

Oral History Interview
with
Mary Redmond

Interview Conducted by
Cassandra Hartnett
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Government Information Living Indexes
Oral History Project

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Interview History

Interviewer: Cass Hartnett
Transcribers: Cass Hartnett and Angelica Johnson
Editor: Cass Hartnett and Mary Redmond

Project Detail

The oral histories collected as a result of this project will preserve the voices and experiences of government information workers who have invested a good portion of their careers to providing and insuring access to government information.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Mary Redmond is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on April 25, 2011.

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About Mary Redmond ...

Mary Redmond was born in Staten Island, New York, and spent much of her childhood in Bensenville, Illinois, where her parents were instrumental in the founding of that community's library. She earned an undergraduate degree from Rosary College, a Master of Music History from the University of Illinois, and a Master of Arts in Library Science from Rosary College (now Dominican University).

Her first professional library appointment was at the Illinois State Library in Springfield, where she served for twelve years. Her Illinois years included the ten months of the Illinois State Constitutional Convention, after which she compiled an index to the convention's proceedings. On December 31, 1981, she began a new job at the New York State Library. During her 25 years there, Ms. Redmond became active in local, state, and national associations. She worked with other New York State Library staff members to organize conferences in support of New York State and federal documents. She participated in the American Library Association's Coalition on Government Information, chaired the ALA Government Documents Round Table, and helped organize GODORT's 2009 Forum on the Future of Government Information. In 1991, she and her institution were awarded the CIS/GODORT/ALA Documents to the People award for their accomplishments in helping establish and reform a depository library system for New York State documents. Mary retired in 2007,

that. And then the library grew slowly. It was just one room in the local public high school for awhile. And over the years they had bond issues and it grew and now it's quite a nice facility but I do remember going there and primarily just taking everything and reading (checking it out of course!) going through the shelves and reading everything I could get my hands on, pretty much.

Hartnett *Now, did you ever travel downtown into Chicago and visit some of the large libraries there, or was that not part of the experience for you?*

Redmond Not in my childhood. Later on, when I went to college in River Forest, and library school also, I did go down and do some research at the main Chicago Public Library, which of course is quite large and very impressive, but I didn't do that as a young child.

Hartnett *If someone had told you then that you would end up being a librarian, what do you think your reaction might have been?*

Redmond Well, I'm embarrassed to say this, but I really didn't have any idea what a librarian really did. And between my junior and my senior year in high school, my parents sent me down to the Illinois Institute of Technology to take a whole battery of aptitude and interest tests. And then we had an appointment with the counselor, who told me all the things that I could do. And the thing they identified that I should do is to be a librarian. And I was appalled! All I knew [was the person at the desk in our local library]. And I'm sure this woman was a perfectly capable, wonderful person, but I only saw her in a role of sitting at the desk, charging books in and out. I'm sure that was only a tiny part of what she did, so I was ... I had no interest in that. And it took me years of stumbling around, to tell you the truth, to decide I wanted to be a librarian. In the meantime, I had completely forgotten about this aptitude test, and I found it in the piano bench! (Laughs) By accident! I found it about ten years after I had become a librarian, and I went to my father and said "You can't believe this!"

Hartnett *how old do you think you were when you took the assessment?*

Redmond I was probably about 17. It was between my junior and senior year.

Hartnett *Okay, it really was kind of a prep, looking forward.*

Redmond Yes. My parents had me go for the tests because they wanted to4.624 361

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Hartnett

k about those experiences a little bit. Talk about college, your experiences in college, the good and the bad of college. What inspired you about college, and what was challenging?

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[involved], once I joined, it took me a little longer after joining to actually get active, but once I got into it, I've never looked back. I'm now a thirty year plus member of ALA.

Hartnett

Redmond By the way, if you stick around for thirty years, they give you ... the rest of your membership is free.

Hartnett

Redmond I didn't even know that 'til I got to that thirty year mark. I thought, "Wow, that's pretty good!" I still have to pay for GODORT and other divisions and round tables, but you get the basic association membership free.

Hartnett

Redmond Yes, yes it is.

Hartnett *Who were some of your early influences within the Illinois Library Association, if you remember? Were there people from other libraries*

Redmond I'm sure that they did. I do remember particularly Barbara Ford, who later became President of ALA, she was one of my colleagues in those days. And I do think also,-- some of the people in ILA might not be national, might not be that well known in government documents circles. However, Tony Miele was the Vice-Chair of GODORT very early on, I think. He and Lois Mills, who I actually didn't know until after I left Illinois. Lois Mills was really active, wherever she went, she was extremely active.

Hartnett *Deserving of the title **maverick**.*

Redmond Yes.

Hartnett *Or **maven**.*

Redmond Yes, absolutely. All the good things you can think to say about Lois are true.

