

Oral History Interview
with
Larry Romans

Interview Conducted by
Tanya Finchum
January 25, 2009

Government Information Living Indexes
Oral History Project

Government Information Living Indexes Oral History Project

Interview History

Interviewer: Tanya Finchum
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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

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.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma Stat

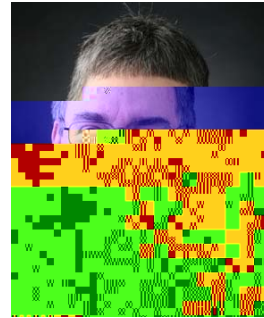
Government Information Living Indexes

Oral History Project

Larry Romans

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Interviewed by Tanya Finchum
January 25, 2009
Denver, Colorado



Finchum *Today is January 25, 2009. My name is Tanya Finchum. I'm the Coordinator for a project called Government Information Living Indexes, and I'm here today in Denver, Colorado with Larry Romans who has been a long-time member of GODORT and some have referred to him as "Mr. GODORT." So thank you for joining me today. I should back up and say that your title is Head of Government Information and...*

Romans *and Media Services, Political Science and Communication Studies bibliographer at Vanderbilt University.*

Finchum *Lots of hats.*

Romans *That's right.*

Finchum *Thank you for joining me today. Let's have you start by telling us a little bit about your childhood, where you were born, and then we'll work forward.*

Romans *I was born in Bangor, Maine. My family moved down to Florida when I was about five, and I grew up in West Palm Beach, Florida. The first library that I used was the West Palm Beach public library, and my first taste of libraries was working on summer reading programs to see how many books I could read and get a certificate, and that was always very exciting to me. Then in high school, I was on the debate team and so we used the library a lot then. I'm sure I used a lot of government documents, but I didn't think of government documents as something separate from other types of the library materials back then.*

Finchum *Did you ever think about being a librarian in high school?*

Romans *No. From about fifth grade I had decided I wanted to be a political*

science professor and so that was my orientation for, I don't know, 10 or

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week before I graduated and started as the history and political science bibliographer. That was what I wanted to do. I wanted to be either a political science bibliographer or a government documents librarian.

Linda Williamson was the government documents librarian, and she was great, but at the time she had been there about 14 years and I was thinking, “How in the world could somebody stay 14 years in the same job?” So I worked part-time in her area to keep my hand in, and about three years later she got a job at Oxford University in England and I moved over to Government Information. All of the people that I knew thought I was crazy—“What in the world are you thinking of? Who would ever want to go into Government Information?” I continued to be the political science bibliographer and I was the government documents librarian. That was exactly what I wanted to do, and so I’ve now been doing it for 25 years. In our Government Documents department, there have only been two librarians in the last 43 years. That’s, I think, pretty unusual.

Finchum *It is. In your library program, did you have a government documents class?*

Romans I did take a government documents class as a throw-away class. The person who taught that was this wonderful woman named Cosette Kies, but she had no on-the-job government documents experience. She was teaching it from an academic background rather than a practical background. I knew a lot more about the day-to-day aspects than she did, so she kind of relied on me to keep her honest about this stuff. It was a learning experience for me, too, but it didn’t contribute much to my documents career.

Finchum *Once you moved over into the government documents side of the library, how did you learn that big collection? Was it a repository?*

Romans Well Tulane and Stetson both were depositories, too.

Finchum *Selective or regional?*

Romans All three of them are selectives. I can’t remember what percentage Stetson got, but at the time I think Tulane was getting in the 60 percent and that’s what Vanderbilt does now. So I really already had a whole lot of experience at that point. When I started in the Vanderbilt department, we didn’t even have an electric typewriter; we only had manual typewriters. Of course, no computers, and this was pretty late. This was about 1984, 1985 something like that. So my first thing was just to get an electronic typewriter to type up cards. People find that hard to believe. We shared a personal computer, some of the bibliographers,

right about 1984, 1985. It was one of those word processing programs where if you made a mistake you had to call up that individual line and make the change and save it back into the document and then call up the

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Now in our department, we must have five or six computers for a four-

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particular?

