

**Oral History Interview**  
**with**  
**Duncan Aldrich**

Interview Conducted by  
Mary Larson  
June 29, 2009

Government Information Living Indexes  
Oral History Project



## ***Government Information Living Indexes*** ***Oral History Project***

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### **About Duncan Aldrich...**

Duncan Aldrich was born in Elmira, New York and went through grade school and junior high in Elmira. Then his family moved to Manchester, Massachusetts and then to Troy, Ohio where he graduated high school. After high school he pursued an undergraduate degree from Ohio University in History, graduating in 1974. He would then go on to earn two graduate degrees from the University of Oklahoma, a Master's in History in 1977 followed by a Master's in Library and Information Science in 1985.

In 1986 Aldrich began his library career as an international and state documents librarian at the University of Nevada-Reno. In 1990 he became head of the Government Publications Department at the University of Nevada –Reno and then in 1994 became the head of the combined Business & Government Information Center there. He is currently the Data Services Coordinator for the University of Nevada-Reno libraries.

Aldrich has been active within the government information community and within the American Library Association's Government Documents Round Table (GODORT) having served as chair of GODORT in 1994. He has also chaired GODORT's Legislation Committee, International Documents Task Force, and Publications Committee. He participated in the DuPont Circle meetings helping to facilitate the Chicago Conference on the Future of Government Information. In 1996 he authored the "Federal Depository Library Manual" and in 1996/97 he worked as an expert consultant for the Government Printing Office (GPO) and prepared the first draft of "Managing the GPO Access Collection," a discussion document outlining the electronic FDLP (Federal Depository Library Program).

Aldrich was appointed to the Depository Library Council twice, serving 1997-2003 and 2003-2006. He chaired the 1999/2000 session. He has also published several articles on the use of electronic government information products in libraries.

Aldrich lives in Sparks, Nevada with his wife, Mary.

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## *Oral History Project*

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## **Duncan Aldrich**

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Mary Larson

June 29, 2009

Reno, Nevada

**Larson**                    *Okay, today is June 25, 2009. My name is Mary Larson. I'm here at the University of Nevada-Reno with Duncan Aldrich and we're going to be talking about his career with government documents and information management. Now just to start out, could you tell me a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up, a little bit about your family and your hometown?*

**Aldrich**                    *Okay. I was raised in Elmira, New York, where I was born. Spent my school years in Elmira, however our summers were spent at my grandmother's in Erie, Pennsylvania. Went through grade school and junior high in Elmira. Moved to Manchester, by the sea, Massachusetts to finish most of high school and then moved to the Dayton Ohio area, Troy, Ohio where I actually graduated high school and then attended Ohio University.*

**Larson**                    *Okay. Do you remember the first library you visited as a child?*

**Aldrich**                    *Yes, I remember the library, and probably what I remember most about it was they had a place where children weren't allowed, the adult book area. And that has a really different connotation than it does today. I don't remember what the name of it was, as I'm trying to recall the look for the first time in probably forty-five years or so. It probably was a Carnegie library.*

**Larson**                    *Were there any librarians from the old days that stood out when you were a child, in your memory?*

**Aldrich**                    *Not really. No.*

**Larson**                    *Now if somebody had told you back in school that you were going to end up working as a librarian, what would you have thought?*

**Aldrich** I had no idea what I wanted to do when I was in school so I would have been surprised by anything that I found out about. So I would have been surprised. Not something I ever thought of doing until I was in college.

**Larson** *Now you've got a bachelor's and a master's degree in history. How did you get from history to government docs?*

**Aldrich** History to government docs? Actually it's feeding myself and my wife. In the summers when I was in graduate school, in the history program, I worked in the library. In one year I was running a crew—we were moving from one building to another and a job opened up and my boss at the time said, "Apply for it. I can't imagine you won't get it." So I did and then after one semester decided to—I was, at that time, enrolled as a PhD candidate in the history program and I just switched over to the library science masters.

**Larson** *Okay. And that would be how you decided on librarianship?*

**Aldrich**

**Larson**

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**Larson**

**Aldrich**

you should do it this way or that way, let's just make it work." It's a very day to day approach.