Hartnett *Were there times when you felt overwhelmed by the amount of information you had to learn, to do this kind of work you were doing at the State Library?*

Redmond

Well, I do remember when I first came, they gave me an orientation and they showed me [around]. They were a regional federal depository library and they also administered an Illinois depository program. So they had very good collections of both. And coming in without the documents background, I can still remember the person showing me around the federal documents. She said “I lobbied for them to adopt the SuDocs system!” And I had no idea what SuDocs was, and I sagely nodded as if I knew. Later on, I found out. But the first day I was on the reference desk by myself, the phone rang. And before I answered, I thought “Please don’t let that be a government documents question. PLEASE!”

Hartnett

That was the telltale moment!

Redmond

Of course it was a government documents question. But I still remember, I didn’t have any idea where this stuff was. I felt fairly safe in saying, which I did, “Oh yes, we have that information. May I take your number and call you back?” And then I went and asked the person, and we had it. So I did feel very overwhelmed at first, but I learned, you chip away at this. Nobody, even if you had 30 years of experience, is going to be able to walk into any library and be able to answer everything off the top of your head, so bit by bit, it kind of fell into place.

Hartnett

One of the things we tell our graduate students at the University of

And it sounds like you would agree with that.

Redmond

Yes, absolutely. One of my bosses said, it can take anywhere from two-to five years to become a really good reference librarian, just a reference librarian in general which would include I imagine government information. Yeah, I was very overwhelmed at first, but you know after a while, you kind of figure out what you’re doing.

Hartnett

a very professional thing to do! Do you remember how you went about learning things? In other words, were there continuing education courses? Or did you read the professional literature? Or was it more a matter of familiarizing yourself, just through the daily work?

Redmond

I think it was a combination of all of those things. One of the things that I did was to try to examine as much of the collection as possible and familiarize myself with the contents, especially for Illinois documents,. They had a separately shelved collection of Illinois documents, so you

could get an idea of everything in that collection. And they used Dewey with a capital I in front of the call number to denote an Illinois state document. So I went from 000 to 999. I took every single thing off the shelf. I did this after hours. Because there wasn't time during the day. And I took notes.

Hartnett *Oh my goodness.*

Redmond So I really feel that I got pretty familiar with that collection by doing that.

Hartnett *It sounds like an exhausting prospect but a very dedicated individual.*

Redmond Redmond: But I really felt like it paid off, in the long run. Because then I really *could* say, when someone called and asked "Do you have this?" yes or no. And then to supplement that, the State Library published a checklist of Illinois documents every month. So once I did the initial research, then I just looked at the checklist every month, and I knew what they were adding. I also did have continuing education opportunities. And the other thing that I did was I -- there was a man, I think his last name was Schmeckeber.

Hartnett *Oh yes. Laurence L[(re)]yes. Lau*

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that building felt like, how the books smelled. What was the setting there?

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Redmond Actually, my first day there was December 31, 1981.

Hartnett *1981.*

Redmond And that was a Thursday, because you had to start on a Thursday, and the next day was New Year's, and then there was a weekend. And so I worked one day, then I was all by myself in Albany for three days in a hotel, because I didn't have my furniture and other personal effects which were being shipped from Illinois. And I began to think, "I'm so lonesome! Am I really going to like this?" But then of course I did, once I got settled in.

Hartnett

and you get to sort of recreate yourself. But it sounds to me like you were already really establishing yourself in the profession, because

did you supervise, and what was the set up of that reference department?

Redmond Well, this was actually called Legislative and Governmental Services. It was a small unit, about nine people, and we were separate from Reference. We were supposed to provide, and did provide, what they called specialized or enhanced services, for legislative and governmental clients. So we produced publications, we had seminars, we did have a special service point, which was for the legislators and state government: we had a service point over in the Legislative Office Building. We had, also, a service point out on the State Office campus, to serve the state

Hartnett

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time went on, I don't want to anticipate your question, but I did take on more of the government documents responsibilities. In addition I volunteered, when the Regional Coordinator decided he wanted to do something else

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were Karen Smith, who was head of the depository program, the

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Hartnett *Describe how technology has impacted your work over the years. I love asking people about their technology memories. I mean, do you remember early computer systems you worked on?*

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Redmond Yes.

Hartnett *What we would now call government transparency, by any other name. Do you remember a time when certain kinds of government records were much more difficult to get, as compared to what they are now?*

Redmond Oh yes, yes. Although but the time I really got active in government documents, that was starting to become a little bit less of a problem. But

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Redmond That's an interesting thought. You know, who knows, if the right opportunity – you never know!

Hartnett *I could see you as a Congressional staffer, you know, a high level*

Redmond I have to say at the state level, I tend to be somewhat timid. And in jobs like the kind you mentioned, there's no civil service protection. And I really did not feel confident enough that I wanted to take a chance. I mean, you can meet people who are long time staffers. I do remember Bernadine Abbott Hoduski saying that when she worked for Congress, every time there was a change in administrations, they had to submit their resignations. Now of course they hired her back and they hired many people back, but you could not count on that. So I admire people who've got that kind of courage but I wasn't one of them. Although I do think it would probably have been very interesting. Who knows?

