Oral History Interview

with

Andrea Sevetson

Interview Conducted by
Tanya Finchum
July 13, 2009

Government Information Living Indexes
Oral History Project
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Interview History

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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 Andrea Sevetson is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on July 13, 2009.
About Andrea Sevetson…

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

Andrea has made a lifetime of contributions to government documents librarianship from serving as a chair of the Government Documents Round Table (GODORT) of the American Library Association (ALA) to serving as editor of 

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

In recognition and appreciation of her contributions to the government information profession Andrea received the 2009 James Bennett Childs Award.
Today is July 13, 2009. My name is Tanya Finchum and I’m here in Chicago, Illinois with Andrea Sevetson and this is part of the GODORT Oral History Project and we’re going to get started and have her tell a little bit about her childhood and then we’ll work forward from there.

I was born just north of here in Franksville, actually Racine, Wisconsin. My dad’s a minister so we actually moved around a little bit when I was a kid, although it was Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota. For about six-seven months [after I was born] we lived outside of Racine and then moved down to DeKalb for a couple years and then up to Appleton for about four years and then over to White Bear Lake, Minnesota where I spent most of elementary school and high school. And then went to Macalester College, and then went on from there to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin- Madison.

Do you have siblings?

I do. I have an older brother and a younger sister. So I’m the middle child.

And do you remember your first library experience.

I don’t, but I remember my children’s librarian, Betty Gilchrist. She was one of the librarians who had—I don’t know if she had half-glasses but I think she had wire rim glasses and she had the bun and everything. But she was very, very nice.

How early did you want to be a librarian?

I actually didn’t decide until after I was at college, so the summer after college. I had worked in Macalester at the library because they were one of the two largest employers on campus. So it was a good choice to get a
job. It was either the food service or the library and I thought the library seemed like a good gig by comparison so I applied at the library. I checked in periodicals on little kardex cards. We had about 1000 periodicals and I just checked in. We had this little consortium, which still exists, and we could like put out the fact that we needed these three issues of *Time* magazine and when duplicates would come in, they would send them out, if they had the things on file. So it was a way of filling gaps without ordering back files or anything like that.

**Finchum**  
*And that was what spurred you to become...?*

**Sevetson**  
No. What spurred me was after college that summer, I worked at Yellowstone National Park.

**Finchum**  
*How neat.*

**Sevetson**  
It was a neat experience, but I didn’t have a car. And it turns out that when you work at a national park that is so far away from everything, there is not a lot to do in the national park. I don’t think there was a television station. There was maybe one radio station that got into Yellowstone because of the mountains and the elevation. There was no cable, at that point in there. The contractors who worked on things had certain amenities. They had satellite or cable or something but the employees had nothing. They had the employee pub and occasionally they would have a movie night but it really wasn’t anything well organized. It wasn’t like once a week or twice a week or anything. So if you didn’t have a car, you were kind of stuck. There were buses that went around the park and you could take them but it would take all day to do the upper and the lower loop. It really wasn’t like ‘get somewhere and spend all day.’

My boss, actually her dad, owned a filling station and he was one of those who sold the paperback books and if he didn’t sell them, he’d take the covers off. You know now you look at them and they say, “If you’re buying this book or reading this book without a cover on it, you’re reading an illegal copy.” Well, I had a bag of illegal copies in my room. People actually came by because they knew I was the person with the books. And I was thinking about, at that point, what I wanted to do and decided, ‘well, I kind of like working in the library. I think I’d like to work in the library. That sounds like a plan.’ My dad knew what he wanted to do at age 13. So he was very uncomfortable with people not having a plan. So I figured as long as, when I went back home, I had a plan I was okay. I didn’t have to stick to the plan, but having the plan was important, how I was going to proceed. So that I was how I decided to go to library school. I was accepted at Michigan and Wisconsin and Chicago and I decided to go to Wisconsin because I had friends there.
and because it did not demand a master’s thesis. I thought, ‘well they
don’t all seem to demand it. It doesn’t seem like you have to do it.’ So I
decided that Wisconsin then was the right place.

