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A Conversation with Judith Hopkins: Part II, Conclusion

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I hope you enjoyed the first half of this interview in the previous TSSL issue. As a brief reminder, I conducted this interview with Judith Hopkins prior to her retirement from her position at the University at Buffalo on October 1, 2004. Judith is the listowner of the electronic list, AUTOCAT (library cataloging and authorities discussion group). Our conversation took place in her office on September 15, 2004.



Ellen McGrath (EM): How many years have you been a cataloger?

Judith Hopkins (JH): Let's see. I graduated from library school in '57. That's 47 years I think. But I'm no record. There's Jim Bowman at LC who had celebrated his 50th year as a cataloger a few years back and he's still working.

EM: I had a climate question. Do you want to make any comments contrasting Buffalo's climate with what you know about where you're moving to in Georgia?

JH: Well, it is going to be sort of a 180 degree turn. I'm going from the snowy winters of Buffalo ... I haven't minded snow so much except of course for whiteouts and things like that, which everybody minds. It's the grayness of Buffalo winters and the fact that it lasts so long. There's really no spring here. But the summers are utterly beautiful and I'm going to hate leaving those. Now down there, it's going to be the other way around. It's the summers that are very difficult. Of course I will probably fall into the local habit of spending all my summer days in an air-conditioned environment. I will be able to spend more time out of doors earlier in the year and later in the year than I do here. So I think it'll work out.

EM: Where of all the places that you've lived would you say is your favorite?

JH: They all have their pluses and minuses. Where I had my first job, South Hadley, Massachusetts, was a village in New England and it was lovely. I could never quite decide what was the loveliest time of year there. In winter, I would think it was winter—the snow all white and crisp. And because it wasn't a city, everything except for the main street would pretty much stay white. Of course the main street would get grungy and gray just by automobile traffic just as it does any other place. New England falls are proverbial for their beauty. Spring-lovely, we had a real spring there, not like the so-called spring we have here [Buffalo], which is just an extension of winter. And summer was so beautiful that I always used to feel sorry for the students who weren't there to enjoy it. So certainly in terms of beauty of nature and the seasons, no place that I've lived matched that. And I obviously enjoyed the library and the work that I was doing and my colleagues, because I went there, first job, thinking I'd stay there for two years. Then I looked up one day and I realized I'd been there six years and that I had better start thinking about moving around or I was going to be there for the rest of my life. While that seemed very pleasant, I was beginning to wonder—did I have any flexibility left? Did I know how to do things any other way but the Mount Holyoke way? Talk about library automation had been appearing in the journals and I began feeling it was going to take a long time for it to get to Mount Holyoke.

EM: So you decided to go out and look for it?

JH: I decided I had better jump and see what else I could find. And in some sense, I may not have enjoyed some things I've done since then as much as I enjoyed the time at Mount Holyoke, but I've never regretted leaving. I went back on a visit last fall, and it was beautiful autumn and I remember thinking I could have been spending

all my life here. But I have enjoyed other places I've lived. When I was in Illinois, in the doctoral program and getting ready to move to Columbus, I was driving one day and I had the car radio on and there was one of these talk shows. The topic for that day was the worst places in which to live. One woman called up and said, "I don't want to talk about the worst place, I want to talk about the best place." And she said "Columbus, Ohio is peachy keen!" As somebody who was getting ready to move to Columbus, Ohio, that was very nice to know. Columbus, Ohio is peachy keen! That cheered me up because of course I hate moving, as who doesn't? Just the physical effort of moving and getting resettled. So to know that I was going to a good place was a nice thing to learn. I lived in one of the suburbs of Columbus and it was a pleasant place. And of course I loved my job, what I was doing at OCLC, so that added to my pleasure. I used to think that I knew the geography of Ohio better than the geography of any other place that I've lived, even though I only lived in Ohio for two years. Because I had to drive all around the state.

EM: Where were you born and raised?

JH: Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. It's northeast in the state.

EM: So you were there through high school?

JH: And college. I lived at home and went to college to save money.

EM: How long did you teach full-time?

