

Oral History Project  
Cedar Rapids Public Library

**Elizabeth Schoenfelder** was interviewed on March 30, 1996, in her home at 47th Avenue in Main Amana.

**Laura Derr (LD):** We will be talking about the Cedar Rapids Public Library. Okay, Elizabeth, if you would share with us, when were you born and where have you lived during your life?

**Elizabeth Schoenfelder (ES):** 1915, I was born. I lived in Amana my whole life, except for the time that I went and got my masters.

**LD :** And when was that? What year did you go for your masters? Sometime in the '50's, I am remembering.

**ES :** '57, '58, something like that.

**LD :** So other than that you have been in the Amanas your whole life. And so you are, you are 80 years old at this point.

**ES :** Yes. My father wanted to teach me chess and I said that's great, I will try to learn chess if you teach me to read. So he went and he got from the school teacher the German Alphabet.

**LD :** The German Alphabet? Okay, sure.

**ES :** And he said, this is Sunday, if by next Sunday you know half of it then I'll teach you how to read and you can teach yourself. My mother didn't want me to. She said, "Shush, you'll ruin the child's brain." My father said, "If she isn't ready for it then she can't learn it, if she's ready for it, she can." By Tuesday night, I knew all of the German Alphabet. I was so afraid that I wouldn't be able to learn it.

**LD :** And you were four?

**ES :** Yes. I was four and a half, it was the winter.

**LD :** Well that's still remarkable.

**ES :** And it took me... I asked, "Which is the most important book in the world?" My mother and grandmother said, "The Bible". Then I learned to read the bible and I really felt good when I could read the first verse.

**LD :** And you began reading in German then, rather than reading in English?

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ES : Yes. My brain must have been German programed.

LD : It must have. You were formatted, already, for the German language. And you had mentioned, and I am not sure we got it on tape, about your interest in books from an early age. You preferred books to toys?

ES : Yes. I always told Santa Claus, "I don't need any new dresses and I've got a lot of dolls." But I wanted a big chest full of books that would last me all year.

LD : And yet, in your early years, you weren't able to follow through on your education very far, were you?

ES : No, see that was under communal Amana, when we had gone through eighth grade, or were fourteen years old, we had to quit school. Then it changed in 1932. But, of course, nobody had any money.

LD : Of course, that was during the depression.

ES : So it wasn't until that I was 37 that I felt, "Now I either go to college or I never will." So I took the entrance test and I passed.

LD : So without any high school you...

ES : No, I had no high school, but the library had always been my second home. I think all those years, when I was out of school, I read two books a week.

LD : So you probably had a much better education than most high school...

ES : I think I had a larger background than the average 18 year old.

LD : Elizabeth, what did you do in the years, between when you left school at 14 and 37. What kinds of jobs did you hold? And you raised a family during that time, didn't you?

ES : Well, yes. I got married. I got divorced and re-married. We had, after the change, our home had been a Community Kitchen, we had a little restaurant for a few years. And then the war came, and rationing. And tourists didn't come anymore because of the gas rationing. So I got myself a typewriter and I learned to touch type, by myself. And I took a correspondence course in accounting and I got myself a job in Cedar Rapids.

LD : You did? Where did you work?

ES : For Thomas Crabbe, Investment Banker.

LD : How do you spell, Graff?

ES : C-R-A-B-B-E.

LD : Oh, Crabbe. I was misunderstanding, good. And how long were you working with him?

ES : I think I was there about seven years. That was, then, when I decided. My husband wasn't too happy about it. But I told him, "George, I have to, there's no choice."

LD : Now was this was when, obviously, you still had children at home. You were raising...

ES : One at home.

LD : One at home?

ES : The other was going to school.

LD : So one had already gone to college, at that point?

ES : Was going...

LD : Was going, to college. And I am sorry, what are your children's names? I know your husband's name was George.

ES : Jeanette and George, yeah.

LD : And where are they now?

ES : George lives at West and Jeanette lives in Denver.

LD : So you have one nearby?

ES : Yes, yes.

LD : That's nice. You mentioned that when you made the decision to go back to college it was in conjunction with your daughter's entrance into college?

ES : My older daughter.

LD : Your older daughter. So, well talk about that, did you end up going to the same school at the same time?

ES : I did. She was a senior and she started at the University when she was 16.

LD : Oh, she did?

ES : She was let out of her senior year of high school.

LD : So she was her mother's daughter?

ES : Yeah, she was. Well, she had been brought up to expect college. I had always wished for it and it was only right that she go first. She had her whole life in front of her.

LD : Yeah, I can understand that. So you entered in 19.., that would have been mid-'50's when you entered then.

ES : '52, end of '52.

LD : What did you major in?

ES : Religion and English.

LD : That's a good combination. What led you to an interest in library work? Was it something that happened in college?

