

Transcript of Oral History Interview with Elizabeth Schow
Interviewed by Kathy Bradford May, 28, 2008, Brigham City, Utah
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Acc # 08.23.1 | MS 348

KB: Today is Wednesday, May 28, 2008, and I'm speaking with Elizabeth Schow at the Brigham City Library. First, I'd like to know about where you grew up and a little bit about your family. Then we'll talk about how you started working at the library as a high school student.

ES: I was born and grew up in Brigham City and spent my whole life here with a few exceptions. I went to elementary school at Mountain View and then junior high and high school here in Brigham City and graduated from Box Elder High School. I was hired during the summer between my sophomore and junior years as a page at the library. I didn't even know about the job at first. I was working on some goals for a Young Women's medal, and I volunteered to do some work at the library with Terri who was the Children's Librarian. I helped her out with story time and things like that. I was just about to turn 16 as I was doing that, and this job came open. She told all of the volunteers (there were about five of us), and I was the only one that was old enough to apply because I had had my birthday. It was the end of summer when the job came open, and I have a June birthday. I applied for it and came in for an interview. The interview was a lot different back then – a lot easier than what we do now. I did get the job.

When I interviewed, they had a box top. It was like a copy paper box top with books in it, and I had to put those books in order. So how many books can you fit in a copy paper box top? We had to put them in alphabetical order, and the numerical ones were in there. Everything was in that little box top. That was all I had to do to show I could put things in order. I did miss one because I put the large print book in with the regular alphabetized books, and Vernie said that it was shelved in a different area. She counted it as a miss. I didn't know the large print books were in a different area.

KB: How do they do it now?

ES: Now Susan and I get a cart, and each of us will fill the top shelf of one side of the cart with books. Susan's area will have an entire shelf on a long cart, and there are quite often 30 books there from the upstairs section. Then I take the other side of the top shelf, and I fill it with books from the fiction section. I try to be sure to pull out all of the little rules about alphabetizing and where you're placing numbers in relationship to titles. I look for authors' last names that are really close together to see if people are paying attention. So on the fiction side there are usually 20 books or so that you're putting in order. It's quite a bit more than it used to be, and now there's also a written exercise that we give them, about four pages long. So there is quite a bit more to be hired on as a page now than it was when I applied.

KB: Do you have a lot of applicants for the page jobs?

ES: Not a lot. If a job comes open sometime around the summer, the end or beginning of the school year, we have a lot of high school kids that are looking for jobs. If it opens during the school year, we don't have nearly as many because there are not many people that are interested in that small of a job. A lot of the high school kids already have jobs that they've found during the summer, so we just have a few that don't already have jobs, and then some of the adults are interested.

KB: So, back to when you started as a page, what did you have to do?

ES: Well, I started out shelving in the Children's Department. All the books come in to the clerks at the front desk, and as they come in, the clerks put them on the carts. Then I would come in, take the carts out, do a little sorting on the cart, get them ready to shelve, and get them shelved as soon as possible. It is often a race against the clock. I always wore my wristwatch and kept tabs. Every time I walked back to my cart, I checked the time to see how fast I was going and if I was getting it done fast enough.

KB: How many hours did you work?

ES: When I started, it was two hours a day, and then Fridays and Saturdays alternated, so it was ten hours a week total. After I'd been there three years or so, the hours went up to 11 hours a week – a big increase. Mondays we worked three hours instead of two hours, and the weekends were still alternating.

KB: As a page, you don't work as much with the patrons as with the books. Is that right?

ES: Yes, although it's amazing how often we'd still have contact with the patrons because we were out in the stacks shelving. They'd see us as someone who obviously worked here, so when they'd see us shelving books they knew we worked there. Being young, we were also very approachable to people, and we'd get a lot of questions and had to direct them to a librarian. If it was a really quick thing, like finding a book in the immediate area, I would take them to the shelf and show them if I was close to it anyway.

KB: Did you like it?

ES: I did. I really liked it. To me, being a page was kind of a stress relief. I worked all through college. I was a page for all four years of college. I went to Utah State University, and I commuted.

KB: Did you get any more hours when you were in college?