Finchum  

*And at that point, did you have a special area you wanted to focus on within libraries?*

Sevetson  

No. I knew I didn’t want to be a cataloger. I knew that—that was sure.
And that’s actually borne out throughout my career. I can appreciate
what it does. I know a bad record when I see it. I know when things need
to be fixed, but being a cataloger, being the indexer, has not ever really
appealed to me. I thought I didn’t really want to be in collections but I
ended up managing the documents collections at Berkeley and it was
actually sort of interesting. But really, in terms of what I thought I was
going to do in library school, there was no bearing on what I’ve ended
up doing and what I’ve really felt good about doing. I would say when
you’re in graduate school, unless you’re really self aware, you really
should take everything you can because you have no idea where you’ll
end up and where your life will take you and what the choices will be,
too.

Finchum  

*Did you have a government information class?*

Sevetson  

I did. I took John Boll’s government information class. He was German,
so we called him HerrBoll affectionately. And he taught a really good
documents class, and the reason I took it was because at Macalester
we’d had hearings in the collection and nobody quite seemed to know
what to do with them. They weren’t a depository but they had this stuff
and it was like they were special and nobody knew what to do with
them. Well that seems like a really good career move to learn about this
stuff that people seem to not know what to do with. We did the treasure
hunt exercise where you find this and you do that. I just really enjoyed
everything about them, about that class. So the first job I got had
government documents as part of the job description.

Finchum  

*So let’s talk a little bit about your first job.*

Sevetson  

When I was in library school, my last semester, part of what I did that
semester was I got very serious about job hunting because I didn’t want
to get out without a job because, of course, nine months later my student
loans would become due and a life of debt would build up rapidly. So I
job hunted and I got a job down at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia.
I was there almost exactly two years and it wasn’t a great fit. They didn’t
have people there who were good at mentoring. It was such a small staff,
but I had thought I wanted to work in a place like my college library. It
would have been a small undergraduate institution, liberal arts. It turns
out that really wasn’t me at all but I got enough experience and I got enough of a chance to do different things when I was there that my resume was then attractive to a bunch of places. Attractive enough to get me interviews, which was, of course, a huge step and the next step was getting a job. So I got the job at Berkeley and started in February 1989 at UC Berkeley in Government Documents.

Finchum: And stayed there?

Sevetson: I stayed there almost 12 ½ years to the day.

Finchum: And then from there, you did what?

Sevetson: From Berkeley? I was unemployed for six months because I left Berkeley to move east to get married. So I had this weird six month gap, which really—it was fine. I was still doing professional things. It turns out that at that point my network kicked in. I didn’t really have to apply for a job. Although you have to go through the process, but it was already mine at that point. I was sitting at a Government Information Technology Committee meeting, I think. I think that was the committee, and John Karaliunas of the Census Bureau was there and I’d known him through different pieces of work. He sort of looked over and two weeks later I got this email and he said, “Do you need a job? I have a job. I need somebody to write Census 2000 Basics and do some work for the Census Bureau.” And I sort of thought I had a lead on a job at the Department of Education in the library, but that never panned out. So I ended up spending three years at the Census Bureau both as a contractor and then about half of that time as a federal employee.

Finchum: And then what?

Sevetson: And then what? And then I went to Alaska for two weeks, took an Alaska Cruise. And then I started at LexisNexis, almost exactly four years ago.

Finchum: And you’re still doing that.

Sevetson: And I’m still doing that, yeah, doing training, background work on products. Products like the Serial Set white paper, Hearings white paper, Congressional Research Digital Collection white paper. I do training guides. I don’t actually edit the Wiki but there are things that I will say, ‘This needs to be on the Wiki and can we get this on the Wiki and do something with it?’ So I have my fingers in a lot of different places and it keeps it really interesting.

Finchum: A natural progression it seems.
Sevetson  Well it kind of does, but if you had started out sort of shooting from library school, you really would say, ‘What? What happened here?’ But ultimately a lot of it ended up with working with librarians. Being the librarians’ librarian with training materials and being a resource for librarians who use, in this case, the LexisNexis products, and before that, Census materials.

