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Interview with Ruth Alford, member of University of Delaware library staff, June 21, 1973, by Rebecca Button.

Q This is an interview with Ruth Alford, a part of the Oral History Project of the University of Delaware. Ruth Alford was a member of the University library staff from 1945 to 1973. When did you first come to the university, Ruth?

A In July, 1945.

Q What had you been doing before you came here?

A Well, I had been a librarian. I had lately come from North Dakota. I spent one winter there, which was enough.

Q Had you been at the University of North Dakota, or another school?

A No, it was a state teachers' college--Minot~~t~~.

Q How did you know about the University of Delaware--how did you happen to be hired here?

A As soon as I knew I was not going to stay in North Dakota, I applied to about a dozen different places. I had known this area because I had been a high school librarian down in Salisbury, Maryland. And I liked the area. And I applied and got the job.

Q What were some of your ideas about the university before you came--had you ever heard of the University of Delaware, or had you ever been in Newark?

A I never had. In fact I called it Newark (New' ark). But, as I said, I knew the area fairly well. I thought when I came, though, after being in North Dakota for the whole winter, it was the most beautiful spot I had ever seen.

Q Who were some of the people who worked with you in the library when you first came?

A Mrs. Boone, Helen Boone; Mr. Lewis, bless his heart; Helen Boyce; Helen Thomas...well, I think they were the only ones who were here when I first came.

Q What is the staff of the library now? Could you try to compare it in terms of growth generally.

A Well, we have almost 100 people on the staff now. At that time there weren't more than 15 or 20, including student assistants, even.

Q What would you say might be...what would you have thought of as weaknesses of the library when you first came...what were the strengths of the library...and how did you see the university in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

A Of course, the library had suffered from the Depression. And the budget

was very small. We simply couldn't get all the things that we needed. Of course it has increased enormously since then. The book collection of course has increased enormously in the last few years. We are now approaching the million mark. As far as the university is concerned, there's some advantages and some disadvantages to growth. When I first came to the university, I knew all of the faculty and most of the students. Now I don't know a fourth of them. There's something about being a small college or university that is helpful, I believe.

Q What about some of the faculty that you remember in an interesting way... some of your favorites.

A Well, there's Dr. Abel. I remember...well, his students all loved him. They all talked about him. I remember one day he came into the library, and he came up to my desk. He wanted to know if we had a chart showing the various tartans--Scotch tartans. Well, I didn't know why he wanted it, but I found it for him. And then he showed me an advertisement that he had for some plaid vests. And the list of the various tartans. And he wanted to see what colors they were in. Well, sometime later, he came in; he had his coat pulled together. And he came up to my desk, he threw open his coat, and there was this bright red and black plaid vest. He said, "Brass buttons, too, mind you!" I remember his portrayal of the main character in "Life with Father."

I wonder if you'd be interested in some of the queer reference questions I've had in my day? I have named animals, Russian wolfhounds, French poodles, Siamese cats. I have found the going price of muskrat skins. I have also...one student came to the desk one day, he pointed to a reference that he had, and said, "Do we have this journal?" And it turned out to be "Ibid."

I would like to pay a tribute to Mr. William Ditto Lewis, whom the students usually nicknamed "Ditto," which was his middle name. He wasn't always appreciated, not by everybody, but he was a true scholar, and a fine gentleman. I remember one afternoon, some students brought a cow onto the lawn right in front of the library. And they said they were going to milk the cow and they had a little pail...and give the milk to Mr. Lewis. Not a one of the boys could get a drop of milk. I said, "Stand back, boys and let a country girl show you how." And I did--I got about a quart.

Q Did you give it to Mr. Lewis?

A Really, I have forgotten.

Q Could you tell us some more of your knowledge of Mr. Lewis and his role here as the librarian--some of the things he might have done.

A The present archivist, John Clayton, says he thanks God every day for Mr. Lewis. He was very careful to keep things to...his indexing of various holdings of the library have been really invaluable. He is responsible too for writing, really, the library story, and for the Joseph Cleaver Diary, the diary of a young man who was at the university which was then Delaware College--I believe Newark College then, back in the earliest years of its history. He was rather strange character. I enjoyed him and I think most of the people who knew him best did enjoy [him].

