

Oral History Interview
with
Andrea Sevetson

Interview Conducted by
Tanya Finchum
July 13, 2009

Government Information Living Indexes
Oral History Project

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Oral History Project

Interview History

Interviewer: Tanya Finchum
Transcriber: Natalie Nielson
Editor: Tanya Finchum

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 State University Institutional Review Board on February 15, 2007.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Andrea Sevetson is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on July 13, 2009.

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About Andrea Sevetson...

Andrea Sevetson was born in Racine, Wisconsin and spent much of her youth in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota. Her father was a minister and she has an older brother and a younger sister. She earned an undergraduate degree from Macalester College, and master's degree in library science from the University of Wisconsin- Madison. Her first library job was at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia staying for two years then taking a job at the University of California, Berkeley where she stayed for close to thirteen years. She then left Berkeley and moved to the east coast to get married. While on the east coast she worked for the Census Bureau for several years and then took her current job with LexisNexis.

Andrea has made a lifetime of contributions to government documents librarianship from serving as a chair of the Government Documents Round Table (GODORT) of the American Library Association (ALA) to serving as editor of *DttP: Documents to the People* to serving on the Inter-Association Working Group on Government Information Policy (IAWG) to serving as chair of the Depository Library Council to the Public Printer. She is also well known for her knowledge of GODORT's bylaws and Policy and Procedures Manual. She also played a vital role in GODORT's early web presence and has lobbied for enhanced public access to all formats of government information. Additionally, throughout her career Andrea has mentored newcomers and been accessible to aid veteran librarians as well.

In recognition and appreciation of her contributions to the government information profession Andrea received the 2009 James Bennett Childs Award.

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Andrea Sevetson

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Tanya Finchum
July 13, 2009
Chicago, Illinois



Finchum *Today is July 13, 2009. My name is Tanya Finchum and I'm*

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job. It was either the food service or the library and I thought the library seemed like a good gig by comparison so I applied at the library. I checked in periodicals on little kardex cards. We had about 1000 periodicals and I just checked in. We had this little consortium, which

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if they were going to do a meeting and I was calling in or if they needed to get everybody together for a meeting, it can't be before 10 AM eastern time because I just don't function before 7 AM. I can get up and get myself to the airport or something, but you really don't want to be talking to me before that time.

I actually I was on several conference calls that would start at 7 AM. And one I think was 2 or 3 hours. And at one point, I just sort of got up, was still was in my robe because it had started at 7 AM. I went into the kitchen to make myself a bagel and, of course, my knife hit the butter dish and there was a lovely 'ching.' And that, of course, carried through the phone lines like nothing you've ever heard before and they all stopped and said "What's going on there?" You're just sort of sitting and listening and taking notes.

Somebody said to me, maybe a year into that, but I may be confusing that with another [time]. They just looked at me and said, "Boy you look really tired." I remember being absolutely exhausted by the time I was done being GODORT chair. I spent hours and hours on the phone every week. There was a month when I spent more time in Washington, DC than I did in Berkeley, at my job. I don't remember what it was that happened, but it was like I just spent all this time going back and forth. The spring DLC (Depository Library Council) meeting was in there, and there was probably an IAWG (Inter-Association Working Group) meeting and something else, so it was exhausting going back and forth. Probably the thing that sticks with me most about that was all the different stakeholders and what they would say to you, in the room. And then, sort of, figuring out along the way and watching them, what the real priorities were, of that.

Finchum *And you had a role to play with the web presence?*

Sevetson I did. I didn't keep track of it when it started, so the best I can figure out was about 1993-94 Gopher started, the whole Gopher thing. Jim Walsh, who was the editor of *Documents to the People*, emailed me some files that would have run in *Documents to the People*, the bylaws and the *Policies and Procedures Manual* and some things like that. I don't remember why, but I knew I could put them on our Gopher and set up a place for those things to be. Then that rolled over into the web, which I was the web manager for GODORT almost until I left Berkeley, until right before I left Berkeley. I did that for about 7 years.