JH: Three years at the University of Michigan. I did a little bit of teaching at Illinois, before that and I did a little bit of teaching here in Buffalo afterwards. But full-time was '74-'77 at Michigan. You get the course evaluations and I would put them off. Sometimes it would

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be months before I'd read them because you never knew ... On the whole, they were good evaluations. Most of them clung to a core of opinion. But every now and again there would be one way out here or way out there. Very, very good or very, very bad. And you never quite knew if those were something you should ignore, on the theory it was just somebody who'd gotten on your wrong side or wasn't even thinking. If everybody said excellent, excellent, excellent, you wouldn't pay much attention to that. So were the outliers somebody unusually thoughtful and percipient or somebody to be ignored? You never quite knew. There was one that I remember getting once who said, "She's an utter disaster as a teacher. She would probably be very, very good one to one with a cataloger in a cataloging department, but in a classroom ..." As I said, this was an outlier, because most of my evaluations were good. But I've come over the years to think that, this person, whoever it was, was onto something. That I probably am better

on a one to one relationship, going over things with somebody. Especially if the person allows me to be pedantic and talk about theory and things that you do speak about in a classroom. And that way I don't have to do any grading or formal evaluation.

EM: Were you teaching cataloging?

JH: Yes, introduction to information retrieval, basic cataloging, advanced cataloging, classification. I taught a course on LC classification here [at UB]. They just had it briefly. It was still fresh in my mind when I came here, so I offered to teach it. They had it once or twice. People got a chance to go deeply into the LC classification and tables.

EM: Would you like to say anything about library school, cataloging education? Maybe from the time when you went to library school to the present, trends you've noticed?

JH: I think perhaps the one trend that I have noticed is the trend towards not requiring cataloging courses in library school, which is a trend I do not like. There are still a number of schools that do require a course, including this one [UB]. In many cases, it's called introduction to organization of materials and covers a variety of things in addition to cataloging. There's less and less emphasis on cataloging rules. So people do have to pick up a great deal on their own, there's no getting away from that. Even schools that do require a cataloging course may have fewer advanced courses that are focused specifically on cataloging. But since I haven't really studied the offerings of library schools in the last 20 years or so, I don't really know what they're doing in this.

Obviously I think cataloging is important. It's important that people be well trained to do it. Therefore I don't like the trend of not requiring it for all librarians. That way people who

might become very good catalogers aren't exposed to it. And cataloging is something you have to be exposed to. It's not something most people enter library school planning to do. For one thing, unless they've had a job in a library, they don't even know cataloging exists. You know reference librarians and you know people at circulation desks, but you don't see catalogers. So you have to have had some exposure to them in a job or in a cataloging class. I have had students who weren't planning to become catalogers, but found that they were intrigued by it and liked it and went on to become catalogers.

EM: When you taught full-time, I assume cataloging was required. My experience in my cataloging class was that the vast majority of the class hated that they had to be there because it was required. Then there were a handful of people that were just sort of blasé. And then there were a few like me that realized "This is what I want to do!" Was that your experience when you were teaching? And the people who hated it, really hated it and vocalized that frequently.

JH: Yes, I think that's true. They didn't perhaps vocalize it to me, but I just assumed the majority of them had no particular interest in it and wouldn't be doing it later on. But I went on the theory that it wouldn't hurt them to have this exposure. That was the second reason why I think it's unfortunate that cataloging isn't required in many schools these days. Not only does it cut off a source of future catalogers, people who hadn't thought of it, but when exposed to it found it interesting. But also for people who aren't going to become catalogers, who do need to have an introduction, to know how the catalog they are using is created, to know why certain things happen, who are going to be making decisions about the indexing in their online catalog. If they don't know anything about cataloging, they can't do it very knowledgeably.

EM: I wonder if this is one case where automation has helped the basic cataloging course, because you can see

more quickly when you make changes to cataloging what happens. Maybe people don't hate it as much.

JH: I would hope that's true. But automation was still relatively young even when I was teaching in the mid '70s; of course this was post-OCLC and all that. But nonetheless online catalogs still weren't that prevalent.

EM: Even I, that kind of liked this stuff, had to admit that some of it was kind of dry. You know, just plowing through AACR2.

JH: Shall we say, it's not good continuous reading? It is a reference book. You go into it to get the answers to the questions you have when you need the answers to that specific question. But of course you do have to know it well enough to know where the answer is to this particular question and how it's organized and the principles on which it's based.

EM: Do you catalog now?

