

Notes from Interview with  
C. Desmond Koster  
July 21, 1994  
by Anne Kabler Robichaux

Claire Desmond Koster retired as Assistant Professor Emerita from the Medical University of South Carolina in June 1985. She graduated from the College of Charleston with an A.B. degree in 1943, and earned a B. S. L. S. in 1944 from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. She worked at Fort Bragg, NC as Assistant Librarian at the Hospital Library for one year, then as Librarian of the Service Club Library for two. She was Assistant Librarian at Florida State University Library, Tallahassee, for two years, before returning to Charleston to become Director of the Medical University of South Carolina Library in 1949. In 1968 she resigned as Director to become a Reference Librarian and served full time until her retirement, and part time until June 1988.

Throughout her career at MUSC, Desmond ("Miss Koster" to most of the staff) was cheerful, willing to do whatever needed doing, and always ready to assist patrons, possessing a keen awareness of both faculty and students' research needs. She was active in SC/MLA (then the Southern Regional Group), serving as Vice Chair in 1957, and 1966, and as Chair in 1958. She also hosted the 6th Annual Meeting in Charleston, in March 1957. Desmond was also active in MLA and in the South Carolina Library Association, serving as Chair, and as Exhibit Chair for the SCLA Annual Meeting for over 10 years. She also was the first librarian to receive recognition (1983) from the local chapter of Sigma Xi, the Scientific Research Society, for "providing noteworthy assistance to those in scientific research."

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

The first chapter meeting I attended I think was in 1950 in Birmingham (note: this was in 1953). Mildred Crowe (Langner) was the Librarian at Birmingham. At that point Dr. Lynch's office (then President of MUSC) was above the Library so all I did was go upstairs because I'd received the notice of this meeting - I had joined the Medical Library Association - and this was for the southern librarians. I didn't know if Annabelle (Furman, previous Librarian at MUSC) had ever done this sort of thing. Anyway, I couldn't get over the clubs in Birmingham. And Mildred Crowe or one of the doctors with whom she was very friendly belonged to one - I believe it was called the Vulcan Club. We went there for our dinner. I was terribly impressed because there were no clubs in Charleston at all! This was the first meeting I attended. Dr. Lynch said he supposed it would be a good idea for me to talk to other librarians. He let me go and of course in those days there was none of this organization, I just paid my way and gave them an itemized account when I came back and they paid me back exactly what I said, but obviously I didn't charge for taxi fares, or drinks, or stuff like that. This was the first year I met that real nice girl I've always liked, who ended up in Florida but was at either at Emory or

Birmingham when I first met her - Maxine Grimes. I remember we cut a meeting one time and spent the whole afternoon in the bar drinking Bloody Marys. This was an MLA meeting.

(This reminded Desmond of the 1968 meeting in Augusta - where she roomed with Sophire Wilson, then the Cataloger at MUSC and an African American.) The banquet was going to be held at the Master's - at the Augusta Golf Club - and they would not admit Blacks. They said they would have a separate dinner. And we said that no one from MUSC would participate, even though we did not think this was strange. This was before the big hospital strike in Charleston, and in the middle of the Civil Rights issues, but some of these places were holding out - you know they would not let Black golfers play there then. So Buz (Warren A. Sawyer, Director of the MUSC Library, 1968-1989) told them to forget about us as far as the banquet was concerned, that we would just go out together. But they changed the site of the banquet so others must have complained. I just remember we had a late night and I got back to the room at 3:00 A.M.

The '50 meeting I don't remember much as I was so new. I do remember Mildred Jordan (Emory) made an interesting speech. Mildred Jordan and Mildred Crowe - I don't remember how old we were - they seemed very professional, very stylish, very well-dressed. Everyone wore hats, white gloves. They knew everyone - all the doctors, all the students. It was like the early years at the Medical College - you just knew everyone. They were very well known among their colleagues.

Question: I know the Chapter covered a larger geographical area than it does now: do you remember how many people attended the earlier meetings?

Maybe 50 to 75 people would come to the meetings. You know people from the really small libraries wouldn't come - so many of the hospitals had only one person who couldn't leave. Most of the people seemed to be from the colleges - but maybe because I knew them the best. I loved Mr. Postell, and there was a real cute girl who worked down there, a real pretty blonde, Ann Hodge (Macomber). She and I were commiserating one day about the nurses and how impossible they were. She was funny. Now the girl from Tennessee - Eleanor or Ellen -- she was the librarian - maybe at the University of Tennessee - now where is that English fellow (Mark Hodges)? Well I don't know if she was at Vanderbilt or Tennessee - a head librarian. She is the one that said to me "I always bring warm clothes when I go to meetings in the summer because the air conditioning is so cold in the hotels, and cool clothes for the winter because the heat is so much." But I do remember Ann Hodge.

(Interviewer noted that Ann Macomber was one of the group from LA that remained as "Honorary Members" of the Southern Chapter when the group split in 1972. At that point, only nine persons from LA were members of the Chapter.