**Larson** *Now when you first started working in the library, the first job you had there, was that in government docs? Or was government documents something you got into a little later on.*

**Aldrich** When I first worked in the library as a library staff person, I ran the library stacks or managed the book collection and various other things to do with the building. Moved from there to the circulation department and then from there to interlibrary loan. I didn't actually work in a government documents department until I got my first professional position. And a good part of the reason I got the documents position at the University of Nevada is my advisor at Oklahoma was a guy named Chuck McClure and Chuck McClure was one of four or five top people in government documents at that time. He edited one of the main government information journals. So the job opened in Reno. I applied for it, he was one of my references and here I am, still, twenty-three or twenty-four years later.

**Larson** *So he would have had a big influence on you in that regard.*

**Aldrich** Yes, I think so. I wanted a public service job, and it was a public service job.

**Larson** *What did your family and friends think about the choice of going into librarianship?*

**Aldrich** I think they thought it was fine. My mom and dad both went to college and my dad's mom and dad both went to college so education is appreciated and working as a faculty person, and on a campus, is probably a pretty good thing.

**Larson** *Now once you got into government information, how well do you think your library school background prepared you for getting into that? Were there unanticipated challenges?*

**Aldrich** Oh boy, now you're asking the good questions. I'd say most of what I

**Larson** *No, no, as you said, it's the pragmatic things, the everyday things. It's hard to teach supervision, and that's hard.*

**Aldrich** You either learn it, or you don't. And if you don't, you get out.

**Larson** *Now do you want to talk a little bit about your work experiences at the different locations before you got into government documents and then after you got to UN-R?*

**Aldrich** Okay. Again, back in Oklahoma I started managing the stacks. One thing that I remember from that is that the crew I ran, which is about twenty student assistants, was also responsible for sorting out all the materials, pre-sorting the materials, before we took them up to the stacks to shelve. The sorting area was right behind the circulation desk where students sat and did homework while they were waiting for people to help. When I moved from stack management to circulation, the first thing I did was turn that around so that the circ students, in their spare time, were sorting. That's probably the first unpopular decision that I made as a manager. Well for the circ students.

**Larson** *Right (laughter). But it was efficient.*

**Aldrich** Yes and it worked.

**Larson** *Okay. So after that, why don't you talk a little bit about your first job in*

**Aldrich**

**Larson**

**Aldrich**

**Larson**

**Aldrich**





*Catalogs of government publications. So it was pretty quickly we began to move in the electronic direction.*

**Larson** *Okay and you got here around?*

**Aldrich** I got here in 1986. It was about three years later that the head of the department left. And eventually I became the head of the department.

**Larson** *Now you've mentioned a couple of times about public service. Do you have a favorite public service story?*

**Aldrich** Public service story...

**Larson** *I think every librarian has one of those odd public service stories. You know, the strangest request.*

**Aldrich** Well, I guess it'd have to be the person who came in and I was helping look through the *Nevada Revised Statutes* for information on diplomatic immunity. And it ends up, he was the ambassador from Venice. So it was an interesting discussion. Nevada does not have any stipulations regarding diplomatic immunity and he was unwilling to really listen to that.

**Larson** *And especially because I don't think we have diplomatic ties with Venice. No ambassadorial contacts.*

**Aldrich** That's right.

**Larson** *Well the first library that you worked in would have been Getchell.*

**Aldrich** Right.

**Larson** *Here on campus. Do you want to describe a little bit about what the work area was like? How it was laid out? Did it have that library smell?*

**Aldrich** Well the Getchell library was a catenation of two buildings and the government publications department was almost an entire floor of the old building. We had close to a million paper government documents and probably twice as many in microfiche and some microfilm. The interesting thing when we got here is we had one of the very few, again, microcomputers in the building. We had a front office where we had a phone modem hook up and all the librarians would do online searching. Back in those days, you didn't have things like—well Google's the obvious thing. But even the library databases we deal with today like EBSCO and ProQuest. Back then you had to come and sit down with a librarian and we charge you a lot of money and we'd put together



Bernadine was one of the original founders of GODORT. She was an EPA librarian, I believe, at that time, working for the EPA. Who else? Jack Selzer at Penn State. I'm thinking of people that I knew because they were the leadership in GODORT at that time. There was Susan Tulis, Julia Wallace, oh just many, many people. Couple of people in the government printing office that were important at that time were Jay Young and Don Fossedal, the Superintendent of Documents at that time.