ES : Well, it was really accidental. Everybody asked me, in my third year, what are you going to do? And I said, "I don't know." My husband got worried too! And I said, "George, it was a miracle that I could go and there will be a miracle that will tell me what to do." That's what happened. I met with one of my former advisors and he asked me, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "That's a \$64 question. I'd like to use everything I have learned and I don't want to go into anything where I will feel fenced in. I want everything." And he said, "I know what you'll do, you will be a Reference librarian." And he sent me to Dr. Ellsworth to talk to him and he encouraged me. And so I went to library school.

LD : So this Dr. Ellsworth, he was at the University of Iowa?

ES : Yes, he was the Director.

LD : Why did he send you to Rutgers University?

ES : Shaw and Dean Martin, the Rutgers School was new and they were good friends of his, he thought of them highly.

LD : And so he had connections there? This was Dr. Ellsworth?



ES : Yes.

LD : And he was the one that recommended that you go to Rutgers because because he thought it was a good school. And you mentioned two names Shaw and...

ES : Yes, Dr. Shaw and Dr. Martin.

LD : And they were both at Rutgers?

ES : Yes.

LD : Well, how did George react when you told him you wanted to go to Rutgers University?

ES : He said, "You can't go." And I said, "But I am going." See there was my mother, my grandmother and my father living with us. And a horse and a dog. And he said, "What are we going to do?" And I said, "Think." Jeanette, my oldest daughter, was home and she got married that year in August. And she said, "George, if you and I don't start planning, come Fall, mother will pack her suitcase and she'll be going." And I said, "George, you don't have to go, you can stay here." I said, "I'll come back and I can take care of myself." He said, "I know that you can, only too well. And I am going with you."

LD : In other words, he wasn't about to let you go off to Rutgers by yourself.

ES : So my daughter took my 90 year old grandmother with her to Denver.

LD : Really. So she helped make it possible for you to go?!

ES : My father had to look after my father. And he was in Cedar Rapids then, found a farmer, took him the horse. Another one took in the dog. The cat went to Denver, where she got lost. And it all worked out.

LD : It all worked out because you knew it was what you had to do.

ES : It was something, I didn't have any choice, I had to do it.

LD : It sounds to me like you have had those experiences all your life.

ES : If I don't follow, then I am very sorry.

LD : Kind of a strong instinct, this is the direction my life should go in.

ES : And so when I talked to Dr. Ellsworth, I knew that this was it. And it fit,

going into library work, because my number one love was books. My number two love was people. And getting those two together, and sharing what I knew.

LD : You had said, we met earlier, you said something that I thought was so significant that I wrote it down... "You always wanted to have knowledge at your fingertips." That was one of the things that you mentioned to Dr. Ellsworth when you were talking about what you were going to do with your degree.

ES : Yes.

LD : And I think that's a classic definition of a library.

ES : It was always more important for me to know, than to have.

LD : It's the right career. It was the right career.

ES : I found my niche.

LD : When you went to Rutgers, and then I should probably get onto the topic but you have so many interesting stories. The people that were there with you, were younger or were they older, was it very unusual for a woman, and you would have been 41 then, to a....

ES : It was a mixture.

LD : So you were not very unusual, to be there at that time?

ES : No, not there.

LD : More in undergraduate school, I'm sure.

ES : Yeah, I was the oldest freshman.

LD : I'm sure. How did you get, you came back and immediately began to work at the Cedar Rapids Library, how did you get that job?

ES : Well, I sent out some letters, and Iowa City wanted me and so did Cedar Rapids and that school, they wanted me to go into a college library. But I knew I would feel fenced in. In a public library you come across everything. So I chose that.

LD : Why did you choose Cedar Rapids?

ES : Well, that way, my poor husband was homesick. I had a chance to go to Kansas.

LD : Oh, to a library there?

ES : Mmm. But George didn't want to go. Well, I thought that he had been putting up with me for a good long time now, I'd better go back home with him.

LD : That's the way marriages work, you do things for each other, right. Different sacrifices at different times.

ES : Right.

LD : When you went to, started at the Cedar Rapids Library James Marvin was the Director then.

ES : Yeah, he came out to Rutgers, he was out interviewing somebody for the Bookmobile.

LD : Oh, really?

ES : He met me at Rutgers. He looked like a college student, so young and spry, at that time. Well, he must have been only in his 30's.

LD : Well, because, he is still in the field, isn't he? He is still alive and working.

ES : I think he has retired.

LD : You think he has retired. I'm not sure. But everybody says, if he has, it has been recently. I'd like for you to give us an overview of the different kinds of jobs that you did at the library? You were hired as a Reference Librarian?

ES : Mmm.

LD : And you stayed in that position for most of the time? Or did you change jobs for a time?

ES : No, for about 16 or 17 years, until Miss Richardson became Assistant Director. And Tom Carney was the Director then, because it was when Miss Grover retired. And I wasn't too eager, at all, to take over the Adult Services. I liked the Reference, being with people.

LD : And Adult Services was what Ruth Richardson had been doing. So you would have been asked to take her position, at that time?

ES : Yes, mmm.

LD : But you took the job?

