

Voices of SLA

Barbara Semonche (BS)

Interviewed by

Rebecca Vargha (RV)

April 2009

RV: This is an interview with Barbara Semonche for the SLA oral history project. The interviewer is Rebecca B. Vargha. Today is April 21, 2009, and we are in Chapel Hill, North Carolina on the beautiful campus of the University of North Carolina. Barbara Semonche has been a proud SLA member for over 32 years, and it would take most of this interview if I go through all of the Association activities that Barbara has participated in, but we're going to get through those in the course of the interview. Most recently, Barbara has been the Park Library director at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication here at the University of North Carolina. Barbara, at this time of year our thoughts turn to graduation, particularly on a university campus. So our graduates here at the University of North Carolina will have their wonderful ceremony on May 10. And I just happen to know that you're the commencement speaker at the School of Information and Library Science. We'll have 96 new graduates, and I wonder what sorts of advice will you give to them -- to the people who are just going to be joining the profession?

BS: I've been thinking about what I would say to them. I'm at the end of my career and they're at the beginning of theirs, and I'm wondering what I could say to them that would be meaningful, that would be helpful, and that would be encouraging. They come from an educational background that is superior. I know they'll have the skills. And I know they'll

have the intelligence, the energy, and the dedication to make their way. But there are some things that I can pass on to them that may help upon reflection. They must be prepared for change. Radical, abrupt, seemingly without any relationship to them until it hits them. And the best thing I can suggest that they do is keep a 360-degree view all around them at all times. You never know what's going to impact you unless you pay attention. Keep close to your friends, to your faculty, to your colleagues. I would urge them to make friends with people who are much older and much younger than they are. You never know what you can learn until you make the effort. But to focus on them, I think I would say learn to manage yourself, your time, and your relationships. Never work alone. Seek support, offer it, never turn down the opportunity to help, and never be embarrassed to ask for help. Oh, one more thing. Don't say no too quickly. Typically, opportunities and risks are very much alike, and I would urge them to be adventurous.

RV: Well that's certainly wonderful advice. And speaking of adventure, whenever I think back over your work experience, you've been the library director here at the Park Library at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication since 1990, but before that you were the library director at the *Herald Sun* newspaper in Durham, North Carolina from 1976 to 1990. You have worked as a library contractor at the Environmental Protection Agency in Research Triangle Park. And before that you've worked as a language specialist at the UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center. That is quite a career path.

BS: Yes, this is my fourth career, and I'm not sure it's going to be my last.

RV: That's wonderful. That is a great career path, and it sounds like you've certainly learned a lot along the way. What a great experience.

BS: Oh yes, I did. Usually when I didn't expect it.

RV: Can you think of something...?

BS: Yes. I was working with deaf children, and I learned to listen by trying to teach them. I realized that I couldn't teach unless they were looking at me. All they had to do was close their eyes or turn their head and I had lost them. And this was a bit of a change. Also, my internship that first year out of college was with a Miss Alice String from the University of Milwaukee. I was there for a summer. And she was a magician with deaf children. She knew how to teach them. For six weeks I watched her work her magic. And then my turn came. I was not very good. And even after watching her and paying careful attention and using the puppets and the exhibits, I still couldn't reach them. Finally at the end of the six weeks I knew I was going to be evaluated. And if the deaf children could speak I don't think they would give me a very good evaluation. So I asked her, "Miss String? What does it take to be a really good teacher?" We were putting away our materials from the day's session, and she didn't answer me right away. I waited, and then finally she said, "Barbara it takes three things. It takes materials, methods, and me." I was very young. I thought I knew something about the materials and the methods, but I didn't know what she meant about the "me" part. And so I asked her. She said, "Barbara, that's what you'll spend your life discovering. How to learn about yourself so that you can work with others."

RV: It sounds like she was a wonderful mentor.

BS: She was.

RV: How and when did you become involved with SLA?