**Larson** *Now was there anybody within the Gov Docs profession that sort of served as a mentor or role model for you? You mentioned Chuck had been important earlier?*

**Aldrich** There were really three that I'm going to rattle off the top of my head. One is Ridley Kessler who was at the University of North Carolina and later chaired the Depository Library Program. Jack Selzer, I mentioned already. He was the chair of GODORT then and later served on the Depository Library Council and Susan Tulis, who I already mentioned as well. I'm going to throw somebody else in there, too, Prue Adler, who was the legislative liaison for the ARL which is the Association for Research Libraries.

**Larson** *I know you would have been working closely, obviously, with the GPO. Were you dealing with a lot of gray literature or mainly books? Gray literature, manuscripts?*

**Aldrich** At that time it was almost exclusively government publications. And these are anything from Senate hearings to bills and public laws, statistical compendiums like *Digest of Education Statistics*. All kinds of stuff on health from pamphlets—I say we had a million items. It's not like a million big volumes. Thousands of these things were just pamphlets and sheets that get handed out in the offices. Maps, department...

**Larson** *Technical reports.*

**Aldrich** Technical reports. Environmental impact statements. All kinds of stuff. But not really gray literature.

**Larson** *Okay.*

**Aldrich** Okay. Now we got mostly the stuff that was finally published. Mostly stuff that was printed through the Government Printing Office. The agencies would check off whether it goes to the depository libraries.

**Larson** *Now when you first came to Reno, how did you learn your collection, essentially?*

**Aldrich**

I spent a lot of time in the collections. Basically, just reviewing it and reading some literature on how the agencies that I worked with published—or what their publishing patterns are. As well as how they organize their publications. International agencies tend to divide between documents and publications and I've been out of that for so many years it's blurring. Like books that they published versus official records of meetings and things like that, if they did studies or issued a report. Anyway, helping with the reference and walking around in the stacks a little bit and just seeing how it looks on the shelf and stuff like that.

**Larson**

*Okay. Now just personally, how do you tend to learn things? I mean not learning the collection but are you a visual person? Or are you a spatial person?*

**Aldrich**

Well it's interesting that you should ask this, spatial because I am a spatial person. I cannot read, as an example, a software manual. I need to sit down and put it in and just see what it does. And then go, oh I can't

**Larson**

**Aldrich**

**Larson**

**Aldrich**

**Larson**

*use and operate the older more traditional resources?*

**Aldrich**

And was the libraries or gov docs? I can't remember.

**Larson**

*Either one actually. I guess you could take libraries more generally and then government docs specifically.*

**Aldrich**

I would say mostly take advantage of the new because the reason it's new is it's working better than the way we used to do it. There are some things in government docs that are really specific to knowing how to assist in the area. Probably the most obvious is legislative tracing or tracking which means sort of follow from the introduction of a bill through its passage, or not passage, as a public law. What's the basis for the policy for clean water, or whatever. That's actually, I always thought, one of the most interesting parts of the whole thing. Another convoluted one is the patent procedure. Identifying how people would categorize a patent in order to pull up a list of the pertinent patents to what the person is thinking he or she is going to get a patent on.

**Larson**

*So trying to learn the organizational sense.*

**Aldrich**

Yes, so much of librarianship is just looking up stuff. If you want to look up stuff on Abe Lincoln you basically go into the card catalog or journal databases and look up Abraham Lincoln or the Battle of Shiloh. In the government information area, there's a lot of rich information that you need to know how to follow it back. I guess in Science and Chemistry that can be true too in following the atomic construct of chemicals and their interrelationship with literature and things like that.