ES : Yes, they finally talked me into doing it.

LD : Well, we'll come back to that period, but I would like to, I'd like for you to talk about your memories of the building. You were primarily in the old building, in fact, you retired before they moved to the new building, didn't you? So all of your memories are of the library that was at the corner of Third Avenue and Fifth Street. Could you talk about what that building was like and how things changed, over the years, there? Apparently...

ES : Well, there were more and more books. A bigger and bigger Reference Department and less space. It looked like a big warehouse. But we got a lot done, under those conditions, really.

LD : When you first went there, where was the Reference Department?

ES : Upstairs, on the balcony.

LD : That kind of balcony area. Now did that change over time?

ES : I don't recall when we moved.

LD : But you went down to the first floor? My memory is that eventually, wasn't it down near the, that fireplace...that big mantle?

ES : Yes, yes.

LD : I was, we moved here in 1980, so I was in the library in those 3-4 years.

ES : That is the year I retired.

LD : Is that right? Well, I don't remember you, but that certainly doesn't mean anything. That's when I first started using that. I love the building, it's a wonderful piece of architecture. But I didn't really see it until after the library moved out of it. Because the inside, as you said, was so full of books.

ES : I started working there after I became a grandmother. And the day before I retired, I became a great grandmother.

LD : Is that right?

ES : And I called Mr. Carney and said, "Tom, have you ever had a great

grandmother work for you?" There was a moment of silence and then, "Course not." Well I said, "Today and tomorrow you will have. I have a great grandson."

LD : Isn't that remarkable? That is a nice closure. You know from first grandchild to first great grandchild. How many great grandchildren do you have now?

ES : Four.

LD : Four? It happens very quickly. If you would talk about what you did in the Reference Department, Elizabeth. And the people, how many people worked with you? And what was a typical day like?

ES : I think there were about 8, 7 or 8, Professional Librarians.

LD : In the facility.

ES : We all had to work some at the Reader's Assistant's desk.

LD : You took turns at that desk?

ES : Especially, I did at the beginning. Later on, I worked only at Reference.

LD : And you were in charge of the people that were in, working in the Reference area?

ES : Yes.

LD : So you were a manger as well as a Professional Librarian?

ES : The most important thing to us was to give good service and not to turn anybody away without an answer. The first year I started, in 1958, and that's when the Reference explosion came in library information.

LD : In other words, there were lots more books available and lots more resources.

ES : In that year, I think they answered 13,000 Reference questions.

LD : Oh, you mean the public suddenly got aware of you and really began to use the facility.

ES : We also gave out directory service.

- LD : Yep, I remember that.
- ES : People appreciated that.
- LD : They don't do that anymore.
- ES : No.
- LD : No.
- ES : And that's too bad.
- LD : Although, they still do a wonderful job of answering tough questions. Because I had to call with a geographical question the other day. I had a partial address and they....
- ES : Well, they don't have enough staff. And that year, when I made my final report, we answered that within 21 years, we answered, let's see, 91,000 Reference questions.
- LD : 91,000 Reference questions, with a staff of how many people?
- ES : 8 Professional Librarians.
- LD : About 8, that didn't grow over time? Did you have more people, that were working the Reference area when you left than when you began?
- ES : Yeah, I think there were more. We also had some clerks.
- LD : People who weren't Professionals?
- ES : Yeah, and we'd put those at the Telephone Directory desk.
- LD : Wow, that is amazing!
- ES : There was one day before Christmas, one day, too many people called. We gave out over 500 addresses!
- LD : Oh they were sending their Christmas cards? Oh, wow. And that's true, you have always been open to what the public needs and what the public wants.
- ES : Well, that's what we were there for. Sometimes, some of the girls would say, "What a stupid question we got, don't people think?" And I said, "Be lucky you are on the other side of the fence, what if you had to ask those questions?"

LD : Do you have memories of particular questions, that really stand out?

ES : Yeah there was one that was so funny. A middle age man, nicely dressed, he looked like he was a small town banker or lawyer. And he was going to Germany in August, to the Bavarian Alps, and he wanted to know when it would be full moon there. So, I took out the Farmer's Almanac. And he said, "Oh I looked in that and it doesn't cover Europe." And I said, "It one earth and one moon there's a time difference of about 8-10 hours but that's it." His face got real red and he said, "I never thought of that." Wouldn't you think of it, you know the world goes around, it wouldn't be a week later or earlier.

LD : Well, that's just it, we all get very provincial in the way we see things?

ES : Then one woman asked, one time, next year could you tell me what day of the week Easter Sunday falls on? We should've written those out.

LD : You really should. That's wonderful.

ES : Because you forget them.

LD : Ruth said that there was a song that used to be sung at Christmas celebrations about the twelve days of Christmas, it was related to all the goofy things that happened in the library. I'd love to hear that! You were involved in, not so much the outreach areas as the main library. And I know that you had an experience in that library that I would really love for you to talk about, because I'm not sure that there is really anyone who remembers it. And that is the noted appearance of a patron that had passed away. (BREAK) We were talking about different duties you had as a Reference Librarian.