ES: I didn't. The hours stayed the same, but for a while I did have a second job. I worked over at Smith's for a little while during college to earn a little bit more money. It was just nice to come in after school and shelve. You'd just forget everything. You'd concentrate on the little numbers and letters and get some physical exercise. You could just let your mind have a little relief. I love things in order, so it was perfect for me that way, too. That was a good way for me to unwind. I could get a pretty good workout. My arms are not nearly as strong now as they were when I was a page because I'm not doing all that heavy lifting like I used to. It was a really good thing. The only thing I didn't like about it was how black my hands could be because the books would be so dirty. After handling all those books, after I would finish all my carts (because we had multiple carts to shelve), they would just be coated. I'd go back and wash them after each shift and just watch the dirt go down the drain. You could just watch it; you could see it in the water. It was so dirty! There was a lot of dirt on some of those books.

KB: Tell me about college. What did you major in?

ES: I majored in history. It didn't start out that way. I started out as a biology major and went for about two years as a biology major and then decided that wasn't for me and, through a series of events, ended

up as a history major. It was a decision-making period, but I was really glad to make the switch. It was good. I switched about halfway through, and Utah State University was just switching onto the semester system off from the quarters. I actually got done faster as a history major than I would have as a biology major even starting two years in as a history major. History accepted so many other classes in so many areas. They count everything.

KB: After you graduated, did you come directly here to work?

ES: No. I quit my job about four weeks after I graduated from college. It was the end of June because I decided to go on a mission for the LDS Church and went to Berlin, Germany. So I worked here up until the day before I entered the Missionary Training Center. I was gone for 18 months, and when I came back, Vernie held the position that I now have, and I knew that she was retiring sometime after I got home. I had already applied for graduate school. I received my acceptance letter while I was at the MTC because I'd applied a few years in advance to be accepted. So I knew I was going to come back from my mission and go to graduate school and then maybe get a job. I came back and found out that Vernie was retiring in March. I got home in December, and she was retiring in March. I started school in January, and as soon as the job came open, I went down and applied and got the job that I'm doing now as the Adult Fiction Librarian.

KB: Did you start when she left, or was there an overlap?

ES: There was an overlap of not quite a week. I think it was about four days, and she was able to show me how she did a lot of things. She took me through cataloging a little bit because I had never cataloged before. I hadn't had any training specifically as a librarian, and then Sue, the Director, also trained me on cataloging. She did the bulk of the cataloging training. Vernie just did very basic cataloging to get me started.

KB: Was it helpful that you had been here all those years before and kind of knew what went on here?

ES: I think it was. There were still a lot of new job duties for me, but I already knew the people. I was already friends with them. A lot of times on a new job, you'll have that time period where you feel kind of out of place because you don't know anybody around you. I already knew the people here for the most part. Michele was new. Sue started before I became a page so she was here the entire time that I worked here, and Vernie, Susan and Connie were here. I think Michele and the pages were the only staff members that I didn't know from my previous employment. I think that made it a lot easier to start a new job and to get into learning all the new job duties. There was still quite a learning curve. I was taking over the credit work.

KB: What does that involve?

ES: When accounts are really past due and people aren't returning their books, then the accounts are supposed to be sent to collections. Recently we've started moving old accounts that have a lot of unpaid fines that people have never paid – we're working on sending those, too. That's just getting started now though. That's very recent. We have something like \$20,000 in unpaid fines, and that does not include the overdue books because they don't count until they're on the fine screen. They're just checked out as overdue right now so it doesn't count all the books that are just not returned.

KB: You could use that money.

ES: Yes, it could make a big difference.

KB: Does that money go into your budget or the general fund?

ES: It should all go into the general fund and then it would be considered as things are coming down the line to be broken up into budget.

KB: What else do you do?

ES: I order the fiction books. I go through catalogs and select books and order what books we get in the adult fiction collection. I catalog them and get them ready for the clerks to then cover. When I started, I didn't have quite all the jobs that I have now because now I also do the web page. I make any changes to the web page, make new pages, whatever. I really enjoy that. It does take more time. I feel like I'm stretched – very much so – but I do enjoy doing the web page. I think that's a lot of fun. I've also recently started doing the podcasting. Sue decided she wanted our library to have a podcast, so I've started to do those. That takes a lot of time again to write the script and record and edit it and then piece it together.

KB: That would be impossible for most people.

ES: I've just been learning as I go. There are so many things that make more technical things easy for most anyone to do now. There's time to learn how to do things because I had never done a podcast before. I go out and find some software on the internet that would be a free download. I found that.

KB: Did anybody come and teach you how to do that?

ES: No, I read a little bit and just played around with the software and we started going. My first podcasts were really, really boring. They gave some training at ULA, and there was one of the colleges in the Salt Lake area – I forget which one --- that had some really fun ones that were kind of weird on their podcast. I decided I would make ours weird, so I'm trying to be a little more creative.

