

Ann Macomber, 10/10/93. History of Southern Chapter of the Medical Library Association project. Interviewed by Susan Woods and Janet Coggan, Wynfrey Hotel, 43rd Annual Meeting in Birmingham, Alabama.

Monday, October 10, 1993, talking with Ann Macomber of New Orleans, Louisiana.

SW: Ann, what do you recall about the founding of the chapter, the very first time the group met and got together or those events? Could you talk about those?

AM: Okay, well that was in 1951 and at that time I was actually still in library school at Emory so I was not at that initial meeting. My first meeting was the second meeting which was held in Birmingham and that was 40 years ago in January, that would have been in 1953 and I was asked to be a speaker. I was asked to be on the program at that meeting so that was really a thrill for me because I was so young and new at being a professional and so I was very pleased that I had been asked to do this and I can remember Mr. Postell Sr. and I rode the train to Birmingham. Back then there was not a lot of travel money and so the two of us got on the train in New Orleans and arrived in Birmingham and it was in January and I remember so well that I had one of my typical living in New Orleans sinus attacks and I had gone to my ENT man and said please, you've got to help me, I've got to speak in a day or two in Birmingham and you must pull me back together so he did and I also asked for him to give me a few jokes to tell so that I could include that in my presentation and he did. They were clean and so I could use them and so that's really my first recollection of the Southern Chapter since I was not directly involved in that organizational meeting which indeed as I understand it was exactly that, it was the organizational meeting held in New

Orleans with Mary Louise Marshall at Tulane and Bill Postell Sr from LSU and they got it together.

SW: And what was your position at this time?

AM: I was a reference librarian.

SW: At LSU?

AM: At LSU?

SW: In New Orleans?

AM: In New Orleans, right.

SW: And you, you were attending library school at Emery?

AM: Yes.

SW: Uh-huh. And for at one point you worked at Emery, is that correct?

AM: Yes, and then I left LSU and worked at Emory Library for Mildred Jordan from 1955 until 1960 at which time I returned to New Orleans, to LSU, and the director then was John Haystack and I worked for him until I retired.

SW: Now, I'm relatively new to the chapter, having been in it only ten years, and I hear several folks refer to this big split that occurred. Can you tell me what you know about that?

AM: Well, the initial organization of the Southern Chapter, if I'm not mistaken, it included maybe some 12 or 13 states, everyone was included, we had even New Mexico was part of it at some point, and that was primarily because of the librarian there in Albuquerque was Mildred Bake. Mildred Bake had been the librarian, one of the librarians at Tulane Medical Library in New Orleans and Mildred was closely

associated with the Southern group, as we called ourselves, and oh the grand Southern ladies of the Southern group, and so we wanted Mildred to be part of our group so we included New Mexico and so even with that many states we didn't have very large attendance at our meetings for whatever reason, perhaps travel budgets, but in fact I think we went into the 70's before we ever got over a hundred attending a group meeting and remember back then we were groups, not chapters and so when the split came up, the split had actually been suggested as far back as the 60's, I happened to be chair of the Southern group at that time and we were meeting in Austin, Texas, and the Texas librarians because they were such a large group and because traveling to the deep South such as Louisiana or Mississippi or Alabama was a long distance for them to travel, they didn't want the group to be so all-inclusive, they wanted to narrow the states ...(unintelligible)...and it was not they were not successful in that attempt back in the 60's and then we knew it was coming up again in the 70's. I believe we were meeting we were in South Carolina I don't know if it was Charleston I guess it was Charleston or Columbia, I'm not sure which, but I had come fully prepared with some statistics. I had done my homework because I knew and it was indeed a Texas librarian who was pushing for this, Lee Jones, and Lee Jones and I had conversations in the past, so I knew that so far as I personally was concerned I had a formidable foe, so we were meeting in a room, I remember the business meeting was held it was theater-type seating, it probably was a, might have been a classroom there at the university and I remember when I was given my turn to speak and you spoke from it was an open business meeting and I got so emotional in my

presentation I finally had to sit down because that's how strongly I felt about the division of the group and one of my points in presentation was the fact that Texas librarians were such a large group that they could have their own group if they didn't want to be part of us, they could have their own group and still have a representative attendance, but I lost. We lost. And I've felt lost ever since because of the development of Telnet and other National Library of Medicine programs, you were almost forced to belong to the group where you had been assigned to work with so I had to leave Southern and become a part of South Central.