Hartnett *what are your memories of coming to this city over the course of your career and continuing to come here to visit family? What memories do you have of Washington DC some memorable moments, or things the city was like then and now?*

Redmond Well, I have to admit, the first couple of years, in the late '60s, early '70s, there were some concerns about public safety. I remember when I told my father I was going to a meeting down in Washington one time, he was really worried. And thankfully I think a lot of that has definitely improved. But in addition to the meetings that I attended, just walking down the Mall, and going to those wonderful museums that are free! You know, it just doesn't matter whether it's the art museum – I can't remember the name of it.

Hartnett *The National Gallery of Art, and the Smithsonian.*

Redmond ... and all of them! They've added to them: the Hirschorn Sculpture Gallery and I think there's a – I've been to it! -- the African Art Museum. I love the National Zoo -- every time I'm in Washington, I try to take an opportunity to go. This is not a government facility, but the Newseum. For a while, part of my responsibilities involved the New York State Newspaper Project, and I love newspapers, almost as much as I love government documents! (Laughs) So I visited the Newseum when it was in Rosslyn, and now of course it's down in Washington, and it's a wonderful facility. So, just walking down the street, even if you're not going into anything, just to be in Washington is so exciting! And the Library of Congress of course is a wonderful place to visit also.

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he's still going strong. His family had a really bad health situation, several of his siblings died fairly young. It's quite amazing he has lived as long as he has and been so active.

Hartnett

*Well and speaking of active people, so many of your colleagues are at
decide to retire and what kind of projects are you involved with in
retirement?*

Redmond

Well I had been Interim Director of the State Library for four years and at the end of the time a choice was made to select a permanent director who I think is wonderful and is doing a great job. That of course meant

Hartnett

Redmond

(obviously, making sure that your contributions are useful to the library)? You do have the facilities you do need. It's a perfect job and you know you are not getting paid a salary, but you've got your pension [laughing]. In a way it's better than a paid job for me.

Hartnett

(Laughs)

h my own colleagues, the kinds of complicated decision making that comes at the time of retirement. However, I want to now go a little bit backwards in time because you say Interim Assistant State Librarian?

Redmond

I was Interim Director of the New York State Library, of the research library.

Hartnett

What are your ideas about the role of state libraries today where the been very in touch with that group of colleagues, what do you see as some of the roles and challenges, or is that something you care to comment on?

Redmond

Oh, of course. Well I think one of the major things that has happened all throughout the states—explanatory for the tape, I dropped my glasses; we both had to fumble for my glasses—is the role for the statewide contracts for online databases for libraries. It would be impossible for

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kind of encouragement would you give them? Or do you have any thoughts about the challenges of new people coming in and trying to learn the new and the old?

Redmond Yes, well it is definitely challenging. I wish I had become professionally active sooner than I had. If you don't want to tackle ALA right away, there should be a regional or local or state [group] because that is where you can meet a lot of aficionados of documents and really get your toes in the ground or into the water. I would certainly say keep reading the "old literature" -- Schmeckebier, Morehead -- it's still valid.

Hartnett *Boyd and Rips!*

Redmond Yes, Yes, Yes and there are others that I'm sure if I could stop to think about, I'd probably remember. They're classics, they really are. I would say try to get to the Depository Library Council. Even if you only go every couple of years, I find it a tremendously valuable opportunity to find out what's going on. It's wonderful to have all this online communication, but until I actually started to go to meetings and meet people, I would volunteer to do things and no one would ever accept my volunteering because why would they when they had people that were right there that they could turn to and they *knew* and they were active? And I think, I keep saying volunteer, I think people should volunteer where they're in their institution. If they're in a depository library, they're still people who are afraid of documents. Anybody who is in a depository library or even not a depository, anybody who's working with documents, if you say you're interested and you want to help and learn, I bet your offer will be accepted (Laughs). I think that's a fair statement to say.

Hartnett *do* (Laughs).

Redmond Yes, yes, absolutely and I do think that, we kind of touched on it a little bit but I do remember if you look at some of the GODORT programs over the last couple of years, one of my all time favorites, it was called "Shotgun Weddings and Amicable Divorces" and it was the integration of reference within government documents and then there was something similar a couple of years ago. It's a fact of life whether we like it or not, administrators are going to say we cannot afford in many cases to have these special collections, special service desks, special this, special that. It's got to be a part of whole the system. And to think of it as an opportunity because you if you already learning this, you already have it, you can make yourself so valuable to your organization as well as to the patrons who come in looking for the information. Don't let that opportunity slip away from you (Laughs).

