CAPTURING OUR STORIES

An Oral History of Librarianship in Transition

A. ARRO SMITH
Foreword by Loriene Roy

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HOW APPROPRIATE TO START WITH A MEMOIR IN A FOREWORD TO A book of oral histories!

Each year one fortunate person serves as the president of the American Library Association (ALA). After being selected president-elect in 2006, I held the position of president during 2007–2008. People still ask me what that experience was like, and in many ways I am still regaining my energies from that intensive and exciting time. In short, I had to attend to three categories of tasks during my time as ALA president. One category was the work required of each ALA president, such as chairing meetings of the ALA Executive Board, ALA Executive Council, and ALA Council; completing media interviews; arranging for the ALA President’s Programs; and preparing the President’s Message for American Libraries. The second category of work involved responding to the issues that arose. In my case these issues included sharing the message that public libraries could help the public prepare for the transition to digital television and responding to censorship cases, such as the elimination of abortion as a search term in MEDLINE and the removal of copies of Philip Pullman’s book The Golden Compass from library collections. The third category of tasks related to any initiative the ALA president wants to continue or launch, options that have become increasingly streamlined during the terms of more recent
ALA presidents. The initiatives I explored focused on recognizing library services as well as the contributions of individual librarians.

One example of how I was able to recognize the efforts of libraries reflected my interest in international librarianship. As ALA president-elect and ALA president, I had the good fortune to travel, completing fifty-two trips during my presidential year. Of course, ALA is concerned with libraries, and that travel brought me to libraries in Aotearoa (New Zealand), China, Mexico, South Africa, Canada, Australia, and many locations in the United States. This travel inspired me to launch a way to recognize outstanding library services and initiatives across the globe through the awarding of the ALA Presidential Citation for Innovative International Library Projects. Citation recipients are now selected by a committee of the International Relations Round Table and are recognized annually at the International Reception held at the ALA Annual Conference.

Although ALA’s concentration is on the library and librarians, the emergence of its companion organization, the ALA Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA), renews a focus on the library worker. ALA-APA reminds us of the contributions of the individual and confirms that those working in libraries also need support and recognition whether through a certification process, information on salaries, or information about pay equity or unions. Attention to the retired librarian also is seen in the recent formation of the Retired Members Round Table (RMRT) of ALA.

Work in libraries is about the individual patron and library worker. As a professor, my work is also centered on the individual—students, clients with whom we collaborate, and alumni and potential employers. When I first became ALA president-elect, a friend, Tim Ditlow, told me that people from my past would return to my life. And he was right. Five hundred people danced in front of, beside, and behind me at the Honor Dance that the National Museum of the American Indian hosted for me in June 2007. Four days later, 520 people attended my inaugural banquet, including two of my sisters, friends from Aotearoa (New Zealand), my son Owen Hunter and his classical guitar octet Bella Corda, and the best
cover band in Austin, the Eggmen. A few months later, my high school Spanish teacher met me at the bottom of the escalator to baggage claim at Duluth International Airport, holding up the cover page of the Duluth News Tribune, featuring an article that announced my return to my homeland: “Big Reader Leads County’s Big Read.” As I spoke from podiums in locations ranging from Cloquet, Minnesota, to Denver, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Louisville, Las Cruces, and Portland, Oregon, I looked out on crowds that often included a former teaching assistant, a former student, or my own high school teachers or professors from the University of Arizona or the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. And though the events provided me the opportunity to share news about ALA, summarize my own work, or address a conference topic, it was the opportunity to hear the unique stories of the everyday lives of librarians that most resonated with me.

As I heard about impending retirements of librarians known for their professional contributions, I grew concerned about the lack of a conduit by which their life lessons could be gathered. I had worked on several previous oral history projects—documenting thematic interviews of the lower Colorado River region, helping design a program for the Association for Library Service to Children, helping coordinate oral history interviews for the Texas Library Association. I knew of the work of Dr. Martha Norkunas and witnessed the way her courses on oral history influenced how students in our School of Information approached their research. I felt that librarians, too, would have extensive stories to share. These would be the stories of decisions that led to educational paths and career choices. These would be stories of details, of response in the midst of a changing profession, all tempered by the emotional impact of regret, opportunity, and life history review. As a fan of StoryCorps, I even entertained the presence of a mobile technology lab enabling interviewees and interviewers to gather and share.

