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# **Oral History Interview**

**with**

**Bill Olbrich**

Interview Conducted by  
Linda Johnson  
February 15, 2012

# *Government Information Living Indexes*

## *Oral History Project*

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### **Interview History**

Interviewer: Linda Johnson

Transcriber: Gina Kahn

### **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.

### **Legal Status**

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with [Insert Narrator Name] is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 1, 2012.

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### **About William Olbrich....**

William L. Olbrich, Jr., now retired, served for 44 years as the government information librarian at a variety of institutions including St. Louis Public Library, Washington University, Tufts University, and Baylor University among others. Becoming active in GODORT in 1982 after serving as Chair of the Texas Library Association's GODORT, he chaired the GODORT Census Working Group and went on to serve as a member or chair of Awards, Legislation, Bylaws and other committees. Bill has an abiding interest in American intellectual and cultural history especially library history. However, he is currently researching the editorial cartoons published in the six daily newspapers in St. Louis, MO, during the Progressive Era (1900-1920). He is specifically interested in the cartoon work of fellow-Texan Robert Minor on Teddy Roosevelt. Bill earned his bachelor's degree from Southwestern University, master degree from the University of Iowa, MLS from the University of Texas, Austin, and his ABD/Phd from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

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### **William Olbrich**

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Linda Johnson

February 15, 2012

Durham, New Hampshire & St. Louis, Missouri



I am Linda Johnson at the University of New Hampshire interviewing Bill Olbrich who is in St. Louis Missouri by telephone.

**Johnson** *Tell me about your childhood, where you grew up, brothers or sisters, a little about the town, etc.*

**Olbrich** In and around Houston, TX. My boyhood home stood in the shadows of the San Jacinto Monument and the high school football stadium. So I loved history and football from my earliest days. One brother, a “C minus BBA” who made his pile and has retired to the lovely Texas Hill Country.

**Johnson** *Tell me about the library you visited as a child*

**Olbrich** A very small Carnegie about 8 blocks from home. I rode my bike there in the summers, and, by age 16, it was my excuse to borrow the car. Just like the Beach Boys song. I read a lot of 1930’s history textbooks and science fiction there.

**Johnson** *Tell me about any librarians from those days that might stand out in your memory now.*

**Olbrich** The very small Carnegie was an extremely nice elderly lady who was more a care-taker than anything else. Other librarians—notably Jr High, High School, a bigger public library, and my UG college—were not friendly at all. At UT-Austin Jim Thornburg was a career Air Force officer who was using his GI Bill to get his MLS. He liked me and appreciated my experiences so he hired me at the UT-Austin government documents Dept.

**Johnson** *If someone had told you in high school that you would one day work with government documents what would you have thought?*