SW: What year was this again?

AM: It was in the 70's, I believe, it was either 71 or 72.

SW: Okay, okay. Well when I spoke with Irene Graham, she said that she just thinks it's pitiful that we're the only chapter not to have its founding place, its birth place, within the geographic region of its chapter anymore and that she felt like that we ought to get a plaque and put it on the door of the LSU Library and on the door of the Tulane Library.

AM: I agree with her, but Louisiana was caught, remember we were the border state, and so Louisiana course I was not a director, it was not in my hands, it was John Meeshay and Mayo Drake who was at the new medical library in Shreveport and I personally feel even if Louisiana had made the decision at that point to stay with the Southern Chapter, we would later have been required to go with South Central because that's organizational-wise that they would have chosen us to stay with them, but remember we included North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama,

Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, as I say, New Mexico, now many of these states have now left and belong to other groups anyway, but the beautiful part of the Southern Chapter was because our meetings were small in terms of attendance, you knew everyone there and the opportunity to meet with people and know them on a one-on-one basis was invaluable. You don't even get that now in your chapter meetings, because you're having one and two hundred in attendance, and I personally feel you lose a lot that way.

SW: What, that leads me into my next question very well. What role do you think the Southern Chapter played for you professionally or what were its objectives in the beginning in being found and, since you have kept in touch so well with the chapter, how have you seen that evolve and what changes?

AM: Well the whole medical library profession of course has, oh my since I first became an MLA member back in the 50's I guess it's tripled maybe it's even quadrupled, I mean even your national meetings were not that large, and the Southern Chapter was always so well represented, I've forgotten now how many presidents we've had, but that always made you feel so proud that these were people you knew personally, this was not just someone that you voted for on a mail-in ballot, these were people that you rubbed elbows with, that you shared thoughts with when you met them in chapter meetings and basically the design of chapters really back then, groups, was to allow staff to attend, not the directors, so you were dealing with an inter-library loan librarian from Texas, and remember back in those days, there was no magic like fax machines, xerox machines, in fact one of my duties at Emory

was to do, each one took a turn and we had to go back there and through the old wet process you had to photocopy materials for inter-library loan and if you ever tried to photocopy an article out of some of the large oversize German periodicals and make a clear copy in a darkroom, you know what I'm talking about, so that the group meetings allowed you this opportunity to, to exchange complaints and talk about problems and it was as I say, it was a one-on-one relationship that I got the most value from, I wouldn't give anything for the olden days and I know when you talk to older people we all say the same thing, the good old days, don't misunderstand me, I believe in progress, and I think it's wonderful that we have mechanical devices now to transmit information, but in my day chips were something that came off of wood, hardware were hammers and nails, software had not even been invented, and so we were dealing in a much more simplistic way with the exchange of information.

SW: So you feel that those regional groups helped you function better as a medical librarian when you went back home?

AM: Oh, I definitely do, I definitely do.

SW: What about some of, you made a comment on the way to lunch about dress codes that I found very interesting.

AM: Yes, well back in those days and I'm going to present to the Southern Chapter a picture that was taken at the meeting at Emory in 1956, and you will note in the picture that almost every lady has her little white gloves with her, and many of them had on their hats and now you never see a hat at a meeting, and I have a drawer full of little white gloves, so you know that, that's not, that's certainly not part of the dress code,

and all of our banquets were always formal affairs and one of the things that I thought was interesting this morning in the meeting was the fact that you always invited to your banquet, the host librarian always included members of the faculty and their wives because we wanted to make a showcase for the faculty to let them see medical librarians as a group and so it was all a part of public relations, you were selling your services to the people that made out your budget and it worked both ways, and it was always so enjoyable at the banquet, which was always formal, these faculty members and their wives would be interspersed with the librarians and that added a lot to our meetings. Now the meetings are so large I'm sure you couldn't do that but in those days, as I say, we had no more than forty, fifty, sixty people attending and I personally I miss the formality of the meetings, I miss the formality within the library scene itself and perhaps the dress codes, an enforced dress code is maybe a little stringent, but you never attended a meeting, there were no men at meetings in shirt sleeves, and certainly no women there in blue jeans.

