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A Conversation with Judith Hopkins: Part I

Ellen T. McGrath
University at Buffalo School of Law, emcgrath@buffalo.edu

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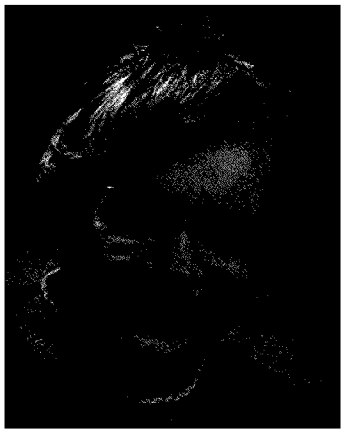
A Conversation with Judith Hopkins: Part I

Ellen McGrath
University at Buffalo
emcgrath@buffalo.edu



I have had the pleasure of having Judith Hopkins as my colleague at the University at Buffalo for the past seventeen years, so I was aware of her plan to retire. As her retirement date of October 1, 2004 drew nearer, an idea occurred to me. I knew many of my fellow law catalogers subscribed to AUTOCAT (library cataloging and authorities discussion group). They often asked me about Judith Hopkins, AUTOCAT's listowner, and I thought they might be interested in hearing directly from Judith. Thus the idea for this interview was born. Judith immediately and graciously agreed to my request. I posted a message to the OBS-SIS and TS-SIS electronic lists on September 1st requesting questions from law catalogers that I would then put to Judith. The response was good and I supplemented those with a number of my own questions.

I had the great honor of sitting down with Judith Hopkins in her office on September 15, 2004 for this interview. Ninety minutes later, the tape ran out and so we decided we had better stop. Before we begin, here are a few highlights of Judith Hopkins' career:

- Education: Wilkes College, A.B. (cum laude) degree in history, minor in French, German, and Spanish; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, M.S. (L.S.) and Certificate of Advanced Studies and completed all requirements for Ph.D. except dissertation.
- Library practice: Serials Assistant (half-time), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Library; Cataloger, Mount Holyoke College Library; Assistant Head, Catalog Department, Yale Law Library; Bibliographic

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Editor, OCLC; Assistant Professor, University of Michigan, School of Library Science; Head, Original Cataloging Section, Central Technical Services, University at Buffalo (UB); Technical Services Research and Analysis Officer, Central Technical Services, UB (present position, from which she is retiring).

- AUTOCAT listowner.
- Secretary, Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS) Technical Services Directors of Large Research Libraries Discussion Group (Big Heads).
- Full curriculum vitae at her website: http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~ulcjh
- Biography at: http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/archives/womens_work/bios/hopkins.htm

The too brief timeline above is brought out in more detail during our chat, which follows.

Judith Hopkins (JH): Just one thing, when you're transcribing it, Kilgour is K-I-L-G-O-U-R. [This was Judith's correction to the written questions I had given her in advance, on which I had misspelled the last name of Frederick Kilgour, OCLC's founder ... major oops!]

Ellen McGrath (EM): Editing to the very last ... Do you have any OCLC stories you would like to share? [Sally Kelley had e-mailed me to say she had roomed with Judith at ALA once and had enjoyed her OCLC stories.]

JH: I was there [at OCLC] for about 2 years. For most of that time I was the only librarian on the staff and my job was to act as a sort of interpreter between the programmers on our staff and the catalogers in the academic libraries in Ohio. I provided training, I did profiling— that involved driving all over Ohio, often with Mr. Kilgour. In his car, but I did the driving. He was probably sick and tired of all the driving he had to do over the years. I remember one day we were coming back from wherever we had been, we were on the highway, right near the office, in familiar territory and he had to call my attention to the fact that I was speeding. You know how you sort of have a feeling for how fast you're going depending on the feel of the car? Well, I had forgotten to compensate for the fact that this was a bigger and heavier car and so it felt the way my car felt going at 50 MPH, but in his car I was going a bit beyond that.

