, you know for many, many years librarians, people who went to library school from Mississippi either went to L.S.U. or to Illinois. It was on the train route. The train went north and south in that direction. This may just be a personal thing but I think you found it in most people you have interviewed, maybe it's just our nostalgia. I always remember the funniness about we would say well here's Bill. We were so proud of the fact that Bill Postell, Jr. was going to be chairman because in Charleston, S.C. where his family was originally from, his father had been the founder. Here Bill served, he joined both sides so he could...all these crazy things.

Question: Just before we finish up on this particular aspect of the history of the Chapter I have heard, ever since I was a newcomer and joined the chapter, that the Southern Chapter was known for its social aspects. Where did it get that name, how did that come about?

Well, southerners are social. Furthermore, southerners are storytellers, and as Eudora Welty said, You need people to listen to, you need people to listen to you and you need to listen and you need to talk when you tell stories. And you can't get two southerners together without them telling stories and they can go on and on and on, as you well know. That in itself is a social event. Second, they tend to know everybody, it's almost like, it's difficult to know who is related and who is kin. I have family members I have for all my life called Aunt somebody and she wasn't an aunt at all, she wasn't even related. My mother's dearest friend was always called Aunt Belle and we were adults before we even knew Aunt Belle wasn't even related in any way, shape, or form. Furthermore, Southerners are people who like to gather

together almost like their family to eat. Eating is a social event. For instance, in talking about where they met after the meetings, they all gravitated to the bar. Now, everybody didn't drink but they gravitated to the bar. I'll tell you another wild story about one of the big meetings I do remember though. From there they would all go to the same place to eat. Then when they all got back they would all to somebody's hotel room to talk. I think it's just by nature, as I said if you like to talk and eat it's no fun unless there is somebody sitting opposite you or with you or listening or interrupting. Or trying to top your story. One of the wildest meetings we ever had was the time of the [Russian] threat. It was when we went to Gainesville during the Cuban Missile Crisis. We were all to be at this big sit down dinner and one of the male brothers was speaker that night. Mildred Jordan sat on one side and Fred Bryant sat on the other, but anyway, during the middle of all this the waiters had to disband to join the Cubans in their fight or something. So here we were in this big hotel and I don't know how many there were, over 100 and a sit down dinner had to become a buffet, and so the cocktail party went on and on. Everybody went that year because they were afraid that if the war came we wouldn't see each other for a long time."

Question: My next question is how has the Southern Chapter affected your professional development. What role did it play in your development as librarian over the years?

Well, I would keep going back to the people associations. As I said we've talked about...there was a great deal of exchange of information helpful-there wasn't a great deal of just "I can do it better than you" or "I'm bigger than you" and this sort of thing. Everybody, for instance like Mary Louise Marshall, Gertrude Annon, all incorporated new people in but it was a shared experience of librarianship. I remember when I first became a medical librarian, it was in a very large university, Cincinnati Medical Center, and the head of a large chemical research library called me and said let's go to lunch, I might be able to be helpful to you. She knew I was right out of library school, had never been in a scientific library. My background was medieval and ancient history and international law. But this was the same kind of thing here [at Mississippi.] When you came people would call from a distance and say, now when you come to the meeting we will get together and if we can be of any help. They would send list of their duplicates, they asked for lists of things that we needed. I would frequently fly from here to Atlanta or from here to some place else, particularly to the National Library of Medicine, where we took with us our lists of things we wanted and they shared what they had. When the new person came in that in itself helped your own personal development. But it also helped your development of your library. Then I think the other thing is they all encouraged you, they searched you out very early to serve in the Association. I think that, gracious me, by the time I had been here five years I had already been on several committees and I think I had been secretary and on the education committee and then they would recommend you when you go to National and promote you at the National

level. I served two terms on the certification committee with Miriam Libbey. They would always team you up with somebody who had been active longer. So you could live in rather isolation. For instance, I don't think that there really was a scientific library nearer than maybe [Mississippi] State which is a 175 miles away. Therefore your association was very important for your own personal development as a medical librarian and for the development of your library.

Question: Who were the people who contributed most to your professional development through those years?

Oh, probably Bill Postell. Bill Postell was a tremendous [person]. He really was an articulate and a person interested in the history of medicine and he wrote beautifully, and he had a fantastic sense of humor. So we shared a great deal because of our natural interest in history. His being in the field of science mine being in a little slightly different area but nevertheless Bill Postell, Mildred Langner, and Sarah Brown, and Gertrude Annon, Ralph Esterquest, and Olderson Frye. He used to scare me half to death. He had an unbelievable memory for books. Many, many late evenings when we would sit around when they were discussing the early founding and development of the National Library of Medicine programs. Scott Adams, undoubtedly, but that was both professional and very personal. Joan, and he and I would sit around and discuss chapters of his books as he was writing them, and papers that he would write, and I can go on and on and I might forget somebody who would be extremely important. Mary Louise Marshall and frequently Louise Darling whom I've often noted.