But, as my friend Beth Hallmark often reminded me, ideas are a dime a dozen. To bring an idea to fruition takes the commitment of one person. In this case, Arro Smith, always responsible and personable, dedicated
years of reading, writing, and coordinating, leading to the capture of thirty-five professional life histories and their interpretation.

I invite you to read the stories of your colleagues and friends. Their stories are yours as well. I also invite you to consider extending Capturing Our Stories and participating in the legacy of librarianship by sharing your knowledge and experiences with your younger peers within your own library and by interviewing others. Please do this before you regret not having done so.
MY DEAR FRIEND, COLLEAGUE, AND ADVISOR LORIENE ROY BEGAN THIS collection of stories with her story in the foreword. Now I’ll tell you some of my story.

My library career began in 1990 when I graduated from the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Texas at Austin. I was one of Dr. Roy’s first students at the beginning of her career as a professor. She inspired me to become a public librarian, and I have worked at the San Marcos (Texas) Public Library my entire professional career. I am a cataloger.

Dr. Roy and I stayed in touch after I completed my MLIS, and I always enjoyed sitting with her at the alumni suppers held during the Texas Library Association Annual Conference. It was at one of these conference suppers that the dean of the Texas school, now known as the School of Information, implored the practicing librarians present to consider returning to school for a doctorate so that we could teach. He mentioned many of the prevailing statistics about the “graying” of the profession and the fact that many of his faculty were quickly becoming emeriti. Dr. Roy gently kicked me under the table and whispered, “You.” I took up Dr. Roy’s challenge, and she served as my committee chair for the dissertation on which this book is based.
This notion of the “graying of the profession” is well documented in the library literature, beginning in the late 1990s and continuing through the next decade. A sea change in library personnel occurred at the beginning of the millennium because so many professionals had entered the library workforce in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

But back to my story. To tell you the truth, I was not even interested in oral history. I was going to do my dissertation using quantitative research methods to examine subject-heading and authority records (I am a cataloger, after all). But the University of Texas insists that all its doctoral students study both quantitative and qualitative research methods as part of their plenary curricula. To satisfy this requirement I happened to be taking a class in the Anthropology Department that introduced me to oral history methodology. And Dr. Roy happened to be ALA president-elect.

When you are ALA president-elect, you may organize some special projects for your tenure as ALA president. One of Dr. Roy’s Presidential Initiatives was to document the collective wisdom of this generation of librarians who were quickly retiring—and dying. I was not interested in this project, but when you are ALA president-elect, your Midwinter and Annual Conference schedules are packed with meetings and obligations. When you are ALA president-elect, you bring flunkies, friends, and people who owe you favors to Conference so that they can attend the meetings that you cannot. As Dr. Roy’s doctoral student, I was her flunky. And this flunky was sent to a meeting about a nascent oral history project to document the professional lives of retiring and retired librarians.

And, frankly, that meeting was awful. There were many great ideas about how to do this project, but no real leadership to make it happen. It also happened that my current dissertation topic was quickly going down in flames due to a change in personnel at the library school. As I was reporting on the meeting to Dr. Roy that afternoon, it occurred to me that I might be able to make this Presidential Initiative happen for her—and I might just be able to use this project to finish my PhD.

Later in this book, Dr. Billie Grace Herring will colorfully describe the time when the library school dean asked her to stay on and take an avail-
able scholarship for a doctorate: “You talk about a gift landing in your lap!” That perfectly describes my own experience working with Loriene Roy on this project.

Dr. Roy gave me the opportunity to make her American Library Association Presidential Initiative a reality. “You talk about a gift landing in your lap!”