Finchum  And when did you join ALA and GODORT?

Sevetson  I joined ALA and GODORT—I think my [ALA membership] card says 23 years ago. So it was when I got my job at Roanoke so 1987.

Finchum  And you became more involved and more involved with GODORT?

Sevetson  Yeah. Actually, 1989 in Dallas was my first ALA and it was hotter than heck outside and I about froze to death. Words to the wise, they over air condition hotels and big conference rooms. So you’ll be sitting and it’s 95 degrees outside and I’m sure you know this really well, and you’re absolutely freezing because the air conditioning is just pumping out the air. And it was sort of a very odd experience. I don’t know the first GODORT meeting I went to. I probably went to some at that conference, but it’s such a big conference it’s like well should I go do this, should I go do that? And I must have gotten started in the International Documents Task Force right away. That was really my entree to go in and it’s really a nice small group. And I think it was ’92-93 when I was the coordinator of International Documents Task Force.

Finchum  And you were chair, at some point, of GODORT?

Sevetson  Of GODORT, yeah ’96-97. Yeah.

Finchum  And then you were on Federal Depository Library Council.

Sevetson  And then I was on Depository Library Council (DLC) from ’99-2002.

Finchum  So what were some of the bigger issues when you had those two positions?

Sevetson  When I was GODORT chair, trying to think who it was who introduced a bill—the end of 1996, sort of cast something on the waters to amend the Federal Depository Library Program. That started a whole effort. The Inter-Association Working Group (IAWG) on Government Information Policy started and we met regularly for almost two years. There I was in Berkeley and all of the meetings were in Washington and one of the hardest things to get through, just in terms of personal negotiations, was the time zone difference. I’m not a morning person, so
if they were going to do a meeting and I was calling in or if they needed to get everybody together for a meeting, it can’t be before 10 AM eastern time because I just don’t function before 7 AM. I can get up and get myself to the airport or something, but you really don’t want to be talking to me before that time.

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

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

Finchum

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

Sevetson

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

Finchum

A long time.

Sevetson

It was a long time. I don’t think it was as complex as it is now. I mean, I could go in and I could hard code, there weren’t cascading style sheets
and all that stuff. I was very lucky. The folks in the [Library] Systems Office had a lot of confidence in me. I’d get invited to their Christmas parties because I would just go hang out with them. It was really worth it both to my unit and the other sorts of work I was doing to be on good terms with them and have a good relationship with them.

**Finchum**

The Berkeley Administrative support was there for you?

**Sevetson**

Yup, they were also there. My boss could not have been better. I had $250 phone bills when I was GODORT chair, all of the time. I would spend—like literally 2-3 hours a day on the phone during the whole IAWG stuff, just sort of conference calls, and touching base with different people. So you know, you get home and your ear is red. And the phone rings and you just think, ‘I just really don’t want to talk to anybody.’ I spent all day on the phone.

**Finchum**

Not every year is like that, is it? For the chair?

**Sevetson**

No they only try to revise Title 44 about every 10 years. So every so often somebody will bring something like that up and all I can think of is, ‘Well not me, not this time. It’s going to be somebody else.’

**Finchum**

Many people refer to you as the walking PPM (Policies and Procedures Manual).

**Sevetson**

Well, it’s not true anymore. You don’t really want to tell them that. I was laughing with Valerie Glenn who now knows so much about that. And I’ll think now, ‘Well there’s something about that in the PPM, I should go look that up.’ But you know, I don’t really know anywhere near as much as I used to, because I don’t need to. Nobody asks me that anymore.

**Finchum**

How did you learn it to start with?