I would like to make a comment here. I think that it's nice to recognize your so called peers, but I don't think any of us thought of each other as peers, we thought of them as personal friends, associates who helped us and we helped them in an exchange of ideas and information. I do think it's one thing to get up and make a big splash about these people and it is another to really incorporate them into your life. I would like to think that people would begin to identify after all in every generation there are those that would render unbelievable service both to the Association and individually to the development of other people. I would like to think that one of the major contributions of mine, hopefully, would have been that I would have encouraged people to be medical librarians or to be gung-ho, enthusiastic about whatever it was that they did in the field, and then go do their own thing, not copy somebody. I think that's what those people did, and I think that in every generation there are those people. We knew them, don't ask me why, we knew they were there when we first came into the group. I keep mentioning the greats of the day and you can't help but think about them as great. I think it becomes important, and I think that's why those of us who were early on in this chapter have never given up those relationships. Simply because they were there for us without our asking. We had a hard time avoiding them if you want to know the truth.

Question: What do you recall about the early meetings of MLA back then, do you have some stories?

I think that the southerners that when they went anywhere no matter where they went they always went together, so all they do is they just carried on their shenanigans just like they were back home. I can remember many a times things became rather rambunctious. [When I wanted to go to my] very first [meeting] in Washington, D.C., I remember Dr. Dorist who was fabulous, he was the Dean of the Medical School [at Cincinnati] said you go, and your object of going is to meet people just have fun, enjoy yourself, and learn from them, you will learn as much from people as you will from going to meeting. Of course Cincinnati was highly endowed and all this was no great problem, but anyway the one thing I do remember that there were awards for the scientific paper and everybody knew, rumors had gotten around who was on the list possible. Joan Tittley Adams, Joan Tittley at that time, we thought surely she was at least one of the contenders, and Joan had gone out and bought a gorgeous, beautiful black evening gown, for this was a formal occasion, to wear to this banquet. Well sure enough she won, the hundred dollars, and so when she went up to get the award some ladies from England were sitting next to us and they said, Dear, what are you going to use your money for? and Joan said, Pay for the dress that I wore to accept it.

And at the banquet, and I've forgotten how the story came about. Every so often John [Ische] would rush up to the table with all these lovely ladies and everything and he would just greet them enthusiastically and kiss them. The young man up there at the head table sitting at the end [from Texas] thought well maybe this was a little rambunctious.

Question: Did MLA have sections in those days?

Yes, but they were primarily along a slightly different line. They were geared to history, to bibliography, to academic research, research in medical libraries. Papers were major papers. The sessions were for everybody. So you didn't have the short paper contributed paper. There would always be, which there is now, sort of the kick off that set the tone for the meeting, but the papers [were more substantial then]. Remember when I came into the field and when many of us came into the field the director of a library was usually the only librarian. Fact is, when I came to this city I had myself a pregnant secretary and a shelver. But anyway, at the time you had the director who frequently was more than just the administrator, they might have been the reference person. There would maybe be somebody in cataloging, serials and all this was all together, but you didn't have large staffs, therefore there were more common interests. Everybody was interested in learning the same thing. I remember being very interested in big issue of personnel, organization of personnel. I can remember the development of personnel charts, job descriptions. I can remember when you really got down to business on a job description. Also, in many instances

in the early days the director of the library who left to go somewhere else was very involved but most times the administration would hardly let anyone go until you found them somebody else to take your place. I think acquisitions was another rather large issue at that time. Oh, and also the nature and development of collections and what kinds of collections they should have depending on where you were in size, so that it wasn't really necessary for the smaller libraries to collect everything. There was a great deal of sharing also, remember now that was the time of the development of the big exchange list. Which was a very large business. I can remember when that moved to Washington as part of the U.S. Book Exchange. But that originally all these lists were compiled and sent around to libraries and you picked and chose and shipped, and it was a great deal of collection development and personnel job descriptions, education of personnel. Then we went into the big issue of building libraries. I said I always hoped I would be remembered for something besides building.

Comment: Irene on behalf of the oral history committee of the Southern Chapter of the Medical Library Association I thank you very much for your time, for the valuable history and background and expertise that you have shared with us today that we can preserve for ever and ever on this tape. It's important, I think, that the Chapter is doing this, going back to preserve really a very personal way of designating our history and tracing our history through the years, so this is very valuable to us and I appreciate very much that you have given me this times. This interview was conducted by Ada Seltzer, the current director of the Rowland Medical Library at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. Thank you.