BS: Perhaps I wasn't paying attention, but I didn't know a thing about SLA when I was taking my courses, when I was doing my practice. It wasn't until I finally got a job -- and that in itself is another story -- at the *Herald Sun* newspaper library, and I didn't know anything about how to run a news library. So I connected with one of my fellow students who was a former librarian at the *Charlotte Observer*, and she showed me how. Then I realized I

have a lot of learning I better do fast. And she said, "Well Barbara, why don't you join SLA?" And so I said, "Mary Ellis, I'll do that. How do I do that?" She told me, and so that's how I got started, and my first conference was in New York, I believe it was 1977. And I spent three intensive days in workshops meeting with the very, very best in the business. And I felt like a pitiful neophyte. But they were very warm and welcoming and instructive, and I thought this is like a post-graduate course in the kind of work that I'm doing. After that, I realized I had some connections right in my own backyard, because there was the North Carolina Chapter. I got involved with that and I realized, whoa, these are people from all sorts of other divisions, other specialties, other collections, with many different skills. And then I thought, "I'm at home." And so the Association just carried me the rest of the 32 years.

RV: That's wonderful. So it does sound like your involvement with SLA has met expectations.

BS: Oh, exceeded them. I felt -- and I still feel -- that I've received a lot more than I've given.

RV: The mentoring that you've done with students-- I've certainly seen it here in North Carolina. You give so much to students. You've always been so supportive, both financially and as a mentor, sponsoring students who are attending their first meeting. Frankly, I just think you're one of those people who really walks the talk, because you talk to the students and you say what are you taking this semester? Why are you going into library and information science? So I've seen you in action.

BS: But you know, there have been extraordinary members in our chapter, and in my particular News Division, who have served as mentors, and one of them is Eliza Robertson. And if I recollect correctly, she -- and I believe you too -- had been responsible for nominating at least five of our young chapter members for a diversity leadership award. I think that's extraordinary for a chapter of our size. And then of course

her husband is Dav Robertson who I think probably runs the farm club for all of our special libraries.

RV: (laughter) If it was a baseball team, that's exactly what it is.

BS: He's been a great coach.

RV: Definitely. That is very, very true. And of course SLA has a new award, too. The SLA Rising Star Award. So I'm hoping that we will have some nominations, and because I'm on the Awards Committee, that's why I'm putting in the commercial for this.

RV: So what do you think were some of the major issues for SLA when you were working in the Chapter, when you were organizing a conference, all of the committee work that you have done? What are some of the major issues that you saw for SLA and for the profession?

BS: Communication. Involvement. Membership recruitment. And that's interesting, because when I was joining SLA, membership might have been somewhere in the neighborhood of 5,000--considerably less than what it is now. But we were at a point where our Association, our Chapter, and our News Division was accelerating. We were making the transformation from -- in the news division, for example -- from people who served news organizations -- research staff -- who are not necessarily trained librarians or researchers. And as it evolved, our News Division membership became much more professional and increased their membership and involvement, their participation, their cooperation with other divisions; the Legal Division for one. And I think that speaks very, very well when members see the value of what they are receiving in education and get the thrill and excitement from recognizing that they can make contributions not only to their profession, but for the Association. And the communication is what helps that two-way street flow.

RV: We've talked a little bit about your reasons for joining SLA, but what rationale would you give to other professionals for joining SLA and specifically for taking an active role in SLA at some level? When you're thinking about professionals in general -- information science, library science, what's the number one reason that you would give to someone, whether it's a student or somebody who's made a career, for joining SLA?

BS: If you want to know, as an emerging professional in any field, what's new, what works, what lies ahead, and who knows, the Association provides that.

RV: The centennial's going to be a great conference in D.C. in June. If you think back about some of the most important things that SLA has done or the changes that have been made on an Association level while you were a member, is there something in particular -- and it's fine to have more than one item -- but when you think back in terms of your participation as a member, what are the most important things SLA has done for the membership?

BS: It begins small, in very small ways. Early in my association with SLA, I had no realistic plans of participating in programs, serving as an officer, editing a news journal, mentoring a class.

RV: The listserv, all the things that you've done.