**Olbrich** Am I really that big a Nerd?

**Johnson** *How long have you been in government documents?*

- Olbrich** Full-time professional level 44 years.
- Johnson** *How did you decide on librarianship/government information as a profession?*
- Olbrich** Just sort of fell into it. When I got my history MA, there were 100 jobs for 1000 new PhDs. Even my poor math knew that wasn't good. I was also slightly "burnt-out" and felt I could not do another 6 semesters towards a PhD I'd gotten interested in "archives" and found "archives" were taught in the Library School. When I got off the elevator at the UT-Austin Library School, the "Jobs Board" was 3 feet tall, 6 feet wide, and filled with 3X5 cards reading "Wanted Now". It was divided by type of library and sub-divided by US region. Thunder and lightning! The original plan was to get the MLS, work a few years, find a good dissertation topic, and return to history. My MLS "final paper" was on the subject specialist in the academic library. After working in government documents for a month, I began beating my head on the brick wall. Years spent looking for history topics with enough sources, and here every shelf held almost everything a historian needed. The chair of New Mexico's history dept—a great supporter during my time there in 1978-79—told me he did his BA honors, MA thesis, and PhD dissertation out of the government documents collection at Stanford.
- Johnson** *What did you know about the profession when you made this decision?*
- Olbrich** Zip. Even though I'd worked a year as a shelver & circulation desk clerk as an undergraduate. The librarian fired all males in the library at the end of the school year and refused to hire any more. In graduate school I worked a work-study job at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library; I loved doing archives and helping scholars.
- Johnson** *Was there one person who had more influence than others in leading you to this decision? Tell me about that person.*
- Olbrich** Two library school professors: Sam Whitten and Don Davis. "Sam" was the quintessential new Deal Democrat: very liberal, very out-spoken, erudite beyond belief. Davis was a library historian, something I had never thought about, even though the history of who read what was already formed in my history thinking. His CV, by the way, is about 50 pages long single-spaced. A truly active academic. Slept on the floor at his house a couple of times for local library history events after I graduated.
- Johnson** *What did your family and friends think of your career choice?*
- Olbrich** Not much. My parents were glad I found work. I had a date with a hot nurse once. She was immediately turned off and demanded to be taken home. Out of earshot my undergraduate friends now in various graduate programs laughed, saying "Guess books and blood don't mix!"
- Johnson** *What's your educational background?*
- Olbrich** BA, MA in American history, MLS, ABD American history.
- Johnson** *How well did library school prepare you for your career in government information?*

- Olbrich** My work-study job in the Government Documents Dept of UT-Austin always clashed with the time government documents was taught, so I never took the class. However, I found everybody taking the class had to reply on me to help them do the homework. Other than that, I found Library School a breeze with little intellectual content. “Arid careerism” was a catch-phase in those days.
- Johnson** *How did you prepare for a career in government documents/information?*
- Olbrich** 18 months work-study in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library; 16 months work-study in the government documents dept at UT-Austin. 9 months public service assistant in undergraduate college library. Degrees in history. I’m one of the few people I’ve encountered who understood “provenance” before learning the Superintendent of Documents classification system.
- Johnson** *Tell me about your work experiences.*
- Olbrich** Researchers in these collections were totally dependent on what the staff knew of the collections. Alphabetizing the names of letter-writers to Hoover and filing manuscripts gave me a deep and detailed understanding of what was in the collections. Finding aids in the early ‘70’s were all but non-existent. I didn’t see a CIS volume until 1975. The generation of documents librarians before me had a lot of “dragon ladies” who had memorized their collections and who brooked no nonsense. Scary lot, actually.
- Johnson** *Tell me about your first job in government documents. (how did you get it, did you like it, what did you do)*
- Olbrich** My library school class was the last one where everyone had a job before graduation. Actually, we were the first semester the NY Public and several other big libraries didn’t send recruiters out. I applied to 6 jobs: 4 in reference, 1 in archives, and 1 in government documents. The only nibble I got was the government documents job. I wasn’t the first choice, but the first choice had a pot conviction, and the state of Georgia wouldn’t hire him. So I got the government documents job at Georgia Southern College (now “University”) in Statesboro, GA. I went from shelving documents and shagging requests in May to supervising 1 FTE and 20 hours of students in July. The director was a real curmudgeon who believed catalogers were the only true librarians, and reference people (including me) had to operate out of the circulation desk. That way the students got to talk to an actual librarian. This was a very popular idea among his generation, actually. I’ve run into it in a couple of other places. So I reviewed the GPO items profile, supervised the shelving, perused the new documents, and worked the circulation desk. I’ve always been a firm believer in bibliographic instruction (BI), especially for government information. I got rave reviews from the history, political science, and criminal justice faculty almost immediately. Then the director told me to stop teaching because 1) everybody in the library couldn’t do it, and 2) he was annoyed by the letters and phone calls of praise. I left for the greener pastures of Tufts University in Boston after 18 months.
- Johnson** *Describe the first library building you worked in. Describe your work area.*
- Olbrich** The Zimmerman Library at Georgia Southern had the old New Deal building connected to the 1960s glass building. The school was deep in the pine trees of coastal Georgia and smelled of pine, dankness, and red dust. Government documents was in the basement of the older building.