And along the way, I became a really good oral historian and cultural anthropologist. I came to fully embrace qualitative research methods, feminist theory, and the power of many voices to tell one story.

Capturing Our Stories: A National Oral History Program of Retired and Retiring Librarians is an American Library Association partnership with the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin. Capturing Our Stories gathers professional histories of experienced librarians as they exit their careers and makes those histories accessible to colleagues, students, and less-experienced librarians using state-of-the-art digital archiving tools through the Internet. The website for the Capturing Our Stories project is hosted by the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin. Please visit it at www.ischool.utexas.edu/~stories/ to listen to and watch the videos of most of the interviews. Transcripts, which are keyword searchable, scroll along synched with the interviews. Permanent copies of all the interviews are part of the American Library Association Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Both the recordings and the transcripts are available through Illinois’s online catalog at www.archives.library.illinois.edu.

I worked with Dr. Roy and the American Library Association to organize a cohort of volunteers to interview librarians at the end of their careers. We used oral history methodology, which calls for the interviewer to simply prompt the subject to tell her story in her own way. (It is clearly different from journalism. There were no set questions. It was not a survey.) I conducted twelve of the interviews myself. Thirty-five interviews were collected in total.

At first we simply used voice recorders, which is the standard oral history method. But when word spread through the library school of Dr. Roy’s project and my involvement, Quinn Stewart, the information technology

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guru at the School of Information, called us into a meeting to demonstrate a powerful new tool to combine video interviews with searchable transcripts and stream the results on the Internet. This rich-media technology, GLIFOS, had been developed by a colleague at the University of Texas, and it was available for our use. So we began using camcorders to video record the interviews.

Successful doctoral research involves doing something that no one else has done previously. It must be unique research that expands our knowledge. My project, under Dr. Roy’s supervision, was unique in two respects. I used state-of-the-art streaming technology to present an oral history project to a wide audience. When you read a quote from a librarian in the stories that follow, please know that you may go to the Capturing Our Stories website or to the ALA Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and listen to the audio recording for the individual’s inflection—and in most of the interviews you may watch the librarian’s expression—to see if you agree with my interpretation and transcription. It is all there. All my raw data is available for you—and future researchers—to study.

This preservation method (combining the recording with the searchable transcript and making it available on the Internet) was unique among oral histories at the time. The other unique aspect of my research that qualifies it as a successful doctoral study is the use of theory. Maurice Halbwachs posited that all our memories are our memories because we share them with at least one other living person. He believed memories must be collective to exist at all. Oral historians have eyed this theory for many years, and Alessandro Portelli has employed these ideas in his research about specific memories shared in Italy, but no one had interviewed a sizable sample of one population using oral history methodology to produce a collective memory of a profession using Halbwachs’s theory. This is what I have done.

My successful dissertation is not an easy read. It includes an exhaustive literature review to document the ways my research is unique and to establish the relevancy of the research. It has a very long discussion.
about the methodology and theories involved. And it includes an attempt at historicism (don’t ask). This book intends to be just the good stuff. (My editor has insisted.) Part 2 of this book provides a primer of the theories and methodology I used, as well as tips on how to conduct your own oral history project.

This is the story of librarianship in the last half of the twentieth century told by thirty-five individuals. I have collected these oral history interviews and “listened” to hear a collective story of the profession emerge. Each individual story is unique, but together the stories are often the same story told over and over. I listened for repeating themes. They are presented here to tell the story of librarianship in our own voices, in our own way. I hope you enjoy them.

NOTES


What else can I say? Talk to people. Talk to people. Please. Don’t be shy. There’s—I spent today—this has nothing to do really with what we were talking about. I sat down at a table today for lunch with a cataloger. I had never met her before—there was an empty place at a table—and I sat down. A little while later, another lady came along, and she sat over there, and we said, “Come on, come on, join us!” It turned out that she was a cataloger too—for the Library of Congress—and the two catalogers got into a discussion about personalities. And they decided they were both introverted and—I’m definitely not introverted—we started talking “Librarians: What are they? What aren’t they?” We went the gamut from how non-conservative are most librarians—how liberal, how far to the left, how standing by the library rules and rights—all the way back to jokes that catalogers tell on one another. It was just hilarious; it just went on and on. And none of us wanted to stop. And this is typical activity. Never sit in a corner: just join a group and start talking. I think that is the best way to learn about where you want to be? Is that—?  

