

Interview with Florence Blakely

Durham, NC, April 21, 1998

by Rose Simon

About Florence Blakely ...

This interview offered me the opportunity to renew an old and special acquaintance. Decades ago, and months before I entered library school, Blakely took me on my first working tour of an academic reference collection. She was then head of reference in Perkins Library at Duke University. In years following, I would visit her from time to time on her own turf, and I remember watching her *run* from the desk to the reference stacks and back to secure a prompt answer to a telephone query. She literally loved the reference chase; and good public service was the core of her work. She has been a generous contributor to the profession on the state, regional, and national levels, and she has graciously welcomed and supported generations of new librarians in the early years of their careers.

Blakely was born in Clinton, SC, and was graduated magna cum laude from Presbyterian College. She earned her B.S. in L.S. and M.A. in L.S. degrees from Peabody College, and was elected to Delta Kappa Gamma and Beta Phi Mu honor societies. She served as reference librarian at the Greenville (SC) Public Library before going to Duke University, where she served in reference from 1948 to 1956, and as head of reference from 1956 to 1979. She has been recognized for her outstanding professional accomplishments in a number of ways, including the award of a Council on Library Resources Fellowship in 1970, and the Isadora Gilbert Mudge citation in 1974. Twice she served as a visiting lecturer in the library school at UNC-Chapel Hill. Blakely became Assistant University Librarian for Collection Development in August 1979, and she served as Acting University Librarian. With good reason, the highest library staff award at Duke University is the Florence Blakely Award.

NCL: What was your undergraduate major, and how did you come to choose librarianship as a career?

FB: I was born in Clinton, South Carolina, in 1923. There I went to high school and to Presbyterian College. We had 11 grades, so I started college when I was barely 17 and I was graduated in December 1943 — because we were on the quarter system; and because all the boys were gone — except the would-be preachers. I majored in history and English.

I was a student assistant in the library at PC (Presbyterian College), and that's what turned me into a librarian. My first mentor was a neighbor, Isaac Copeland, who became head of the Southern Historical Collection at UNC. Isaac came back to Clinton as the Librarian at Presbyterian. He was a true model of a professional librarian, and he let me do everything, which was great. I read shelves, cataloged (catalog? ME catalog?), and I didn't know what reference work was, but I found it to be the most interesting part of the job: students coming up, saying, "Hey, I've got

to have something on Florence Nightingale, quick." It was a fun thing.

NCL: How did you decide to go to George Peabody College for your B.S. in L.S. degree?

FB: When I was about to finish college, Isaac said, "Florence, I want you to go to Peabody." I said, "I can't go to Peabody. I borrowed money to go to college. What would I go to Peabody on?" He said, "I'll get you a job." So, he wrote to Mrs. Ruth B. Duncan, who was the reference librarian at Peabody College. (He had been Librarian there.) And I borrowed more money.

In September of 1944, I went to Peabody — on the train, of course — troop train, no place to sit down. I think I sat on my steamer trunk. I had never been anywhere away from home. I had a very mind-expanding year at Peabody. I took my reference course under Margaret Knox. She was a very young, good reference teacher — very hard, very demand-

ing; but I knew that was IT, because reference was fun. And I saw books that I would never see in a little college library — reference books — and I found that just fascinating.

When I was about to finish, Isaac said, "Florence, I want you to go to Greenville and work for Ellen Perry in the public library." And I said "Okay." (I didn't have any other plans.) So Miss Ellen Perry hired me to be a reference librarian at the age of 22. She, too, was truly a role model. She was a marvelous lady, very proper, but she had a sense of humor. Straight as an arrow. She wore a little brown felt hat when she left the library every day. She was a good Episcopalian. She had been to Carnegie Library School under the first real library school teachers. And I soon understood why Isaac said I should work for her. She was a model reference librarian. She whipped me into shape. She did not put up with sloppiness of any sort. She had her standards and you met them. I was the only reference librarian there. It was a grand experience, and we became very good friends.

