

Oral History Interview
with
Grace York

Interview Conducted by
Tanya Finchum
July 13, 2009

Government Information Living Indexes
Oral History Project

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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 State University Institutional Review Board on February 15, 2007.

Legal Status

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

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About Grace York...

Grace York, born in Detroit, Michigan, earned a Bachelor of Arts in History from Wayne State University in 1968 followed by a Master of Arts in Library Science from the University of Michigan in 1969. Grace spent her library career at the University of Michigan where she started as a serials cataloger in 1969, retiring as Coordinator of the Documents Center in 2009. Her creation of the Documents Center and its website set the standard for providing government information over the internet.

Grace accomplished much over the course of her career and those in the field of government information benefited from her relentless efforts in support of no-fee access to government information. In 1995 she created *Government Resources on the Web*, one of the largest indexes for government information on the internet, and served as webmaster through 2008. Also in 1995, she created the first internet version of Government Printing Office's *Administrative Notes* and in 1994 she created the first internet version of the American Library Association's Government Documents Roundtable's *Handout Exchange*.

Among her contributions in 1991 Grace began distributing Census data free via the internet, followed by Congressional directories and committee memberships in 1993, and followed by Congressional e-mail addresses in 1994. Over the course of her career she has also received several awards such as the University of Michigan Librarian Lifetime Achievement Award (2007), James Bennett Childs Award (2006), the ACRL Law and Political Science Section's Marta Lange Award (2000), the Documents to the People Award (1998) and the Paul W. Thurston Award (1995). She has been active in library associations and has contributed to the professional literature.

As of August 31, 2009 Grace will be retired from the University of Michigan but will forever be in the hearts of the GODORT community.

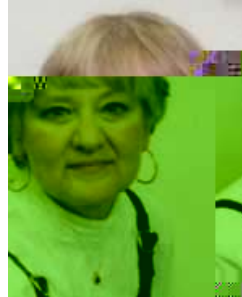
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Grace York

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 here in Chicago at the American Library Association Conference. And we're interviewing Grace York, the creator and head of the University of Michigan Document Center. Is that correct?*

York Mm-hmm, that's right.

Finchum *Thank you for coming today. And let's start by having you tell us a little bit about where you were born and then we'll work our way forward.*

York I was born in Detroit in Grace Hospital, but my mother said I was not named after the hospital. And my dad was in the Harper Hospital at the time with a twisted leg, so apparently he walked over in crutches to see me. The first words I remember, they weren't the first words I said but the first words I remember, were "Look Daddy, funny yittle car," which probably referred to the VW bug. Then the next one was "Break his leg." That was actually at a wrestling match. I was three, and my dad took me to a wrestling match. I was rooting "break his leg," and everybody was laughing because there I was up in front. I haven't been back to a wrestling match since then. I guess I don't behave very well.

Finchum *Did you have siblings?*

York I have a half-brother who's 18 years older than I am. So he's about 82 now.

Finchum *So basically grew up as an only child?*

York I grew up as an only child, yes.

Finchum *Well what's your earliest memory of going into a library?*

York Finney School. It was a grade school, and I do remember the school librarian teaching us how to use the card catalog at the time. That stuck with me even though the rest of the library research didn't. That's about how to use a card catalog. Most of my research when I was in grade school was done at a public library, a Detroit Public Library branch.

Finchum *Then you had access to a big library? Not necessary the branch, but the main Detroit Library?*

York Yes, I never went to the main library in grade school. But I could walk to the branch which was about 10 blocks away.

Finchum *When did you decide to get a degree in Library Science?*

York Oh, now that's a tale.