ES : Well, we indexed the daily Cedar Rapids Gazette.

LD : So, there was no index before you began to work there?

ES : No, they always indexed the current.

LD : Oh, I see, you had a current index, but it didn't go back, beyond.

ES : No, only a certain number of years. And I started the index, of the Gazette, from its first day in 1911. That was exciting, I saw Cedar Rapids being built.

LD : When you were going through those newspapers, wow. How many years did that take, that index?

ES : From 1883-1911, that was when Mr. Marvin was in the Philippines, that I started it. He always felt that a public library should not be a historical one.

- LD : So he wasn't too interested in that project?
- ES : No, I started it while he was gone. There had been too much time invested in it, so we kept on with it.
- LD : They let you continue. Yeah. That's 18 years worth, '83-, no it's more than that.
- ES : 17....
- LD : And 11.
- ES : You know not all the deaths were recorded at that time, in the beginning.
- LD : Yeah, I'm sure, with record keeping, you really saw a change over the years. How did you do that, Elizabeth, did you simply take it manually. You indexed it with note cards, or how did you?
- ES : With note cards and subject headed it.
- LD : You would have loved a computer!
- ES : I suppose I would have. It would have gone a lot faster.
- LD : It would have gone a lot faster, yeah.
- ES : And the language changed. For instance, if a butcher's wife died, it said Mrs. So-and-So, the butcher's wife, dropped dead this morning. But if a society lady died, she soared to the wide, blue yonder.
- LD : She soared to the wide, blue yonder!
- ES : You could tell which social...
- LD : So language, you could tell which euphemisms were connected to status in society.
- ES : Right.
- LD : Well, that has changed, in terms of reporting.
- ES : It took a long time for me to figure out, what the soiled doffs, on Second Street, were.
- LD : I'm sorry, say that again, what the...?



ES : What the soiled doffs on Second Street.

LD : Yeah, I don't know what that is...

ES : Prostitutes.

LD : The s-o-i-l-e-d....?

ES : Doffs. It took me awhile to catch on.

LD : So they couldn't say that word? The prostitute word, huh? That's incredible. And now, of course, everybody dies of a short illness. Did you notice that?

ES : Yeah.

LD : Or a long illness. There's no information anymore, it doesn't seem like.

ES : What I liked especially too, was selecting books to be bought. That I miss, that after I quit working.

LD : So you were on the collection, or Selection Committee? Talk about that, because a lot of people remember that with great affection. What did you do as a Selection Committee?

ES : We read the book reviews and marked the ones that we thought we should buy. And of course, that depended on how much money we had. We never could buy everything we wanted.

LD : So what did you do in the committee meetings, then? Did you argue for the books that you really wanted?

ES : I did.

LD : You did? But it was primarily a discussion of different....?

ES : Yes, we tried to keep an even balance.

LD : In the different departments? And did you have, how did you know what the books were that were coming out? Did someone have to actually go through the reviews and make note of them? Or did you have to do that?

ES : Yes.

LD : You did that? That was all part of your job? How often did the Selection Committee meet?

ES : Once a week.

LD : Once a week? For how long?

ES : A couple of hours.

LD : So it was a very...

ES : We kept it pretty current.

LD : A very consistent routine. Now this would be just the heads of the different departments that would be involved in that?

ES : Well, there were, we'd just take what we recommended and then the head of the department would go to the meeting.

LD : So people in your department would have input, but they...

ES : Everybody had input.

LD : But they didn't all go to the meeting?

ES : No. You gathered all the notes that had been made, and then make your selection from those.

LD : It was a very intensive process, then. I don't think they still have a Selection Committee anymore.

ES : Oh don't they?

LD : Not, just department heads, but it all just occurs within the departments rather than people actually coming together and discussing it. I'm not sure how it all occurs now. I'll have to ask and find out. And I think they made it more across the board, everybody had a roll in the decision, rather than it being just the department heads. I know that would have been a fun meeting. When you get together and you get talk about the thing you love the most.

ES : If you had all the money, you wanted. But you often had to make choices.

LD : From one year to the next, the book budget was always in doubt. As to what was available.

ES : And another thing, which I really like, that was selecting pamphlets and clippings. Because so much came out in government pamphlets that was

current. Where by the time it got into the book, it was old.

LD : This would be kind of like a vertical file?

ES : That's the vertical file. When I got there, the vertical file, they had a dozen. And they had stacks of pamphlets. Mr. Marvin always said that the vertical file was a nuisance. So I made it a point, when he asked for some information, I first checked the vertical file before the book. If it was in there I'd say, "Mr. Marvin, it's in the vertical file. It's not a nuisance. I need some more files." And one time he came, and he said, "You know, last night I had a dream. And you said to me now I really want, for Christmas this year, I want some vertical files." And he said, "That must be your unconscious talking with my unconscious and your gonna get more files."

LD : Well, isn't that terrific?