KB: Have you had any feedback on it yet?

ES: Not from the public yet, but it's a relatively new thing.

KB: You have a blog now, too. Do you do that also?

ES: Yes, Sue wanted to start the blog in February 2006, so that's when we started. At first it was something people didn't much want to do. It was one more thing. Everyone was already overloaded, and so Sue and I were pretty much doing all of it at first. Since then, we've all taken a day -- the day that we close the library -- my day is Tuesday. I work the night shift on Tuesday, so Tuesday is my day to do the blog. Then Sue took Friday because nobody has the night shift when we close at 6. We've just kind of broken it up, and it's worked out really well. Everybody has started working it into their schedules a lot better now.

KB: Is the public getting into that by now?

ES: We have a pretty good readership. We get a lot of hits from other places in the country or the world even. We have patrons that have commented on it. In a survey we've asked people if they've looked at our blog, and we got several people who said that they did. Some said that they'd commented on the blog, and hopefully that survey helped increase awareness of our even having a blog.

KB: I think you're doing great things. Let's get back to fiction.

ES: That is my main function although sometimes things like computers take over my time for that because every time anybody has problems they say, "Elizabeth!"

KB: Well, your co-workers that I've interviewed have all said that you're the on-staff computer expert.

ES: Even though I'm not so much an expert, I do what I can, and then I refer the rest to Wing, our Computer Tech. His company's under contract.

KB: When you decide which books to buy, do you have lists of the ones people like to read, or do you just know what will be well-received here?

ES: Well, I kind of know what's gone out in the past, and so if I hear about a new author that's similar to someone like Karen Kingsbury, I know that it will probably go well so I try to get those in. I go through both the Library Journals, Booklists and other magazines that have book reviews for librarians specifically. I'll go through the reviews, and I try to bring in new things. Sometimes after I've been reading, I get really discouraged with new things because if they don't check out, I think, "Oh, I've wasted all that money. Nobody's reading them." But then I get in the mood again, and I'll start choosing titles that are getting really good reviews, that are really good, and I think people will like them if they'd just check them out. Every once in a while, I try a new one, if I think it really, really looks good that I think I would even like it.

KB: Do you do a lot of reading?

ES: I do, but I'm a slow reader, and so I can't get through a lot of books. I want to read a lot of classics myself, too. So it's trying to split the time between new stuff and the classics, but I will read some of the newer ones that I'm really interested in. I try to recommend them as much as I can on our little staff-pick shelf that we have out near the circulation desk because they go very well. People love to take books off that shelf. We also have Bookletters, which is a new program online, where people can sign up to receive e-newsletters from the library. We have lists of new books, and one of them I've named The Librarian's Bookshelf, and I put staff picks on that. That's one of our most popular newsletters. You'll have to subscribe to that one.

KB: I will.

ES: Anyway, we set our books on the shelves out here. I'll take some of those and type them in on The Librarian's Bookshelf where everybody can see what is on there, and it comes out every month. I also take The Librarian's Bookshelf list and upload it onto a website called LibraryThing, and I have a widget on our blog that brings in code from the library on LibraryThing that I have created, and it will rotate the covers of these books that we've added to that list. So we have book covers showing recommendations in our blog. I'm trying to push these staff picks because I know that people really have enjoyed them.

KB: Well, you've brought the library well into the electronic age.

ES: I have fun doing all of this stuff as new things come out. I enjoy learning it even though I'm not terribly good with computers myself, and Sue is somebody who wants to stay very current, too. Sometimes she'll hear about something and say, "Let's do this" before I even have a chance to think about starting it. That does help to push us forward.

KB: Do you ever have trouble with the public being upset because you don't have a certain book?

ES: Sometimes they are, and sometimes it's even a book we've had but have had to get rid of because we don't have room on the shelves for it any more. It may still be circulating, but at a lower rate than others, and so it has had to go. Circulation is a big part of our decision to weed books. But, yes, we have people who get upset by that. We have inter-library loan as an option for them, and we let people make book requests. Quite often if I can get it in a paperback fairly inexpensively, I'll go ahead and get it again if it's something we've had before. We can't have everything on the shelves.

KB: You have a limited budget and limited shelf space.

ES: Yes, so it makes it really hard sometimes to make decisions when you weed. I think that's one of the hardest things about my job – deciding what gets to stay and what has to go. It's a really hard decision sometimes.