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This passage is from Valerie Feinman’s oral history interview for the *Capturing Our Stories* project. She is talking about her experience at the 2008 American Library Association Annual Conference in Anaheim, California. Valerie attended a preconference workshop I held for the project that year, was one of our first interviewees, and has been my chief cheerleader for the project’s duration. Her enthusiasm for sharing stories shines through in this brief quote from her interview. This book is about these stories about librarianship that we share among ourselves.

Please sit down and join the conversation.

In my preface, I alluded to the theory that underscored my dissertation—that shaped it. The short version of that theory is that if we listen to many people tell their personal story about being a librarian, certain elements will be repeated—each time in a new voice and with different words—that represent the “social memory” of librarianship. This is the memory that this generation shares of what it was like to be a librarian. And because it comes from many voices telling their personal stories, it will be different from an encyclopedia article detailing the aspects of a career in librarianship. This social memory will include feelings and attitudes about the career that cannot be captured any other way.

This is a story about librarians telling the story of librarianship. Many voices have been recorded to form a story of librarianship that describes a generation of librarians who began their craft using what we would now call “analog” technology—typewriters and card indexes—and retired fully immersed in the digital age. These are the information professionals who ushered the technological age into existence. Their “library science” gave birth to “information science.” They are the Mothers and Fathers of the Information Age.

This story about librarianship begins with the social memory of making the decision to become a librarian. Each is different, but a surprising number of interviewees had no intention of becoming a librarian. Many librarians began their careers as teachers. I call these “accidental librarians.” The first chapter concludes with a memory we all share no matter what kind of librarianship we ultimately practice: library school. Many of
these library school memories are about the difficulty of cataloging class. In fact, these cataloging class memories are so prevalent that the discussion becomes a library cliché. Chapter 2 looks deeper into the clichés and stereotypes within the profession and in popular culture.

This cohort of librarians remembers the ways “it used to be done” and was instrumental in the introduction of the computer and “the way it’s done now.” There is a nostalgic social memory of the typewriter and the card catalog. And there is pride that we introduced technology to the masses with our clunky, DOS-based OPACs—and then became “information scientists.” The third chapter, on technology, includes both nostalgia and memories of innovation.

Because these are librarians at the end of their careers, they have a long view of the profession. Most have become “very successful” and have become administrative leaders within their organizations and institutions. A surprising detail emerges from the social memory of librarianship: many regret being promoted. Many long for their entry-level positions and the hands-on practice of librarianship. Many plan to return to that work as volunteers after retirement. The fourth chapter looks at not only these regrets but also issues of sexism and compensation. And the fifth chapter examines the most recurring trope across all the interviews: these librarians enjoyed a very rewarding career because they were helping people find the information and resources they needed.

The concluding chapter of part 1 attempts to sum up the collective memory of librarianship. The ultimate story of librarianship—the story told over and over—is that this profession was the right choice for these people because it let them do something that really mattered. They helped people. Over and over.

NOTE
LIBRARIANS SHARE MANY OF THE SAME STORIES. WE ALL contribute to a shared narrative—a shared story. And all of us have a story to tell about the decision to become a librarian, often after an encouraging librarian in our childhood led us to discover the wonders of the library. Let’s begin this project by recounting our earliest memories of libraries and our decisions to become librarians. The reasons we have chosen this vocation are individual and many; however, many shared narratives will emerge. This chapter concludes with memories we all share: our time in library school earning the qualifications for our vocation.

The Decision to Become a Librarian

Two future librarians report setting out to read every book in their childhood libraries. Peggy Richwine attended a very small school with only four classrooms. The “library” consisted of shelves along the walls of the four rooms. She set a goal of reading all the books. “So I read every one of them. And I’d take one home every night and read it, and return it the next day, and take another one home the next day.”