Romans Well, I'd like to say it was my charm, but I think he found that he really liked library work and he found government documents particularly interesting and a position opened up at Sewanee. He didn't have an MLS at the time but it was in government documents and he applied and he got the job. Since then he's gotten his MLS and he moved to a public library and back to Sewanee, and so now he's in charge of Public Services. I think we did do a good job about indoctrinating him about government information because I think that's still his real love.

Finchum *How do you train someone that comes in that's really interested in learning the collection?*

Romans Well I think for all of the students we do some fairly extensive training because they need to be able to answer basic questions at night and on the weekend. When we see somebody is really interested in it, then we give them more training and also we started letting him answer questions. We gave Kevin the first stab at answering the questions and he did very well and it just had a snowball effect.

Finchum *It's hard for new ones coming in to learn the collection. They've got the old versus the new? So do you have any secrets to learning the ropes?*

Romans One of the things that really helps in our department is that we really focus a lot on web pages. We have our own government information web page and a really good political science one. We get a broken link report every month and the students start by checking those things and that's how they get comfortable with it. We have maybe 6,000 websites linked from our page so users get a pretty broad view. Then with reference questions we let them take the lead on what they want to do. The younger the person is, the more apt they're going to start with the electronic sources than with the paper sources. Depending on how they do it, we try to familiarize them with the other kinds of sources, you know, and I think that's basically how it goes. We have a student manual, online tutorials, and lots of sample questions.

Finchum *Have you taught government documents classes?*

Romans No, I haven't. The woman who used to work with me in our department until recently, Amy Stewart-Mailhiot, has been teaching classes at the University of Washington. It's been a really interesting experience to me to watch her prepare for her classes, and it really is a fascinating process. She teaches a distance course, but she has to actually go there a couple of times a semester and she keeps me up to date with everything she's doing.

- Finchum** *And ask you for advice on things?*
- Romans** Yes, sometimes.
- Finchum** *Let's switch gears and talk about your involvement with GODORT.*
- Romans** I forget what year it was that I first started going to GODORT meetings; it was in the 80's. I swear the first GODORT meeting that I went to was the Education Committee. At least it was the first meeting I went to at that conference. I don't remember others and it just so happened that half of the committee had resigned, including the chair. So they asked the people in attendance if they wanted to be on the committee and so I said, "Sure." They also needed a chair, and I think I put my hand up volunteering about 10 seconds before Atifa Rowan did, and so I became the chair of the Education Committee.
- One of the things that we started doing when I was chair was the GODORT Handout Exchange, and at the time it literally was handouts. I would contact different people across the country to see what kind of handouts they had, you know, "finding aids," things for classes, "How do you use the CIS index?" or those kinds of things. People would send us 200 physical copies of these and we'd set up tables on Saturday morning for the GODORT Update and people would come and pick up all of the handouts. Well that was pretty unwieldy. We were wheeling in dollies full of these handouts and so we switched to 5-1/4 inch diskettes. Then we changed to the smaller diskettes, and then we moved to a gopher site because Grace York from the University of Michigan volunteered to do that. Then we moved to a website, and I guess for 15 or so years it's been done through the web so we're no longer carting the paper versions around.
- When I stop doing all the stuff that I'm doing now I'd like to focus a little more on the Handout Exchange again. I think that it can be really helpful to a lot of different people but because nobody has really taken responsibility for it right now that it's just kind of sailing. I'd like to get it really more cutting edge than it has been.
- Finchum** *In the earlier days of that, you had to make phone calls or write letters. You didn't do e-mails, I guess.*
- Romans** Right. It was a much longer process to get those handouts. People had to agree not only to run off hundreds of copies and the expense of that, but to take the trouble to ship them to us. It depended on just a lot of cooperation from a lot of people.
- Finchum** *Kind of the precursor to Browse Topics?*

Romans Exactly, yes. Even better than Browse Topics. (Laughs)

Finchum *From an OSU person,—well, we'll talk about that later. (Laughter)
That kind of led up to you being the recipient of the Documents to the
People Award in 1995, right?*

Romans Right ...

Finchum *Part of it?*

Romans Yes. I think that probably had more to do with my getting that award than anything, although right about that time I also started the FDTF Frequently Used Sites site and so I think that was part of it, too.

