Ruth Sydow interview

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It is February 28, 1995, and our guest today is Ruth Sydow, who worked in Central’s library in several different capacities between the years 1956 and 1965. And now we’ll turn to Ruth, and we’ll pick her brains for the best of her memories. May we start, Ruth, by simply giving us your place of birth, and the location of your family home?

I was born in Wisconsin, in Menomonee, and lived all my life in Wisconsin until I was married. And then I’ve lived out in Washington for the first 25 years of my married life in various places. We lived up in the Big Bend country in Whitboro, we lived in Rainier, which is south of Olympia, and then most of the time we lived in Ellensburg, or as my children refer to it, E-burg.

MS: E-burg, right. Now, will you please give us the circumstances under which you came to work at Central. You applied for the position?

Yes. We had a family of seven children, and my husband and I realized that we needed extra income from his income as a Lutheran pastor to put the children through college. So, since the college was handy I thought that that would be the best place for me to start working. I applied at the Registrar’s office, registered for a class in typing, but at that time there was a coming vacancy in the library, and they told Miss Mount about that, and she was very interested in me also, so as long – for that quarter – it was Spring quarter when I was taking the typing class – I also worked for Miss Mount for one hour a day.

MS: That’s Margaret Mount.

RS: Margaret Mount, correct.

Now what was the nature of the work that you did for her as a secretary? Was it a typical secretary’s job?

Frankly I would say no, it was not a secretary’s job – [laughs], but I did want to just kind of toss in here that Margaret Mount talked with Dr. McConnell about having me fill the vacancy in the library, and when he found out I had seven children he quite vehemently said, “She should stay home and take care of her seven children!” But he didn’t realize it was because of the seven children I needed to work.

Now my work in the library entailed a whole gamut of activities. With Miss Mount – Margaret Mount – it was mostly in the ordering department. With Mary Green it was typing catalog cards, doing the acquisition book – some of these things are now outdated in this day of the computer – and we ordered books. It was a little bit of everything.

MS: Now we realize that at the time you came to work at Central the library was over here in the building that we now refer to as Shaw Hall, but at that time it was the only library on the campus. But while you were here you moved out of that library to a beautiful new facility over on the other side of campus that we identified as Bouillon Library. Will you tell us about that move?

Yes, it was very interesting. We hired – I say we, but of course it was the college – hired the students to help with the actual physical moving of the books. They were shelved on the shelves of the old library according to shelf list numbers, and then to get them in the new library they were put in boxes, or they also constructed a chute where they could put the books down one at a time and slide them down, and they’d get them in boxes and get them in the right order. Well with the books we didn’t have much
problem, but when they were taking the shelf list itself one of the students took the turn too fast, and dumped several drawers of the shelf list. Well the shelf was Mary Green’s little special baby that – we didn’t have the heart to tell her that it might possibly be out of order, so John [inaudible – sounds like Green] [inaudible] on them, Ellen and I got the cards back in the trays as fast as we could, and every time we had a few spare moments and no one else was looking, we would go through again to try to see that they were all like they should be.

MS: Now Ruth, between those years that you worked here at Central there were several different head libraries [sic] starting out with Margaret Mount, whom I might mention as a woman head librarian, she was rather a rare commodity in the United States at that particular time. Who were the head librarians following Margaret Mount?

RS: Okay, Mary Mohler became head librarian while we were still in this old building next door, and then the next one was Mr. Gorsholtz, who was here just a few years, and then following him it was George Fadenrecht. Those were the ones that I worked under.

MS: Did you have any opportunity to work with students directly while you were working in the library?

RS: Yes, quite a bit, I would say. I didn’t have any supervisory capacity with the students until I became circulation reserve librarian, and then each quarter I would get about 45 students working under me. But before that I would work along with the students and show them how to type catalog cards, and the menial labor that we do – did in those days.

MS: Do you happen to know if there was any personnel in the present library that was here when you were?

RS: Yes, Jennifer Jacobs. She was a student, and she got her BA from Central. She worked as a student librarian during those years, and then she went away to library school and now she is back and works at the “new” library in the upper campus.

MS: And Victor Marx?

RS: Yeah, Victor Marx and – is it Thomas Yee?

MS: Yes.

RS: Uh-huh. I talked with – with Thomas and Jennifer yesterday. Jennifer gave me a complete tour of the library. But Victor Marx was scheduled to work last night, so he wasn’t on campus.