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Karen Breen reports starting from A and working through the collection at her high school library. Ms. Breen remembers her early childhood library sharing a building owned by her grandfather. His plumbing shop was in the other half. She spent many afternoons in the library as her grandfather worked next door.

I can remember reading all the time. I can remember pretending that I was completely engrossed in a book so that when my mother would call me, and I didn’t answer, she’d say, “Oh, she’s just reading.”

I didn’t know what I was going to do when I was in high school. My mother did the typical “Well, you read all the time, why don’t you become a librarian?” And it was like, you know, the clouds parted and the sun came out. And then when I realized that being a librarian meant that I was always going to learn things—that people would ask me questions and I would research with them so that I would continue to learn—I decided that I wanted to be a librarian. In library school I took a children’s lit course and knew right then that’s what I wanted to do.²

Ms. Breen’s later childhood involved a great deal of moving while her father was in the military. She remembers that the library—in whatever temporary city they were stationed—could always be counted on to provide emotional stability: “The library was the only place that I knew to get the things that made me the happiest. And that was books.”³

Bill Mears tells two stories from his childhood. The first is his recollection of learning about the public library. He was already an avid reader before discovering the library, and he spent his money buying Hardy Boys books from the stationery shop in his neighborhood. They were ninety-nine cents each. He collected Coke bottles with a two-cent redemption value in order to fund his reading habit. He clearly remembers the astonishment he felt upon finding out that the public library would lend him Hardy Boys books for free—and that he could spend his Coke bottle money on the cinema, which only cost nine cents.
Dr. Mears’s second childhood library memory continued to influence his library values throughout his long career:

And I think that I will always, always remember this—I can still see this scene in my mind: Being a young boy, and being interested in things, I one time—I kept looking in the library for books on a certain subject—I’ll tell you it was sex. And I could never find this book, so—I didn’t want to go up and ask at the desk—but after enough weeks of looking, I finally went up to the desk, and I asked this librarian that was at the desk, “Do you have such-and-such book?”—I can’t remember the title. And with that, she started, “Why does a young man your age want to look at that type of book—?”

And about that time, a nice woman from behind the scene came onto the scene and said, “Mary”—or whatever her name was—“I’ll take care of this.” And she came up to me, and she said, “We keep that book behind the desk. Do you think you are old enough to read this?” And I didn’t know what to say, so I said, “Yes.” And so she gave me that book, and I got to look at all the pictures in that book, and was contented and turned it back in.

And I always to this day remember the kindness of that woman, because I was so embarrassed. And love that woman for that, and I still think of that woman kindly, and always insist that my staff treat people with respect—especially kids.⁴

Dr. Mears’s career has been expansive. He was the director of a large university library but has also led a public library, a seminary library, and a prison library.

I started off as a—kind of a—a forced volunteer at a junior high library. I was involved in a program, and the principal said, “When you are not doing anything in this program, go help out in the library.” And that was my initial introduction to being involved in working in a library.
After that, I went to library school, and [I] was very much involved from that point forward in libraries. I was the assistant director of public services at the University of Southern Mississippi. I was the director at a community library in Ohio.

I came back and started off as the assistant director at Texas State University, formerly Southwest Texas State University. I was there for twenty-five years.

After I retired I went to help someone out—they called me and asked me to help automate the Episcopal Theological Seminary while they were hiring a director—and it was only supposed to be for three months. Well, the search fell through, and I ended up being there for eight months—and I really enjoyed that stay in a seminary library.

After that, I went to a prison library. I was the director of a men and women’s prison library for two years. And then a friend of mine told me about the availability of a public library’s director position in Kyle. And I took that position and I have been there ever since—and I really enjoy that.5

Dr. Mears is detail oriented, as most good librarians are. During his tenure at Southwest Texas State University, he was able to build a new library for the campus. It is one of his most dear accomplishments. However, he does regret one thing about that process: the main book return at the circulation desk was engineered incorrectly so that no standard book drop cart can fit under the slide. The books must slide to the floor and a clerk must pick up each one. He specifically remembers going over this detail with the architects and carefully measuring to make sure it would all work ergonomically, but the measurements were taken before the granite flooring was installed—and the book truck has never fit correctly. It is a testament to his character that one of his greatest professional regrets is that a clerk must pick up the books from the floor.