EM: Did you always call him Mr. Kilgour?

JH: Always. I think everyone called him that. I can't remember what Phil Long called him. Phil Long was our systems analyst/chief programmer. Phil Long was a genius. He is the only person I've ever really met whom I could safely use that word in conjunction with. I remember we had a visitor once who had spent some time with Phil, perhaps 15 minutes or so. And I was leading him out because it was a complex building and you needed a guide to get out and he said to me "He's a genius, isn't he?" And I said, "Yes."

EM: How was he at speaking with you? Did he use a lot of technical jargon?

JH: No, he was quite good. I often would go back in the evening, because during the day the phone would ring, ring, ring, ring. And I was getting telephone ear, if there is such a disease. I found that if I went back in the evening, then I could do some uninterrupted work. And Phil was usually there. Around 9 o'clock, we'd break for tea and coffee and sit and chat in his office. We'd talk about this and that. I remember once he explained to me how diodes worked. And for about 24 hours, I understood how diodes work. But since I never had any occasion to make use of it, I quickly forgot it. So to this day, I do not understand what diodes are or what they do or how they operate.

EM: Do you know where Phil Long is now?

JH: He was a bit older than I was, so he may be retired. But I think in the end, he went back to Yale. That's where

he'd come from with Mr. Kilgour, when he came from Yale. One other story suddenly occurs … nothing like starting and then memory trips. We were in the training mode, in the use of the OCLC terminals. I think this was even pre-Beehive. We'd asked that each library send one person down and spend a day and be trained in the operation of the system. We did it in groups of about 10; I figured I couldn't do more than 10 people at one time since it was going to be hands-on. Then they'd go back and train their colleagues. There was one particular institution, a very small library, one cataloger, one director of the library, probably one circulation/ reference person. I had to train both him [cataloger] and the director. He was petrified. I basically had to hold his hands and put them on the keys.

Although that isn't the story I started to tell. This particular day Mr. Kilgour had a visitor, a director of a library from Australia who was staying with the Kilgours. He had sat in on my morning training session to see what it was like. That evening I went back to get some work done since I'd been training all day and hadn't gotten much of anything else done. At about 11:00 [PM] I was leaving and I ran into Mr. Kilgour and his visitor in the parking lot. He had forgotten something, so he wanted to go and pick it up in the evening and his guest had come with him. His guest knew what time I had been there in the morning. He looked at me and said "Don't you know when it's time to go home?" Usually when people say things, I can never think of a smart retort until hours later. But for once in my life I did and said "Yes—now!"

EM: I've never been to OCLC. Is it in the same physical location?

JH: No. Back then we had a small suite of rooms in what was the Ohio State's research center. It was on the outskirts of Columbus, a few miles from the OSU [Ohio State University] campus. Some years after I left, they moved up to Dublin, Ohio, where they built a building of their own. They now have three buildings of their own on a campus setting. It's quite different from the original location. Basically there was one office, Mr. Kilgour's and then an outer office where his secretary sat. Then there was a room with cubicles, where I had a cubicle, like a carrel. There was a room in the back without cubicles where several programmers sat at desks. There was a little sort of staff room where we could make coffee or lunches or whatever. And then there was the computer room, which actually was OSU's but we had the right to share it. It had things like card readers and such, so when I wrote a program, I could put it in. I'd get it back if it didn't run. So I'd take the cards and try them again.

EM: You would program by yourself sometimes?

JH: This was for my dissertation. All of the programming was for my dissertation. I met Mr. Kilgour when I was in the doctoral program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I was struggling to come up with a dissertation topic. Some of my friends could toss off half a dozen [topics] in 10 minutes, but it took me about 6 months to come up with one. Mr. Kilgour was a visiting professor in the school that summer and teaching a course on information storage and retrieval. I'd already taken that course with a different faculty member, but I figured at that stage, information storage and retrieval was a different course with each person who taught it. So I thought I'd audit it. And I was right; it was completely different from the one I had formally taken.

