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Raymond A. Palmer interview conducted on April 6, 1984 about the Boonshoft School of Medicine at Wright State University

Raymond A. Palmer

James St. Peter

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY

School of Medicine Oral History Project

INTERVIEW INFORMATION

Interview date: April 6, 1984

Interviewer: James St. Peter (JS)

Interviewee: Raymond A. Palmer (RP)
Executive Director of the Medical Library Association,
Former First Librarian of the School of Medicine Health Sciences Library
Interview 1

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

[Beginning of recorded material]

JS: My name is James St. Peter, and this is the first in a series of interviews with Mr. Raymond A. Palmer, former first librarian at the Wright State School of Medicine Health Sciences Library, and currently Executive Director of the Medical Library Association. The time is 2:00 p.m., the date is April 6, 1984, and we are in Mr. Palmer's office at 919 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Illinois. Mr. Palmer, would you describe your background before you came to Wright State University?

RP: Before I came to Wright State, I was on the staff of the Countway Library at Harvard Medical School. The Countway Library is a somewhat interesting and anomalous library made up of two major collections, the Boston Medical Library collection and the Harvard Medical Library collection. I was Assistant Librarian there for some six years before coming to Wright State. My job responsibilities were the day-to-day operation of that library, which was literally at that time the largest academic medical library in the world, and I also had the responsibilities as Personnel Officer. Before that time, I was the administrative assistant to the Director at the [Welsh] Medical Library, the [Welsh] Medical Library being the academic medical library for the Johns-Hopkins Medical Institutions. Prior to that, I did my library work – that is, I got my Master's Degree in Library Science – at the University of Kentucky. My undergraduate work was done at the University of Louisville. My academic background was in biology and chemistry, and after college and before library school, I was for several years in the Research Department at Seagram's there in Louisville, and then for a year I did supervisory work in the plant.

JS: When did you first come to Wright State?

RP: I believe in 1974. Yes, I was there between 1974 and 1982.

JS: Why did you come to Wright State?

RP: At my job at Harvard, there was really no way for me to move up in the system within that library, and I felt that I was ready to take on the challenge of running an academic medical library. So, at the time I was looking, I had several offers. One from the University of Chicago, one from the University of Missouri, and this one at Wright State. The one at Wright State, to build a medical library from scratch and be in on the ground floor with a number of talented people to work toward the development of [a] medical school, was just too exciting an opportunity to pass up. So that's why I ended up in Dayton, Ohio.

JS: Did you find out about it through the posting of the position that was available, or was it a great find type of thing where you heard it from [someone] else?

RP: I knew from reading the medical literature that Wright State was developing – that there were a couple of new medical schools under development in Ohio, and I also saw the ads in really the newsletter that this particular organization publishes, which is the main one to carry job advertisements for medical librarians.

JS: When you came to Wright State, what was the interview process like? Were you – who was on the committee?

RP: It was a fairly formal and a fairly structured interview process. As I recall, I interviewed on two separate occasions. I met with administrative people in the University Library, and administrative people also who were on board at the Medical School. I think the first go around, Ed Spanier was already at the University, so I had a fairly extensive interview with Spanier. And I – the first interview and the second interview run together, but I believe at the time of the first interview, I met with Drs. Kegerreis and Spiegel. The reason for my coming to a second interview was that John Beljan, who was then appointed Dean, was not yet on board, and it was then necessary for me to interview with Beljan also. So, while I saw a number of other people on the campus, those [are] the principals.

JS: What were your first priorities when you came to the position? What was your initial reaction when you first got here to Wright State and saw the state of development?

RP: Well, as far as the state of the development of the Health Sciences Library, there was nothing. So, the first thing that I did was negotiate the space in the Dayton Montgomery County Public Library with the then-librarian Bill Chate [sp] to develop the library. Bill was as gracious to me as he had been to others in the community that had started libraries. For instance, the Sinclair College – or the Sinclair school library started there, and I believe the Wright State University library started there. So, the first job was to find space to house a collection that I had to develop, and then I set about doing a number of things with respect to the development of the collection, and then a little later on, it was time to begin hiring staff. During all of this time, I was working with the architects at [Levenporter] and Smith to refine and make major changes to the

drawings of the part of the Medical School building which was to end up housing the Fordham Library.

JS: Why did you have to make major changes to that drawing? What kinds?