SW: Um-hm. I would love for you to describe the New Orleans MLA meeting, I know we're supposed to be talking about Southern Chapter, but I think it's very such a wonderful story about when you were hosting the MLA meeting in New Orleans.

AM: Well in 1970 we played host to the national MLA meeting and we worked very long and hard on it and in those days the host libraries did a lot of the work in preparation for the annual meeting and we wanted to make it as southern as we could and so the welcome party was a party that was held at the then Roosevelt Hotel, now it's the Fairmont, and we turned the stage into that large ballroom into a garden

scene and we begged, borrowed, or stole old ante-bellum dresses and we dressed up, we had to rent I think one or two pieces for the men to wear because we couldn't find anything any costume appropriate to the time, and that's how we greeted the guests as they came in. And we had topiary trees made and I was the one primarily responsible for it and I can remember riding out to the city park commission and they had agreed to lend us palms and trees and I rode in a pick-up truck with the some of the maintenance men from LSU and we decorated and I went to a florist and told them that we were just a non-profit organization and I had \$200 to spend on flowers and couldn't they please, please, please do something for us and it was really a scene that most people still say they remember and then for the banquet we had a jazz banquet and we had a second (?) line and we had umbrellas, we decorated an umbrella for Miss Deeshay who was the director of LSU and I held onto that umbrella until about three years ago and finally I had to give it up, but the flowers we put on that umbrella, once again we were very money-conscious and we went to a five and dime store and we picked up the flowers that had artificial flowers that had fallen on the floor, and the manager let us have those at cost so everything then you did with money in mind and I think that was the last year that an MLA convention made money for the organization, I think we made \$10,000 for the organization because we were able to save them so much money and on a cost basis, they were making say a dollar on each ticket that they sold and we fed that back into the organization. Those days are gone forever. But it was our pleasure to do it, and I still think to this day, that if we had more volunteers giving of their time and effort, some of the overhead cost of putting on

a convention would not be so prohibitive.

SW: Um-hm. Who are some of the people that you feel contributed to your professional development?

AM: Well, certainly my director, William Postell, he was the one, senior, who encouraged me to go to library school and to get my master's, and then Mary Louise Marshall, who was certainly one of the grand ladies of the medical library association, she was the director at Tulane Medical Library, and I can remember, I attended my first MLA meeting in Washington, DC, and Mary Louise Marshall took me in hand and took me up to some of the other great ladies outside of our region, Gertrude Annan, she made sure that I met Miss Annan, and Estelle Broadman, and some of the names that even though for the young ones today they're, some of them are deceased, some of them are certainly retired, but Mary Louise made sure that they met me as a new member, and that was so meaningful to me, and I felt that I had really arrived when I could shake hands with some of these women that had, and back in those days it was more women than men, and so I remember the women of course more than I remember some of the men, but...

SW: What would you tell a brand new medical librarian starting out today? What kinds of things would you like to tell them?

AM: I would like to tell them when they go to, to chapter meetings and to national meetings to try and establish a social rapport with their colleagues and I think that structured meetings are terribly important, but don't devote all their time to sitting in a meeting and taking notes. Get out and have the social intercourse with your, your

colleagues and your peers and share your thoughts about what's going on in your library and that's how you grow. Structured meetings of course are fine but I do think that the opportunity to have a one-on-one and I keep going back to this one-on-one, but you simply can't get away from it and if I had a complaint to make against chapter meetings and national meetings, it's the loss of that free time that allows you to do this. I served for six years on the program and convention committee of national MLA and I kept fighting very hard for the rules for putting on a national meeting that allowed you that free time, but now with continuing education courses and business meetings and committees on committees on committees, it's very difficult to have this free time. And that's a loss.

SW: Um-hm. I agree. I agree.

AM: It's a big loss.

SW: Do you have anything else that you'd like to tell us? You've answered all my questions so beautifully.

AM: Well I just wanted to say that I feel very honored that the Southern Chapter still remembers me and was kind enough to include me in what I still consider to be the, my 40th anniversary, because it was in January of 1953 that I was here in Birmingham, my birthplace, and to be able to come back is real special and it's a memory I will cherish always.

SW: We will too. Janet and I will not forget this. We've enjoyed meeting you and talking to you.

AM: Thank you so much.