One day during that summer when I was talking with my adviser, Kathy Henderson, about possible dissertation topics and my problem of coming up with anything, she suggested that I go and talk to Mr. Kilgour. I was a bit nervous about that. He had started OCLC I think in 1967. So this may have been the summer of '69 or so. OCLC wasn't operational at that point; it was still in the development stage. They were writing programs and things like that. Anyhow I went and spoke to Mr. Kilgour. And he said "Sure" and he pulled out his little black book. You know some men have little black books of this and that and the other thing. Mr. Kilgour had a little black book of research topics, things that interested him. So he leafed through and he mentioned one and I said, "Hmmm, I'll think about it." I came back next week and I said "No, I can't see how to get a grasp on that." So he said "All right. How about this one?" I came back next week and said, "Yes, that one sounds rather interesting. I might be able to do something with that." And then he said, "Well, you could come to Columbus and I could supervise your dissertation. I was planning to hire a librarian straight out of library school to work at OCLC in the fall. If you wouldn't be insulted by being offered such a beginning level position, you could come, work half time at the job and half time at your dissertation and I'll supervise it." I said, "I'll take it!" I didn't stop and think; I just said, "I'll take it!"

A few years earlier, Illinois sponsored the clinics on library applications for data processing; I don't know if they're still going on, they were an annual event back then. The nice thing for the doctoral students, any of the students, was that you could attend them for free. About two years earlier, one of the speakers had been Anne Curran from NELINET and she was describing her job. I couldn't even understand half of it. But even though I didn't understand much of what she was saying, it sounded fascinating and I was thinking I'd love to have a job like hers. And suddenly I did end up with a job like hers. So in the fall, I went to Columbus. OSU and Illinois were both part of the CIC (Committee on Institutional Cooperation) so it was perfectly feasible for a student at one institution to go and spend time at another institution. I was formally a CIC traveling scholar at OSU and he [Mr. Kilgour] had a visiting faculty appointment at OSU. So it was legal.

EM: At that particular point in time, had you already been a practicing librarian?

JH: Yes, I had been a librarian for about 10 years and then I decided to go back for the doctorate, thinking that perhaps I might teach. Well, I never did finish that dissertation. It was a disappointment to me and to Mr. Kilgour. But I learned more in those two years at OCLC than I think I did in any other period of that length and that includes periods of formal education. So I've never regretted it. I found myself wanting to spend more and more time on the job and less and less on the dissertation. Not that that was being forced on me. I was choosing to do this because I found it much more interesting. Without sounding egotistical, I think it was good for the institution that they had somebody who was an experienced cataloger. I don't think a beginning cataloger, straight out of library school, would have been as good in that position. Because you had to resolve the problems that the catalogers at the various institutions would bring up once we started and became operational. Having a sense of the kinds of work that the various catalogers did, understanding their terminology, and having been a practicing cataloger for some years did help.

EM: You must have been making stuff up on the fly about how to do things, how to make OCLC deal with what the catalogers needed to do. How exciting!

JH: It was. I loved every minute of it! Then I had to go back to Illinois to finish this dissertation. And they [OCLC] had hired another librarian in about my last 3-6 months. So there was somebody to take over the job. But I just never finished [the dissertation]. I guess I was not born to be a researcher or a teacher.

EM: The other thing people wanted to know about is AUTOCAT, because obviously that's how most of these people "know" you. How much time each day do you spend on AUTOCAT business?

JH: That can vary. It can be just 15 minutes or a half an hour. If there are lots of problems it could be an hour or two. Douglas [Winship] spends more time than I do. He acts as the list moderator or editor. That is, messages come through and he looks at them and determines if they should be distributed or not.

EM: Do you set aside a certain period of time that is AUTOCAT? How do you do it along with your regular work?