**Sevetson**

How? How? In, I think, the late ’90’s, I don’t remember why or what was going on, but it became really clear it was in bad shape and nobody really paid any attention to it, and it just needed to be updated to deal with what the committees were really doing, what was going on on the web, all sorts of different things. So I made a push to have every single chapter reviewed. I would send them to the chair, and if I didn’t hear back from them, I would call them and I’d say, ‘Okay, so I sent that to you, do you want that text? Is there anything that needs to be changed?’ If they would say there was something that needed to be changed I would say, ‘Well I’ll write it and I’ll send it back to you.’

**Finchum**

Okay.
Sevetson  

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

Finchum  

*And then you came to the rescue of* DttP.

Sevetson  

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

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

We just were sitting around, this is where my memory becomes really clear about what happened when, in 2003 around the [ALA] Midwinter [meeting] in Philadelphia and someone had applied to be editor but they had gone through the interview process and for whatever reason they had backed out. They said this isn’t what I want to do. And I was sitting there [in the Steering Committee meeting], I think I was chair of Bylaws at that point, and I said, ‘Well, I could do that.’ Susan Tulis was sitting
next to me and she said, “I could be your distribution manager.” Then we were sort of locked in at that point. We’d been joking but it was sort of like, ‘We really could do this. We’d never done anything like this before but we’re really smart people.’ She’s extremely organized. I’m organized.

We figured all we needed was a couple people to work with us and the people who were, I think, around the table then—I think Chuck Eckman was there and I was talking to him and I said, ‘Do you want to come and do this?’ And he said, “Sure.” I said, ‘I’m sure I can get Helen Sheehy because I’ve written with Helen for years.’ Probably, if I looked, the first thing I’ve written would have been with Helen. Chuck said, “I think we need somebody else.” We looked around the room and Dena Hutto was sitting there. He said, “Dena’s a good writer. We should get Dena.” So we said, “Dena do you want to come and do this?” And she thought about it and she said yes. And I said, ‘I know Lynne Stuart had actually talked to John [Shuler] or wanted to talk to John about being the advertising manager and I’m not sure where that ever went, but I’ll call Lynne. I know Lynne.’ So sort of like within an hour or two we had an idea of what the group would be and how we would put it together.

On the way home from Philadelphia, I was in the car, my husband was driving, I was on the phone with Lynne saying, ‘Lynne this is Andrea, do you want to come and do this? Do you want to be a part of this?’ And she said, “Well let me think about it. Let me talk to my husband.” And she wanted to do it. So we put this packet together. In the mean time, Susan’s husband, Frank, edited Law Library Journal for 12 years [or so] and it turns out Law Library Journal is also produced through ALA so she knew the people at ALA publications and talked to them about timelines and what it takes to get issues together. We put together this proposal with a mock timeline and how we would do things and all of our CVs and then this cover letter saying we’ve worked with each other for years in various guises.

It was funny because the publications committee was sort of like well—here’s where I’m hoist on my own petard. The Policy and Procedures Manual does not have a group model. It has a single editor model [for editing DttP. And I thought, ‘You know, this is crazy because this is what you all want to have happen. Have a group doing this because it would be so much better. But you’re going to tell me the Policy and Procedures Manual isn’t going to let me do this?’ Well, we all know we can change the law. All we have to do is say this is what we want to do. So I guess they finally talked themselves around and decided, “Well this is really what we want to have happen, this kind of thing, so let’s just let them do it.” So we got the group approved and met.
I actually told the Publications Committee, “If you want us to do this, I really need to know before we go to DLC this spring because I need to talk to people about content and what we want for content,” because we had to put together issue 3-4 for the rest of that year. We got the approval so we started working everything that needed to be worked. We met with ALA Publications up in Toronto, the summer of SARS and they talked to us about what they could do, different things they could do to help us and they were just phenomenal. We only worked with, I guess, three or four different ALA production services people over the six years and there are [editors of other ALA publications] who said they’ve been through like a dozen. But I think because we were so well organized they liked to work with us. We were a lot less trouble than some of the other groups.

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

Finchum: That’s good.

Sevetson: Yeah.

Finchum: And the financial end of it you improved too, as well?