ES : See, with those, I made the headings myself.

LD : So really created them from scratch then? You were the one who expanded that into....

ES : Mmmm.

LD : It is a tremendous resource.

ES : It is. The most current things, the odd things. If that would have had to be in books we wouldn't have had the space.

LD : I know young people use those, because they are accessible. They're much more comfortable.

ES : And they have headings that they would look for. That was the important thing. The card catalog always daunted people, but the vertical file...

LD : You'd just pull it out.

ES : And there it is.

LD : Yeah, it makes sense.

ES : And these are to be weeded, every year, because if you don't keep them current, there's just too much in there and you don't find anything. There are a lot of facts in there, where I don't know where you'd find it in a book.

LD : Anywhere else. I'm sure it was very helpful to you, in Reference, because

you may have questions that were, often, current that there might not be any other information on.

ES : No.

LD : Anything else in your regular duties, that you'd like to talk about?

ES : Well it was simply fun.

LD : It was fun?

ES : It was great.

LD : You, your primary purpose was to be there and be open to whatever the walk-in needs of the public might be.

ES : Right.

LD : I'm not sure that there's as much of that anymore.

ES : There was always a personal contact.

LD : As you said, there is a lot of stress for not too much staff working. But that's not so much different from when you were working, was it?

ES : No.

LD : In the weeding process, that you mentioned, how did you do that? Did you have to personally go through and pull out everything.

ES : I did it, because I didn't want anyone else throwing away things that I knew we used.

LD : So that was a decision a Professional needed to make? How many hours did you put in a typical day? When did you go into work, when did you leave work?

ES : Well, it was from 8:30- 5:30, three days a week. And from 12-9 two days a week.

LD : So you were there in the evenings. And the weekends, were you open on weekends and evenings too?

ES : No. Saturdays we closed at 5.

- LD : Okay. I know, I heard others say that they ended up going in and working on weekends whether they had schedules or not. Because of all the need to move things around and to continue to make the collection work. Were you ever involved in those moving days, where they would have to move part of the collection to a different place and rearrange things?
- ES : Once in a great while we made changes.
- LD : But not on a, every year kind of basis?
- ES : No. Miss Richardson always measured and measured. And when in my Reference Area we made a change, she say, "Did you measure?" And I'd say "No, I looked." "Are you sure?" "I'm sure." So she had somebody measure it and I was right. I have always been able to gauge distance.
- LD : That's a great skill to have.
- ES : I think I developed that playing Chess.
- LD : Oh, that's interesting.
- ES : Well sure, it gives you spatial concepts.
- LD : Sure, yeah. And especially if you were doing that at an early age.
- ES : Spatial concepts are a part of the masculine mind. Language is the woman's mind. But my father, he trained me in that. Even I could do math before I went to school, without paper and pencil.
- LD : That was a great benefit.
- ES : He'd say, "Now if I have a pie here and you and your father want pie, how can you both get the same amount?" He said, "No paper, no pencil. Look at the pie in your mind." I said, "Each one of us gets a half." And that's how he taught me math.
- LD : Sure. I think they are doing that more today than they used to. Putting it into some kind of concrete problem, so that you can understand.
- ES : See that's why I could pass the entrance test. In geometry I looked at the, I knew which answer could be the right one.
- LD : Your father was your best teacher then?!
- ES : You bet he was.

LD : Your lucky. We were going to talk about something and then went back to the duties that you were involved with.

ES : You wanted to talk about Helen?

LD : I wanted to talk about Helen's dying And because you had such vivid memories of that event. Just let you share, she was a very special patron, that experience of her appearing to you after she was no longer physically able to do that.

ES : We didn't know it.

LD : Right, tell us that story.

ES : Well, you called her Helen. She came in every morning, to read the newspapers, and left at a certain time again. She was quiet and she wore anklets, she had on too much make-up and she usually wore a costume of blue and green. Either the sweater or the skirt was blue or green, or vice versa. And one morning, our Reference Section was across from the balcony where the newspapers were that she read. (BREAK) I was at a phone and Helen came down the stairs from the balcony and walked past. And I thought, uh-oh, she had on a new brown dress, nylons and her hair was beautifully done, her make-up was neat. And I thought to myself, Helen must have found a pot of gold. The phone rang again, somebody came to give me my break and I forgot about Helen. But that afternoon, one of our patrons came and he said, "Have you seen the newspaper?" And I said, "No." He said, "You lost one of your best patrons." I said, "Who." And he said, "Helen." I said, "Did she have a sudden heart-attack today? This morning she was full of life and in good shape, this morning. Yes, she had a new outfit and she looked as though she owned the world." "But she was dead.", he said, "She died at 3:30 or 4." I said, "Bill, that's a case of mistaken identity. She was in here at 10:30, I saw her, she walked past here, maybe, 12 ft. from me." "No." he said, "There was a fire in the apartment house and she suffocated." I said, "That's wrong." Then I called over to the Circulation Desk and I said, "Did you see Helen this morning?" She said, "Yeah, she walked past here on her way home." I said, "What did she wear?" She said, "Oh a brown outfit." "See." I said, "I'm not the only one." Then there was one, she came in at noon and said, "What are you arguing about?" I said, "He said Helen died last night. And she was in here this morning." "Well," she said, "She was sitting on the park bench waiting for the bus when I came." And I said, "What was she wearing?" "A brown outfit." Well I said, "Bill, here's three against one." Then Miss Grover called and she said, "Did you see the paper, that Helen died?" And I said, "That's a case of mistaken identity, Myrna, Mary and I, we saw her in the library, the other one saw her on the park bench. There were

