

Jack Bales interviewed by Leah Perdue on March 25, 2024

**Leah Perdue:** Okay. So this is an interview with Jack Bales, he was a reference librarian at Simpson Library. How're you doing?

**Jack Bales:** I'm doing fine, thank you very much.

**LP:** Yeah, so, first I guess I wanted to talk a little about you, your background, how you ended up at Mary Washington.

**JB:** Okay, I entered college in 1969, graduated in 1973 with a bachelor's degree in English, and I went to the University of Illinois to get my Master's degree in library science, and when I was working in Illinois in the late 1970s, when I thought I might leave my home state and just kind of see what the rest of the world was like. Back then the main place to find jobs, you know, nothing was online back then, was the paper Chronicle of Higher Education, so I started looking at that, and there was an ad for a reference librarian position at Mary Washington College, and what caught my eye was that the person edited the library newsletter, and I had a lot of experience with newsletters and editing, so I applied for it, and I flew to D.C. and then took a shuttle service to Fredericksburg, and the library director, a woman named Ruby York Weinbrecht, an alumna of Mary Washington, she offered me the job on the spot, and I accepted it. So I started work on July 1, 1980. And I stayed until August 1 of 2020, cause I wanted to say that I worked for more than forty years at Mary Washington, so it's forty years and one month.

**LP:** That's impressive!

JB: Yeah.

LP: So, I guess you have quite, like, a history with the school, then, if you were here for that long?

JB: Oh yeah, I've seen a lot of changes, like, from the move from Trinkle to Simpson, and things like that. In fact, when I came, in 1980, the library was clearly too small. It was designed for some 100,000 books, and I'm pretty sure back then we were pushing some 300,000 books, and many books were in storage, and if someone wanted an old book we had to go and get it from storage, and what was worse, I think, as someone who worked there for so long, was that there were all these cubbyholes and rooms and levels, and there were like the three main floors, but then there were floors between floors, and below the bottom floor there were these, what were called sub-basements, and can you believe it, we actually had a smoking room in the library back then, we had a typing room with typewriters and everything, and a smoking room. People say 'my gosh, you had a smoking room in the library.'

But it was just, and also it was hard to find books, you know, we had maps in fact, you wanted 800 [inaudible] over here, or sub-level one or whatever, and also there were all these little rooms with names, like I remember the art library, or the psychology library, and of course that implied that all the art books were there, and all the psychology books, and that wasn't true at all, you know, most of them may have been there, but not all of them. People say 'I want a book on art, where's the art library,' and they just sit down there, rather than look for their specific subject in

the catalog. And again, the library director then was Mrs. Weinbrecht, and she retired in 1984, and then Roy Strohl came on board in January of '85, and he started planning not only a new library, but also a new online catalog that would take the place of the card catalog, and surprisingly, there was a lot of resistance to both of these things!

People kept on talking about the beauty of Trinkle, and the wooden shelves, and how wonderful it was to be there, and that may have been, but as a functioning library it had really outlived its usefulness. People didn't like the idea. Not all people of course, but some of the— some people did, did not like the idea of an online catalog, 'we can't browse through an online catalog, we like to browse through these catalog cards and see the different subject headings and make notes and everything else.' We tried to explain that the same information was on an online catalog record, they said 'No no no, you can't browse through them, you can't flip through them,' I said 'Well, you really could,' but, you know, to this day, by the way, I've talked to people that say 'oh, the new Simpson is nice,' but quote: "I sure miss Trinkle," you know, I hear that a lot.

And the new library was pretty much ready by the fall semester of 1988, but there was a problem with getting the shelves, so rather than move in the middle of a semester we held off until Christmas break of '88, we hired a moving company that specialized in moving libraries, and with some student aides, they moved everything over the course of [winter] break, books were boxed up and moved over here, we had some problems with the weather, I remember some damp snowstorms and a little rain, and you know, kind of miserable conditions on a couple of days, but things were ready to start by the start of the spring semester. Considering the people I worked with, it's interesting because, again I was there for forty years, and I kept getting older, while my

colleagues, they stayed pretty much basically the same age. When someone would leave someone about that same age would come back, and, there were just superb staff, and I told one of them, shortly before I retired, that age never ever occurred to me whatsoever, that I always viewed them as colleagues, even though some of them were probably the age of my children, but, and I really mean this, the thought never occurred to me, that I never viewed them as ‘kids,’ or ‘youngsters,’ or something like that, and I hope they never viewed me as some old fuddy-duddy, whose time had gone a long time ago.

**LP:** So you mentioned, how Trinkle was maybe a bit difficult to navigate, finding specific materials, do you feel like, how do you feel like the move to Simpson, and like the addition of the digital database and all of that, how do you think, do you think that changed the way people use and interact with the library?

**JB:** I remember when I stepped foot on campus in the summer of 1980 there was no online anything, books were in hardcopy, we had shelves upon shelves of what we called ‘current periodicals,’ you know, now we get magazines and online, but we got them in paper back then, and back issues were even in paper, they were either on hard covers, they were either on microfilm or microfiche, to look at a back issue of a magazine, you had to go to the microfilm and microfiche machines like we have here at Simpson. I don’t think the library had any sort of image back then, students went to Trinkle to get what they needed and they’d study, but the new library just really changed things. For starters, it really moved the center of campus in that direction, and that was a big point, and then it moved it even more when they built the Woodard student center a little bit after that.