Sevetson: I’ve said I’m not a business person, but I wanted to run it on a more business like status. John [Schuler] had already started with ALA by moving the production over. And we also then got the distribution list from him and turned that over to ALA. So they actually then dealt with all of the administrative business aspects of it. Then Susan [Tulis], who had been distribution editor, began managing the reviews process. So we had somebody dealing with ads, we had subscriptions, so we actually had money coming in at that point.

I had been a columnist with *DttP* so I attended the staff meetings. We used to bill advertisers at the end of the volume so we would get one
check a year. I thought, ‘I don’t think GODORT can afford this right now.’ GODORT had no money at that point. I said, ‘We need to bill after every single issue.’ We’ll let them pay in advance for the whole year. We have no problems with that. That’s not an issue at all. But otherwise, we will bill after every issue. That way there’s a consistent revenue flow and people can see the revenue flow coming in.

Finchum

Good business sense.

Sevetson

Yeah, and because there had been that problem, I started producing an annual [financial report]—or actually for every meeting, a where we were with the revenue side of DttP and the expenditure side. So people could see how much it cost to produce every issue. There’s one figure and they saw how much was coming in. We would project every year for subscriptions and for advertising. We could show now for the six years what all of those financials were. I don’t think it had ever been done. They would see it through the treasurer but it’s several months after the fact when the treasurer gets the report and can update the budget. Ours is much more immediate. [About] three days before the conference I get the advertising report and we’re able to show up to the minute what we’ve received. This is what’s outstanding. This is what we expect to collect through the rest of the year.

Finchum

A good business plan and having the background to do it...

Sevetson

Yeah and just letting everybody know what’s going on. I think that was the other thing that had been going on. We’re at volume 37 so for 33 years it had been going on back in the background. And really changing that model and bringing it out in the open so that people could see.

Finchum

Will the next phase be electronic?

Sevetson

We [the Publications Committee] actually did a survey, which was really good. I had wanted to do a survey but when you’re editing it and doing it there’s so much. It just fell down with me. Over 60% of the people who have responded, which was about 20% of GODORT membership, said they wanted it in paper still. If you go electronic, depending on what you do, it doesn’t necessarily save money, because you don’t necessarily have subscribers and you don’t necessarily have advertisers. But you still have some level of costs depending on what you do. So we don’t break even, but we’re within about $5000 of breaking even [annually] so that’s pretty darn good for something that people get, the membership benefit that comes out. So that’s going to be for GODORT to figure out, what they want to do. The membership, at least currently, says the people who responded, said they still wanted it in paper. They, of course, liked the electronic online, but they like the current for walking
around, reading what was going on. They’re like me like that.

Finchum

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

Sevetson

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

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

Anyway, Helen and I, she actually was elected International Documents chair the year before I was, and I thought, ‘Oh, I’m going to be up against this woman my whole career. This is just awful.’ We call, we talk, we know each other’s family and all these things. It has always been really good. And she and I write together really well. We’ll write stuff and pass it back and forth and generate ideas. She is just a
phenomenal writer. I’ve learned a lot and gotten a lot better by working with her. Doing DttP also makes you a better editor and writer because you’re editing and writing other people’s things.

Sort of thinking about mentors, not like this person who is more advance in their careers taking me through, but there were good, good people who I had as friends early on and have stuck with me. The other person who I relied on extensively when I was GODORT chair was Dan O’Mahony at Brown University. He was the Legislation Committee chair and then he also became the chair of the Inter-Association Working Group on Government Information Policy after Fran [Buckley] moved on to be Superintendent of Documents. He had an ability to deal with the crap and the patience to work through the process. He’s one of those amazing people who doesn’t get their back up if somebody says something really obnoxious. He just has an ability to diffuse it. You watch this in various rooms when people do something or say something and you see the tension go up. He is able to ratchet it back. When you’re talking about legislation, when you’re talking about a program everybody cares so much about, tensions can get sort of high sometimes and you’re tired and you’ve been working and you flown in or whatever. So he’s a phenomenal resource. He also has a really amazing recall of details and events, which is hilarious sometimes.