Finchum *If someone was to come up to you today and ask if it's a good idea to get into government information, what would you tell them?*

Romans Well I think that it's just a wonderful area to be in. The thing these days, of course, is that at more and more places there isn't a separate government information department. I would really encourage people to specialize in government information but I'm not sure what the job situation is going to be in the fu

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leadership clique and there was a group of people who seemed to just keep sharing the different positions, you know, trading them off among themselves. As I got more involved and took on more responsibility within GODORT, I opened up the round table some. In the appointments that I could make, I got new people involved and people who had been around awhile but just couldn't seem to get connected to any particular GODORT group. I think any chair of GODORT brings in new people, but I think I did a particularly good job of doing so. There are a number of people who have gone on to get really involved in GODORT and to hold pretty high offices in GODORT who are people who started because I appointed them to a committee the first time. Of everything that happened in that year that I was chair that was probably the thing that I did that was best.

Finchum *Nurture them on?*

Romans Yes.

Finchum *Well did you have a role model or someone in particular you modeled yourself after in the GODORT world or Government Information, either one?*

Romans No, I don't really think I have a mentor other than Charlotte Smith back at Stetson who was so involved in government information. I've certainly had lots of people who have been helpful that I think have also been mentors to other people. One of those people is Andrea Severson, who was GODORT chair two or three years before I was. I'm not sure that Andrea and I ever agreed on much of anything, but she knows so much about the process of making GODORT work that whenever I felt out of my depth I would contact her and she almost always knew what needed to happen. So I think of all of the people who were helpful the year I was chair, that she probably was the person I relied on the most.

Finchum *Who did you rely on when you had a difficult government information question at the library? If you couldn't answer it, who would you ...*

Romans Luckily in the first years there was Linda Williamson, who was the Documents librarian, and also during that time Gretchen Dodge was her assistant. I helped hire Gretchen and I knew she was the one that Linda Williamson would want and she was not my first choice, but she ended up working with me for 18 years. She was just wonderful, and between the two of us we could answer just about anything. I think these days probably the person that I ask the most things of is Jim Church at Berkeley because I think I'm not as up on international documents as I am on federal documents and so if he doesn't know the answer, he knows someone who does - so I'd say he was probably one of them.

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Romans Well I'm not sure everybody would think that I'm a nice guy, but I think there are enough of them that do, so it felt good.

Finchum *What are some of the things you're doing at the bigger ALA?*

Romans Well, one of the things that I did a few years ago was be chair of the Committee on Legislation (COL) and being COL chair was one of the two things that I really wanted to do in ALA. It's kind of hard to be able to become COL chair because there are a lot of people who want to have that position. I really loved doing it, but as it turned out, I needed a liver transplant and the annual that I was chair, I was in the hospital getting a liver transplant. So I wasn't able to do as much in that job as I really wanted to.

But two years ago I was elected to the Executive Board of ALA. I thought I knew so much about the American Library Association, but when I got on the Executive Board it was amazing to realize how little I knew about ALA. It's a fascinating job. You are approving a budget of over \$50 million a year. You're dealing with all kinds of personnel issues. You make a great deal of difference on policy issues and so forth. It's just an amazing experience. The way I got to do that is that I was already on ALA Council and that was kind of a luck thing. The Tennessee Library Association was looking for somebody to run for ALA Council. I didn't even know what ALA Council was. I said, "Oh, sure," and I was pretty sure the other person was going to win, but I ended up winning. I learned a lot about the governance of ALA at that point, and I've actually been an ALA Councilor now for 16 years. I'm one of five people who have been on the Council all that time.

Finchum *Continuously?*

Romans Continuously, yes, and so as a result of that you really get to know the movers and shakers in ALA, and you can affect what happens. I think one of the best things that I was able to do for GODORT and other roundtables was until I started pushing it, roundtables didn't have a councilor. After a pretty long fight about it, we were finally able to get the top five roundtables to have councilors and at the time GODORT was one of the top five. Well, a couple of years ago we slipped down to

at-large, but it's still not quite the same thing as having somebody who is working for you—that's their job.