Finchum *A long time.*

Sevetson It was a long time. I don't think it was as complex as it is now. I mean, I could go in and I could hard code, there weren't cascading style sheets

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Nobody's going to read the whole *PPM* but the deal for me was, 'How can I make it relatively simple for committee chairs?' They were only supposed to read their committee's chapter and then chapter one which deals with conference, which is the monster but it has like 'this is what you're supposed to do at conference, between conferences, prepping for conference, communication and all of that.' That was my goal to have there be two things that they would have to read. I don't know if it pleased anybody then for me to say, 'Well all you have to do is read chapter one and your chapter,' but at least they didn't have to go cherry picking through the whole *PPM* and reading all these different things.

Finchum

And then you came to the rescue of DttP.

Sevetson

Yes, we did. It's always a problem your last issue or two. It's just grinding it out because you know if you've been doing it for six years, like we just did it for six years, I think the only thing that got me through the last issue was I was working with the new team so that gave me more energy. The editor at the time I was chair—was it—I'm not sure if it was Jim [Walsh] and he'd just finished it so his last issue took a long time to come out. A new editor had taken over and the editors used to be in charge of not just gathering the contents and sending it to ALA for layout, they used to do all the layout themselves. Mary Redmond, who had been an editor in the early '90's, I think, told me it would take her 80 hours an issue, to put that together. So that's eight weeks a year that she was taking out of her job to put together *DttP*, and mainly it was minutes and people's speeches from programs so not journalistic [or scholarly] kind of content.

After I was chair, a new editor took over and the whole layout process was much more complex than he had thought it would be and it sort of fell apart. Then John Schuler took over and he did some really good things. He moved the production process to ALA so that the lead editor's job was only putting together the issue. You weren't doing layout or anything, you were putting stuff together. You were editing it, making sure it was consistent or whatever. And like everybody else, by the time he got to the end of his time and he was doing it all himself, he lost energy too. And I have a lot of sympathy for the losing of the energy.

We just were sitting around, this is where my memory becomes really clear about what happened when, in 2003 around the [ALA] Midwinter [meeting] in Philadelphia and someone had applied to be editor but they had gone through the interview process and for whatever reason they had backed out. They said this isn't what I want to do. And I was sitting there [in the Steering Committee meeting], I think I was chair of Bylaws at that point, and I said, 'Well, I could do that.' Susan Tulis was sitting

next to me and she said, “I could be your distribution manager.” Then we were sort of locked in at that point. We’d been joking but it was sort of like, ‘We really could do this. We’d never done anything like this before but we’re really smart people.’ She’s extremely organized. I’m organized.

I actually told the Publications Committee, “If you want us to do this, I really need to know before we go to DLC this spring because I need to talk to people about content and what we want for content,” because we had to put together issue 3-4 for the rest of that year. We got the approval so we started working everything that needed to be worked. We met with ALA Publications up in Toronto, the summer of SARS and they talked to us about what they could do, different things they could do to help us and they were just phenomenal. We only worked with, I guess, three or four different ALA production services people over the six years and there are [editors of other ALA publications] who said they’ve been through like a dozen. But I think because we were so well organized they liked to work with us. We were a lot less trouble than some of the other groups.

Troy [Linker], at ALA, I called him to talk about something financial, he doesn’t do layout stuff, he’s the head of it all, and I was asking him something and he said, “I am now looking at this other publication. This is their last summer’s issue I’m editing.” It was six months overdue. It should have been out the previous summer and this was January. And he said, “You guys are so organized.” And I thought, ‘Oh, okay. This is good.’ And that’s what we have always heard from them, “we’re so organized.” You know, there’s sometimes when we fall down on the job a little bit, but I’ve always thought we can be disorganized amongst ourselves but I really want to put on a good front for ALA just because it feels like we get really good service from them. If we need a little bit of time sometime, they cut us a little 8

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check a year. I thought, 'I don't think GODORT can afford this right now.' GODORT had no money at that point. I said, 'We need to bill after every single issue.' We'll let them pay in advance for the whole year. We have no problems with that. That's not an issue at all. But otherwise, we will bill after every issue. That way there's a consistent revenue flow and people can see the revenue flow coming in.

Finchum

Good business sense.

Sevetson

Yeah, and because there had been that problem, I started producing an annual [financial report]—or actually for every meeting, a where we were with the revenue side of *DttP*

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around, reading what was going on. They're like me like that.