We were asking people to write responses for DttP to the regionals’ report and we asked him to write a response or I was corresponding about something that was going on in GovDoc-L [listserv] with him. He came back with this long sort of list of everything that had happened over the years about this that and the other thing. And it was like, ‘Oh, okay.’ So whoever was putting this out on GovDoc-L was wrong on all the details. I don’t even have to check because I read Dan’s account and I was like, ‘Oh yeah that’s right, I remember that’s exactly what happened.’ Then we asked him to write [a response to] the report on the regionals. We wanted everybody to write about 800 words which is about one DttP page. He came back at four pages, which is another thing that you worry about when you’re an editor, is the length and what it will cost to produce. It wasn’t that it wasn’t a really valuable article, it was just the expense and there were these other two people who had been cutting from 900 words to 850 just caring about every single word and being so good. And there he is with 3200 words and [I thought] ‘What will I say to the other two authors now?’

**Finchum**

Well, it seems like the government information community is pretty tight. It’s a community.

**Sevetson**

It is a community.
Finchum  *Any idea of what keeps it together like that? What would you think?*

Sevetson  I wouldn’t even say that everybody always likes each other either because you can watch and people roll their eyes or by talking to people you know these people really don’t get along. It’s almost like it’s family at some point. I think it’s that everybody cares about this thing, [this program], and they care about the people who come in and need the information that’s in government documents. You hear really touching stories about people.

I can’t think of who this is, who talked about the veteran who found out about the battle that he was in through the military histories. He had been in that battle, and he didn’t know why it was important but this library had military history and he found out why he had been there. I used to have, occasionally, people come in and they’d need to use—what is the handbook that has all of the programs? The social work programs and stuff like that?

Finchum  *Domestic Assistance?*

Sevetson  *Handbook of Domestic Assistance*, yeah. I would have these people come in and I thought if there was a publication that ever needed to stay in paper, it would be the *Handbook of Federal Domestic Assistance* because you get these people coming in, and you think, ‘I’m not sure how well these people read.’ So I would just say, ‘Here it is, come and ask me if you have any questions, I’d be happy to help you.’ They could just go and sit and sort of commune with the publication and figure out what they needed to know. I’m not sure it would have been as easy for them on a computer. I would get these people who looked like they had fallen on hard times and they would need the *Handbook of Federal Domestic Assistance*.

Finchum  *On the opposite end of that spectrum, did you have a favorite reference question?*

Sevetson  No.

Finchum  *It doesn’t necessarily need to a good one?*

Sevetson  No, but there always seemed like there was an inverse relationship between how much time you spent on something and how grateful the patrons were. They would come in with what they thought was a hard question and it might not be so hard and be extremely grateful. “Oh, thank you so much.” Somebody who wanted infant mortality rates, and there’s a table in the back of the *Statistical Abstract* and I’d say, ‘Here you go.’ And, “Oh, thank you so much!” And then you know these
customers you spent 20-30 minutes with an intensive work. “Oh, okay. Well it’s not what I wanted.” You don’t get it. This is so good. We’ve worked so hard to get here.

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

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

**Finchum**

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

**Sevetson**

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

**Finchum**

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

**Sevetson**

Yeah. And I always felt uncomfortable, generally, about doing that, but I would ask my friends. I would, put it out to five or so people and say, ‘What do you think about this? Do you know anything about this?’ Because I always felt like, ‘I don’t know if I really want to expose all my ignorance in front of all of my colleagues this quickly. All of the
things that I don’t know, I don’t really want to tell them all this.’ And
then I would feel better if they said, ‘I have no idea or did you try this?’ and
if I had, it was like okay. Taking that route affirmed you that you really weren’t that stupid and you really hadn’t missed all that much. Then I could put it on GovDoc-L but I didn’t do that that often.