During the business meeting at this meeting it was voted to keep the Louisiana members who felt strong ties to the Chapter as Honorary Members - Mayo Drake, John Ische, Ann Hodge Macomber, and Bill Postell. Membership lists were informal and honorary membership was not formalized.)

Question: What about the big split in the organization?

I don't remember a lot about it, other than there was a lot of debate. The reason being was purely geographical. There just wasn't that kind of money for people to go very far to meetings. (Interviewer: NLM was dividing the country into regions and the Regional Groups of MLA felt they should mirror NLM.) But the girl from Puerto Rico always came! (Noted that we still have good participation from Puerto Rico and that the meeting in 1995 will be there.)

Question: Do you remember the first meeting that was held in Charleston (1957)?

That was one of the most successful because Dr. Waring (note: Dr. Joseph Ioor Waring, M.D., a local pediatrician, and noted medical historian) hosted a reception at his house, at Charles Towne Landing - beautiful grounds, and a beautiful house. I don't remember anything about the meeting, or even where it was, or who spoke to us. But Dr. Waring unexpectedly had a hernia operation and was in bed. Those who knew him - like Mildred Crowe and Mildred Jordan - went upstairs to see him and he didn't mind. Even those who didn't know him, but knew of him, since he had written several books by then, trooped up to see him. Anyone who knew anything about history of medicine wanted to see him. That was a lovely party. I don't remember where we had the banquet that night, maybe the Fort Sumter Hotel. Dr. Pratt-Thomas spoke to us (note: Dr. Harold Rawling Pratt-Thomas, M.D., Chair, Department of Pathology and later President of MUSC, 1962-64). He spoke on the subject of camellias because that's what he was raising. He's now gone to orchids. It was a delightful talk, it wasn't medical at all. They lived on Tradd Street and he invited everyone to come by and see their garden. He was a most attractive man and everyone was just entranced with him. I just don't remember the program - I just remember all the highlights of the social activities. We must have had some meetings but I don't remember where we had them! Maybe Baruch auditorium or maybe one of the hotels.

Question: What about the meeting in Galveston, when you were Chair? (1959)

I don't really remember much about it, I remember being there. I don't remember even the social functions, but I do remember that everyone was nice to me, and the way was sort of smoothed. I do remember that I enjoyed Galveston - it reminded me of the beaches here. Its very pretty with lots of oleanders.

Question: How has the role of the Southern Chapter played professionally, and in terms of your objectives? How have you seen it evolve?

I think I am one of those people who have never had objectives. Everyone seems to have a goal, but I've never had one, at least that I know of. I always enjoyed my work, and liked to do it as well as I could. The Southern Group was a way to meet your peers, and it really wasn't organized like it is. We came, and we had a good time. But it wasn't as large a group.

Question: What people contributed to your professional development?

Because I was the head librarian, although it was a small library then - we only had four people for years - I met the Heads of these other big libraries. I was really interested in hearing what they had to say about what they did.

Question: What do you recall about any of the early MLA meetings?

One in Denver I remember we took buses to a picnic. There were no facilities. We had drinks and a long bus ride. Everyone was in misery. Another I remember was in Lake Placid. We stayed at the Lake Placid Hotel. That was a lot of fun. In fact I saw a fellow there I hadn't seen in years. He had been at Fort Bragg, worked in an office next to the library. He was working at some special library, semi-medical related, so he was at the Lake Placid meeting.

# EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH



Most of you should know this month's Employee of the Month, if not by name, at least on sight. Desmond Koster, Health Affairs Librarian, has been with the Medical University just over 23 years.

Miss Koster started working in the Medical College Library when we were only a medical college, a pharmacy school and a nursing school. There were only four people employed in the library at the time. . . now there are 26.

Everything was very "homey" then, said Miss Koster. "The departmental offices were next to the library so we knew all the faculty. And at times we functioned somewhat like a student union and a message-taking center."

While she thoroughly enjoys the new facility and the bigger school, the likelihood of knowing even most of the students well has been lost.

The operation of a large medical library involves a great deal more than most of us can imagine. Today's modern medical library is equipped with computers, audiovisual aids, hundreds of periodicals and, in our case, 80,000 volumes. Our hook-up with the National Library of Medicine near Washington, D.C., makes information readily available to us and through us to the other medical libraries throughout South Carolina.

Is the Library used by persons other than students? Yes and no, says Miss Koster. "Many employees are not aware that we have anything but medical books. We have a great many volumes on art, history and the literary classics. Oftentimes, a secretary will come in to pick up a book for a professor, only to be surprised to find that we have something of interest to her. We, of course, encourage all the employees to utilize the library."

Miss Koster is a native Charlestonian (obvious by her accent), and a graduate of the College of Charleston and the University of North Carolina School of Library Science.

Everyone this writer has spoken with has expressed the same sentiment about Miss Koster: the tall, attractive lady who is always ready to help.