BS: Never even thought of that. But it took one leader -- it happened to be in the News Division -- who was chair at the time, sat down with me at one of my early conferences -- it might have been 1980 or 81. She said, "Barbara, so what would you like to do to get involved?" I looked at Sandy Hall and I said, "I don't know what you mean." She said, "Well, all of our members participate in some way or another." I said, "My organization won't support travel and not too much in the way of other expenses. What did you have in mind?" She said, "Well, you have a library science school near you. Why don't you serve

as our liaison?" I said, "What does that mean?" She gave me some ideas, and I said, "Well I could talk to them. Maybe create a brochure with our production agency, and maybe that might help." And from that one thing, suddenly I got invitations to speak at a conference -- on management, which was curious because I was a solo manager; what would I have to say? It took me six months to write that speech. It was only going to be ten minutes long. But just one thing after another. And Ruth Seidman asked me to do a presentation on editing a newsletter. Then suddenly that rolled into "Would you like to serve on the committee to plan an annual conference?" I was never really prepared for any of these things. It was as if I had to constantly get out of my comfort zone and learn something more in order to do this. I was always reaching far beyond anything that I ever thought I would do. It wasn't the Association pushing me, but it was just drawing me, little by little, further and further. And I didn't know it until I looked back and there it was.

RV: As you alluded to early, it's the risks and the opportunities.

BS: Yeah, I was a risk-taker. I said yes probably more often than I should.

RV: One of the questions that we've talked about is participation in SLA and the type of influence it's had over your career. Because it certainly sounds like it's had a tremendous amount of influence.

BS: What was exciting for me at annual conferences -- particularly at the business meetings -- was to see how smart, sharp, effective communicators could manage a meeting. The way the agendas were prepared and the way they had a parliamentarian to help through the knotty things when discussions got really heated and there were more amendments than you knew what to do with. I remember Didi Pancake just being quiet, calm, but completely effective. I admired that, and I decided if I'm going to participate, I'm going to learn how to do that. So they were like role models for me. I don't think I would have had

that if I stayed close and tight to my own organization, to my own world. I would have done essentially the same thing year after year after year. It was watching other people in different environments that was absolutely inspirational. The Association did that for me.

RV: It sounds like, as you said, that you went outside the News Division, which is a wonderful division -- but it's the influence and the collaboration among other divisions and groups within the Association that really helped round out your career.

BS: I didn't know there was such a thing as the Military Division. I didn't know there was an Insurance and Employee Benefits Division. I've worked with all of those people -- particularly on committees -- and that's where the real work of the Association gets done. Task forces, too. I've served on eight of them, and I treasure those. They were demanding experiences, but, again, it's the post-graduate learning.

RV: Exactly. And as you say, there's a lot of work to be done on the Association level in terms of moving the Association forward. Is there anything else about SLA, as you think back, that you'd like to talk about in terms of things that have changed? I always think of you as an early adapter. For example, I think about the way you led the way with listservs. And that was before listservs became what they are now, essentially. You were always an early adapter in terms of adapting technology.

BS: That's sort of interesting. I was always feeling that I was chasing technology in order to get caught up. The reason I went into newspapers was so that I would have nothing to do with computers.

RV: How ironic.

BS: Well yes. The curriculum at UNC's school of information and library science -- at that time, in 1974-76 -- was just beginning into programming languages and computers. And I

struggled with this, and I thought enough already. But when my job started going into electronic font and typesetting editing, I learned how to do that simply because I was curious. And then when the Internet came on, it was a network administrator in our school, in 1993 that came dashing into my library and said, "Barbara, you've got to get an email." And I said, "What is an email?" He showed me, and I was singularly unimpressed. I said "What can you do with this?" He showed me how you can talk with people all over the world. I had my first email address. And then I said "Well this seems fairly easy. How about connecting with people in the Chapter -- in the North Carolina Chapter and in the News Division -- and then later on with the Fellows? How do you do it?" They said you have to talk to the office of information technology on campus. I said "I can do that." They said "Well here are these manuals," and I said "I can't do these." So we took courses here at the university. The university has such a wealth of knowledgeable people; it offers such a diversity of opportunities, whether it's in a seminar, a one-hour class, or coaching. People were helping me all along the way. So I was not an innovator. It just seemed to be that I caught on like the second rung, and then I rode it for all it was worth. Then I was doing web pages, and I realized that these met with appreciation and a sense of value. If you go through many anniversaries for an association, you begin to understand that the distribution of knowledge -- historical materials -- this can be a real godsend. So I didn't really know what the Internet was, where it was going, how it was going to affect me -- my job, how it was going to relate. Again, I just hopped on this electric whirligig and took off. And it's still happening, because the further we go, the more we realize we've neglected to set up standards for archiving web pages, and we haven't established a number of the best practices that we need for archiving photos. We're working on it. We're not there yet. So there's still a lot to be done, but I'm delighted that I was at least a part of this. It's been exciting.