He had a temper, and I remember one day, there was a student assistant who was trying to maneuver a truckload of books into the elevator. And just as Mr. Lewis happened to pass by, the truck toppled and all the books spilled on the floor. Well, Mr. Lewis called her "Butterfingers" and oh, he just blistered her. The girl started crying and ran out. Well, I followed Mr. Lewis out. I followed him down the hall to his office. And I said, "You are the reason we can't keep student assistants." Well, he became angry too, then. And we did a little shouting at each other. And we both became red in the face, I'm sure. Suddenly he reached out--there were two trowels, engraved, that had been used for cornerstone laying. And he picked up one of them and he handed the other one to me. In other words, we both had weapons. Then we both started laughing, and the quarrel was over. Mr. Lewis also did a wonderful bibliography of letters and diaries in the university library. Recently a young man came and wanted to see it. He said it was wonderful; it was the best bibliography that he'd seen of this kind. And he himself was very much interested in letters and diaries. And he wanted to know where Mr. Lewis lived. I told him, and gave him his address. He said he was going to see him. Well, he did. And Mr. Lewis wrote me and he thanked me for sending young Cummins his way. Mr. Cummins went to Oberlin, Ohio to see Mr. Lewis, and Mr. Lewis died just ten days ago in Oberlin. They used to say about Mr. Lewis that he was not happy until he had every book in its place on the shelves in the library. I don't think that is really true. He wanted the books circulated. But he also wanted to keep them safe.

Q Was there a special project...did Mr. Lewis want an enlargement of the library for quite a while before they moved to the new library? How severe was your crowding and when did it start to happen--at the old library, Memorial Hall?

A We were really bursting at the seams before the new library was built. There just simply was no more room for expansion. Unfortunately, there was no money for it for a while. And we just had to even curtail some of our buying because there was no room for anything.

Q What were your solutions. You curtailed buying although you had a budget, because there was no room for more books. Did that force the move to the new library?

A Well, I think it was just finally recognized by the administration and by authorities that we had to have more room. And finally the funds were provided to build a new library.

Q Was Mr. Lewis still the librarian when you moved to the new building? When did he retire?

A No, he retired I think in 1962, and we didn't move into the new library until 1963.

Q It's too bad that he missed the new building, isn't it. Did most of the staff that you had worked with go over to the new library with you?

A Yes. All of them who were then members of the staff moved over. Yes.

Q Did you find it a joy to work in the new library?

- A Oh, yes, it was delight to have room. And I thought then that we had all the room in the world. But in the ten years that we've been there, I've seen this library fill up...and there's going to have to be more room before too long.
- Q Would they build down underneath the library, do you think? Would they have large subterranean stacks?
- A There has been some talk of it. I don't know. There's been a plan for making a separate science library, underground, between Sharp lab and Brown lab...in other words it would be centrally located, underneath, with tunnels connecting. I don't know what's going to happen.
- Q Is the flow of publications greater every year--have you seen any leveling off at all?
- A None at all. There's just more and more. And also they cost more and more.
- Q Does the budget for the library go up every year? Book buying?
- A I don't know what will happen the next year. It has gone up every year, up 'til now. But at the time of my retirement, the budget for this next year was very uncertain.
- Q What would you, as you look back over your long career at the university library, be able to tell us about people you respected, who you recognized as scholars, because of their use of the library. Could you see this? Could you recognize some of these people as being particularly scholars, as you observed them.
- A I believe I would think first of all of Dr. <sup>Sypherd</sup>~~Sieffert~~, Wilber Owen <sup>Sypherd</sup>~~Sieffert~~. He was a daily visitor to the library. He was one of the true scholars, I think, that this university has produced. He used to come and consult me, occasionally, when he was writing his book about horses, and I said, one day, that he was going to be the greatest authority on horses in the world. He said, "Yes, and you'll be the next one."
- Q Was Dr. <sup>Sypherd</sup>~~Sieffert~~ always the same, with his rather high color and dignified manner and bright eyes? He always seemed to be a very alert person.
- A He was indeed. Although he was serious, he also had a very keen sense of humor, and I mentioned his book about horses. By the way, these were horses in art and literature, and unfortunately it was never published.
- Q Was his continuing interest in the Bible? He taught a course in Bible. As far as you know, was that his major scholarly interest?
- A No, I don't think it was his major interest. He did...was interested in biblical literature. But I don't believe that that was his major interest. He was interested in literature of all types. As a matter of fact, I have Dr. Sieffert's set of Dickens. I've been getting rid of most of my books before I leave, but that I'm holding on to. When he...he left his library to the university library. But he had told