After two years of reference, I decided to get some other experience in the county system. So I moved down to the basement to work with Mary Cox. She was a wonderful person, a professional, too; but she was not as proper as Miss Perry was. I spent a wonderful year going out on the bookmobile, working the branches.

NCL: What brought you to Duke University?

FB: In the spring of '48, I got a free ride to Nashville. It was just for a couple of days, and I thought, "Well, I'll drop into the library school and see if any of the old teachers are there." I went into the dean's office and we talked a little bit and he said, "Would you be interested in going to Duke University as a reference librarian?" I said, "Well, it never occurred to me. I'd really rather go to the University of North Carolina" (because I had friends at PC, like Isaac, who'd gone on there). He said, "Well, I can't help you there, but I have a letter from the Duke Librarian, and they're ready to hire a reference librarian. You want me to send your name in?" And I said, "Why not."

Well, soon the Duke Librarian invited me to an interview. I got on the train, and got off in Raleigh, rode a bus to Durham, took a city bus; got off at the hospital, and asked, "How do I find the library?" (It wasn't Perkins Library then, it was just the library.) The head librarian, Dr. Benjamin Powell, was not there at the moment, so I was interviewed by the head of the reference department, Lucille Simcoe, and the retired librarian, Mr. Breedlove, who'd been there about a hundred years. (He was filling in.) No formality whatsoever. No written application. They didn't ask for refer ... oh, they asked me if I knew anybody currently on the staff, and I said, "Yes, Jane Sturgeon is from my hometown." So they hired me, for \$2,400 a year. That was a lot more than I was making in Greenville!

So in September of 1948, I came to Duke—with my steamer trunk again — and lived close to the East Campus. I was overwhelmed! There were those books — those reference books that I had seen at Vanderbilt. And, of course, at Greenville Public we hadn't had them. But I was a public librarian at heart — always will be.

NCL: What was work at Duke like, and what were some of the greatest professional challenges you faced during your career?

FB: The Duke reference department had three librarians and one was chronically ill and never there, so there were really two of us. Lucille Simcoe was head. She was a Randolph-Macon grad who had gone to library school at Columbia, and she was a good teacher. She informed me shortly after I got here, "Well, we'll be going to freshman classes" — about 50, I think it was, English classes — "instructing them about the library." I said, "I can't do that! I'm not a public person. I don't make public speeches." "Well, you're the only one here!" So I did!

We had a small library staff, so it was a family. I remember that the reference department telephone was out in the hall under the big clock. We didn't even have one in the department. The reference office was about 4 x 4 — it was a tiny

little closet — and there was just room for one person at a time in there.

I well remember when the first copier came to the library. It was one of the early models and it was down in the basement. It was a huge, huge monster. We were one of the early libraries in the Southeast to use the Xerox machine to reproduce catalog cards, and never thought about the copier being a public service. The first copier in reference was an old thermafax. That was horrible. We had to make change; we had to do all these things for the machine. Then we got a real Xerox machine out in the hall, but guess who had to maintain it? The reference staff. And we had to issue borrower's cards to outside borrowers. Now, why the circulation staff couldn't, I don't know; but we had to issue borrower's cards. All the odd jobs. We were filing cards into the North Carolina Union Catalog, and I made every argument in the book and some that weren't in the book and everybody agreed — Miss Gertrude Merritt agreed — "Yes, it's not right for you to, but there's nobody else to do it, so you do it." So, we had student assistants doing it. (They could have had student assistants doing it.) Anyway, it's typical, it's just typical.

But in that little reference department, I had a chance to learn the collection and to work with fascinating faculty; and we covered that desk a heck of a lot of hours a week, the two of us.

NCL: When did you get used to doing the freshman BI? — even before it was called BI.



Photo courtesy of Florence Blakely.

FB: Yes, we didn't know it was BI. I guess the torture was that first year. Then I got a pattern and a flow and enjoyed it. I actually did enjoy it. But we didn't have slides or anything like that. All we had was the blackboard. I would draw the outline of the library and the various departments and talk about them. That's about all there was to it! Eventually, we did slide shows. But it never got boring. I've always been interested in the interaction between faculty and librarians. Some of the freshman English instructors were gracious and welcoming. They stayed, they showed interest, and the students showed interest. Others said, "OK, good-bye." And so you did the best you could.