RV: Talking about the Association, our thoughts turn to SLA as a global association, and I know that you've certainly been involved with that. Whenever I look at your CV and some of the lecturing and traveling that you've done on behalf of news libraries... Could you talk a little bit about some of the connections that you made whenever you've been in Europe, for example, and some of that experience in connecting globally? And do you think that has helped get the word out about SLA?

BS: Without a doubt. SLA developed some fascinating partnerships. It is open to this, and they did so with the Freedom Forum. They came up with a program whereby news researchers could apply to work with journalists and news researchers in other countries. The Freedom Forum had -- at that time -- 12 what they call independent journalism centers. For me, it was in Poland and in Romania. So in 1996 I applied. I was accepted, and all of the sudden, with passport in hand, I was off to Bucharest and then to Warsaw. And I was so warmly welcomed. Now mind you, I didn't know those languages, but they were very, very receptive. I had translators with me all the time. And I still keep in contact with some of those people. And when I've gone back, for example, to deliver speeches in the Netherlands and in Copenhagen, I find friends who remember me from earlier connections. But more important, they know what SLA is. Now it's a challenge for some of our international colleagues to afford membership, and I think it's very good that we have these levels of memberships.

RV: The tiered program.

BS: I was on a task force that looked into doing this -- goodness, it must be almost eight or nine years ago -- but the way SLA reaches out to its international colleagues I think is exemplary, and I'd like to be very supportive of this continuing for as long as it can. I have immensely benefited from it, and it has been an exciting experience. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

RV: We've talked a bit about some of the people who have been mentors and coaches for you. We talked about some SLA members and people who were important in shaping your professional beliefs, but are there people that you think of very specifically as your mentors? In addition to people that we've already talked about.

BS: Fred Roper. Retired. He was my first instructor in 1974. He taught reference.

RV: And that would be here at the University of Chapel Hill?

BS: It was. He was an excellent instructor, extremely knowledgeable, interested in his students. He listened well, had a quiet sense of humor, and was very, very hard with his assignments and with his grading. I don't think I did particularly well. But I valued the entire experience, and I could see everyone around me did. Over the years -- when he later went on to become dean at the University of South Carolina School of Information and Library Science -- I got to know him better, particularly through the Fellows which is a wonderful group. The Fellows of SLA play a great mentoring role, particularly for the first timers at conferences. We hold a reception, and we typically take one or two and escort them through the exhibits, connect with them before the conference, after the conference, and there's nothing like one-on-one. It's the personal interest that I think sustains and supports us all. And Fred Roper and I have talked over the years -- usually at conferences; we look for one another -- and I just hold him in such high esteem. And there are others. Certainly Rose Vormelker. I met her when she was well into her eighties. She lived to be 99. She was a president of SLA in I think the early fifties. She was a government documents librarian who later was a consultant for some of the Ohio newspapers. She was a petite, dark, intense woman. She taught a summer course at Kent State University for students about news librarianship. I got to meet her then. She was a sharp lady. I thought if I can be anything like her, I'd consider it advantageous. There are others. Kitty Scott, former president. I worked with her for a long time.

RV: And if memory serves, I think you won the Vormelker Award in 2000 from SLA?