Richard Corson tells of an early childhood crush on the librarian. He was already an avid reader, but the attractions of Miss Charlotte Mough-
ton, who worked at the Winter Park, Florida, public library, helped spur his interest. Another crush on another librarian (student) led to marriage. Both Richard and his wife are librarians.

Richard’s wife, Connie Corson, became interested in librarianship when she entered art school as an undergraduate:

It was kind of a decision by default. I was an art student of in-studio art and art history at Queens College before it was part of the City University, and the college had a wonderful art library. . . . And I right away decided that I wanted to work in that library as a student assistant, you know? . . . So I needed a job and found one in the art library where I worked for four years.

And when it was time for me to graduate, I decided what am I going to do now, you know? Am I going to be able to sell paintings? Am I going to be able to make pottery? And so on. And I had a wonderful librarian there who was my mentor all those years. Stanley, Dr. Stanley Lewis was his name. And I went to him and I said, “Dr. Lewis, I don’t know what to do. I am graduating.” And he was a professor at the Columbia Library School and he taught art librarianship there and he said to me, “Why don’t you become a librarian, become an art librarian?” And it was like a eureka moment, you know?

What a great idea—that I could still continue to be in the field of art but as a, you know, with a library background. So I enrolled in Columbia and I had to work, so the next thing I asked Dr. Lewis was where do I find a job? You know, I don’t have any library experience really. And he said, “The Museum of Modern Art is looking for a page. Why don’t you get in touch with them?” So that was my first job. I worked at the Museum of Modern Art for eight years and later went back for another year and I went from being a page to doing cataloging and head of reference. 6
Connie tells another great story about the importance of books in her family:

Well, books were always a very important part in our family. I grew up in Berlin, Germany, during the war years. In fact the war and I started at the same time, 1939. When our family left after the war, we came to the United States, you know, to New York. My grandparents had to flee and they left everything behind and so did our family because we came over actually at the time of the airlift—the Berlin airlift—and so we brought just very basic things. And many years later, I would say fifty, over fifty years later, my husband and I opened up the crates that had been standing in my cousin’s basement all those years. And out of twenty-five—twenty-five or twenty-six—huge crates, sixteen of them were filled with books. So that tells me something about the importance books had in the life of our family.7

Jane Fitzpatrick, the interviewer, knows that both Connie and her husband are librarians and both went to Columbia. She assumes they met at Columbia. Connie corrects her:

He was in the library school at Columbia, but he was a daytime student and I was a night student so we never would have met if it hadn’t been for the fact that he came to the library at the museum, and one of my colleagues there said, “Oh, there’s this good-looking guy in the reading room.”8

Richard was “the good-looking guy in the reading room.” Jane Fitzpatrick also conducts his interview. She asks him about the decision to attend library school and receives an answer very similar to Connie Corson’s:

I decided to go to library school when I was in my final year at college and I didn’t have a clue of what I wanted to do. I had been
doing some research for one of the government department faculty there, doing a lot of documents research and other things in connection with a book he was writing. And when I told him—when I asked him what should I do—he said, “Well, why don’t you go to library school?” And I said, “What’s that?” [Laughter]9

Jane asks him if he was always an avid reader: “I read a lot. Yes, I was a good reader and I enjoyed reading and I was often at the public library as a kid. I had a crush on the librarian, the public librarian of Winter Park, Florida, when I was a freshman in high school . . . Miss Charlotte Moughton.”10

Next, Jane asks him if Miss Moughton might be available for an oral history interview. Richard reports that she has passed, but the reference room at the Winter Park Public Library is named in her honor.