Lucille left after about one year, and Mrs. Catharine Pierce came in. She'd retired from Swarthmore. She was head of reference for several years until she retired from Duke. In 1956, Dr. Powell, who was my boss from the time I went to Duke until 1975, called me in and said, "Miss Blakely" — he always called me Miss Blakely until the last few years — "Miss Blakely, I hear from Bill Hamilton and other faculty that you are a pretty good reference librarian, and, do you think maybe you could be head of this department?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I've been here seven years. I guess I'll try it." "Well, that's fine. And in time, Miss Blakely, you'll make \$5,000 a year."

So I became head of the department. We had an opening, I think, because we had only three members for a good many years. And the department needed to add a staff member ... still does. But the first one we took in was Mary Canada, who was my colleague for the rest of my career and who became head after I went to collection development. Mary had been the undergraduate librarian, mainly reserves, and then had gone to UNC to library school. She studied under Miss Susan B. Akers. And that was the best thing that ever happened to the reference department. Mary was a wonderful teammate. She and I balanced each other. I mean, I get spread in too many directions. And Mary is organized: she knows what she's doing, and she accomplishes a heck of a lot. She and I shared the work through the years. And gradually we added other staff. Every year my annual report was a documented case for adding staff. Sometimes it would work! (But the thing was, we were really a team. I never knew how to run a department any other way, but as a team. I don't think you can run a reference department from the top down.) And when we moved into the new building in 1970, we REALLY had to expand the staff. Business just took off, of course, because the desk was visible when you walked in, instead of being out of sight upstairs in the Gothic reading room, as it had been in the old building.

NCL: Did your feelings about reference work ever change over those thirty years?

FB: Not about reference work, but the pace became frantic and stressful and I was tired of trying to keep together a team of rugged individualists, all of whom were brighter and better reference librarians than I was. You always want to hire people who are smarter than you are, but they are prima donnas. I liked them, and they were wonderful. But I was just plain tired. I loved collection development anyway, had been working in it all along. So I was happy to change jobs, although my heart was still in reference. It's still in reference. But when I left it, I left it completely, because you can't be in two places. I never went back.

Collection development was extremely interesting. I saw the world from a whole new perspective when I

changed offices. I was dealing with things I'd never dealt with before, and I was learning — dealers, overseas and domestic; serials budget, I mean budget, THE BUDGET. Anyway, I sympathized with my predecessor Gertrude Merritt so much, and I realized I used to give her a hard time; but she was really generous. She had let the reference staff be bibliographers of sorts. I still think that reference, the front line people, are in the best position to see what's coming over the hill. Where are you going? What areas will you need to build? A bibliographer who is not in touch with the public can't get that overview.

We had a good time in the '60s building an alternative press collection. We went heavily for periodicals and pamphlets and for books on things like how to build a bomb. Now we are the only library in the country that has some of those materials. The Library of Congress, in fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* people, would write frequently, saying, "I bet you have this. And would you please xerox it." It makes you feel good. That crazy stuff is research material. Mr. Powell would question it sometimes, but Gertrude Merritt didn't bother us.

I never had a real boss. Mr. Powell never bothered me. Jake Waggoner, the assistant or associate librarian, was officially my boss. All I did was ask him for support. They never said, "You're doing a good job." They didn't say, "You're doing a bad job." They just let me alone, which was fine with me. Mr. Powell did bother me a little bit when we got into the new building because he had bought this fine coffee table-type furniture, and I said, "Mr. Powell, the students will have their feet all over that." "They better not." I said, "I can't help it. They're going to have their feet on it." They did! They moved everything around for their comfort and convenience. They used sofas to take naps, of course. And he finally called me in and said, "Miss Blakely, I would appreciate it if you would keep students from bringing food and drink into the building. And tell them to sit up straight and keep their feet off the tables." I said, "Mr. Powell, we are busy. We'll do what we can." And that's all I ever promised him! Bless his heart, he was a true Southern gentleman. And he ran the place like a benevolent plantation owner, because Duke in those days was run like a plantation.