RP: Well, I had to make major changes because none of the people who had worked on the plan for the Medical School building had any kind of library background. And the architects did what they could to flesh out how the auditorium ought to look, to flesh out how the – or to draw on paper how the auditorium – what their concept of the auditorium was, their concept of the office area for the Medical School building, and their concept of what the Medical Library ought to be like, with just a little bit of input from the people on campus. [Levenporter] and Smith had had experience in doing public libraries before, but no academic library experience [and] no medical library experience, so as the principal group which came together to start the Medical School were brought on board, they were all involved in this planning process, and of course the planning for the library fell to me.

JS: How much space did you have to work with within the Dayton Montgomery Public Library when you first came here? And how long did you stay there?

RP: Roughly seven, eight-thousand square feet of very good stack space. Well, we kept a part of the collection in that library for a couple of years, but when the Medical School opened, we moved the most current materials into two contiguous laboratories that were about, oh, in total, a thousand square feet or fifteen-hundred square feet in the Biological Sciences building so that we could have a temporary facility to operate out of, and via a courier service, we would access the material [at] the Montgomery Public Library until the Medical School facility was built.

JS: What were the first immediate tasks that you had to approach when you were building the collection? What do you mean by “building a collection,” first of all?

RP: Well, what I mean by “building a collection” or “developing a collection” is simply this. A medical school library is going to contain current texts in all areas of medicine. It’s going to contain current journals in all areas of medicine. It will also contain non-current materials, in the form of audiovisuals, slide tapes, videotapes. So, I can’t say that there was one thing that I – I set out about doing a number of things simultaneously, inasmuch as this is a medical school and a medical school library connected with – closely connected with, with integral ties with the community hospitals. I set about finding the kinds of resources that were available in the community hospitals, so that the collection that I would be developing at Wright State would be not duplicative to the complementary of those resources that were already available in the city. Many of the hospital libraries were, as hospital libraries characteristically are, cramped for space for journal materials. So, we worked out an arrangement whereby the Wright State Health and Sciences Library would be the repository for the backfiles of journal materials, for older journal materials. Now, in some situations, you might make a case for a new academic medical library not collecting very heavily retrospective journals, but because of the unique situation in that community, it made quite good sense for many of the journals that were available in the community that were going to be used somewhat heavily, to go back to volume one, number one, even if volume one started in 1898, to be housed in the Wright State collection. I also started – in

addition to soliciting materials locally and from other medical schools, I also started buying materials rapidly to round out the journal collection, and I also rapidly began the purchase of recent monograph materials. But because of my contacts, I think, with many medical librarians all over the country, because I knew the kinds of duplicative resources that were available from the Harvard Medical Library, I was able to solicit materials and buy materials much less expensively than if I had used exclusively the route of purchasing materials from out-of-print periodical dealers.

JS: When you talk about the collection policy of the Health Sciences Library and setting up a consortium of materials from the area hospitals, did you assign future collection policy? Did you assign certain titles to certain hospitals to collect, or did you just say, at this point, we're gonna assume the collection policy of taking all the current journals that you needed?

RP: Well, you're really talking about several things all at once in that collection. I started developing the Wright State collection so that it would, on the one hand, support the needs of the evolving curriculum of the Medical School, and on the other hand, so that it would be complementary to the materials that were available in the community. Now, already the community of hospital librarians had begun talking a [rational] acquisitions or cooperative acquisitions program. So, one of the things that we first started working on – and there is documentation and a little bit of published information to support what it is I have to say – what we did was look at the collection strengths of each of the hospital libraries, and made rational decisions about who in the community would be responsible for collecting most heavily in surgery, and who would be responsible for collecting most heavily in cardiology. Now, there were some very logical things that fell to Wright State. The collections in the basic sciences, of course, were not strong in the hospitals. They were clinical collections. So, Wright State assumed the responsibility for the mainstay of the basic science materials. Also, the extensive bibliographic apparatus and reference materials that are necessary to support a community reference service. And we also, following the establishment of who was going to collect what – and we also got all of the hospital administrators involved to sign off and take responsibility for their institution collecting in a particular area. With the proliferation of the publication of new medical journals, as they would come out and we would get sample copies of them, we would evaluate them according to stated criteria, and if we thought that they were appropriate for the community, the hospital or institution – if it could afford to add that particular title to its collection – [would] pick it up and also purchase a backfile of five years, if a backfile happened to be available for that particular title. [Of] course, if it was a brand-new title, there would be no backfile, but we strove to get volume one, number one of each of the new publications that we felt were appropriate in the community. We also very carefully analyzed our interlibrary loan activity to see what we were borrowing repeatedly outside the community, so that we could use that as a kind of index of the kinds of things that we should be adding to the community's collection. I think, from what I'm saying, that the development of this, the Wright State Health Sciences Library collection, was really a unique process, which certainly involved the interaction of the community of librarians within the city, and I don't know of any other medical library that has ever been, or is likely ever to be developed in quite the same way.