BS: Yes, I did. That was a real thrill. And the hardest part about it is I wasn't able to go to that particular conference because my husband was very ill. He's completely recovered now, but Susan DiMattia was kind enough to read my acceptance remarks, and apparently they were very well received. And Susan has been a big supporter.

RV: And Kitty -- you said Kitty Scott as well.

BS: Kitty Scott, and... Dav Robertson, from the Chapter here, was my boss. He was the sort of supervisor for this program between the School of Information and Library Science here on campus and the Environmental Protection Agency. That was my first introduction to some serious library research work, and Dav was very good at what he did. And he brought me a long way. I've known him for 32 years. He was extraordinary. So he's been a strong, strong supporter. There have been others. Didi Pancake. I've mentioned. Sylvia Piggott was very helpful early on -- in the early nineties -- helping me understand how the board worked and how the committees responded. And I was on several committees, and she just needed to enlighten me with some very important background. Wilda Newman. This is another vital source in my life too. She's retired now from Johns Hopkins. All of those have been extraordinary contributors, really guideposts in my career that I would return to from time to time for consult.

RV: I see. Are there any other people that you can think of that you would categorize as best thinkers in SLA or in the profession, and if so what characteristics put them on your list?

BS: I'll have to begin currently -- with this positioning document -- positioning SLA for the future -- which I believe Gloria Zamora and her team have been an example of what committed, serious, thoughtful research can do. I know that Kitty Scott was one of the earliest advocates of developing a vision statement and every single one of our presidents

since then have worked on... You on membership development, for example, on reaching out to our international colleagues. You've traveled all over the world.

And so each one of these very able and talented leaders has contributed duties. I've admired very much their style, their ability to work with a very diverse and occasionally contentious group. I've admired the way that they could navigate through some very, very thorny issues. Bill Fisher, for example, the way he took us through the trials of a name change, or the attempts to do so. When we've had issues on membership fee increases, these have been very, very challenging. Most of my career, the executive director of SLA has been David Bender, and I really must recognize his contributions, which have been monumental. He left an excellent record. I certainly commend our newest CEO, Janice Lachance . Very approachable, she's visited our chapter, and she is just a very down to earth person. And I also recognize what she has done with Environmental Protection Agency libraries when they had been threatened with, if not elimination, just about total budgetary cuts. So I admire those people who fight a good fight. One more thing about this association, and I don't know who's responsible; we're made up of very intelligent, dedicated, creative, inventive people. And certainly we are professionally oriented. But every now and then we'll come across extraordinary members who have reached out to their communities, particularly in matters of hardship, disaster... And I'm thinking of Lisl Zach who was in my graduating class, 1976 -- at SILS. And she was in Baton Rouge, and the president of the Louisiana/Mississippi Chapter, when hurricane Katrina hit in August 29, 2005. People were evacuating. The New Orleans Times (inaudible) had to evacuate at the last minute. And she opened her entire house in Baton Rouge to as many of those reporters and editors as could find rescue and shelter in her house. Then she set out to find out where were all the other librarians in the area. And she was fielding calls from all over the country. How are you? What's happening down there? How are the libraries? How are the librarians? How are the informational professionals? She was like command

central during this, and she was recognized by the Association. There are others who have set up libraries in Africa. Now, this is sort of outside of our charge, but what it does is it speaks so highly to the character of who we are, and I think connects with the public in ways that are beyond what we can do in our jobs. And I'm so proud of that.

RV: Let's pull out the crystal ball here and talk about the future a little bit. In your opinion, where is our profession going?

BS: I knew this question was on the list, and I was struggling with that. I like what Yogi Berra was purported to have said, something about prediction is very hard to do, especially when it's about the future. Now whether he said that or not, it still is true. I don't have an easy answer. The answer I'm going to provide probably would fit just about any organization; that if our association can develop three senses -- a sense of direction -- where it needs to go, where it has to go, and how it's going to get there -- a sense of balance on what is worth doing now, later; and a sense of humor, which is in reality a sense of humanity -- I think it'll do just fine. And from my current perspective, it is aces with all three of those senses. I have no doubt about the future. It will not only survive; I expect SLA to thrive.