JH: Yes, with about half my time. I've been having the pleasure of cataloging rare books and a few incunabula [lately]. So it's been very challenging.

EM: Do you find yourself still referring to AACR2 frequently?

JH: Oh yes, I still find myself looking up rules, asking LC the answer to a question. I found myself with a little puzzle the other day, so I wrote to the Cataloging Policy and Support Office at LC, which is one of my favorite institutions in the world. They were very helpful and gave me the principle. They cited something in AACR2 that I hadn't read quite as thoroughly as I should have. The definition of what was a collection and what wasn't.

EM: Have you trained a lot of catalogers, over the years in your various positions?

JH: No. When I came here [UB], I was Head of the Original Cataloging Section in the Cataloging Department.

There were already two experienced catalogers in the section and so we just sort of worked collegially. When new editions of the *Cataloging Service Bulletin* would come out, which was quarterly, we would study them together or we'd talk about them. Or as we heard draft documents, we would study those. Basically I was acting as a sort of principal cataloger, that is, the one who is supposed to keep up with the rules and make sure that other people knew them. I acted as a resource person for the people in the copy cataloging section. Now of course we just have one cataloging production section, which has staff that does both, copy cataloging and original cataloging. And there are people who do the AV cataloging. If I had to start cataloging AV, I would, shall we say, have a great deal more reliance on the rulebooks than I do for books. You can't keep all the rules in mind and all the permutations. And that's what they're there for, they are a resource and they're a great resource.

EM: Do you want to say anything about ALA and your participation over the years and what it's meant to you?

JH: I've enjoyed my participation in ALA. My first years as a librarian, I joined ALA, but it never really occurred to me to attend conferences or volunteer for a committee. The first time I went to an ALA conference was when I had decided to leave Mount Holyoke. That was the year ALA started the placement service. So I thought I'll go to ALA and try out this placement service. And there was also going to be a preconference on library automation. So I thought, I'll go to the preconference and I'll spend the conference interviewing for jobs. And I did. My active involvement in ALA didn't start until a number of years later when I was at OCLC; I think the second year I was there. Barbara Gates of Oberlin was chair of the CCS [ALCTS Cataloging & Classification Section] Nominating Committee. She nominated me for an elected position on the CCS Executive Committee. Well, I didn't win that election, but at least it was a start. And the next time I ran for an office, I did win it. So I got involved

and I do think you get much more out of an organization if you're involved in it. I certainly have found that true of ALA. I have belonged to several divisions, but most of my activity has been in ALCTS and its predecessor, RTSD, Resources and Technical Services Division. I've also belonged to LITA [Library & Information Technology Association] and been involved in that, but to a lesser extent. That was more in my OCLC, and immediately post-OCLC days, when I was more on top of technology, but of course the technology has gotten further and further away from me. I subscribe to the LITA list, but that's about the extent of it. And of course I read the LITA journal. I have participated in some NYLA [New York Library Association]; I've been in SMART [NYLA Management of Information Resources and Technology]. And the Western New York/Ontario ACRL [Association of College & Research Libraries]. But most of it has been at the ALA level.

EM: I think everyone is well acquainted with your Big Heads minutes. You could probably track trends in academic cataloging/tech services issues through them.

JH: That's one of the reasons why I think Big Heads is important and why they get big audiences there. You have at least 20 or so people around a table and you can have 200 people in the audience.

EM: In a lot of ways, you were out there before even listservs, disseminating major communication from meetings. I think the way you take minutes and then get them out to people is astonishing and essential.

JH: Well, I've tried. As I said in my acknowledgements at the Orlando Big Heads meeting when I got the pin and the certificate, basically I've always had to take notes at meetings because I just don't absorb well what I hear. I have to have something in writing to refer to later; otherwise I've wasted my time attending the meeting. So it all grew out of that.

EM: Thank you for doing that, because it's been helpful to me and I know I'm not alone in saying that. I'm sure many people have said it to you personally. But you're a tough act to follow. I'm not sure what they're going to do now.

JH: Well, I am sure they will find somebody. Every time I've given up a role as a secretary and they got somebody else, almost invariably I've found the person to be admirable and thought "Why didn't I think of doing it that way?"

EM: The amount of detail you capture is truly amazing.