JS: Did you draw upon the assistance of librarians from other medical schools in Ohio?

RP: Yes, very heavily. You're probably aware of the National Library of Medicine's regional medical library program as supported by funding from the Medical Library Assistance Act. At that time, part of that network, which included in Ohio, was the Kentucky-Ohio-Michigan [regional library network]. I worked closely with the librarians from the medical schools within that tri-state area, but most particularly, I worked closely with the librarians at the other academic institutions in Ohio. We had the Osteopathic School starting at that time. Well, starting a little bit after Wright State started. So, I think that I was somewhat helpful or at least lent a receptive ear to [Ann Goss] when she was developing that library. Karen [Brewer], who was at Northeastern Ohio University College of Medicine, was starting her library just about the same time I was, so while her experience and her goals were somewhat different from mine, we were able to provide each other with mutual support, I would say. And at the [medical college] at Ohio in Toledo, the librarian there was somebody I had worked closely with at Hopkins, and initially he provided some cataloguing services to me on a contract basis. I also worked closely in some other capacities particularly with the librarian at Cincinnati and the librarian at Ohio State, but since I'd been in this field for fifteen years now, these people were people with whom I had already established working [relationships]. So, it was very easy to be accepted as one of the family members of the Ohio group.

JS: When you were developing the collections at Wright State, where did you draw most of your financial support from?

RP: Well, from two sources. The library was supported with state funds. It derived the major portion of its budget from the funds that were used to support other aspects of the total institution. There were grant funds to support equipment purchases and furnishings for the library. This was for the total Medical School. And then the library had private funding in the amount of a half a million dollars from the Fordham Foundation. My principal contact was Velma Fordham-Pruett, who was the donor of this money. At that time, that half-million dollars was the largest grant – largest outright donation of private monies that the institution had ever received, and then following on that, Mrs. Kettering donated a million dollars to the Medical School. The Fordham monies were never used for anything other than collection development materials. We purchased books and journals with Fordham money. And I used the money for [one-shot] purchases, not for current journal subscriptions or current books, but things that we would purchase once and never have to purchase again, like a backfile of the Surgeon General's catalog, or a backfile of *Biochimica et Biophysica Acta*. And at the time, shortly before I left the institution with Dr. Beljan and Dr. Spanier, because there was a significant amount of money still in the Fordham coffers, I think in the neighborhood of, oh, roughly three hundred and fifty thousand dollars, because the library was to bear the Fordham name, it was my recommendation that those monies which we had completely free access to be put into an endowment so that on a yearly basis, the library would always have private monies on which to draw to participate in collection development. The documentation that supports that is written in such a way so that, as the technology changes, if books are to take another form – the online journal, as an example – that those funds could be used for that purpose. So, I think that the approach that we used was one in which the future of the institution and the future of the library, the financial future, was guaranteed as much as we could do it with that amount of money.

JS: What were the staff development priorities that you set for the Health Sciences Library?

RP: Early on, at the time that I came on board, the plan was to have the University Library perform the technical services, functions, for the Health Sciences Libraries, that is the procurement of books and the cataloguing, the processing of books. After a little bit of experience, and after we found out that in order to accomplish this, the Medical School was going to have to support the personnel in the University Library anyway, the decision was made for the Health Sciences Library to do all of that itself. Therefore, the first priority was to hire technical services personnel who could do the book acquisitions, the journal acquisitions, the book cataloguing and processing, and the checking in of journals. It did not – the development of staff which would provide the frontline library service, circulation, reference, database searching, that sort of thing – that was really the second stage of it because, with the development of the library initially, there was no need to provide faculty members or students with anything but the most modest level of library service. And I was able – despite the fact that I hadn't been on the reference firing line for many years, I was able to cope with that personally.

JS: It sounds like you put a lot of hours in, doing reference among other things.