I had cast-off furniture and had to share the electric typewriter with the documents clerk. Users had to come into the office/work area for assistance. I made a lot of signs that the director eventually made me take down. Not tasteful, he said. That's been the case for 40 years, by the way. Baylor smelled of industrial cleaner. Of course, the whole campus did. Tuft's Wessel (since demolished) smelled of old gym socks. The building was stuck into a "hillside" that turned out to be a glacier moraine. Rain and snow run-off coursed downhill into one wall of the library where it would stagnate and occasionally break thru. While I'd agree that every library has its own smell, I can't recall any of the others.

**Johnson** *Describe an average working day from the first of your career.*

**Olbrich** 2 hours reference desk, 6 hours documents office. Check the student shelving of the previous night. Look at the new documents as they came out of processing. Work with any researchers (2 or 3 a week). Work one night a week and one week-end a month. I've kept this schedule even at the St. Louis Public when we were open only 1 night a week and 1 Saturday a month (for right now). At every location, I sent circulation statistics through the roof. At Tufts, it went up over 500% in my 3 years. Spent a lot of time researching local history, looking for the dissertation topic.

**Johnson** *What were some of the major issues facing the profession when you first started working? (And when you retired?)*

**Olbrich** Getting documents in the library's catalog. Then and now. It's amazing how the catalogers really hate government documents and can quibble away their addition to the library's catalog. I had one head cataloger blame me for the USGS's failure to fill in the various letter parts of water-supply papers. When the letter parts were completed, she cataloged only the volume. We had about 20 shelves of parts awaiting completion, and she felt it was my responsibility to change this situation.

**Johnson** *Who were the leaders?*

**Olbrich** GODORT was just starting. I knew no one in the profession. Leroy Schwartzkopf was God. I first talked to him at the Oct 1976 DLC in Washington. I was scared to death! There were only a couple of badly-dated textbooks and one or two columns in LJ/AL. I met Fran Buckley when he was the assistant documents librarian at the Detroit Public. He was skinny and beardless. He came to Storrs, CT, for the first meeting of the newly-reactivated Depository Library Council, at UConn. It was the first time they'd met outside Washington, DC. Carolyn Stocking, the UConn Documents librarian, and Buckley were the first "pro-active" librarians I ever met. Jim Livesey at GPO became an ardent librarian supporter. Bernadette Hoduski says otherwise now—sez "others" were more important, but she never told me "who".

**Johnson** *Tell me about any mentor or role model within the profession that you may have had.*

**Olbrich** I had none. Supervisors were pretty useless. Directors were remote. Only in Boston were there "others like me" nearby to talk to. NELINET was a dream! A dozen documents librarians within 20 miles of each other, and another 70 with a half-day's drive. Glorious! I made lots of mistakes because I didn't know any better. As a result, I made it a point since then to work as closely as possible with new librarians, even if they aren't doing government information.