Finchum *Okay. Let's hear it.*

York Okay. I wanted to be a journalist, and I worked for the University Relations department at Wayne State while taking journalism class. But I realized I might not be cut out for journalism because I remember our class talking about going down to Mississippi and helping people register to vote. I wasn't really interested in doing it and then, of course, that summer these three civil rights workers were killed, Schwerner and two others. So I realized that might be dangerous. Then another gal and I interviewed the Detroit Police Department Substation. They took us around in their squad car and we were sitting in the back. They played a joke on us and had the lights on so we looked like hookers that they were taking around. After that my mom said, "You know, I don't really think you're cut out for journalism." So how I got into librarianship was sad. It was not noble, at all. I was majoring in Spanish. What would I do with it? Well, there were lots of jobs for librarians and I thought, 'okay I like to read.' And I can get a job real easy and then not have to take it home with me at night. That's what I thought, okay, as a sophomore in college.

Finchum *Not quite what you expected?*

York No. So I majored in history, which I liked, and then worked at the Detroit Public Library as a student assistant in branch processing. At the

their cards, which you would then use to do cataloging and then photocopies. This was before OCLC. So I filed the cards in Russian even though I didn't know Russian and kind of had to learn the Russian alphabet to do it. Those are the things I did as a student assistant before I went to library school.

Finchum *And then where did you go to library school?*

York University of Michigan.

Finchum *And first job as a librarian?*

York At U of M (University of Michigan), serials cataloging. I had a colleague who joined me in a serials staff position, and we just celebrated our 40th anniversary two weeks ago. We're both still there, just in different departments now. I had my option of doing descriptive cataloging of either foreign government documents in western European languages or university publications. I chose the foreign government documents. It was just descriptive cataloging. It wasn't Library of Congress classification. So I didn't really have to read and understand the contents, but I had to understand certain words in a lot of different languages.

Finchum *Did you join ALA [American Library Association] back at that point too, or later?*

York I think that was later. I think I joined SLA [Special Libraries Association], maybe joined ALA in 1975.

Finchum *A long time member then, for sure.*

York Yes.

Finchum *I was told to ask you to talk about the race riots, the lines that you had to cross?*

York Yes, yes, yes. That was the summer of '67. And I was working at the Detroit Public Library over the summer. I wasn't taking classes at the time. And yes, that is a funny story. I had to drive downtown, and I had to talk the DPL [Detroit Public Library] into letting me park in the employee parking lot. I carried a squirt gun with me that I was hoping would look like a pistol. I would carry it in my left hand as I was driving. I didn't want anybody to mess with me when I was driving home. Then driving home, I couldn't go this one way, I had to go this other way that went right pass Chandler Park where the troops were

the highlight of it. The Detroit Public itself during riots wasn't that bad. But at night, we could sit out on the porch and hear the gun fire ten miles away. After that Detroit was never the same. They're really working hard on reviving it, but it's just never been the same after that.

Finchum *That didn't scare you away?*

York Yes, it did. My first job was in Ann Arbor and not in Detroit, so yes it did. So that was a story about the riots.

Finchum *So you've been in government documents how long?*

York Well, I was cataloging government documents right away, you know, international. But about 15 months later I decided I really wanted to be a reference librarian. I had been working with the reference department to catalog some of their foreign government documents, extensively, so they knew who I was. So when the position came open as Assistant Documents Librarian I was hired pretty quickly.

Finchum *Did you think that you would ever stick with it this long?*

York Well my dad died when I was 9 and my parents were older to begin with so I never really envisioned myself living as long as I have or even to the millennium. It was a big thing for me in 2000. I never could envision my career that long. I never really thought about it.

Finchum *Just kind of happened.*

York It's just kind of happened, yes.

Finchum *Talk a little bit about when you decided to create the Documents Center and the website?*

York Well the Documents Center is an actual unit which has moved around since 1975. I think it was '76 when the OCLC first came out and they were starting to use it for cataloging. I think I was first public service librarian to actually see it and think 'Ah-ha. That could be used to answer reference questions.' So that was 1976. But the interface was just incredibly clunky. In 1985 or '86 the Commerce Department came out with its *Economic Bulletin Board*, and I think we were using the Dialog at the time. I thought 'Ah-ha people always want the *Consumer Price Index*,' because they heard about it the day before. For them to get the *Consumer Price Index* figures from me, you're going to have to wait until September when the paper comes.