JH: It's overwhelming and can sometimes bury the forest in the proliferation of trees.

EM: I think it's more often helpful than not, at least for me. Did you want to say anything about your mentors? You don't have to name them but have you had them along the way?

JH: The idea of mentoring wasn't something that was prevalent when I was coming along. I may have had people who would be considered mentors today, but you know we didn't have a formal mentoring relationship. I certainly learned a lot from Mr. Kilgour. I can remember my first job and the Head of the Cataloging Department, Margaret Ellsworth. I owe her a great deal. You know, I came out of library school and I started cataloging. I had the rulebooks and I tried to follow them. But it was Margaret who got me thinking about cataloging. This was a period when Seymour Lubetzky was writing and the Montreal McGill conference and the one at Stanford were taking place. But you know those were far off, you'd read something about them in the literature. It didn't concern me. Margaret was planning to go to the McGill conference and she had a copy of the Lubetzky critique. She gave it to me and said, "Let me know what you think." I was petrified. I wasn't supposed to think about cataloging, I was supposed to DO it. So I read it

and, to my pleasant surprise, I had some thoughts. And some questions, which I gave to her. She said later she used one of my questions at Montreal. So she was the one that opened my eyes that cataloging was not something fixed in cement forever. That this was the way it'd always been and always would be. It was something that was subject to change and that I could think about it and contribute to changing it.

EM: That's pretty exciting when you're fairly new to the game.

JH: I have always been grateful to her for that. So yes, as a mentor, Margaret Ellsworth.

EM: Is there anything you did not do, but sometimes wish you had in your career?

JH: In terms of librarianship, no, I don't think so. Cataloging to me always seemed to me the most fun. I did have a bit of reference when I was at Mount Holyoke and I enjoyed that. But I always knew that cataloging was where my heart was. So I have been remarkably fortunate. I have been able to do work that I've enjoyed—and be paid for it! And get recognized for being good outside my own library. And for that, I thank AUTOCAT and the work at OCLC. Because it was OCLC that made me professionally. Until that point, the only people who knew me were the ones in my classes in library school and the people I'd worked with at Mount Holyoke and at the law library, which was my second job.

EM: What was that? The law catalogers will want to know about that!

JH: At the Yale Law Library. I never told you how I got my job at the Yale Law Library? It was when I had decided that I was going to leave Mount Holyoke and I was going to go to ALA and attend that preconference on library automation. Now ALA was being held in St. Louis that year. The preconference was going to be at the University of Missouri in Columbia, which was about 100 miles away.

And there was I think one flight a day on Ozark Airlines from St. Louis to Columbia. I went down to LaGuardia to catch my flight to St. Louis and then Columbia. And LaGuardia got fogged in. I'd calculated that if my flight took off by say 10:24, I had a chance to make my connection in St. Louis. But if it didn't, I wouldn't. Well, 10:24 came and went and we were all still on the ground. Then it occurred to me that there must be other librarians from the East Coast going to that preconference. There were probably other marooned librarians at LaGuardia and all I had to do was find them. Now you realize, the only librarians I knew at the time were the ones who were in my library school classes, whom I hadn't kept in touch with, and those in my library, who weren't here. So I began wandering around LaGuardia. Hither, thither, yon.

EM: Is this where the librarian stereotype comes in?

JH: I guess it does. Anyhow, I finally saw a group of people that I thought might be the ones I was looking for. I began to loiter in their vicinity. Finally a man detached himself from the group and came over to me. And I said the magic words, "Are you a librarian?" I found them. There were about 50 people there. When we finally were able to take off and got to St. Louis, the airline hired a bus and had us taken to Columbia. Now if I'd been by myself and the only one, it would have been too bad. With the bus, we got there basically on time. And as I said, I did use the placement service, once I got to the conference proper and had lots of interviews. Back then, it was an employees' market. But in the end, I took a job with somebody I met on that bus: Fran Woods, who was head of cataloging at Yale Law Library.

EM: How long were you there?

JH: Two years. I really can't call myself a law cataloger, because I wasn't cataloging the law books. They had experienced people doing that. Yale was, and presumably still is, very social

sciences oriented in its law school. They had lots of social sciences material, lots of Public Law 480 material that had come in from various parts of the world, from various programs. Those were the things I cataloged. So I was basically a social sciences cataloger.