- Johnson** *How did you learn your collection? What were some of your strategies?*
- Olbrich** Shelving and checking others' shelving. Stacks maintenance. Perused the documents as they were processed. Sometimes I did the processing. The documents processor is the best finding aid in any library. Professors made paper-writing assignments. If I could catch one student with the assignment, either at the "desk" or in the documents office, I'd trade them all the research materials they'd need for a copy of the assignment. Then I'd approach the professor making the assignment. Most of the time I got a BI out of the meeting, and, if I didn't, I'd make a 1 page hand-out for the class. At Baylor I did a new BI every two weeks, year-round.
- Johnson** *How do you learn things? (what's the role of memory)*
- Olbrich** Repetition. Detailed assistance for a dozen students doing the same assignment, and soon you not only "understand" the documents series, you could expand the series covered. From County Business Patterns to the quinquennial censuses to the specialized annuals, the concept of "indicator" became all important.
- Johnson** *Were there times when you felt overwhelmed by the amount to learn?*
- Olbrich** Legislative histories, Census, and Patents
- Johnson** *How did you respond?*
- Olbrich** Legislative histories and census had several freebie workshops over time. Patents never did, and I've done my best to avoid them.
- Johnson** *How do you suggest those new to the field learn how to use/operate the older more traditional sources?*
- Olbrich** Don't try to learn everything. You can't because there are so many sources with unique user requirements. Government information sources require expert-level user abilities. Learn those sources you need to use; your user community will make you aware of those. After that, it is a matter of repetition. That's where my football career comes in handy. In football, one practices 5 days a week and plays one game a week. In football practice one does endless repetitions of specific moves: each certain kind of block (several kinds of these), each certain form of tackle (several kinds of these), and many other specific moves. Repeat, repeat, repeat; with a coach bellowing out criticisms on each repeat. After a while—sometimes up to several months in time required—each kind of block, each kind of tackle, and all the other specific moves become routine. Then you get to play in the weekly game. It's the same way with government information sources. The first time you get asked for information requiring complicated/complex government information sources, call the experienced librarians in your area—including your regional librarian--and ask for help.
- Johnson** *What have been some of the major challenges of working in this area?*
- Olbrich** The loneliness. The lack of in-house collegial understanding or appreciation.

**Johnson** *What have been some of the rewards?*

**Olbrich** The “AHA!” moments when a vexing government information practice suddenly becomes clear and understandable. It’s an addiction. The students, God bless ‘em. The kids who make an “A” when they’ve always been a “C” student and the looks on their faces. Graduation day, walking down the line of students, high-fiving those who remembered you, who sometimes came to you every semester for 4 years. Your “babies”. Seeing your name in print, whether in an ALA officers’ directory, in the acknowledgements of an important book, or as the author of a publication. Getting asked to provide a GODORT oral history. I mean, look at who I’m listed with! *Me?!? In that group?!?*

**Johnson** *Describe how technology has impacted your work over the years.*

**Olbrich** When microfiche showed up in the middle 70’s, we jumped on the format. We had a lot of influence to make X24 blow-back the industry norm. We talked to enough vendors to get good readers and good reader-printers. We were ready to move into computer formats, but we got bogged down in the “tangible product” debate, and we lost our clout with both government agencies and information vendors. In My Humble Opinion anyway. Of course, now we have absolutely no say in the format of materials received. Part of these new threats is due to “our” GPO, DLC, GODORT, everyone who works with government information—failure to keep ourselves up-front-and-center in the information wars being waged in our society.

**Johnson** *I have heard people say ‘the more you handle the materials, the more you’ll know what’s on your shelves.’ How does this translate in the electronic world?*

**Olbrich** Unfortunately, it doesn’t. The damned geeks change the sites too quickly. Look at the Census Bureau sites. They just can’t seem to leave well enough alone, and we aren’t in their face enough to stop them.

**Johnson** *How did you become involved in GODORT?*

**Olbrich** I was Chair of the Texas LA GODORT when ALA went to San Antonio for the first time in 1982. TLA GODORT held a party and it seems 100s of people showed up. The elderly Goddess Catherine Reynolds even walked up a flight of stairs to get to the party. It was talked about for several years after. The FedDocs Census Work Group didn’t have a chair at their meeting, so I took over because I was there. I ended up running the Work Group for a couple of years and was hooked. Thereafter, I simply said, “I volunteer. Whaddayah need?” Something was always found for me to do.