KB: So if I'm reading you right, the best part for you is doing all these electronic things.

ES: I really enjoy that.

KB: And the worst is the weeding?

ES: Yes, not because it's a horrible thing, but because it's hard to choose what to remove from the shelves. You know some of them are really good books, but nobody is reading them right now. After they're weeded, they go to the Library Book Sale, which goes on all year. We have a small rack upstairs just off from the circulation desk, but there's not a lot out there. It's a very small sale. The bulk of our sales are at Peach Days. I do really enjoy ordering in the books and cataloging. I like to find out what all the books are about through doing that. That's where I find out that I'm really interested in reading a certain book.

KB: Almost everybody I've talked to who has been involved with the library mentions the family-type feelings among the staff here. Do you feel that, too?

ES: Oh, definitely. It's a very close-knit staff. I know I talk to people on staff about personal life issues more than a lot of people. Most of my friends who live in Brigham City are people who are on the library staff. It makes it a really nice working environment. That's not to say we don't have our problems. Just like in any workplace, we have differences of opinion, misunderstandings and things like that, but we get through those. It does help to get through them knowing that we have a friendship underlying whatever is happening.

KB: Do you have to do programming like Sue does with the adults or the Children's Librarians do with

the kids?

ES: For years I didn't have to, but last year Sue told me that she wanted me to do a Single Adult program. So I started to think about that. I decided I was picked because: 1. I didn't have other programming I was doing. 2. I was single. 3. I was young. So I ended up with it, and single adult programming is totally out of my realm as far as what I would see myself being involved in. I got together some ideas. Diane Francom, our literacy coordinator, was talking one day about how her son was a stand-up comic in comedy and improv shows. I thought, "Oh, that would be perfect for our opening!" She actually donated \$100 to pay him and friends to come up and do the show.

I'm not a big comedy improv person myself, but we had people asking about it, even married people, asking, "Why can't we come?" I wish they would have.

KB: So you didn't have a big turnout?

ES: No. I thought that would be a fun thing for a lot of people. They did a great job at their performance with a lot of audience participation. I think there were five people total, and some of them were friends of the performers. Roxanne, one of our clerks, actually saw some patrons on the internet upstairs, knew that they were single adults and said, "You know, we have this going on downstairs. Why don't you go down?"

So they came down and tried it out and they enjoyed it. They were laughing. So anyway the first one was kind of a flop. We tried it for two months after that. The next month we did a social with dessert. We had people bring desserts, and we had games, but we had three people from Logan. There was nobody from Brigham City! We went ahead and had the program, but they were friends anyway. They had come up, and they all wanted to meet other people. But a librarian? Especially me to sit and have an evening of desserts and games with them. Not very fun. I'm not always into the social events for singles. There were two women there and one guy, but that was it. This was supposed to be a singles activity for local people, and although Logan is not that far away, we were still not serving anybody in Brigham City.

I decided to try one more time, but I was tired of nobody coming to programs that I wouldn't want to come to myself. I told Sue I was going to do one more to see if anybody shows up, and I was going to do a writing group. She said, "Okay. That's fine." She would have been okay at that point if I had just stopped altogether because the numbers just weren't there, and we were putting money out.

I said, "Let me try one more month and do a writing group because that's one that I actually care about."

I did the same publicity and preparations for the single adult writing group as I did for the other two singles activities. So the date for the singles writing group came, and we didn't have anybody show up at all, but we had all of these people coming in saying, "Why is it just for singles? Why do you have to be single to come to this?"

That is a perfectly legitimate question. Why would you? So I asked Sue if I could try the next month just a general writing group for everybody. We did that. We put out publicity for that, I had a sign-up sheet at the front desk for people to put down their e-mails or phone numbers. We just had our second one last night, and I have 45 people signed up for e-mail notification. Our first meeting was the last

Tuesday in April 2008, and we had 20 people show up for the first writing group. I was really excited to know that there were that many people interested in writing. They were all local people, too. It was not like we were only getting people from Ogden or Logan. These were Brigham City people who were coming to join the writing group. We even had one boy at the first one who was probably 10 or so. We had senior citizens; we had middle-aged people; we had younger adults; and then we had some teenagers, too. We had some high school girls.

KB: How do you conduct the sessions? Do you tell them what to write?

ES: A lot of people thought it was a writing class, so the first thing I said was, "This is a group, not a class. I am not a teacher. I do not have a degree in creative writing or anything to do with English" -- even though history has a lot writing.