MS: Did you have any experience before or since at any other institution – any other college or university?

RS: Well if you want to go back to high school.

MS: Well then let’s go back to high school.

RS: I worked as a student in the library there one hour a day for three of my high school years, and then after I – where was I at – okay, then after I became secretary to the supervising principal I worked in that – I helped order the books and such for the library there.
MS: Now, an important factor in everybody’s life – did you feel that the salary that you got at Central was fair, and – certainly not adequate, but was it fair?

RS: Well, I was satisfied, but my husband wasn’t. He thought I should be getting more for all the varied things that I did, and a lot of them were very technical, and were technically library staff things which I did.

MS: Did you have opportunity, as time went on, to improve your salary?

RS: Yes. When I started work civil service had not entered the picture at all. It came in after we had, I believe, moved over to the new library. But before that we were privileged to take up to six credits per quarter, and for that we were given release time, and I availed myself of that. I took all the library classes which were given at the college, and several others also – unrelated classes also.

MS: Now we are very concerned today with equality between the sexes and the way they are treated on the job. Did you feel that as a woman you were in any way picked on or denigrated while working at Central, or did you feel that women were treated reasonably and decently?

RS: I felt that they were given – as the quotation is now – equal pay for equal work. I’m an adaptable person. I’m not that demanding, and I was satisfied. I had a job, I was working to put my kids through school, so as far as the working situation – I was satisfied.

MS: Good. Do you recall any particular supervisors or head librarians that you were especially fond of and that you thought were especially competent in their position?

RS: I really liked working under Margaret Mount, and I realize a lot of people did not care for her because I [inaudible] she had an abrasive personality, but with me it was all okay. We got along very well. I – it’s hard to play favorites now. I liked Mary Green, I liked Mary Mohler, I kind of liked them all.

MS: Now I happen to remember you myself as a musician on campus, not just as a secretary or librarian. In what ways did the University give you an opportunity to participate in musical groups?

RS: Well, I play a cello, and it’s a case of among the blind, the one-eyed is King – I was the cello player. George Beck, who’s in the Science Department, also played, but he was not very active. So I played with the college orchestra. I came every Monday night for their two hour rehearsal. I also played for – with Herbert Hertz [Bird] in a string quartet, and we did perform for the public – not very many showed up, but we did perform. And then we also, under you, I believe, along with Hertz, did the musicals – Brigadoon, Carousel – that’s all I can think of, but I was there sitting in the pit.

MS: Those musicals started in 1957 with Carousel, and before Dr. Hertz left we had done four or five of them together, and then went on to work with other people. But we could not have gotten on without the kind of volunteer help that you gave in that orchestra pit, because there simply wasn’t any money in those days to pay musicians, and we were able to do well with volunteer musicians such as yourself. Did you ever have an opportunity to attend any workshops or conferences financed – where your expenses were financed by the institution?

RS: Yes. After I became the circulation reserve librarian I attended a conference over in Tacoma. That was after George Fadenrecht was there – that he – he drove the car, and a car full of us went over there for a library one-day seminar. That is – to my memory there was only that one that I attended.

MS: Now earlier you were remarking a particularly tragic moment on this campus when a number of theses were destroyed. Do you recall the incident? Would you like to tell us about it?
RS: I recall that morning very well. It was true panic time, and people were running around all over. What had happened is that the theses and research papers had been presented and accepted, and they were now bound in the proper manner and boxed, ready to be shipped to the bindery. Well they were set a little too close to where the custodians would pick up the garbage, and that’s what happened. The custodians took them out to the dump. When the staff came to work the next day – and it took a few minutes for them to realize what had happened. I don’t know how many cars high-tailed it out to the dump. They had already started burning. They were able to salvage a few, and I don’t know in numbers how many, but they were able to salvage a few. And well, then they had to contact all these people. The college offered to re-type their work for them, but of course a lot of them, when they had handed in their theses, threw away their notes and there was no way for them – no way that they could re-do all that. And there were threatens of law suits, but I never did hear that anyone actually came through with a law suit on that.

MS: It – it was all – it was a tragedy for sure, and it in the end cost the college a considerable amount of money to reconstruct those theses and get them back to the bindery so that those students’ work is now catalogued up in the new college library.

RS: But they never did get them all.

MS: Not all of them, no.