So John Wilkin and Jean Loup and I met and decided to get a

subscription to the *Economic Bulletin Board*. John figured out a way to download the data into our email account. Then when he left temporarily he said, "Well, you're in charge of it." I'm thinking, 'I don't know how to do this.' So we had a lot of other people, and I was in charge of it. And then in '91 when the census data came out we had a project where another gal and I downloaded a lot of the data from Michigan and put it, again, in their email account. John built the gopher in early '92 based on the *Economic Bulletin Board* and then we included the census data.

In '94 I learned how to use the Unix protocol so I could do things myself, which was really important. This is starting to get a little bit boring, but by the summer of '94 when I knew basic Unix, that's when Larry Romans and I talked about the GODORT Handout Exchange. So that's when that came in. Then I think in September, I started doing a congressional email list, because some congressmen had email addresses but they were not putting them on their gopher site. Then we started enhancing it. So we had a pretty robust gopher site in '94 before we started the web in '95. And it was April of '95.

Finchum *So you were great pioneers in this effort.*

York Well, if I remember correctly, we had some access to the web in '94. That and the gopher were built both in '92 or '91. But the connection was incredibly slow, and we were using Mosaic which is an incredibly slow program. There was no Internet Explorer. Now I think Mosaic might have been a forerunner of Netscape. Netscape was really the program, if I remember correctly, that made the web practical for people to use.

Finchum *I've had more than one person tell me they would like to pick your brain, with all that you know and have on the website.*

York Well it's really funny, I'll talk about the website later and what's happening to it. They are trying to analyze the taxonomy of it right now using incredible programs. I've been joking that they're trying to analyze my brain. Everything will be logical and then there'll be something that goes 'whoop,' off the screen. But it was really Netscape that made it possible. And so in terms of internet history, it was the bulletin boards that came up first. We had our gopher before the feds did. Texas A & M was doing something and Minnesota was doing something and I think Carlton College was doing something but there wasn't much out there. But we did it before the feds did it.

And you haven't asked about StatUSA but I think I might as well talk about that one. We were buying this data from the *Economic Bulletin Board* and answering email questions from around the world about

economic data which none of us really understood much. We were doing [lots of] email reference in 1992 as a result of the *Economic Bulletin Board*. Then somebody asked the Commerce Department a question, and they said, “Where did you find that information?” “Well, we found it on the University of Michigan gopher.” That was when Economic Bulletin Board realized that actually we were doing something. The whole point of this was that we thought government information should be free and we wanted to prove to the Commerce Department that there would be a market for free data because they weren’t into that then. This was before that big web thing in 1996.

So Ken Rogers was not real pleased

them to give it away free, and ultimately that's what they did. So at this crucial point where STAT-USA was deciding it was going to charge Depository libraries, some of the places that they got the data from made the decision—we'll give it to you, but we're going to give it away free as well. So but that's just really the very early history....

Finchum *So you almost need to be good at political things, not legislative type things but working people.*

York Yeah, and I'm not sure that I personally was that good except that I believed in what I was doing and that actually, probably, came through.

Finchum *A good steward for government documents.*

York Well I was trying at that point. It's gone downhill since then.

Finchum *But you set a good example for the rest of us. Did you have a mentor anywhere along the way, within the library or within government documents?*

York Well, yes. When I first started, it was my first supervisor. She was very good, and her name was Ann Gale. We had just moved into the new documents room, our first documents room, when she took her dream trip to Australia and died of a heart attack in the Sydney Opera House. Apparently she had a congenital problem that none of us knew about. And I would not go to Australia for many years. I was afraid. When I finally did go in 2003 and stood in the Sydney Opera House I understood why she might have had a heart attack there because they have this long spiral staircase. That was sad. Pretty much I was on my own in the library, but in terms of GODORT, yes. Fran Buckley was my regional librarian for a while. And in Michigan there was Dick Hathaway and Jenny Cross. I remember Carolyn Kohler right from the beginning, but we really didn't have that much contact until we were in CIC [Committee on Institutional Cooperation] together. I think Fran Buckley was probably the first.