Finchum

Well, let's back up, I needed to ask you earlier, did you have a mentor when you were in library school or your early career?

Sevetson

I don't know that I had a mentor like that. I had several people who were really good friends, and who still are really good friends, who I had a lot of respect for the way they thought. They weren't necessarily any further along in their career than I was. But we all just sort of kept our eyes open and talked to each other. One was Chuck Eckman. He and I started at Berkeley within two weeks of each other and kept each other sane because we started with people who had been there for years and years and years. When we had been there for two years, there was a major retirement and our department lost over 100 years of expertise over night and we were down to about 17 years. It was our boss and us. But lots of experience does not make you a pleasant person and staying at a place for a long time does not. They were not necessarily the nicest people. So we really bonded through that experience. And in some ways, we think about things the same way, but our processes are different. The way we work through things is different. So it was always really good to work with him and to talk with him about how things got done and what our expectations were. He was always really, really good to talk to.

The other person, it was sort of funny, was Helen Sheehy at Penn State. She has been one of those people who has always been there in my career. We actually started in documents about the same time. We'd each show up at these meetings, and we each thought the other one had been around for a long time. We didn't realize that we were both new until later and we started rooming together. I know we were rooming together in '94 in Miami so certain conferences spring out. GODORT had a really good hotel right on the beach. It was a new hotel on the beach and we ended up with this really nice balcony. It was funny. I think we had an extra towel in our room. And somebody across the hall, somebody else we knew, Annie Watts, they needed an extra towel. So they loaned us their coffeemaker for the extra towel. Of course being in a hotel, if you have four towels, you will get four towels every day. But it's almost impossible in a full hotel to get more stuff if they're just starting up. So we gave them the towel and then they were good and we had the coffeemaker.

Anyway, Helen and I, she actually was elected International Documents chair the year before I was, and I thought, 'Oh, I'm going to be up against this woman my whole career. This is just awful.' We call, we talk, we know each other's family and all these things. It has always been really good. And she and I write together really well. We'll write stuff and pass it back and forth and generate ideas. She is just a

phenomenal writer. I've learned a lot and gotten a lot better by working with her. Doing *DttP* also makes you a better editor and writer because you're editing and writing other people's things.

Sort of thinking about mentors, not like this person who is more advance in their careers taking me through, but there were good, good people who I had as friends early on and have stuck with me. The other person who I relied on extensively when I was GODORT chair was Dan O'Mahony at Brown University. He was the Legislation Committee chair and then he also became the chair of the Inter-Association

Finchum

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- Finchum** *Any idea of what keeps it together like that? What would you think?*
- Sevetson** I wouldn't even say that everybody always likes each other either because you can watch and people roll their eyes or by talking to people you know these people really don't get along. It's almost like it's family at some point. I think it's that everybody cares about this thing, [this program], and they care about the people who come in and need the information that's in government documents. You hear really touching stories about people.
- I can't think of who this is, who talked about the veteran who found out about the battle that he was in through the military histories. He had been in that battle, and he didn't know why it was important but this library had military history and he found out why he had been there. I used to have, occasionally, people come in and they'd need to use— what is the handbook that has all of the programs? The social work programs and stuff like that?
- Finchum** *Domestic Assistance?*
- Sevetson** *Handbook of Domestic Assistance*, yeah. I would have these people come in and I thought if there was a publication that ever needed to stay in paper, it would be the *Handbook of Federal Domestic Assistance* because you get these people coming in, and you think, 'I'm not sure how well these people read.' So I would just say, 'Here it is, come and ask me if you have any questions, I'd be happy to help you.' They could just go and sit and sort of commune with the publication and figure out what they needed to know. I'm not sure it would have been as easy for them on a computer. I would get these people who looked like they had fallen on hard times and they would need the *Handbook of Federal Domestic Assistance*.
- Finchum** *On the opposite end of that spectrum, did you have a favorite reference question?*
- Sevetson** No.
- Finchum** *It doesn't necessarily need to a good one?*
- Sevetson** No, but there always seemed like there was an inverse relationship between how much time you spent on something and how grateful the patrons were. They would come in with what they thought was a hard question and it might not be so hard and be extremely grateful. "Oh, thank you so much." Somebody who wanted infant mortality rates, and there's a table in the back of the *Statistical Abstract* and I'd say, 'Here you go.' And, "Oh, thank you so much!" And then you know these

customers you spent 20-30 minutes with an intensive work. “Oh, okay. Well it’s not what I wanted.” You don’t get it. This is so good. We’ve worked so hard to get here.