Mr. Lewis that he was doing it, and he said, "Now, I know that some of these things you won't need. They'll be duplicates." And he said, "Anything that you don't need that there are no strings, give them to people who will want them." He said, "For instance, I know Miss Alford would like to have my set of Dickens." So I have them.

Q Well, Dr. Siéffert is a brilliant example of the University of Delaware scholars you've met and known. You were talking some about the changes in student behavior and the kind of changes you've observed in the library itself. It's probably important to talk about that, Ruth.

A Well, at the expense of probably being called an old fogey, I don't think the change in students and their behavior has been for the better. I believe there has been just too much permissive; certainly many of them at least are slovenly in appearance, and slovenly in their behavior. We've had, for instance, pages torn from books and magazines, without regard for anybody else...completely thoughtless of the convenience of other people. In the reference room in the library, we had beautiful new furniture, lounge furniture, and within ten years it just had to be replaced. They have written on it; they have put their dirty feet on it--bare feet on it...it's just typical of the kind of behavior that we see nowadays.

Q When did the library have to have guards to watch its books going out. When did they happen?

A Well, soon after we moved into the new library we began having guards. We never did before.

Q Was that because books were being stolen?

A Well, yes. Of course, there's always some loss of books. But it became more prevalent.

Q One of the first major changes you saw was the influx of people after the G.I. Bill, just following the war, and that was really coincidental with your coming here.

A Yes, it was. One thing I noticed about the G.I.'s...they were mature; they were serious students. They knew what they had come back to school for. Much more so than the younger ones who were just entering. You'd see a pair of G.I. boots or a Pea Jacket, across a chair, and you'd see somebody who was really hard at work.

Q At the time the G.I. came, it was the first real large, new population to change the enrollment. Did you find in your library meetings with Mr. Lewis that the library was hard put in those first couple of years to meet the new pressure?

A Well, we were. The enrollment practically doubled within a year. And we didn't have staff enough, we didn't have the books that we needed. There were so many things we lacked. But we struggled.

Q What would you think about as changes, if you were going to be changing the university--or the community. What would you think of as possible changes we need?

A As far as the university is concerned, I believe we're getting too large. I think perhaps we should have a limit on the enrollment. Now of course I realize that everybody should have an opportunity to go to college who wants to. And as the population increases, some provision will have to be made for them. But possibly smaller institutions, more institutions, would be the solution. There is something so impersonal about a large university that you lose some of the contact with faculty and staff that you just can't get in a large institution. As far as the town is concerned, I like small towns. I don't like the sprawl, this urban sprawl that we have...beginning to have here in Newark. The traffic is awful. I don't know any solutions, though.

Q Have you had special community interests outside the university since you came here, and how did you get involved in these. How have they changed?

A The very first year I was here, I joined the university drama group. I had always been interested in dramatics, and I took an active part in it for many many years, in fact until just the last two or three years. The University Drama Group was a...it started out as a group of faculty, faculty wives, then they took in a number of townspeople, and now I think it's probably more townspeople than university people. But...also it's changed its name. It was university affiliated, now it is the Chapel Street Players and they have their own theater over on Chapel Street. But I've enjoyed that very much. I've done a little bit of everything with it...acting, directing, scenery, costuming, makeup--I've done a little of all of it.

Q What plays stand out in your mind--particular ones that you loved working with.

A "The Grass Harp" was one which I enjoyed very much.

Q Did you act in that play?