Finchum

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

Sevetson

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

The other one, was when I thought, ‘okay this is really the power of the chair here.’ There was a vote and the vote was so close, I had no idea who had won. So I was like, ‘oh crap, what do I do now?’ And Larry [Romans] actually said, in the back of the room, ‘Well the Chair knows who won.’ And I said, ‘The chair does not know who won.’ I said, ‘We’re going to do a hands-up vote.’ And I said, ‘the past chair and the chair-elect, Diane Garner and Dan Barkley, I need you guys to count the halves of the room. So everybody who said all in favor, please raise your hands’ and we counted. Actually, I think one of the groups had just spoken louder than the other and I think the motion had passed. But it really sounded like it was 49-51 or something like that. Just being able to say, ‘No, the chair does not know. We’re going to stop, and we’re going to do this.’ Sometimes things just really pick up steam and get very hot, or they used to.

My other favorite time was when Kathy Tezla was chair. There was some discussion going on. I think somebody was really fed up. It was late at night and we were in New Orleans, in some hotel meeting room somewhere. We were running long and it was like our business meeting was 8-10 PM so people were tired. They were peeved. And we voted to extend once. And somebody made a motion to extend again and
somewhere during the process of the vote everybody realized, ‘hey, if we vote not to extend, this will be over.’ And literally the count vote was completely different than the voice vote. The voice vote had really sounded much more even. And then suddenly when ‘all in favor of extending the meeting 15 minutes late,’ two people raised their hand. Everybody else raised their hand on the ‘no.’ Kathy Tezla said, “Meeting adjourned, good night.” It was just like that. I was like, “Wow, that was amazing.” The whole room was fed up, but nobody knew how to end this meeting and all of the sudden it just—you could see it, it just occurred to them all, ‘hey, if we say no we can get out of here.’ And it did, it happened just like that. It was just amazing. Maybe not the best thing, but it was really amazing when the group realized, ‘hey, we are not powerless here. We have something we can do about where we feel like we are at this moment.’

Finchum

Any sad moments?

Sevetson

Um, there were some really hard moments. When I was chair, two people important to the community died. David Rozkuszka died and the scholarship is named after David. I had known David at Stanford and he had retired a couple years before then. Actually, my friend Chuck had gone over and taken the job at Stanford at that point. But we knew a month, two months before his death that his drugs weren’t working anymore and that he would die. So we were able to send him a thank you note because we knew he was leaving us money in his will for the scholarship.

Then also within a week of David’s death, Jimmy Connolly, the man who had been the head of the Congressional Information Service (CIS), died. CIS had been supporters of GODORT in various ways, with book royalties and the CIS GODORT ALA Documents to the People award. So that was really another one of those things to sort out. You know, nobody told me I’d have to do this when I was chair. It was like run meetings, get stuff done. It wasn’t, in an odd way, be a spokesperson to the community and extending sympathy and things like that. I remember feeling, there was the sense of a blow, at that point, with those two things and very close in succession.

Finchum

Ran the gamut and learn as you go.

Sevetson

Yes, yes. You learn a lot about yourself and how to do things, how to do things well or not. [Before I became GODORT Chair I started keeping notebooks, and I still have the notebooks and I have friends who are scared of the notebooks. But before I became chair I realized that I was really bad at focusing on things I wasn’t particular interested in or not so good at, sort of like math. You think you’re never going to catch on. So I
started taking notes of all the calls and things I was on. Just sort of tracking and helping myself focus on the calls.

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

Finchum  

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

Sevetson  

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

Finchum  

And stay as active within GODORT?

Sevetson  

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

Finchum  

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

Sevetson  

It has to be the technology and probably everybody would say that. When I was cleaning out files at Berkeley, I would see these letters that department heads would write to each other. Mr. Smith, Mrs. Jones and they would call each other by these formal titles. And it was type written and mailed, regular mail through campus mail and stuff. And now so much is done through technology. Not just at your own institution but then that creates communities. My good professional friend is 2500 miles away from me and we can email, we can talk, whatever it is and it’s not a burden on anybody.
Then also a part of that, the people who used to do the job that I do, in terms of training, would just go out to institutions and there’s nothing else there. I guess it would have been phone calls back and forth. ‘Oh, do you have any materials or training on this product?’ And now we can post them online. I’ve created social bookmarks, Delicious bookmarks for one of our products that help people, over 400 bookmarks into one product so different flavors that people want to have. There’s a lot of different ways you can reach out and touch your user community and that used to be one-on-one. Now people can use stuff I’ve created and I have no idea that they’re doing it. I got an email from a graduate student asking me for some data that I had used. I thought, ‘a graduate student is looking at my Hearings paper?’

