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# Mary Elizabeth Poole: "The Documents Librarians' Documents Librarian"<sup>1</sup>

Jean M. Porter

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For years depository librarians across the country and even the world have been using the reference tools created by Mary Elizabeth Poole to identify and classify federal documents inadequately recorded in early issues of the *Monthly Catalog of U.S. Government Publications*. But few people know of the character and dedication of the woman herself.

Born in Troy, North Carolina, in 1914, Miss Poole was the oldest of four daughters in a prominent family. Her father was a lawyer, but he was involved in many other pursuits as well. Among other things, he owned a peach orchard in which Mary Elizabeth and her sisters worked at a variety of tasks during harvests.

Miss Poole attended Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she earned an AB degree in Library Science. While at Duke, she continued to pursue her childhood interest in photography. Al Hardy, a former North Carolina State University colleague of Miss Poole's and later a documents department employee, describes her as being "an amateur photographer with professional knowledge and expertise, not satisfied with merely pointing and pushing the button."<sup>2</sup> She used her closet as a dark room and carefully conserved chemicals since they were scarce. Miss Poole experimented with hand-coloring some of these black and white photographs. Her photographs are a wonderful record of friends and fellow students from her college days.

Following graduation she was unemployed since jobs were hard to come by during the Depression. To improve her chances for a job, her father encouraged her to take a typing course. I have always admired Miss Poole's typing skill, but only recently did I discover that she acquired that skill by taking a correspondence course from a

business school in Raleigh. Before too long, Mary Elizabeth was gainfully employed full-time at the Duke Library, typing cards for \$75.00 per month. She still doesn't quite understand why the half-time job available at the same time paid \$50.00 a month while the full-time one only paid \$75.00. Anyway, she was one of two people hired in the newly created Documents Division. The other person handled state publications, while Miss Poole had responsibility for federal documents. This appears to have been the beginning of Miss Poole's long and impressive connection with federal government publications.

At this time all the documents at Duke were classified in Dewey. Gradually, all responsibility for the documents, from acquisition through providing reference service, was placed in the Documents Division. At that point a decision was made to create a separate archival collection which meant that the entire collection was reclassified into the Superintendent of Documents (SuDocs) classification system. According to an account written by Miss Poole<sup>3</sup> about the reorganization of the federal documents at Duke, it was estimated that it would take six to ten years to reclassify the collection. Because that time frame was incomprehensible, a goal of three years was established and met, no doubt with much overtime contributed by Miss Poole. To aid in her reclassification project, Miss Poole obtained a list of SuDocs classification numbers from Virginia Polytechnic Institute. This became the basis of the first edition of the *Documents Office Classification* in 1945. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Miss Poole left Duke in 1943 to work in the library at Virginia Polytechnic Institute for one year. Through her friend, Foy Lineberry, who worked in the Library at State College in Raleigh, she learned of a temporary reference position there which included responsibility for the state and federal documents. In 1944 Miss Poole began work as the Reference and Documents Librarian in the D. H. Hill Library, located at that time in the

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building which now houses the Design School. What began as a temporary job, intended to last only for the duration of the war, encompassed the rest of her professional career.

Mrs. Reba Davis Clevenger, who had been reference librarian and was acting director when Miss Poole was hired, had a major influence on her career, encouraging her to pursue several projects which would improve access to federal government publications. These were always well thought out projects. One of the axioms by which Miss Poole worked was that no guide, reference tool, or resource was begun which would be unable to be maintained. For over thirty-five years she maintained a resource which became a necessity for nearly every documents collection, the *Documents Office Classification*. An anecdote about the development of the *Documents Office Classification* is indicative of the woman herself. She used the Government Printing Office (GPO) shelflist to create this comprehensive listing of the classification numbers established by that agency. In order to use the shelflist, she would take the night train up to Washington, D.C., be ready to work at GPO the next day, and return to Raleigh that night. Not a minute was wasted. Throughout her career, she corresponded with several Superintendents of Documents, and her opinions regarding federal documents questions were sought

out on numerous occasions.

Creating a comprehensive listing of all the classification numbers used by GPO and maintaining that listing was not the only project she worked on. *Documents Office Classification Numbers for Cuttered Documents, 1910-1924*<sup>4</sup> compiled by Mary Elizabeth Poole and Ella Francis Smith was published by University Microfilms International in 1960. Since there were no classification numbers in the *Monthly Catalog* until mid-1924, this was an extremely useful compilation. Recognizing the lack of adequate personal author indexing in the *Monthly Catalog*, Miss Poole compiled *Author Index (With Titles) To The Monthly Catalog Of United States Government Publications, 1947-1962*<sup>5</sup>.

My appreciation of Miss Poole's reputation—based on my use of the *Documents Office Classification* while identifying, shelflisting, and cataloging gift documents at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside—grew even greater when I attended a workshop in Chicago in November 1973. An announcement was made that Mary Elizabeth Poole was undertaking an enormous project—adding the Superintendent of Documents (SuDocs) classification numbers to entries in the *Monthly Catalog of United States Government Publications* for the years 1895-1924. A murmur of excitement and anticipation swept through the

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audience. Little did I know that within a few short months I would be working with her.

My first personal contact with Miss Poole was indicative of her approach to most things—low-key but direct. I had arrived in North Carolina on a Sunday afternoon for an interview for Assistant Documents Librarian the following day. I had planned to look over the library during the evening, especially the Documents Department, so I would not be starting out cold in my interview the next day. Before I had barely settled in my hotel room, there was a call from Miss Poole, inviting me to visit the Department that evening. My interview had begun.