JH: No, I start reading my e-mail and I read the AUTOCAT stuff first. I see if there are any messages from subscribers who are having problems or somebody having difficulty getting subscribed or they've been automatically deleted or they're not getting their mail. I can get 1-2 of those a day or I can go several days without any. Usually it's a standard problem you have a standard answer to, so it doesn't take too long. If I were really efficient, I would even have these standard answers written down, just as a file and pull them in and slightly individualize them. Perhaps I will do that someday, but I haven't done it yet.

EM: Someone asked if there were a few top ideas or threads over the many years you've been involved with AUTOCAT that sort of stick in your mind or seem important to you personally.

JH: There are a number that shall we say, recur, even if I don't consider them particularly important. For example, the records that appear with publication dates of the coming year. We've already had the ones from people reporting books that have dates of 2005. The rule is you use the date that's on the book. Ten years from now, who's to know exactly when it was published? That one does turn up every summer and fall, depending on how early these publications turn up. Also how to put labels on various kinds of AV equipment, so that it doesn't interfere with the operation of the recording. And how people mark their books. You know those are basic, nitty-gritty operations type of questions. And since the subscribership changes and you're always getting new people, questions get repeated. Douglas is very good; he refers people to those older messages when the question comes up again. And he may do the search and then say here's the list of the item numbers that have dealt with the topic. So he is very good, he's very service-oriented. Searching is based exactly on what people have said and the words they've used and they don't always use the same words to mean the same thing. And it is search strings you know, not subject headings. Uncontrolled vocabulary at its finest.

In terms of things that aren't discussed as often, but that I've considered important, there are the discussions of the value of authority control, the need for or the use of main entry, the importance of standards in cataloging. And from time to time, we have discussions of cataloging education and what's taught in the library schools. And also the role of the paraprofessional/cataloging technician. Who is a cataloger, what is a cataloger, do you need the MLS? That can be a touchy subject because many of the subscribers are non-MLS librarians and in some cases, they're the only ones doing the cataloging in their libraries. And in many cases, they're very good. They may be self-trained or they were trained by a good teacher or a good supervisor and they know a great deal. I'm a strong believer in the importance of the MLS in giving you a wider picture, a more coherent and thorough background for cataloging. I don't know how much of that is being taught in library schools these days. You remember on the TV show and movie, the one about Professor Kingsfield at Harvard Law, *The Paper Chase*. He said it's his purpose to make you think like lawyers. Well, I think library school makes you think like librarians. It sort of structures you ... I can't really think of the term I want but I think you understand what I mean. I think library school is valuable for that reason.

EM: That leads into a question I received. What skills do you think catalogers might need to sustain them in the future?

JH: I think the basic skills are the same. You need to have a questioning mind. You need to have an understanding of the principles of cataloging, of what a catalog is, what it is supposed to do. The ways about how you're going to do it, to achieve these objectives may change over the years. But cataloging rules have a history of several hundred years behind them and they have proven themselves over time. The actual rules themselves may change, but the importance of having rules has been shown. Certainly in the international cataloging environment in which we are now, you do need general agreement on what rule is to be followed if you're going to create shared databases. It's one thing to have a catalog just for your own library and the only people who are using it are the people who are using your library. But the moment you start sharing a database, you have to have agreement on principles, and on cataloging rules and how things should be done. You need a standard authority file. We're going more and more in the direction of cooperation and larger than individual library databases. For that reason, you do need agreement.

There will be new methodologies used. Obviously with the computer as a tool, things are changing more and more rapidly. Twenty-five or 50 years from now, we may have completely different approaches. For example, harvesting information from machine-readable objects that have programs that would take certain information and create the nucleus of a catalog record. A catalog record in 50 years may look quite different from the way it looks today. But I think the basic principles of knowing what it is you're trying to do for the user and the methods that have been chosen to do it have stood the test of time. They'll be different cataloging rules than the ones I've used over the years. Heavens, the ones I've used over the years have changed. I've used several different cataloging codes. But I think there will always be cataloging rules. The materials that we catalog obviously are going to change. Certainly the things we catalog these days, we never even thought of when I started. And since change is occurring faster and faster and faster, in another 50 years, I haven't the faintest idea what it is people will be cataloging. But I think people will be cataloging. They may not be called catalogers. They may not work in libraries. They may work for publishers or vendors or specialized agencies. But I think that the work we call cataloging will still exist, one way or the other.