three of us who saw her, so it must have been someone else who died." Well, Bill left and he came back and he said, "No, she did die, she was dead at 3:30 or 4 a.m." And I said, "Really? Would you do me a favor?" He said, "If I can." He said her son was a friend of his. I said, "Would you find out what she wore in her coffin?" Because she was buried the same day. I said, "You don't have to do this now. But whenever there is an occasion, in the future, find out for me." The next morning he was at the door before we had the lights on in the library and he came in, his eyes as round as saucers. And he said, "Mrs. Schoenfelder, you really saw her. They bought her a new brown dress to wear in her coffin. Do you think she'll come back?" I said, "No Bill, she just wanted to say "Good-bye." I think that was it. There was a friend of mine who once said, "Maybe she didn't know she was dead." And you know, much later, I realized there was something I should have noticed and I didn't. I saw her and I didn't hear her walk.

LD : That is an amazing story!

ES : But at that moment I was busy.

LD : On March 30 and I am interviewing Elizabeth Schoenfelder in the Amanas. And we'll just pick-up, she was talking about her memories of Helen Stein.

ES : If I had known that she was dead, I would've grabbed her.

LD : Why?

ES : I'd have said, "Where are you going now?"

LD : That's what we all want to know, isn't it?

ES : And Bill didn't come in for quite awhile, to the library. When he came again, he sat at a table, reading, and I went behind, fast, and I dropped a book. And he jumped sky high!

LD : It was a little spooky for him, for awhile.

ES : But he once saw her across the street on the park bench, waiting for the bus around noon, to go home again. I saw her, going through, and the girl at the check out desk saw her going past. We weren't together so we couldn't say, "Look at Helen, in her new dress." It was a no mess.

LD : Yeah. And the fact that there were three people who, individually, saw her. That's remarkable.

ES : If the others hadn't have seen her, I would never had said anything. But I



was so sure that she was alive when she walked past! But I didn't hear her.

LD : I think other people have had similar experiences. And as you say they are often fearful of mentioning because people will think that they are crazy.

ES : Yeah, but there were three of us and you wouldn't think that you would find three crazies! One you can.

LD : Well, obviously the library was a very important part of her life.

ES : It was her second home.

LD : Were there many patrons like that, that you would see on a regular basis?

ES : Yes. There were a number. And they would come and read the newspapers.

LD : And I think that continued to be true too. The library is important to people for a variety of reasons and one of them is social. It is a very predictable environment.

ES : You can read something in the paper and alert someone to it, read this. They were usually people who had a room somewhere, that way they got out.

LD : They got out and got a chance to mix with other people. I'd like to ask you about, just briefly, if you had any memories or comments about the other people who were so important while you worked at the library. I know you worked with Mr. Marvin and Tom Carney, but also Thelma Grover was really an important person, while you were there. And I think also the Children's Librarian, Evelyn Zerzanek, was very active while you were there. Any particular memories, or anecdotes, that you would like to share about them?

ES : I remember, one time, when Miss Grover came in and she stopped at my desk, and she said, "Elizabeth, I hope you don't mind, but have you seen that that bookshelf over there is a mess?" I said, "No, I haven't seen it. And if you see anything that is a mess you better tell me because I'm too busy to look."

LD : You never had time to stop and take a long distance view.

ES : As long as I could find things, I was satisfied.

LD : And you were the one who was finding them, obviously.

ES : They sometimes asked for the woman with the accent.

LD : The woman with the accent?



ES : That's how they knew me.

LD : Yes, you do have a distinctive way of speaking. But they knew you'd give them the answer, right?

ES : Yeah , they trusted me.

LD : You mentioned that umm..

ES : But the whole library was a congenial group. We worked, it was all teamwork. And after I was in Miss Richardson's place I had to hire different Professional Clerks. And I always told them, "Don't ever pretend you know everything, don't be afraid to say to the person, I have never heard of it and ask for more about it."

LD : Because that's how you find the answer.

ES : You're not supposed know it, but you're supposed to find it.

LD : You mentioned that, when we were talking earlier, that there was one year that you had no book budget. And you were involved in helping to lobby for that budget for the next year. Talk about that.

ES : Yes, I will. I think, wasn't that Mayor Canney, at the time?

LD : It was 1977, from your memory. So it must have been, Mayor Canney must have been in office at that time.