I encountered a diminutive woman of few words, who I later came to recognize as an individual of immense energy, strong ideals, and extraordinary commitment. I discovered that Miss Poole worked at the library every Sunday evening after returning from a weekend visit to her hometown of Troy, North Carolina, where one of her sisters lived and where the two of them taught a Sunday School class of first-grade children. This was my earliest indication of the kind of dedication Miss Poole had to her family and her roots, as well as to her profession.

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## **She greatly influenced my attitudes about federal documents and the need to make them as easily accessible as possible.**

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By the spring of 1974 when I arrived at NCSU, the project of adding the classification numbers to the early years of the *Monthly Catalog* was well under way. The publisher had provided a photocopy of each month of the *Monthly Catalog* for the years 1895-1924. A red line was placed by Miss Poole by every entry for which a number was to be added, often during Department Heads meetings. Since her time was precious, she always tried to maximize her productivity. Most members of the staff were involved to varying degrees with the project, although Miss Poole and Mr. Al Hardy, a library assistant, completed the bulk of the work. She came in an hour early every day to work on the project before her daily responsibilities consumed her, and worked from 7 am to 10 pm on the days she was scheduled to work evenings. On weekends when she returned to Troy, she took the work with her. And she brought it back with her every Sunday afternoon when she returned to Raleigh to work that evening. It took approxi-

mately two years to finish the "Classes Added"<sup>6</sup> project. During that time Miss Poole set aside many of her other interests. And once completed, the royalties of over \$23,000 went to the Friends of the Library of North Carolina State University. Following the completion of that massive project, Miss Poole went on to compile a fifth edition of the *Documents Office Classification*<sup>7</sup> and the "Classes Added" reprint edition of *Hickcox's Monthly Catalog of U.S. Government Publications, 1885-1894*<sup>8</sup>.

Miss Poole's contributions to the documents field did not end with her publications. She also established many guides and aids to assist the users of the collection in the D. H. Hill Library. During the years that Miss Poole worked on her various projects, nothing interfered with the efficiency of the department or the services rendered. For her this often meant short vacations, long hours at the library and little free time on the weekends. In fact, during most of her tenure at NCSU, Miss Poole had no full-time staff to assist her. This makes her accomplishments even more incredible. Being the shy and modest person she is, I am sure she would say that these were all things which needed to be done so she did them. While recently rereading the annual reports prepared by Miss Poole during her years at NCSU, it struck me even more forcefully how dedicated she was. From 1944 to 1953, she was Documents and Reference Librarian. Although other professional staff were supposed to assist covering the desk, that was rarely the case. Miss Poole was relentless in pointing out the need for more staff. Rarely did a year go by that the need for staff for reference service was not mentioned in the annual report. From 1953 to 1965 she was a one person Documents Division with some student help. During fiscal year 1965-66, the documents collection became, once again, administratively part of the Reference Department and had a half-time staff member in addition to Miss Poole. By 1969 there was a full-time documents assistant. With the opening of the new tower in 1971, it was decided to concentrate the documents and microforms collections, and all services for them, on the second floor of the East Wing of the current facility. Additional staff was added including another professional librarian position.

In recognition of her longtime contributions to the profession, Miss Poole received the James Bennett Childs Award from the Government Documents Roundtable of the American Library Association in 1978. That still was not the end of the awards which she received. In 1982, Miss Poole was presented with a Watauga Medal for her out-



standing contributions to North Carolina State University.

When Miss Poole announced her resignation in 1979, many wondered what she would do with her time. She had dedicated so much of herself to the profession that many people thought she had no other interests. They were wrong. While much time and energy was devoted to her work, she has many, many outside interests, some which had been placed on hold during her major projects. First and foremost she is a doll collector. Only children—no adult dolls. She has hundreds. Miss Poole not only collects dolls, but she makes them in her own kiln, paints them, clothes them, and enters them in competitions. She maintains very organized, detailed records of her collection. Combining her skill as a photographer with her interest in doll collecting, she has created personalized Christmas cards for years, "forming in the hands of her friends and correspondents secondary collections that are treasured for quality and thought."<sup>9</sup> She knits beautifully, most often for her family and her dolls.

Another of her interests is collecting children's literature. She has created a catalog of her book collection with access by title and by subject. Although she has no children of her own, she has been involved with children throughout her life. Miss Poole has continued to teach Sunday School over the years, sometimes with the help of an assistant. She has also made charitable contributions to aid numerous poverty-stricken children throughout the United States. She volunteers at her local library, keeps up a large Victorian home, and rings handbells in her church. Recently she even took piano lessons. Over the years her interests have been diverse, ranging from woodworking to drafting, from auto mechanics to collecting seashells and fall leaves, from basket weaving to woodcarving.

It was a privilege to work with Miss Poole, although not always easy. She established very high standards for reference service, productivity, and the development of supplemental resources which have been very difficult to maintain.

She greatly influenced my attitudes about federal documents and the need to make them as easily accessible as possible. She created in me the desire to demystify documents for the user and an enthusiasm for working with documents that continues undiminished.

There are many ways to try to express the impact Miss Poole has had on her profession, on the NCSU Libraries, and on the people who have been privileged to work with her or use documents with her assistance. It is certainly a great tribute

to her that former students, faculty, and colleagues continue to inquire about her work and express their appreciation for her assistance nearly ten years after her retirement. Former Director of Libraries Dr. I. T. Littleton summed up her contributions this way. "Although she is best known among documents librarians for the compilation of many indispensable and valuable indexes to government publications, perhaps her greatest contribution is the U.S. documents collection and service that she built at the D. H. Hill Library at North Carolina State University."<sup>10</sup>

#### References

1. Letter from Al Hardy dated January 12, 1990, quoting Mr. Harlan Brown's description of Miss Poole.
2. *Ibid.*
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