RS: Some people just refused, you know. They’d done their work once, they were accepted, that was it.

MS: I can’t imagine myself throwing anything away that is as important as notes on a thesis or a dissertation.

RS: But during orientation now that’s one of the first things that they tell them – save all your notes until you have your thesis in hand.

MS: Yes indeed. What was your impression of the new library building that you moved into over there – Bouillon Hall?

RS: My first impression was “All this space!” We were very cramped over in this other library, and here we had all this space to – to – well, we eventually filled it pretty well with books, too. But that was one of the nicest things. We’ve had facilities there for a social room, which we did not have before, and we availed ourselves of that. The staff would have a party once a month, and I remember well our party on April Fool’s day. We had leftovers from all the other parties, so one of the tables – we were seated at card tables, but one of the tables was Christmas, one was Thanksgiving, one was October – all the leftovers from all the other April Fool’s parties. But that was another nice plus there.

MS: Was the Dewey Decimal system the only system for cataloging in the two libraries – the old and the new?

RS: It was when we moved. One of the last things I did and moved on before I left Central was convert from Dewey to LC – Library of Congress. Everything except literature – the 800s. They decided that they would leave them as is, in Dewey.

MS: Your brain is imprinted with cataloging numbers, isn’t it?

RS: Right.
MS: [Inaudible]. Now, do you have some memories of campus life and activities? Did your family and did you participate as spectator at any events such as athletics? I know that your family did go to the musicals when Mom played. How about sporting events?

RS: Well I had four boys that were willing to either chase, or watch anyone else chase a ball, so I doubt that there were any games that they missed. I'll admit I didn’t go to quite all of them, but the family certainly did, and it was baseball, basketball, football – they started watching wrestling, which they had never watched before, but because we had the family pass they were –

MS: You did have a family pass?

RS: We had a family pass.

MS: Good. One of the tiny fringe benefits of working here.

RS: It wasn’t so tiny. They loved it. Another fringe benefit that they were able to take advantage of was after the Nicholson Pavilion was built and they had a Olympic-sized swimming pool, and all of my children were swimmers and they availed themselves of that many, many times.

MS: Now I understand that you have one daughter who is a graduate of Central.

RS: Mm-hmm.

MS: About what year, and under what name would she have been registered then?

RS: Well her name was – is Jane Sydow, and she is now married to someone by the name of [unclear, sounds like “Rosarn at Eugene”], and she has a degree in Home Economics. Jane, Pat, Jim and Bill – all three attended, but Jane was the only one who graduated. We moved before the others would get [inaudible].

MS: Do you have any other memories that you’d like to share with us that come to your mind? Things that we haven’t talked about?

RS: Yes, I have a few.

MS: Please, shoot.

RS: When they built the new – the Bouillon library they had some artists in residence, and they did a very creditable job of creating artwork for different places. Well unfortunately the students vandalized, and they stole, and they were just not – well, they disappeared. Let’s put it that way. The other thing I remember quite vividly is the accident which Oliver Dobley had. He was a member – or he worked in the custodial department and during the summer they would have to test and inspect the steam lines. And he told us how they would take a piece of paper and have it go ahead of them, and if there steam – live steam – it would cut the paper and then they knew that they had to use some kind of extra care there – turn off, and so on. But a pipe did burst on the corner of 8th down there in the Bouillon library, and the pressure from that steam was so strong that it blew him back out of the manhole and about three feet in the air. He was burned in maybe 85-90% of his body, and I always said it took him about three days to die a horrible death.

MS: How about happy memories?

RS: Well most of them are happy. I had to think awfully hard to think of something that wasn’t. I enjoyed working, I enjoyed the staff, and I enjoyed the other secretaries with whom I came in contact.
MS: Did you notice any particular difference in the attitude on campus when Dr. McConnell left and we got that bright young Dr. Brooks on campus as President? Did you recognize any significant difference?

RS: Frankly, I think I would have to say no. I – I felt that Brooks became more involved. I was much more aware of him being the President, rather than McConnell, who had his little ivory tower.

MS: I recall – one of the most significant differences, and you probably would recognize this one and mention it – that there was a noticeable improvement in the relationship between what we call town and gown. The community and the University got much, much closer together under Dr. Brooks than it ever did under Dr. McConnell. He seemed to feel that the University –

[The interview ends abruptly, and is followed by a female voice explaining that she’s interviewing retired professors and staff for the archives.]