ES : Well, we had no book budget. It was my first year being in charge of selecting books.

LD : Oh, Adult Services, yeah.

ES : Miss Richardson had said, "Elizabeth, if you take this, we're sitting pretty good right now." And then the blow fell, no book budget. I said, "Ruth, you didn't tell me the truth. How could I know that this would happen?" So people were upset. And they would come to the desk, "Why didn't we have any new books?" Finally I said, "Let's try something. I will tell and you will tell the book patron that there is nothing you can do about it. There is nothing that Mr. Carney can do about it, there is nothing the board can do about it, it's the mayor and his gang. Go over to the mayor's office, don't write him a letter, because he'll throw it in the wastepaper basket, you go there and talk to him. And this we did, and one time Mr. Carney was over there for a meeting and he said, "I got a lot of flak, Elizabeth, you know what the mayor told me?" He said, that woman at the Reference Desk, she's telling everybody

to come over to my office and talk to me, not to write a letter because I'll throw it in the wastepaper basket." And Tom said that he was very upset. And I said, "Well when he does that again put him on the line to me. I'll talk to him." He never did. But I would have talked to him.

LD : What happened with the book budget?

ES : Well, the Junior League got, they went to meetings of the League of Women Voters. And there was a gentleman, a retired historian from Washington D.C., he organized the businessmen and got their signatures. And we really had something going. And the next year we had the most beautiful book budget that we ever had.

LD : Which proves that you have to stand up for what you believe in.

ES : Yes, I heard my grandfather saying, "The dog that barks the loudest gets the biggest bone." We were entitled to a book budget and the tax payer was entitled to it.

LD : It is amazing to think that it would've happened. It's just, sometimes I think when people aren't great readers they realize the value of libraries.

ES : You know, it happened once more, the year after I was gone, they had hardly any book budget. But nobody said anything, they took it, and nobody can take things lying down, not when it's your right.

LD : Really, the citizen doesn't know about these things unless you make them aware of it.

ES : I can imagine that Mayor Canney was not happy with me. But that's what would have happened, the letters would have gone in the wastepaper basket.

LD : And there would have been no reason to change the policy the following year.

ES : No, but you know when people come to your office and confront you, then when people attend those meetings and voice their opinion.

LD : You have to deal with it. Someone remembered that Thelma Grover was pretty active in helping to educate council members.

ES : She was very good at that. She was, I think was, more than once, asked to be the director. And she refused.

LD : Oh, really? I had not heard that before.

ES : She was, by far, more valuable behind the scenes. You know, there was something funny. One evening Tom Carney, I trained him at the Reference Desk.

LD : You trained Tom Carney at the Reference desk. That's right he had several jobs in the library.

ES : Yes. And he was sent around to learn the various duties. And he would come in the evening, then we'd walk together to where we had our cars. One evening he said, "I wonder where I am going to wind up. When I am all through and have lived my life to the very degree." I said, "I'll tell you, Tom. You're going to be a director here. And do make it before I retire." And that is exactly what happened. One morning I came into work and he met me in the basement. And he said, "Elizabeth, you were right, remember you told me I'd get director here and I didn't believe you. I was offered and I wondered should I take it? And I remembered, you said I would be director. So I took it. He said, "As long as you are here at the Reference Desk I know I will be all right.

LD : Yeah, he could be very sure of his staff, that is for sure. Well, you had those insights all through your life though. Did you foresee that the bond issue would fail five times?

ES : I didn't have too much hope.

LD : I know that was a difficult period for the library and, I would guess, for the staff, because each time they would get their hopes up, that something would happen. Then it didn't happen. Let's see, you would have left before the final bond issue. As I remember, it was '81-'82, wasn't it?

ES : Yes, I believe so.

LD : When they finally gave up and the Hall Foundation took a roll in funding the new facility.

ES : Eventually it was the Southwest side that didn't give us the vote.

LD : You know that's ironic, Elizabeth. Because I was reading about Aida Van Vechten and her role in bringing about the vote for the library, in the first place. She was a very wise woman, and understood that it would take women to bring that about. But in that particular election, most of the people who voted against that, were the men. And very few of them chose to vote because they felt that it wouldn't be a big issue. And it was because of the

women that voted that they passed it in the first place. So it continued, because ultimately, it was the strength of the literate users of the library that brought it about. And the Hall Foundation, obviously too. What are your memories of social times, things that you did together as a staff, traditions.....

ES : Well, we had a Christmas Party every year. And if somebody retired, or left, we'd have a going away party.

LD : But that was about it, wasn't it?

ES : Well, everybody was always working.

LD : It was hard to find a time....

ES : When everybody could come.

LD : In fact, I, Ruth said that some of your Christmas parties had to take place in 7 o'clock in the morning, before the library had opened!

ES : Yeah, we would have it in the offices.

LD : Wow, that's an early time to party.

ES : You betcha.

LD : How did, I'm not sure how to ask this question. How did, you had more women than men on the staff, obviously. How did wages and salaries compare, was there a difference?