RV: What do you think are the most important skills and competencies that librarians and information professionals will need as they move into the future?

BS: I don't know if it's a competency or a skill, but a willingness to be surprised. You can't know everything. You have to recognize that there are some people who do. So I would say be very good at building networks and partnerships. You can't do anything alone. Be a perpetual student. For one thing it's more fun -- you don't get bored -- and for another thing it opens up new opportunities. Technology is a central part of our lives. I think it will continue to be in whatever formats that are going to come at us. I think we're going to have to find a way continually to find the skills, the knowledges, and the temperament

to close a gap between what we know and what we don't know. And I don't think that gap is ever going to disappear. I think we're going to be building bridges across it, flying over it, tunneling under it, finding our ways around it; we're going to have to be architects and engineers and creative developers of all kinds. We have to be willing, occasionally, to break things, to mend things. And never to give up.

RV: Whenever you're talking about continuing professional development, then certainly SLA's Click University comes to mind, and with the current structure -- now that the majority of the material comes with an SLA membership -- this is certainly one of the ways that all of us can continue to keep our skills up to date.

BS: Click University and the annual conference seminars and workshops are absolutely fundamental to the advancement of your skills. We can't overlook that colleges and universities also offer these skills -- these training sessions, these renewals, for alums -- where I would go first to find out what's new, what works, what lies ahead, and who knows, would be to the Association. And if I can't get to these annual conferences, I would certainly make the connections in my own backyard -- which is through my local chapter -- and then reach out to places like Click University. I would keep involved through the listservs. There are a lot of knowledgeable people who are extraordinarily generous. We have consultants who make their living providing this information. Some of the information is not freely given, but it's available at very, very reasonable cost. Go search it, you'll find it through the Association. It's never let me down yet.

RV: So if you were going to do this all over again -- if we could wave a magic wand and you were going to join the profession again, and you were starting all over -- would you do it? Why or why not?

BS: I figured out one thing.

RV: What's that?

BS: It's very good that I didn't become a librarian early in my career. As a teacher of the deaf, I needed some maturity, and it took me awhile. So I'm glad that this opportunity came later in my life. I was able to bring a lot more balance, direction. A sense of humor for one thing. For me, this has been my most favorite career. I don't know what I'll do after this, because I don't see how anything could come up to it, but yes I would do it again. Happily so. And I would encourage others to do it.

RV: And in terms of your education and your job choices, would you do anything differently? Would you go to SILS? Would you pursue news librarianship?

BS: Well I don't know about the news librarianship. I didn't know it was so wonderful until I got there, and how I got there was... Maybe it's time to tell that story.

RV: Let's tell that story. How did you get there?

BS: Well first, I wouldn't have missed out on SILS for the world. It was that faculty -- who took a chance with me -- the students, the internship at the EPA library; they shaped my entire career. When I graduated in 1976, I had been searching for a job for six months, and had interviews, and nothing was open. This was part of the tough times for libraries. Not many were hiring. And I was getting a little bit discouraged, when one of my fellow students -- Mary Ellis Morton, who was also an EPA intern -- asked if I had tried newspaper libraries. I said, "Do newspapers have libraries?" And she said, "Well I don't know if everyone does, but we did at the *Charlotte Observer*. I said, "Well what do they do? Where do I start?" She said, "Why don't you call the local newspaper, which happened to be the Durham *Herald Sun*. So I did. I called them up and asked the receptionist to speak to their librarian. Shortly the voice of Mike Rouse came on the line. I said "Hello Mr. Rouse, my name is Barbara Semonche. I'm a recent graduate of the

School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina, and I'm wondering if you have any openings in your library." There was a pause, and then Mr. Rouse said, "We don't have a library." Well it was my turn to pause, because I didn't know what to say. So finally I just blurted out, "Well would you like to have one?" As if I could go to the equivalent of Wal-Mart at that time and pull one off the shelf and give it to him. And I could almost hear the smile in his voice. He said, "Perhaps you'd like to come in and we can talk about it." So we did. Now, I was in dangerous territory there. I was a newspaper reader -- had been since I was a child -- but I didn't know what to say to this man. So I went back to Mary Ellis and I said, "Mary Ellis what do I say?" She said, "Well he'll show you around the newspaper and you'll find out." We had a visit, met the editors and the reporters, and then he sat down and said, "Why don't you write a proposal to start this library? With a budget. And we will pay you a stringer's fee. Will that be all right?" And I said "Of course." I didn't know what a stringer's fee was.