**Larson**

*So really you have to know the system with gov docs more so than with some of the other reference.*

**Aldrich**

Some areas of reference. People need to be patient and learn those things because in the old days there was no quick way to get to the information. You needed to know all the steps. Now there's quick ways to get to the information. But if you don't know—not necessarily the steps we took to look them up, but just the steps involved, in say, the policy formulation process then you're going to miss a lot of stuff.

**Larson**

*Now, in working with government docs, what would you say are some of the major challenges working in the area? And that can be either at the beginning or now.*

**Aldrich**

And actually I'm out of government documents now.

**Larson**

*So when last you were involved.*

**Aldrich**

I would say the biggest challenge is informing or making other people in your library aware of the significance of government information to their research process. And that can be as simple as if a student is doing a five page history paper that, wow, there's a couple of government—you know, senate reports say, and I'm making this up completely, but on the Battle of the Little Bighorn. If they could throw those in as footnotes, their professor is going to be pretty impressed. Almost any social issue like teenage pregnancy, the TEACH Act or whatever these various education things are, you can just get a lot of really useful primary information. A lot of librarians who are used to working the main reference desk are going to look first in the journal literature and then the library catalog and may not take it the next step to say, "Oh, maybe there's some testimony in a congressional hearing that would be right on the topic this student is looking at."

**Larson**

*What do you think were the biggest rewards from working in government docs?*

**Aldrich**

The biggest rewards for me are the same as they are today, and that's making it happen for the person who needs it. Basically they have an information need, you can fill it. One really rewarding aspect of government information is hardly anything would be answered with a no. And by that, I mean if there isn't some information piece, you figure out what agency would be working on this particular issue and you pull out a federal government phonebook and you call. You might start with a library for that agency and call them and say, "Do you have anything on this?" Or you just call the agen

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**Aldrich**

but I don't know if they've actually got it up to current but the—at least the first hundred or some years of the *Congressional Record* and the *Congressional Serial Set* are digitalized. And you can go in and put Little Bighorn and find that it was referred to in a hearing that had absolutely nothing to do with the battle of Little Bighorn but there's an interesting couple of paragraphs in there that are just “Wow, nobody's ever used this before,” because they never would have stumbled upon it. So you just have this incredibly greater ability to access the information and manage it and ship the information. I mean, we've probably all by now attached word documents or PDF's to an email and sent it to a colleague. I hated faxes. And before that it would have been mail. I gave a talk one time in Orono, Maine where I was playing the devil's advocate role and just pushing for total electronic. I got into this idea of containers and what I want to do is take the information out of the container and just (sound effect) you know.

**Larson** *Let it run loose.*

**Aldrich** Yeah. Pretty much.

**Larson** *Give it the run of the place.*

**Aldrich** Yeah. And another talk I gave for the Department of Energy I did an analogy to the Starship Enterprise

**Larson**

**Aldrich**

and about so you have fifty to a hundred complete collections of digital information as well as paper information. I still think that's a little bit of a pipe dream. I think if you have a good archival system with reasonably good back up, that's good enough.

So they had to do the two systems and then there's also the politics of

**Larson**

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**Larson**



*world?*

**Aldrich** I would have to say it's a false argument. I mean it's a straw man. If you have a million items in your collection, you're probably only handling a few thousand. If it's digital and you put in a keyword search, you can pull up all the items that have Wounded Knee or whatever I was using as an analogy earlier. So I think you're way better off with the digital than you were with the tangible collection. Yeah there's a couple of thousand items that may become your friends and maybe they don't become your friends when they're in computer, in the same way.

**Larson** *Although I would think if you're doing public service, you're going to come up with the same documents a lot of the time in the same way you would if you were physically handling them.*

**Aldrich** Yes, you would.

**Larson** *The other thing you mentioned before was systems. If you know the systems, maybe it's the sense of knowing the systems more so than knowing the individual items. If you know the system, you know how to get to things, which may be...*

**Aldrich** It really works in government documents because in the call number system, they use the SuDoc number. For example SuDoc 1.1 for whatever agency is always going to be your annual reports and things of that nature. So A 1.1 would be your Department of Ag Annual Reports.