We just went through some guidelines to get us started based on some things I'd heard from people who were interested in the group. I had also done an online survey before the group started. We started out that night with writing prompts. I put together a box that had different items. I got this idea partially from a fiction book I'd read as well as from a writing group I'd done with a friend. It was kind of a mixture. Everyone brought their own computers, pens, paper -- whatever they like to write with. I walked around the circle (a big rectangular circle), and everyone took something out of the box. That was their first writing prompt -- the object from the box. We wrote 20 minutes, and then we got together in groups of four and shared what we had written, and people were able to comment on it. Then we took some time and wrote on a newspaper headline. The first one was just kind of getting us started and doing some little writing exercises. I talked to the group at the end, and they wanted to meet twice a month, and so we're going to try it twice a month when it works with scheduling the room. It should be really fun.

They also wanted the option of just coming and critiquing, having little critique groups the entire time. So they would bring something that they had finished already or had been working on through the month at home. Then instead of doing writing exercises or writing time, they'd have a critiquing group. So last night we had our second one, and we had one critiquing group. It was after a holiday weekend, probably not the best time to do it. We only had eight people last night, but I had some phone calls and emails from people saying they couldn't come to this one, but would be there another time. I've been really encouraged. I talked to some of the participants afterwards. We did a picture from a book for the writing exercise. We had the critiquing group in the board room, and the writing exercise or the writing time members were in the auditorium in the conference room. They had a picture from *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. We used the same picture, and everybody came up with completely different ideas. One girl told me afterwards that she almost didn't come because she was feeling really discouraged about writing and wasn't sure she wanted to continue with the writing group. We were supposed to share our writing goals for the year last night, but there were so few people that we pushed it off. She said, "I had no idea what a writing goal for myself would be."

Well, after she came up with ideas for that picture, she said, "I've never written beyond a short story before, but I think I easily have the start for three chapters here." She was just really enthused about what she could do.

I was the facilitator. I don't consider myself the group leader or anything like that. I told everybody from the first meeting, "If you have any ideas or if you feel that we need to change the format for the writing group along the way let me know. This is a group for the writers that want to come to it, and we

want to keep it what you need.”

That's why we did the changes that we started last night, and we'll see how it goes. We're also doing a book discussion as part of it.

KB: So they have a book to read each month and then discuss it together?

ES: Yes. They started picking up their first book to read last night. It's *Writing Magic* by Gail Carson Levine, the author of *Ella Enchanted*. I think Sue was happy about what we were doing. We went to ULA after the first writing group, and so she was talking to me about possibilities and people she could have come in to talk to the writing group. Even if they're history professors, they do a lot of writing.

KB: That's a closer match than people would imagine.

ES: I remember hearing in college, “Oh, you do a lot more writing in history than we do in English.” Anyway, I'm really excited about it. I hope we keep having a good turnout, and I think we will if we keep changing the group so it's relevant to the people that want to be in it.

KB: You're a great asset to the library. Think of all the things that you're doing that weren't done before. You must feel good about that.

ES: I do. I really like what I do in my job. I go home feeling really good about what I do.

KB: You plan to stay here, don't you?

ES: When I started, no, I didn't plan on staying, but as the years have passed, I've thought, “I'm a writer myself, too. This is a really nice job. I like the people I'm working with. I like what I do. It's a full-time job with benefits, and I can go home in the evenings and I can write.” It's not a job that you have to take home with you all the time. Every once in a while, when there are computer issues, I feel that I have to take my work home with me a little bit because I'm still there to call if they really have a huge computer problem. I take the book drop on Sundays and on holidays so my weekends and holidays are not completely free. But it's not too bad, and it frees a lot of time for me to be able to spend on my writing and working on goals that way. I've just thought that it's really an ideal job for me right now, and I plan on staying.

KB: The thing I've noticed in talking to several of you here at the library is to see how well you fit with your specific responsibilities.

ES: I see that, too. I think that everyone is over an area that just is part of them. I'm glad I have the classics because I love classics. I also love adult fiction, and I'm very liberal about my fiction. I think adult fiction is a good place to be. If you're in young people's or children's fiction, they have to be a little more careful about what they put on the shelves. Sometimes they get a book that has to be put in the adult area. Personally I like being the repository for whatever we feel can't be put on the shelf in the children's area.

KB: I've enjoyed talking with you and I really appreciate what you do and your time here today.