I would have library school students and at Berkeley we went through times when I would dress better and not better, and there was a time after a lot of people had retired, I thought, ‘I want to retire too,’ so I wore jeans and turtlenecks to work for like a year. I looked perfectly fine but they had no idea who was the person in charge. And you would get these interns, sitting at the desk, with these library students who would be dressing up so the patron would come in and they would look at the library school student and ask the question. Then the library school student would turn and say, “Well, what do you think Andrea?” I’d say, ‘Well I think a good place to start would be this, and then we could move on to that.’ And you could see the patron’s focus shift over to you. They had made an assumption from how you were dressed that ‘perhaps she’s not the bright one on the desk, perhaps it’s this well dressed person here.’ So it was always funny to watch all of that.

There were definitely funny questions. We got so many different questions, really good questions. Questions I liked were ones that really made me think hard and have to work hard but were achievable. I never liked the feeling that I was sort of beating around trying to find something that didn’t exist, to satisfy a patron.

Finchum

If you couldn’t answer it, who would you go to?

Sevetson

If it was that hard? There wasn’t necessary anybody to refer them to at that point. It might have to be an agency expert, something like that. When you’re out on the west coast, the agencies—I mean the huge advantage of the people on the east coast is that they actually feel more entitled to call up the people in Washington and ask them questions. Whereas people on the west coast feel like, why would I want to call them? Why would I do that? They really feel a lot more divorced from the whole—the workings. It’s like the government is just this big lump and there’s nobody there who’s really going to help them. And that might be true in a lot of places.

Finchum

Now days you can put out a question on the listserv and get help that way.

Sevetson

Yeah. And I always felt uncomfortable, generally, about doing that, but I would ask my friends. I would, put it out to five or so people and say, ‘What do you think about this? Do you know anything about this?’ Because I always felt like, ‘I don’t know if I really want to expose all my ignorance in front of all of my colleagues this quickly. All of the

things that I don't know, I don't really want to tell them all this.' And then I would feel better if they said, "I have no idea or did you try this?" and if I had, it was like okay. Taking that route affirmed you that you really weren't that stupid and you really hadn't missed all that much. Then I could put it on GovDoc-L but I didn't do that that often.

Finchum

Do you have a favorite memory of a GODORT activity or conference?

Sevetson

A GODORT meeting or conference? Actually, I was thinking about this last night and I was laughing because the parliamentarian for a long time was Edward Swanson, and he actually also went to Macalester. So we had a little bond around that. Somehow he had told me that sometimes when he was giving parliamentary advice, he's really not. You're just creating a space in the meeting for things to calm down. There was one time that I was chair, and I could not tell you what the vote was about, but things happened. In this case I'm not sure why I consulted with him, but I turned to Edward and I said, 'Edward, tell me a story.' And I'm looking down at Edward and he looks at me and he says, "There was a city mouse and there was a country mouse. And the country mouse went into..." So he's talking along for a few minutes. And I'm just thinking about what am I going to do now? And I had my little moment and, 'Okay, thank you.' I don't know where he was in the joke or the story and then I went back to the meeting. Everybody had had to wait, so everybody was calmer.

The other one, was when I thought, 'okaeerD somc7c8

started taking notes of all the calls and things I was on. Just sort of tracking and helping myself focus on the calls.

Starting about '95 I started the notebooks. Somewhere in the margins of the notebook is the IAWG and we had a list of all the people who would play them in the movie. I actually only remember one person right now. I think the woman who played Georgette on Mary Tyler Moore would play Anne Heanue who was the ALA Washington staffer because they both have this sort of breathy voice. It just seemed like a really good fit. I don't know who the actress is but it was Georgette who would play Anne Heanue and I would have to go to the notebooks to find out who the other people were.