A Yes, I did. Also, "Curious Savage." One of the most recent ones that I've done was out at Anderson's Barn...that is an arena stage there and I had a part in "Light Up the Sky," which I also enjoyed very much.

Q Can you recall... people important to you in your community life during your life in Newark?

A My first introduction to Miss Ann Hossinger, who lived up across the street from what was then the College Inn and is now Raab Hall. She called on the telephone and she said, "Can you tell me what 'hubba hubba' means?" Well, I think I answered her question. I found she was interested in everything and everybody. She would sit on her porch across from the College Inn and watch everybody who went in or went out...and I don't think just curiosity; I think she was just really interested. She read vociferously, and if she'd come across something in her reading that she didn't understand, some allusion, she'd call the library. In fact, she was almost a daily caller. She was almost completely paralyzed at the time, but it didn't keep her from talking. Her tongue was not paralyzed. I remember once she wanted some books,

and I offered to bring them to her because she didn't have anybody she could send for them. When I went, she was alone, and she was in the back of the house, so she called to me and told me to come on back to her bedroom. I never saw as many things around the bed...everything--medicine, books, papers, pencils, ink, everything. But she was just interested. I think that wonderful for an elderly woman to be so interested in so many things.

Q Her house is gone now, isn't it--where the parking lot beside the brick building is? What is the name of that which was once the Presbyterian Church?

A They call it the Stone Building now. Yes. Her house was where that parking lot is now. Shortly after we moved into the new library, I was working there one evening and I walked into the elevator to go up into the stacks, and there was a pig. I didn't quite know what to do with the pig...I wasn't frightened of a pig, but the pig was frightened of me. I hurriedly got out and called Security, and told them that there was a pig in the elevator. They said, "A pig!" I said, "Yes, a pig. Come get him."

Q Your most recent project for the university has been working on the Messersmith papers...isn't that true? Who was he?

A I find it rather strange that more people will say, "Who was he?" I think he should be better known than he is. George Strauss Messersmith was a diplomat. He attended the university...at least back when it was Delaware College, and he was engaged in educational work here in Delaware for a number of years. In fact he was at one time the Superintendent of Schools here in Newark. But in 1914 he joined the Foreign Service, and he served variously as...well, probably the most important posts were as Consul in Antwerp and then Consul General in Germany during Hitler's rise to power. He was then moved to Austria. He was there at the time that ~~Dolphus~~ *Dolfuss* was assassinated. Then he came back...was called back and served as Assistant Secretary of State in 1937 and 1940. He was Ambassador to Cuba, he was Ambassador to Mexico, then Ambassador to Argentina. He just happened to be at the places where things were happening. For instance he was in Argentina when Peron came into power. I had been working on a calendar of these papers for...well, it's been quite a long project...two or three years, in fact. And I just finished it before my retirement. It required a great deal of research--many names were mentioned...maybe just a last name--I would try to find a first name...or a first name would be given and I'd have to try to find the last name. There were certain things that were unclear in some of the papers that I had to try to identify. The collection of papers is voluminous. Messersmith was...he said an awful lot. And he was very frank. He...it was said of a colleague of Messersmith's--Sumner Wells--that he knew five languages well, and knew how to hold his tongue in all of them. Well, Messersmith knew four languages certainly well, and he didn't hold his tongue in any of them, unless it was the better part of diplomacy to do so. The calendar runs well to over 700 typed pages--I don't know what it will be if it's published. Many thousands of papers, really, in the whole collection.

Q When were these bequeathed to the university?

A In 1960, after Messersmith died, the university received them. It was



through the offices of Dr. ~~Steffert~~<sup>Sypherd</sup>, who was an old-time friend of Messersmith that Messersmith put a codicil in his will to say that the papers should come to the university when he died.

Q What are your plans, Ruth, now, upon your retirement in June of 1973?

A I'm returning to my ~~old~~<sup>old</sup> home in Florida where I was born and grew up, and where my family still lives. So I'll be there with them, which makes it easier, a little bit, to live here, because it's a ridge... I've put down roots here in 28 years, but at least I'm not going to a new place. And then I hope to do some traveling.

Q Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW.

*Wood?*