RV: I was going to say maybe we should explain what a stringer's fee is.

BS: I will shortly. But I think he knew I didn't know, but he was just wondering if I would fess up. I think he knew I was very green, very much the neophyte. A stringer's fee is for a freelance reporter or photographer. Usually it's a small fee. Mine was for the princely sum of \$75.00. So I went home, and with my husband -- Professor John Semonche -- and Mary Ellis, we blocked out what needed to be done to start this library, and the budget. One of the things on the budget was my salary. I was going to charge \$12,000 for my annual salary at that time. This was 1976. And a week later I had it ready, handed it to him, he accepted it, and then two weeks later he called back and said he'd like to make me an offer. I was very excited and very pleased. He said he talked to the publisher. "He is supportive of starting a library and we'd like to offer you a salary of \$11,200." That sounded fine to me. And so we started. While I could write a good game, I didn't know how to do it. So my friend Mary Ellis spent three days with me. After I approached Mr.

Rouse and I said I was going to need some help, he knew that I didn't know what I was talking about. I think he took a gamble on me because of my education. I came from a top-notch school, and he was willing to take a gamble even though I didn't know anything about it. So Mary Ellis sat down with me, taught me how to make out a subject authority list, how to tear out the clippings, how to put them in a file, how to date stamp things, how to handle the wire service photos, what to do with the metal engravings, and in essence just go to work.

RV: Sounds like a crash course on a very specialized newspaper librarianship.

BS: Fortunately for her I was a good student, and I've always been indebted to her and I'm still in touch with her.

RV: And you took that newspaper library to new heights, because as I recall, you developed an index for that newspaper, didn't you?

BS: Yes. But it wasn't my idea. I have to share the credit, which is another thing we need to do. It was a SILS graduate student. In every job I've had, I've had SILS graduate students working for me. Thank heavens; they've made me look smarter than I am and have produced wonderful things. And one of these was the *Herald Sun* Index. It was Gloria Calven, and she was doing her thesis on newspaper indexes. She came up with this idea and I said maybe we could do something. She made the proposal. We first sought the help of the IT person and he said, "I think we can do this. Do you have the software?" Gloria and I said no. So we had two IBM software engineers, who came to work with us and crafted this software that we would put on an old PDP 11. We later graduated down. The index lasted from 1981 to 1990, when we finally got it down to a personal computer. But we were able to create an index that had a code for author, by-line, which paper, which edition, the headline, the photographer, what type of article it was, the location, and the date--135 character string. Then we proceeded to teach these IBM software

engineers the difference between a “see” and a “see also” reference. This was very, very difficult to do. This was a very popular thing because we were able to sell subscriptions to the monthly and annual index, and we were able to sell the software. IBM gave us the permission. They didn't have much faith that it would sell, but it did. We kind of broke even with this. I didn't know it at the time, but it was exceptional.

RV: It really was. Well those are the kinds of things that I associate with you in terms of your long career -- and a fascinating career and an excellent career -- Barbara. As we begin to finish our time together here this morning, is there anything else that we haven't talked about, from SLA to your career path to education? Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

BS: I'm going to take the roundabout way to answer that. I'm glad that you didn't ask me what I'm going to do after retirement -- my retirement's going to be June 1 -- because I just don't know. However, my nature is to be curious, and a certain willingness to be surprised. So I suspect that something will happen, and I hope it will continue to be with SLA.

RV: Thank you very much. An honor and a privilege, and I'd like to thank the School of Journalism here at the University of North Carolina for hosting us this morning as well.

BS: I know it's been a privilege for me, and it's been kind of a special thrill because of our long-term friendship and our professional collegiality. Thank you again.

End - Semonche Oral History