**Johnson** *Who would you say were your mentors?*

**Olbrich** For GODORT-- Sharon Anderson at UC-San Diego. Steve Hayes at Notre Dame. Jack Sultzer at Penn State.

**Johnson** *How would you characterize the leadership when you became active in the profession? And now?*

- Olbrich** Zealous and forth-right THEN. Who are these inattentive children? NOW
- Johnson** *Every organization has minor controversies and difficult times. As you look back, what were some of these?*
- Olbrich** GODORT's reasons for existing are always cause for vocal concerns. Some of our colleagues want nothing more than a "stitch-and-bitch" group for personal comfort. Some colleagues fight against anything that even smacks of "political activity". Then there's ALA Council who always demand our individual support for federal and state political activities while refusing to advance any of GODORT's concerns. Even having Larry Romans on Council and as an "Uber-Councilor" figure hasn't changed this situation.
- Johnson** *There seems to be a strong sense of community among government documents people. Tell me about the government documents 'community'. What makes it so strong? What makes one so devoted to the field of government information?*
- Olbrich** Non-documents people are plentiful and sometimes helpful, but they do not speak Sudocs. Once you acquire some hard-won understanding of specific government information practices, do you want to jettison it to be an administrator? Lots of otherwise good people do, unfortunately. However, it's an addiction, IMHO; the deeper you dig into specific government information practices, the more often you have the exciting "AHA!" moment.
- Johnson** *Tell me about one or two of your favorite memories involving government information work.*
- Olbrich** When Sheila McGarr came to Baylor to inspect me, I took her to the faculty club for lunch. On the way to lunch, while we were eating, and on the way back to the library, different faculty members popped up begging for BI sessions. I'm laughing my head off by the third request, and Sheila's jaw stayed on the floor for hours.
- Johnson** *Share an "I-can't-believe-they-did-that-in-the-library" story... (just about every librarian has one)*
- Olbrich** My first director was a real character. He directed "while walking around". Whatever he saw on his infrequent trips through the library and its work areas is what he assumed happened all day long. Once I had trouble keeping "DATE DUE" slips attached to books, so I used scotch tape to keep the slips on. Then I was "out" a day or two for something. When I came back, the whole library was hushed. So I asked. "Don't you know?" The director found 'someone' had used scotch tape on a 'DATE DUE' slip! It 'ruined' a magazine cover! 'Sacrilege!' When no one 'fessed up, he got a book truck, went to every work-station and confiscated every tape dispense and roll of tape in the library. You need tape? Get an appointment with the director. [good luck] Tell him why you need the tape. He will [maybe] tear off a piece for your use. This went on for three weeks before staff began buying little scotch tape dispensers and hiding them. The director finally gave up. I was never caught.
- Johnson** *When you began working in the government information profession did you think you would stay so long?*
- Olbrich** NO. I was going to become an American History college professor

- Johnson** *Where do/did you turn for help with difficult questions? (“Remember you’ve joined a community of helpful people. Ask and someone will answer!”)*
- Olbrich** Relied almost entirely on the textbooks and user materials in the actual government documents. Made many telephone calls to various agencies.
- Johnson** *Over your career, what has proven to be the most difficult part of working in government documents?*
- Olbrich** Having lots of library administrators/heads/chairs/supervisors, but almost no library leaders.
- Johnson** *What has been the greatest professional joy you have experienced during your career?*
- Olbrich** Working with the students in academia.
- Johnson** *What do you think has had the greatest impact on libraries and government information?*
- Olbrich** The failure of the profession to grab the internet early on. We’ve been playing “catch-up” ever since.
- Johnson** *What do you feel has been your greatest contribution?*
- Olbrich** Demonstrating the necessity of good BI. The need for agency liaisons. I personally wrote the fourth of GODORT’s 10 principles.
- Johnson** *What has been the greatest change you have seen in the profession?*
- Olbrich** The slow disappearance of our specialization. I am probably the last full time government documents librarian at the St. Louis Public. I was the last full time government documents librarian at Washington University.
- Johnson** *Is there anything that you would like to tell me that I have not asked you a question about?*
- Olbrich** I wish we (GODORT) had started oral histories a lot sooner. Too many of the older “greats” are dead now.
- Johnson** *When history is written about you, what would you like for it to say?*
- Olbrich** He really tried to be helpful. Sometimes he tried too hard.

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