I'll never forget the struggles of the '70s, when the library lib movement started. That's when the professional staff organized, and he went along with us. He didn't fight us, but he didn't understand why we were doing this. We had a thorough, very efficient committee set up a staff ranking structure that still works fine. I think at one point we tried for faculty status, but we knew we'd never get it at Duke. We did get a professional status, and we had seats on some of the campus committees. The faculty respected the reference department very much, but they just couldn't tolerate the idea of us having faculty rank; and I can understand that. I wasn't going to publish. That wasn't my mission.

NCL: Who were some of the other librarians who inspired you, or whom you saw as leaders and/or builders within the profession?

FB: My chief mentors were Isaac Copeland and Ellen Perry. I would also call Frances Neel Cheney a mentor. I did not really know her when I was in library school because at that time she was working at the Library of Congress. I went back to Peabody in the summers of '59 and '60 for a "retread," because by then everybody was getting an M.S. in L.S. and I had a B.S. in L.S. That's when I got to know Fanny, as a friend. And Isabel Howell, who was the librarian of the state library there. I spent a lot of time with them,

and that was a turning point in my professional life. Fanny was always neck deep in ALA, and while I had been a member, I had never been active. There wasn't anything for reference librarians in ALA. All the meetings were about technical services, and I didn't know other reference librarians around the country. They urged me to try to get a section of the Reference and Adult Services Section started in the Southeastern Library Association. So I did.

But the real turning point in my career came in 1970. That's when I got the Council on Library Resources Fellowship. That was absolutely the most wonderful three months in my whole career. I went coast to coast to visit 14 large academic libraries, and did a survey of the reference departments. It was heaven! Pure heaven! In doing this, I made a network of reference librarians. "Okay," I said, "we all need to be able to get together and talk shop." I had some money left in my grant and I asked the Council, "Would it be all right if I invited the librarians that I visited all over the country to meet for breakfast in Detroit? They said, "O.K." And that was the beginning.

The next move was to try to start a discussion group. There were no discussion groups at all in the Reference and Adult Services Section. I asked Mildred Nilon at Colorado and Ann Seyboth at Ohio State, "Would you like to join me in petitioning for a discussion group to be formed for heads of reference like they have for the big heads of tech services?" They did, and we did. We started the first ALA reference discussion group. And in time, we decided we should have a chapter of Reference and Adult Services section in NCLA. People love to get together and talk shop.

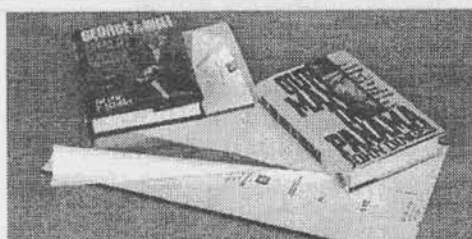
One professional colleague who helped me a lot was Mae Tucker, of the Charlotte Public Library. I think I met Mae at NCLA in Asheville, at the Junior Members Round

Table meeting. It was MORIBUND. We decided that we could work together and either kill the round table or make something of it. So at the next meeting we called a session to kill it: "If this is not going to be a live organization, we should just disband." You should have seen the people turn up to declare it alive! Mae and I did a lot of mischief over the years. She was, is and was, a wonderful reference librarian. A great colleague, too.

NCL: Tell us about Doralyn Hickey. I know that she was a person of stature in the library profession.

FB: She was. I knew Doralynn before she became a librarian, although she had worked in the library at Rice. She came to Duke to get her Ph.D. in religion, and worked part time in cataloging in the Duke library, where we became friends. Once she got into cataloging, she immediately figured out a better way to do things! Immediately! And Gertrude Merritt, my good friend and colleague through all these years, was the kind of person who welcomed this. Doralynn finally decided that she'd better go to library school, even, I believe, before she finished her dissertation. She worked with Ralph Shaw, who was very big on early automation of libraries, VERY big. She went to Rutgers because it offered a cutting-edge program. (At that time, automation meant running rods through punched cards.) And she was really a pioneer in library automation. She was really a visionary person.