EM: That's the key that you hit on for me; the rate of the cataloging rules changes has just ramped up so much, even in my 20 year career.

JH: When I started, we were using the 1949 LC [Library of Congress] *Rules for Descriptive Cataloging* and the *A.L.A.* [American Library Association] *Cataloging Rules for Author and Title Entries*. And those went on until 1967. Then we had AACR1. Then in 1978 we got AACR2, although we didn't implement it for another few years after that. Now we're planning for AACR3 for about 2007.

EM: I guess part of the difference from my point of view too, is that back at the beginning of my career, when changes were happening to the cataloging rules, you didn't know about them. But now you go on a listserv and people are talking about upcoming rule changes and I can't remember if it actually happened.

JH: If it's been implemented or not yet.

EM: Exactly. In a lot of ways, this instant communication, while it's wonderful, I think it's also confusing, especially to less experienced catalogers.

JH: Or to those of us near the end of our careers, when our brains are already stuffed and it's harder to add anything new.

EM: So back when they were going from AACR1 to AACR2, while that was radical and overwhelming, it was paced much differently for catalogers because they almost didn't have to worry about it until somebody put the new rulebook on their desk and said "OK now we're using this."

JH: Unless you were an administrator who had to plan for it.

EM: Was that the position you were in at that time—while going from AACR1 to AACR2?

JH: I was here [at UB]. I came in '77. There was a great to-do at the time about how people could change because it was so different. Studies were done on the amount of changes that libraries would have to make. I think that was when LC brought in superimposition, so that headings that were already established wouldn't be changed. The implementation was postponed until 1981, so people would have a chance to plan. In this library, as in most others, plans were made. John [Edens, Assistant Director of UB Libraries] chaired a committee with people on it from public services and technical services and we met weekly. I trust the minutes of those meetings are in the archives because I think they would be very valuable in the future. In fact it was because of all this planning that John and I co-edited the book on how research libraries implemented AACR2, in which we gave descriptions of how various libraries went about implementing AACR2. [*Research Libraries and Their Implementation of AACR2*, edited by Judith Hopkins, John A. Edens. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, c1986.] We did the book after we'd implemented. We chose libraries of different types, all academic and all research libraries; libraries that took different approaches. So we could give a picture, a snapshot so to speak, of how it was done. I'm sure the implementation process for AACR3 will be quite different.

EM: Just to go back to AUTOCAT for a moment; is there anything funny on AUTOCAT like from Friday threads that stick in your mind?

JH: I tried to do a quick search of Friday threads. It's hard to come up

with humor after the fact, so I didn't really spend that much time to come up with it. Offhand I don't remember any particularly humorous things, but I know they are there. Of course, there are some things that weren't intended as humor but I think are funny anyhow.

EM: I don't think it happens on any other list I'm on, where people will say, "Well, it's Friday" and just throw out kind of a funny thing. To me that's one of the quirky, nice things about AUTOCAT.

JH: I think it's a sort of a tension reliever. It's very serious for the subscribers. When you ask a question, it's for a problem you're having. And problems, problems, problems, all the time, all day long and for those who are reading, it can be a bit overwhelming. And funny things do happen in libraries and in cataloging departments. So it seemed a good idea to have a time and a place where one could vent, yet limit it. If we didn't get fun in our work, why would we do it? I enjoy cataloging. I find it's fun in the broadest sense of the word, something that gives me pleasure to do. If I didn't find cataloging fun, then I wouldn't have become a cataloger. I've often said, "Why should I retire when they're paying me money to have fun?"

This is the end of part one of my interview with Judith Hopkins. Please tune into the next issue for the exciting conclusion!