**Larson**

**Aldrich**

probably the most rigorous committee you can get on in GODORT because there's all kinds of efforts to rewrite the laws that pertain to the depository program and that's—I mentioned NTIS earlier, you know trying to monkey around with some of their regulations to make them more open to depository collections.

The next year Jack Selzer, who was the following Chair of GODORT after Susan, asked me if I would chair the legislation committee. And perhaps in retrospect, foolishly, I said, "Sure. That sounds like it will look really good on that resume for tenure." And that's just a really pretty heavy-duty lot of shots being taken at you and learn to stiffen up a little bit. So that's how I really got launched into it. A few years later—actually after I got tenure at UN-R, the nominations committee asked me if I would run for chair of GODORT. Actually I said no before I had tenure, but after I had tenure I said, "Yeah okay, I'll do that" and got elected chair of GODORT and that was I think 1984-85.

In 1985, in the spring, was approached by the Government Printing Office. They were hiring depository librarians to consult on their transition to a more electronic depository program. That meant working for them full time for a year and moving to Ws a

**Larson**

**Aldrich**

that time I was chair in my third year. And then I was on again probably 2000, 1, 2, and 3. I'd have to look that up.

**Larson** *Just ball park.*

**Aldrich** Yeah.

**Larson** *You mentioned there was an important publication that came out of the GPO work. Do you remember what?*

**Aldrich** Yeah. It was describing how the digital depository program would work. And I'd have to look up—sorry...

**Larson** *It's okay.*

**Aldrich** I'd have to look it up again. That was about a ten page report. It's pretty short.

**Larson** *Now I saw reference to the fact that you participated in the DuPont Circle meetings and helped facilitate the Chicago Conference on the future of government information, is that what led into the GPO work?*

**Aldrich** I think so. I got onto the DuPont Circle group because I was chair elect of GODORT. You have to bring the chair elect in to carry the work on as things progressed. Then one thing that was decided is that we should have a conference of depository librarians, just kind of pulled together, seat of the pants, ad hoc, rather than part of ALA or ARL or the GPO. I was part of the planning group for that0 TD.0sTJrcle gup then tim1.9( )TjJ-14.69 -1.15

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were having to press your agenda you felt maybe a little bit like you know one of the bad boys or something. So at conferences I think...

**Larson** *The maverick gov docs.*

**Aldrich** Yeah the mavericks sorts of thing. And you were all then thrown together with all these other sort of mavericks. And perhaps like oral historians within the history profession. I don't know, a little bit different in some ways than the main stream. So I think there's a lot of camaraderie in that. Plus you work differently in a lot of ways. It's the same with all of you but different from everybody else. So while you do some of the cataloging and some of the public service that everybody does, you just do this really unique set of things.

**Larson** *Now we were talking about GPO and FDLP and everything. Having worked with the FDLP council and having chaired it, what's your vision of the program? What you think it will be doing in say 2015 or 2021?*

**Aldrich** What I would like to see it be doing is providing almost totally digital access to federal information. And again, other than maybe having like federal depository librarians rather than federal deposit libraries. So there are librarians in institutions who are affiliated with the program and hence the librarian in that way would be associated. Because the skill is really going to be—as the collections become more electronic, there's less of a reason—less containers you need to manage in the building. So you have less need for those specialized people who manage the collection. So what you need though is to maintain that level of expertise with the materials so that's something, again, we talked a lot about in my second stint on the council is having the skill set without having the collections. And that's where some people would say that just won't happen. And I don't know, we'll see. The programs—I don't know. I'm going to kind of finally say I don't know.