After she got her Ph.D., she came back to work in the library. One day Carlyle Frarey came in — he had been our associate librarian — and he was then dean of the UNC library school. He said, "Doralynn, would you like to teach in our library school?" She said, "Well, I hadn't thought about it, but, yeah!" They fought like cats and dogs! She



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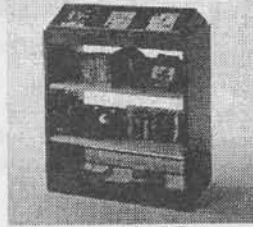
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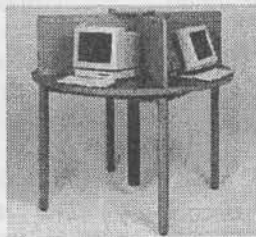
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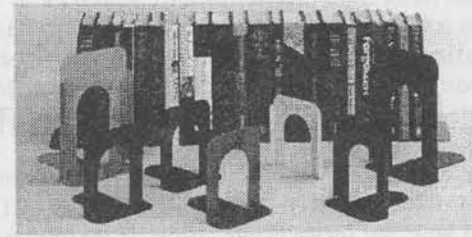
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fought with every dean she ever had! And in time she became a dean. Perfect retribution, I'd say.

She taught at UNC for some time. Students hated her or loved her, and it was about an equal match. If you hated her, you hated her! Not personally, but as a teacher. And if she was your kind of teacher, you worshipped her. She was a very complicated person. I think she was one of the outstanding librarians of this generation, a true prophet. But she didn't like being a dean at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She liked to give grief, not take it; so eventually she went to the University of North Texas to teach. There she developed cancer. She continued to meet class, wearing a wig, until just a few days before her death. She was going to meet her obligations. She never told them she had cancer. That kind of strength is almost overwhelming. I'll always appreciate her. She fits in the colleagues category, good colleagues.

NCL: What were some of the greatest professional challenges you faced during your career; and how do you see the future of libraries and librarianship unfolding now, in the Information Age?

FB: Changes in the library profession—automation and its effects. It's a different world. I couldn't work in it. I mean, I would not be at home with it now, but I appreciate it and it has really changed the world. The information explosion, of course, literally was, and is that—an explosion. I remember in 1948, saying out loud to somebody who thought I was insane, "It would be so nice if all the *Who's Whos* were indexed and you could just punch a button to get information." I was ready for automation!

Before automation, we always had the problem of reaching students other than at the reference desk, and it never bothered me just to reach them at the reference desk.

During the height of the BI revolution, the thought was, "You should put student assistants on the desk and offer research service by appointment." You know, reference librarians have offices out back somewhere. I could never see that. And I've had many a discussion with colleagues about the importance of being on the front lines, because that's where you find out what the question is and teach people. Nobody asks a straightforward question, usually. That's not the way people work. And I remember we reference librarians experimented, and we tried to train students to offer front-line service. That never worked—students wanted to help their friends, not refer them to somebody else.

An article came out recently about the state of undergraduate instruction. Duke has always done well by undergraduates, but now they're setting up new senior capstone courses, all requiring independent research. They're creating a Center for Teaching, Learning, and Writing, and guess who's a partner in it—the library. The time has come. It took automation, the computer, to do it. The faculty has started asking for instruction on the use of the Web for themselves and for their students. There's your opening! That's the revolution! The librarians are going to be working with faculty on instruction. And I just got an article off the Web that seems to confirm this. It's about a new Web site on American Studies resources and it refers to a series of interviews with professors and librarians who explain how they took advantage of multimedia and hypertext to create this site. There you have it. That's all yours.

NCL: My world.

FB: Your world and you're living in it and you are lucky. If I could start over it would be fun, but I don't want to start over. That's for you.



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