EM: What would you say is your greatest accomplishment in your career as a cataloger or a librarian?

JH: Probably my involvement with OCLC. But along with that is my work with AUTOCAT. But of course I can't claim to have created AUTOCAT. I was its third list owner.

EM: But I think you are the list owner that people identify a personality with, more than the others, should I say.

JH: Well, I've done it for a longer period of time. And the list has grown of course. When I started [in 1993], there were about 1850 subscribers and we're about 4000 now. People come, people go. So just by having done it for about twelve or so years, more people have been exposed to me as list owner than were to the former list owners.

EM: But I don't think it's just that. I think it's the particular way you phrase your answers and the history that you can give, that some people just can't give.

JH: I was a history major and it shows from time to time. Like the dash-on questions? [Dash-on entries were under discussion on AUTOCAT during the time of this interview.]

EM: Right. I enjoy that. I would be interested to hear from some really new catalogers now what they think of those discussions. Switching gears, now--what is your favorite book?

JH: Oh, my favorite book, there's no doubt whatsoever. When I was in high school, I went on a self-improvement kick. So I started with the A's in fiction. Not classification, fiction, and this was a small branch library. The first classic author there was in the A's

was Jane Austen. So I took *Pride and Prejudice* and read it. Didn't care for it that much, but being somewhat the persevering type, I picked up another one. I picked up *Emma*. And I did not like *Emma*. And that was the end of my self-improvement kick for that year. But another year passed and I thought, "Well, I'll try this again." And for some reason, I thought I'll start exactly where I did last year. And I picked up *Pride and Prejudice* again. This time I loved it. I just decided it was the best book I'd ever read. And I have never changed my opinion on that. I've read it numerous times. I've seen various dramatizations of it and I still love *Pride and Prejudice*.

EM: I wouldn't have guessed that, knowing your interest in mysteries ...

JH: There're some that are very good, but none of them quite stands out. There are a number of authors who I think write very well in the mystery field.

EM: That's mostly what you read now for pleasure?

JH: Yes, and primarily historical mysteries. Fortunately there are loads of historical mysteries. It's a sub-genre that has sort of developed in the last 20 years or so.

EM: Do you already know your local public library down in Georgia?

JH: It's a branch of the Gwinnett County public library and my sister has shown it to me. So I'll have to learn the route.

EM: TV show—any favorite?

JH: The West Wing.

EM: ALA convention? Did you have a favorite over the years?

JH: San Antonio. Especially my first one, when the weather was very good. I remember one San Antonio, it rained the entire week. You can't really enjoy the Riverwalk and such in the rain. I still remember that first one and I

was walking one morning toward the convention center. Another woman came along and said, “Do you know the way to the convention center?” And I said, “Yes, I’m going there.” So we walked along together. We were walking and I said “Oh what a beautiful day!” She looked at me rather oddly and looked around. “It’s a nice day, but you know nothing special. But of course I’m from Phoenix.” I said, “I’m from Buffalo.” A January day in San Antonio is one thing. A January day in Buffalo is quite another.

EM: That’s a good indication of how perspective is everything. Your favorite job—would that be OCLC?

JH: Yes, but I’ve on the whole enjoyed almost all the jobs I’ve had. Obviously I’ve enjoyed the one I’ve had here [UB] or I wouldn’t have stayed 27 years. And I did enjoy the teaching. Or most parts of it. I did not enjoy grading and course preparation was not my favorite. So it’s probably just as well I wasn’t able to stay in the teaching field. But I enjoy the challenge of picking up a new book, or a very old book (new to me) and bringing it out, to describe it, determine who was involved with it, how they should be represented, what it’s about, where it fits in the classification of knowledge. It’s all challenging. It’s a mystery. That’s why when I was teaching; I used to tell the students that if you liked mysteries,

you’d be a good cataloger and a good reference librarian.



On September 29, 2004, the University at Buffalo Libraries held a reception in honor of Judith’s retirement. One of the gifts given to Judith at that event was an engraved silver plate. The inscription describes Judith’s accomplishments perfectly: Cataloger, Teacher, Mentor, Friend. I extend my most sincere best wishes to Judith upon her well-deserved retirement. But I also look forward to many more years of her wisdom on AUTOCAT. Congratulations Judith!