We have a classroom, we're sitting in it right now, to talk to students about library assignments, we could base the classes on the library assignment, I remember more than one professor, which is pretty much my philosophy, would say 'Jack, just cover the assignment, tell them what they need to know,' and I always started off my classes that way, as you remember from history classes, is that you have an assignment, and I'm going to tell you exactly what you need to know. And so students learned to identify their professors and their classes with me and with the other subject specialists, we were all subject— the reference librarians were all subject specialists, and that was a big plus, the students got to know me in history and english and music, and philosophy and the classics and religion, areas of the humanities, we had the social sciences librarian and a sciences librarian too.

In fact, one time I remember coming back from lunch and there were people poring at my schedule, I had a daily schedule on my door so they knew where I was, and so they were looking at my schedule because they wanted to set up an appointment to talk to me, which was great, you know! So I think students began viewing the library as kind of an inviting place where they could get help from us, the librarians, and the library staff, and meet with us to talk about their assignments. The library now has a digital archiving lab, as you know, that students and faculty can use.

During the pandemic, Rosemary Arneson, former library director, was here, and she always said the building may have been closed, but the library was open, and people were working from home and all that, you'd be astounded at some of the people who'd say 'Well, did you have a

good time working from home, you had to take a break,' or something like that, well the library was open! The library never closed! We were open the whole time, and the people scanned thousands, thousands of articles and pages of books for students, and they did their best to ensure that the students would have the research materials they need, and this was all part of Rosemary Arneson's plan, and she really deserves a lot of credit for this, she always stressed that the building may have been closed, but the library was still open.

And of course at Trinkle everything was in hard copy, now we're going digital, we have the digital archiving lab, and I wonder, you know, and people can access library databases from home, I do a lot of research and writing, and I'm always accessing the databases from home, and books in full text, and you can make virtual appointments with the reference librarians, so I wonder how all that's going to affect the library access.

And of course the campus has changed physically over the years, too. Again right before I started work on July 1, 1980, I came here and I started walking all over campus, and I remember standing by Monroe, I was stood by where Monroe is, before the fountain of course, and looked over I could see Seacobeck, and then looked over and saw duPont and Pollard and Melchers, and that was it, you know! And can you believe it there was a dirt path that led all the way through like a field, that led all the way to Goolrick, so no sidewalk, it was like a dirt path! And there used to be a log cabin, you know, over there too. I think the log cabin was where— they tore that down over a weekend in the late 1980s to make room for Alvey, I think Alvey was right where the log cabin was. So again as I said before, the library helped the campus move in more of a northward direction, and shifted the direction of the campus.

When I came here there was Campus Drive, there was no Campus Walk, and people would drive, and I know a lot of townspeople liked doing this, they'd ride in a circle, for hours I guess! They'd enter Campus Drive from where the drive is by Monroe, and of course I think there's a magnolia tree where they kinda turn around, well there was a drive that went right smack down right where Campus Walk is right now, right in front of Trinkle and Lee Hall and everything, and they came out where Double Drive is, and they'd go out there, and they'd turn around and go back again, and make a big wide loop of it. And I remember President Anderson told me one time that you got a lot of flack for that, but somebody told him when they closed Campus Drive and made it Campus Walk we said 'in three or four years, no one, the students wouldn't even know what was there,' and so, the big brouhaha would all be over.

I think UMW now is doing a good job bringing townspeople to campus, I do, I spent a lot of time helping the former history professor Bill Crawley with the Great Lives project, and I go to a lot of those lectures, and I see many many hundreds of townspeople there, I think it's a great idea, having all these presentations open to city residents. One thing about Trinkle, I'll always remember, and this is one thing I kind of miss from Trinkle, is that back then, I don't know if they still have this, I think it was on the Friday before graduation there was like a practice thing, and the students would march down Campus Walk to, I don't know where, wherever maybe, but they'd always march down from Trinkle, maybe to the gymnasium, I don't know, but the library would kind of stop at that time, and we'd all sit on the little porch there by Trinkle and watch all the students walk down there! It was kind of fun, it was like, maybe a bright sunny day, we'd see people who worked in the library and yell at them or yell at students that I'd know, 'Hey, how are

you!' and they'd yell, they'd see us and wave to us, it was kind of a nice tradition at that time, we'd always, you know, we'd know that they were going to be having a practice session before graduation, so we'd all go out and stand on Trinkle and watch everyone walk by, the faculty marshalls walk by and we'd all wave at the students that we knew.

LP: That's sweet.

JB: It was a lot of fun, yeah. It was kind of a neat tradition of sorts, I don't know whether they still do that now or not, but I've always remembered it.

LP: Yeah, well thank you, that's really interesting. I believe that's all of the questions that I have, that was really useful.

JB: Good, okay. If you want to make a second time of it!

LP: If I think of anything else. Well, I appreciate your time.

JB: Sure thing.

LP: Thank you very much!

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occurring in older buildings, as well as many other changes. You'll be able to see two pictures for each location, which compares the appearance of UMW from then to the present day.