Finchum *And then did all of you come together to form a Michigan GODORT?*

York Yes. And that was '78, I think. We had done some work together in '76 and that was—I'm sure it was '78.

Finchum *And then someone had said you were a fan of Paul Thurston, he was living in Michigan, and there's an award for him and you won it.*

York Yes, he was our depository librarian, after Fran Buckley, at the Detroit Public Library. And he did a lot of early work on coordinating, or at

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passage which is how they picked up the polar bear. And you wouldn't appreciate this unless you had seen *Lost*. But anybody who's seen *Lost* knows that they go to and from Ann Arbor to the South Sea Island in their submarine. Although the island

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government secrecy. Now of course the State Department was trying to promote democracy by opening up government through the internet. But I think some of them were still pretty skeptical and also pretty scared of Putin, too, who maybe a person to be scared of. So it was an interesting experience. They were really far more progressed with using the internet than you might think they were. In fact they [the Russians] were the ones who first told me about Google. But they don't have a lot of free government information. There's some, but not all countries are as giving as our country.

Finchum *Through your career you have had library students under you? You've kind of mentored them. Any one or two who stand out?*

York Well there are a number of them that stand out.

Finchum *Naming names, maybe I should rephrase that then so no one will feel left out.*

York Well, Cass Hartnett, John Hernandez, Suzanne Holcombe, is it still Holcombe?

Finchum *As far as I know. We'll say that for now.*

York Okay. But there have been a number of students. But those are the people who have been in GODORT.

Finchum *What was your approach in helping them learn the collection? How did you instruct or lead them to learn the collection?*

York Cass remembers better than I do what I did to her. I really sat down and showed them things in clumps. [I would say], "Okay, today and the next week, we're going to work on congressional. This is how a bill becomes law and here are the sources" and whatever. And maybe give some exercises. She [Cass] keeps telling me the tale when I did that to her with the 1980 census. I did have a training program, but I was always a back-up [for reference questions].

Now, I think as far as learning yourself, which was one of the questions I saw, I think it's really invaluable to browse, to work on reference questions on your own time when you're off the desk so you can actually spend the time researching, and to prepare lectures for classes or bibliographies. What I tried to do is not only find the right source, but figure out if that was my project, what would I need to know to use it? You know, it's one thing to say, "Oh, well that's on the census CD and here it is." And another thing to say, "Well for the data you actually need, you're going to have to pull it out through extract and let me figure

out how to use that program so I can show you how to do it yourself.”
So follow it all the way through.

There’s a public health class for instance where they have to choose an Indian tribe and then collect data, demographic data, about that tribe as well as health data. Well, how do you choose a tribe to begin with?

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No, I mean, that's what happened. I went to Antarctica in January and I have tales about that, but this one place we went, maybe Neko Harbor, I'm not sure. It was hard to walk up the slope to see the penguins. I

Malcolm even tried to come up. John Shuler was around, although he didn't commute. Mary Mallory was involved in that too. So that storm drew us closer together for warmth if nothing else. Something.

Finchum *I think everyone has a few travel stories with conference don't we?*

York I was in DC, would have been '97-'98 or so. The hotel had to evacuate at 2:30 in the morning and there was a rumor Linda Tripp was in the hotel.

Finchum *Well, I understand that you will be re*

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York No fee access. Yes, that fits right into it.

Finchum *You've been fighting for that from day one. I appreciate you taking the time to do this. It's been great. I hope it wasn't too hard.*

York No it wasn't too hard.

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