Finchum *You've had an interesting 20 something years. Any five to ten year goals?*

Sevetson Probably in ten years I'll be retired, would be my guess, because it's like 11 years when I can actually collect retirement some place. I'm still on the low side of 50. I don't envision ever getting another job. I like my job. I would have to go back to an eight-to-five or nine-to-five. When I'm traveling, you know, usually libraries don't want to see you before nine in the morning. Sometimes they'll want to see you at eight. So like two days a year I have to get somewhere by 8:00 AM. Okay, I can do that. But otherwise you make your own hours. And when you're traveling, you're traveling all the time. I feel like I can be creative in what I do. I love doing the training and the talking with librarians and solving the problems. At this point I've done this job for four years and I really like the job. So I can't see myself changing jobs unless something changes on me.

Finchum *And stay as active within GODORT?*

Sevetson So far, that works. My job lets me maintain those ties and those friendships. So that's a nice thing.

Finchum *In that span of 20-something years, what's been the biggest change?*

Sevetson It has to be the technology and probably everybody would say that. When I was cleaning out files at Berkeley, I would see these letters that department heads would write to each other. Mr. Smith, Mrs. Jones and they would call each other by these formal titles. And it was type written and mailed, regular mail through campus mail and stuff. And now so much is done through technology. Not just at your own institution but then that creates communities.

Then also a part of that, the people who used to do the job that I do, in terms of training, would just go out to institutions and there's nothing else there. I guess it would have been phone calls back and forth. 'Oh, do you have any materials or training on this product?' And now we can post them online. I've created social bookmarks, Delicious bookmarks for one of our products that help people, over 400 bookmarks into one product so different flavors that people want to have. There's a lot of different ways you can reach out and touch your user community and that used to be one-on-one. Now people can use stuff I've created and I have no idea that they're doing it. I got an email from a graduate student asking me for some data that I had used. I thought, 'a graduate student is looking at my Hearings paper?'

Finchum

Isn't it great?

Sevetson

Yeah it was fine. But I was like oh okay, that was interesting that you found this and you found this was really interesting. I wasn't sure why he was going to use that but it was all right. It was just sort of funny. When I started [at Berkeley] one of my favorite faculty members, who I never met actually, sent me a note and he wanted us to acquire all of this stuff. This was just when we were having horrible budget cuts coming in 1991. I wrote back and I said well, "I'm not sure about this. If you had some money that you could put into the pool, that would make my case with my colleagues stronger." And after that, every time he would write to me, he would say "And I will put in X amount of money." And it was usually 50/50. And he always used this stuff, so whatever he asked for we tried to get. Unlike a lot of faculty who would say, "Oh we should have this, we should have this" and then the book would never leave the shelf or the microfilm would never get checked out, he used the stuff.

Part of it was because with that initial purchase, we got a guide, it was National Archives Microfilm. We got like a paper guide to something and it was legal paper, 11x17, and it was really thick and it was all one-
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there and when I left Berkeley he sent a really, really sweet letter saying, “We’ve never met but it’s been really nice to work with you.” And it was really sort of cute. He’d been invited to my going away party, but he couldn’t come. And he said, “Well, it sort of worked that we never met each other.” And he died a couple of years ago.

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nobody else had. I just thought, ‘well, you’re never going to get—it’s sort of like, ‘don’t come looking for a job in this town again’ was what I thought was going to happen. She’s not in documents anymore. She’s moved on. But people remembered her for a very, very long time after that meeting. She made a name for herself very quickly.

Finchum

And then within GODORT, how did how would you recommend someone get involved?

Sevetson

I would say for me it was the task forces, because I had international documents in my portfolio, and volunteer to do something. And then you have to do it. You have to follow through. One of the funniest things when I was chair, my secretary thought this, Carol Bednar, she said, “It was really interesting standing next to you while you were chair,” because at my first steering committee meeting that midwinter five people came up to me and apologized for things they hadn’t done. She said, “It’s really interesting standing next to you.” I said, ‘Yes.’

Following through or if you run into a road block picking up the phone or email and say, “Look, I started working on this, this is where I got, and this is where I stopped and why. What do I need to do?” There’s no harm in asking for help or asking for somebody to help you think it through. I think the most important thing [in getting involved] is to actually do something that you can point to and say I was successful in doing this.

Finchum

Is there anything else we need to talk about?

Sevetson

No, I think we’re good.

Finchum

Then thank you for your time.

Sevetson

Thank you.

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