Richard Corson’s career was chiefly at the Luce Library at the State University of New York Maritime College, a school at Fort Schuyler in Throggs Neck, New York. This is a military college for cadets specializing in oceanography and marine engineering. Among other things, Mr. Corson was in charge of a “ship’s library,” a collection of materials that accompanied the cadets on voyages of their training ship.

Mrs. Corson’s career took an unexpected turn. After working as a librarian at the Museum of Modern Art and then as an art bibliographer at a university, she was asked by a friend at a New York City girls’ school to help with the selection committee for a new school librarian. She had never even considered school librarianship before, but after touring the school and sitting with the selection committee drawing up the job description, she decided she wanted the job. So her career began by following an unexpected path that led her to an even more unexpected conclusion.

Valerie Feinman was born in Canada, and her godmother was the reference librarian at the Hamilton (Ontario) Public Library. Ms. Feinman recalls that when she was eleven or twelve, her father and godmother noticed her aptitude for debate and decreed that she should be a librarian.

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This was 1950, approximately, and the day I turned fourteen, which was in 1951, I began working in the Hamilton Public Library. My godmother, Isabelle Skelly, said, “If you want to have a career in Hamilton, in Canada—anywhere—you might as well become a librarian.” . . .

So, I started at the public library. What does a page do? Well, I started in the summertime, so they gave me all the dirty work: unloading boxes of gift books that came in from all sorts of funny places, and arranging them alphabetically by author. . . . Many books were in sets of twenty, thirty, forty volumes on flimsy paper that were meant to grace the shelves of someone’s library, but they were not meant for a public library. And one of the things I was allowed to do, besides arranging books, was to look at these sets of books, and if there was anything I liked there where there were two or more copies, I could have it. I have a big collection of flimsy-paper classic books dating back from that. I still have them.11

Later, at the Toronto library system, Ms. Feinman got to work on the bookmobiles:

Bookmobiles [were] fun. You usually worked four days a week, from 9 to 6 on one day—two days—and 9 to 9 or 10 on the other days, because you had to go out on the buses. We had two buses, and two cabs, plus a trailer. I was mostly on that one. We were paid $3 extra every month so that we could have pants and be decorous climbing into the cab—and to pay for the dry-cleaning of said pants. [Laughing] . . .

The most exciting thing was the night we were coming back across this long, eight-lane highway in a snowstorm. And the trailer decided that it wanted to go down in the ditch. And it did. And it disconnected. And the cab only went partway down. And we got out of the cab and called the police and the tow trucks, etc., and they came and pulled the cab back onto the highway so
that we were able to go back to the library, but the van took two or three days to dig out because it was covered with snow and deeply down.12

Ultimately, Ms. Feinman became a science librarian:

As an undergraduate, I had studied chemistry, geology, physics, mathematics, etc. I was majoring in general sciences—this is a side story—because, again, there were no jobs for Canadian women in sciences. Once, while I was at college, my dean called me in and said, “You are not doing very well in your chemistry courses. I think that you should not want to be a chemist.” And I looked him up and down, and said, “Have you been in the science library lately?” He said, “No.” He was a geologist—he didn’t need the library very much. I said, “Well, the books are all out of order. There’s nothing published in the last three years that is a book. The journals are impossible to find. You don’t have the latest journals. And there is not a science librarian. I want to become that science librarian.” He said, “My blessings—continue in your courses. We’d love to have you as a science librarian.”13

Stories of “accidental librarians” who did not initially intend to pursue the career of librarianship are an element of the social memory occurring many times over within the corpus of interviews. Jennifer Patterson, Rita Auerbach, Peggy Richwine, Nancy Fogarty, and ALA Past President Sarah Long were all motivated to choose librarianship after initially preparing to be teachers.

Ms. Richwine, a science librarian like Ms. Feinman, chose librarianship after teaching for a few years. She very much enjoyed teaching and describes it as a rewarding experience, but for reasons she chose not to share in the interview, she found that teaching did not give her the flexibility she desired. Academic librarianship in a science department allowed her flexibility and the ability to pursue her love of the sciences.
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