**Larson**

**Aldrich**

**Larson**

**Aldrich**

You know, there's always kind of a threat to the GPO as a federal agency, as agencies in all kinds of governments realize that any day the rug could be pulled out from under and zoom. So there's always an edge of that. I think that probably a really significant thing that Bruce James did, and I will say that it's an odd thing because I'm not sure how much I appreciated what Bruce was doing as the Public Printer when he was the Public Printer. But I do really appreciate the fact that he really pushed GPO into a more electronic environment. I was working at GPO under his predecessor and it wasn't at that time. But he just came in and said there isn't going to be a call on the part of the federal government for printing presses like we run ten-fifteen years from now. So if we're going to survive as an institution and maintain a level of centrality for government information so all agencies aren't just going out to all different kinds of private sector publishers or just throwing their stuff up on to the web willy-nilly, the GPO needs to reinvent itself. He did a really good job of setting up a system that's just about to be launsc cot

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years ago it was, “Oh people are just using Google,” and we’re still there in the library world, generally, as questions that come up that we as

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**Larson** *Do you have an “I-can’t-believe-they-did-that-in-the-library story?”*

**Aldrich** You mean from one of our customers?

**Larson** *No no, probably the staff is what I’m thinking. I mean just something bizarre ...*

**Aldrich** Boy.

**Larson** *Pink flamingoes in the hallway.*

**Aldrich** I’m usually the one doing the weird stuff.

**Larson** *(laughter)*

**Aldrich** Can’t believe they did that in the library. One thing we did when we got our poster printing operation going was we got a life size cut out of President Glick and had students have their pictures taken with Glick.

**Larson** *Oh I missed that.*

**Aldrich** And we would print out and give---we were promoting that we had this poster service. That was a little off the wall.

**Larson** *When you began working in government information, and I realize you’re not there now, but did you think you’d stay in it as long as you did?*

**Aldrich** Same as my early answer about you know in high school if I thought I’d be a librarian, no idea. That’s what I was doing day to day so that’s basically what I was looking at. And I’ve known a couple of people, actually one, Maggie Farrell. She’s in Wyoming now. When I first met her she was brand new as a documents librarian and said, “In five years I’ll be this and ten years I’ll be a library director.” And she was a library director at Wyoming in ten years. That, to me, was just so amazing that somebody would...

**Larson** *Chart a path like that.*

**Aldrich** Chart a path like that. To me it was. I want to do well in what I’m doing on a day to day basis and just get on with my life.

**Larson** *Now when you ran into difficult questions in the gov docs area, was there one place that you could always turn for answers? Besides the federal phone book, I guess.*



**Aldrich**

We had a couple of really good staff people in the building who had been working in documents for years so I could turn to them. In about 1992-93 they started a listserv called GovDoc-L and I was actually, early on, involved as a moderator in GovDoc-L. Like with any listserv now, “Hey, has anybody ever been asked how many pieces are in a Scrabble game?” Of course, we wouldn’t get that, but there is a Scrabble game sitting right there which is why I used that example. Or like how many zebras are there in Africa? That’s actually one of the few “no” questions I’ve got. No, who would count how many zebras there are in

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**Aldrich**

The biggest impact, maybe it was the first speech I ever gave at a Depository Council meeting in about 1990 and four-hundred people out there, scared to death, about a twelve minute talk on what to do with these CD-ROMs that they're sending us in the mail. I outlined a concept that I actually borrowed from another librarian called Levels of Service. And it was basically the census stuff you need to be able to help them with. This other thing, and I gave about four levels of service. And I said, "and, of course, you all got the

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**Aldrich**

back in the early 1980's about—it was by a guy named Lancaster talking about the paperless society, I was thinking well instead of reading a book, maybe you'd have something like—remember heating pads?

**Larson**                    *Yes.*

**Aldrich**                    That you'd put on your leg or whatever, and it had a wire going. So I still imagined a wire. But you could read it and then you'd just kind of scroll through the pages and maybe have audio coming out of it and stuff like that. So when Amazon did the Kindle, I went, "Well I was thinking something a little more flexible." You have the container but you can change the contents all the time.

**Larson**                    *You can change what's in the bucket.*

**Aldrich**                    Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Larson**                    *Well is there anything that you'd like to talk about that we haven't touched on so far?*

**Aldrich**                    What would I like to talk about? You know I guess I'll probably pass on that. I'm not sure. I'm sure if we were at that bar on Friday night, I'd probably come up with a few things, but nah.

**Larson**                    *Okay.*

**Aldrich**                    This is fine.

**Larson**                    *Thanks very much for your time, we really appreciated it.*

**Aldrich**                    Well, thank you.

*----- End of interview -----*