Finchum *Sixteen years. Is there a term limit?*

Romans No, there isn't a term limit, and people come up with that on a fairly regular basis. There really are very few of us who are crazy enough to be on it that long. My latest term as a councilor-at-large actually ends at the end of June but I'm still on the Council because I'm an Executive Board Member, so I'll be doing it at least one more year.

Finchum *So what do you foresee in the next 10 years then?*

Romans For me or for ...

Finchum *Both. First for you.*

Romans Well, I suspect 10 years from now I'm going to be retired. I'm 62. A couple of months after the transplant, even though I was not well enough to really go back to work part-time, I was in the office working half-time for, oh, over six months without being paid, which most people would think was absolutely bizarre. I really do love the job and I was going crazy being at home. So I'm not sure what's going to happen when I hit retirement age if I will go gladly or go kicking and screaming or try to work part-time or whatever.

In terms of government information, boy I don't know. There are so many wonderful things that are happening right now and so many projects that people are developing that 10 years from now I'm hoping access to government documents will be so great that every reference librarian is a government documents librarian and every patron will be able to find stuff, you know, pretty easily.

Finchum *The reverse of that is over the 25 years what's been the biggest challenge?*

Romans Oh, I guess one of the biggest challenges, particularly near the beginning, was getting people to treat government documents like other material. Government documents were to librarians about the way the library was to patrons. It was, you know, a little confusing, a little strange. So if a patron thought the Library of Congress cataloging system was bizarre, librarians thought the SuDocs system was bizarre, and so, all too often we were sort of pushed off into some corner. Trying to convince people that these were sources that they ought to think of right at the beginning - particularly to get librarians to convey that notion to people - was really difficult. One of the best things that

happened was when Marcive and others started using the GPO tapes so that you could batch-load your records and get them into the catalog so that when people searched, the documents would come up as part of their search.

At Vanderbilt we were one of the first 10 libraries who subscribed to the Marcive tapes and unfortunately as the result we have more problems because they perfected them after we loaded the records. I had a mini-career there for three or four years telling people about our experience. I was one of the speakers at the very first depository library conference where they had lots of programs for all kinds of librarians, and I spoke at other places, and so that was interesting.

Of course, the electronic revolution has made our jobs completely different. People can get on Google and find government information. They no longer have to think of government documents as these strange things, you know. So even if they don't have us to help them along, they're still finding a lot of stuff. Now obviously I'm convinced that they would do even better and find even more wonderful stuff if they asked us to help them, but just the fact that it's not esoteric anymore is really a good thing.

Finchum

Still some challenge though.

Romans

Oh, yes. It's not nirvana yet, but I think that government information is getting more and more accessible.

Finchum

Anything I haven't asked that you want to make sure we cover?

Romans

Oh, I bet there'll be five or ten things after you stop.

Finchum

We can do round two later if we need to.

Romans

One of the things I guess I want to say also is that for me what has allowed me to do the kinds of things I've done in GODORT is all of the wonderful people. I think one of the things that really has made it easy for me to do the kinds of things that I've done in GODORT has been that I've had this great group of friends who have supported me and promoted me and so forth, and I want to list them.

Finchum

Okay.

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There's Michelle McNelly, who I first met in the Education Committee about 20 years ago; Mary Mallory, Cathy Hartman, Betsy Richmond, and Kevin Reynolds, and all of us worked to support each other. You know, if one of us has an appointed or elected position, the rest of us

come and help support them and help them make it successful. At times I'm not always the most diplomatic person in the world. Sometimes I can be a bull in a china shop, and when I'm feeling that I haven't done a very good job about something, I have these people who support me. I hope each person who's in elected or appointed positions has something like that because it doesn't matter how well intentioned you are, how much experience you have, and how good you are at what you do, there are going to be people who don't like what you're doing and what direction you're taking the group. You really do need to have people who are going to pat you on the back and say, "That's okay. We'll try again tomorrow."

Finchum *Well I'm sure they'd say the same thing about you.*

Romans Yes, I think they would.

Finchum *If there's nothing else, we'll sign off.*

Romans Alright. Great.

Finchum *Thank you very much.*

Romans Well thank you for asking me.

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