Finchum  
*Isn’t it great?*

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

Part of it was because with that initial purchase, we got a guide, it was National Archives Microfilm. We got like a paper guide to something and it was legal paper, 11x17, and it was really thick and it was all one-sided. One of our library assistants came and said “What do you want to do this?” We sort of looked at each other and I said, ‘Well, can you take it down to copy services and have it reduced to 8½ x 11 double-sided and then we’ll have it bound and put it on the shelf and that will be the guide.’ Then he said, “Well, what do you want to do with the original?” I said, ‘Let’s send it to Fred. He paid for half of it. He should have a user guide.’ So he actually had, in his office, a user guide. He’d send the graduate students up to get the microfilm.

So you would see those usage statistics then. And usually for most other things, we would have our own user guide. After that, it was like, ‘Oh, we’ll make a copy of the user guide and send it down to Fred.’ And he always was so appreciative and I never met the man in my 12½ years
there and when I left Berkeley he sent a really, really sweet letter saying, “We’ve never met but it’s been really nice to work with you.” And it was really sort of cute. He’d been invited to my going away party, but he couldn’t come. And he said, “Well, it sort of worked that we never met each other.” And he died a couple of years ago.

Finchum

That personal touch....

Sevetson

Yeah.

Finchum

...Regardless

Sevetson

It was a personal touch. But it was really sort of funny that we never met each other. He was one of those gentle souls. You could just sort of tell from the way he wrote. One of my colleagues actually met him and brought me back a description and it was sort of funny. So it was probably just as well that I never met him. It would have ruined the whole romance of the relationship there. It was very cute.

Finchum

Well any advice for newcomers?

Sevetson

Personally for my career, I can’t stress enough the importance of networking. Because my networking got me my Census Bureau job and it really got me my job with LexisNexis now as a trainer because I knew John Karaliunas. Then when it came time for me to leave the Census Bureau, I knew Diane Smith and she’d worked at Penn State with Helen [Sheehy] and I’d gotten to know her through that. We were talking and she said, “How are you doing?” I said, ‘Well, I have to leave the Census Bureau.’ She said “What? Why? Are you being fired? Are they kicking you out the door?” I said, ‘Well, I have nightmares now when I go back to work after vacation.’ “Oh,” she said and we talked about that a little bit. A little bit later she said, “Well, I may have a job for you, send me your resume.” And she sent it to the guy who is now my boss. Yes, I had to apply for both the Census Bureau job and this other one, but it was the power of the network that got me the job and having somebody there who knew me and could say, ‘this is a good person, she’d be good in this job.’ So don’t think that sitting at home in your cubicle is good enough.

It really, really pays dividends to use the network.

Then to be, I would say, respectful of people who are out there. I saw somebody once at one meeting get up and basically, in front of 500 of her colleagues, accuse everybody else of not being a good advocate for the FDLP. And I thought, ‘well that career’s shot, because these are the people who will be writing your letters of reference. These are the people who you’ll be working with on projects.’ It’s just not that easy to blow everybody off like that, like she herself had done the work and
nobody else had. I just thought, ‘well, you’re never going to get—it’s sort of like, ‘don’t come looking for a job in this town again’ was what I thought was going to happen. She’s not in documents anymore. She’s moved on. But people remembered her for a very, very long time after that meeting. She made a name for herself very quickly.

Finchum

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

Sevetson

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

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

Finchum

Is there anything else we need to talk about?

Sevetson

No, I think we’re good.

Finchum

Then thank you for your time.

Sevetson

Thank you.

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