RP: Well, I certainly spent a great amount of time doing a number of things, but I would say a small amount of time providing reference service. I was also able to call on the good offices of the hospital librarians in the city. I worked out an arrangement with them early on, whereby they would provide some level of reference service, library service, to new faculty members coming on board, many of whom, of course, were physically located at the hospitals themselves.

JS: When did you move operations out of the Dayton Montgomery County Public Library?

RP: Well, as soon as the first class started – and you'll have to fill in these dates yourself, because I'm very bad at remembering the numbers – as soon as Wright State's first class entered, we moved part of the collection out so that we could provide service to them, and as soon as the Medical School building was completed, which was really shortly after that – it seems like a short period of time – within a matter of a couple of days, we moved the collection into the Fordham Library facility. I think the collection at that time numbered about thirty-thousand volumes.

JS: What kind of hierarchy did you establish for the hiring of personnel? You said you hired the tech services people first, technical services. And then you brought in the reference librarians and circulation people. Can you give me the name of the first person you hired as, like, Director of Technical Services?

RP: Um...

JS: Were any key people, did you feel, that you needed to bring into the program?

RP: Well, yes, there were a number of key people. The first person I hired as Head of Technical Services was a young man by the name of Michael LaCroix, who had a strong acquisitions background in the academic library arena. And the next key person I brought in in the technical services area, who was to ultimately take over technical services, was Sheryl Ruby [sp], who

came with [a] strong technical services background in medical libraries. My first key references person was a young woman whose name is Rebecca Stephens. And I would say, while the staff grew very rapidly, those are the three early professional staff members who were the backbone of this tiny, growing organization. But one of the things that you need to be aware of is that, in addition to having the responsibility for developing the library, I also had the responsibility of developing the media services activity for the School of Medicine as well, and that's a whole – the media services activity, except for the development of the [Learning Resources Center] and the distribution responsibilities, that followed in time the initial development of the library. But at the same time, it was a time-consuming sort of activity, and I was also with that involved in the redesign of the library at the VA. [As] you know, there was a building built on the grounds of the VA to accommodate, or to provide classrooms, laboratories, teaching situations. [It] needed also to have some kind of library facility for the medical students. The VA Hospital Library at that time was quite inadequate for the hospital, so we developed a facility at the Medical School building at the VA which would not only serve the needs of Wright State, but would also serve all of the hospital needs. And the facility was designed in such a way that it would be redesigned in our space, but it was run by the VA. So that's how that worked.

JS: Was Betty Beljan on board as [the] Health Sciences Librarian at that point?

RP: No.

JS: Who was the librarian at that point?

RP: Woodrow Deaton was his name.

JS: Is that D-E-A?

RP: D-E-A-T-O-N. Betty Beljan was brought in later by Jim Hahn who was then – and the people – Jim Hahn was the head of the VA library system, and I had done some work with him on designing the – as well as with other people at the VA – on designing the facility. And I think, upon my informal recommendation, as well as the recommendation of people within the structure of the Dayton VA – it was on that recommendation that Betty Beljan was brought in to run that facility. And I think Betty now has recently been promoted to another administrative post within the hospital.

JS: From just the Health Sciences Library development to the old law school medicine development, what were your perceptions of how the School of Medicine development – about the speed at which it was going? It was put together in record time, the School of Medicine.

RP: Well, I think that if you take the comments I have made about what I managed to put in place in a several-year period of time, you have that on the one hand, and you have the same sort of rapid, in-depth development of the Medical School in many other areas to look at as a total package. You've got a very good picture of the speed and the level of intense commitment that that small amount of people initially had in getting this project off the ground. And there is no way that this could have happened without the drive, the brilliance, the foresight of John Beljan, coupled with the enormous amount of support and broad-spectrum knowledge that Ed Spanier

brought together on the whole process. But when I first came on board, there were just a handful of people. There was Beljan, there was Spanier, there was Suriano, there was Kolmen, there was [Zappala], and a couple more people. I mean, there were less than ten people and the kind of hierarchies that you have in established institutions were at that time, of course, nonexistent, which made for everybody feeling as if they had – and they really did have – a very strong piece of the action. But because everybody had so much to do, things were facilitated, I think, enormously by not having too many committees to touch base with and check on what you were doing, that sort of thing. And I must say that the – while the university certainly was enthusiastic about what the people in the Medical School were trying to do, we needed to operate at breakneck speeds, and that secretly produced tensions with the university, within the university's support services, that I think all of us felt, but we always found ways to work within or work around the system.

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