ES : There was no difference between men and women. I never felt set aside.

LD : So you never felt that there was any discrimination?

ES : I didn't notice any and I know that when I hired we had only one man in the department. And so I hired two more men because it is a good thing to have a balance. Because they have different interests and sometimes we were glad.

LD : It would be helpful to get the range.

ES : Mixture is best and you know we always, took everybody else for granted. There was no competition, that way, between people. It was all helpfulness.

LD : That's right.

- ES : One time the librarian, The Masonic Library called and it was John Hiatt and he answered the question. And the librarian called me and said to tell the girl that answered it that I really appreciated it. I said, "It wasn't a girl, it was a man." And he said, "You mean, in spite of women's lib., that you hire men?" I said, "I am willing to call any man my equal who knows as much and does as much as I do. "Well, I hire men too. But they have to be as good as a woman in order to be a man."
- LD : And I am sure that there were not as many men in the field.
- ES : Not then.
- LD : Why, do you suppose?
- ES : Well, I think it was more a women's world.
- LD : It was considered.
- ES : Mmmm. I know that now there are a lot of men in the field.
- LD : Yeah, I see a real even mixture, these days.
- ES : I think the mixture is good.
- LD : Well, I think you're right. We do have to bring in both, the diverse experiences of people and you get the better, big picture that way.
- ES : And get people from different backgrounds.
- LD : Right, right. Were you ever involved in any censorship concerns? Did you ever have patrons that came to you and asked that books be removed from the shelves?
- ES : Not personally.
- LD : Do you know if the library ever responded by removing a book from the shelf?
- ES : Not that I recall.
- LD : Not that you recall. How did the library handle that?
- ES : The one to ask would have been Miss Grover.
- LD : Oh, she probably would have been who they would have gone to for every

one of those concerns.

ES : It was a really good group.

LD : I think that I have pretty much covered the areas that were important to me. You know we had talked ahead of time. But I probably missed many things that were important. Are there particular things that you would like to share about your experience there?

ES : Well, everything was important.

LD : Yeah, yeah.

ES : We had a good Business Collection.

LD : Was that, were there strengths in the collection that you really aimed for? Obviously, if you were dealing with the business community that would be important.

ES : Well, we had a lot of expensive Reference Material that we used everyday. Businessmen came in during the noon hour and used it.

LD : And still do.

ES : I bet.

LD : They do it through their computers now. Did technology change much, while you were there? Did things happen that really made your job different?

ES : No, not really.

LD : Because, I am thinking that microfilm and microfiche, those things would have come into play during that period.

ES : Yes, microfilm. Now I was not mechanical, so if I was using a machine and something went wrong, I had no trouble having someone else help me, because if I fixed it, it wasn't fixed.

LD : Well that's where those different experiences and backgrounds come in handy. Those men are pretty mechanical.

ES : You bet they were.

LD : Are there any other things you would like to say, on tape about your years at

the library? Any other memories that you would like to share?

ES : Well, it always made me feel good. If I got a note from a patron thanking me for help. There was one time I got a letter from a secretary of a large company, in it she wrote...Whenever I was in trouble, no matter what I had to know, you always found the answer. You made, for me, the world a better place to live in.

LD : Wow, that's one worth keeping.

ES : I still have that note.

LD : Well you were fortunate in that you really have, you lived in so many different arenas, from your communal experience growing up, which was a very small world.

ES : One time a man came and he asked a question and I wrote it out for him, and he said, "I am a handwriting analyst. Would you let me analyze your handwriting for you?" I said, "Sure, I've got nothing to hide." So I wrote out a paragraph. And he said, "You grew up in a world in which there was no money." I said, "Yes, you're right. The first 18 years of my life." And he said, "You've had three different lives, already. When you go into one, you close the door of the old one and go into the new one." That was right too, first it was the communal, then it was the normal marriage with children and then it was going over there as a secretary, when I worked for Tom Crabbe. I had never written out a check in my life before. And at the end of the month he said, "Elizabeth, the first time you wrote on the check I could see it was the first one as careful as you were. And I thought, oh my God, you handle thousands of dollars everyday with two bank accounts. What did I get myself into? But when you made your profit-loss statement at the end of the month, it was perfect. And I knew I would be all right." I must have scared him.

LD : He realized that you were really inexperienced at this. But you're a quick learner, obviously.

ES : Well, if somebody else can do it, I can learn it too.

LD : You bet.

ES : When my father taught me chess, at four, it wasn't until I was 13 that I won my first game from him. Never conceited any game. It's hard to beat your teacher. When I'd lose a good game and I thought I had him and he'd win, he always said, "It is much better to lose a good game than to win a poor one."

LD : Because you learn that way.



- ES : So I never have been afraid of failure. If there is something I can't do, it's simply not my line.
- LD : Well, what worlds do you plan to go into from here on?
- ES : More knowledge. When I was little I thought heaven would be a place where there would be a big castle of books and I would spend the rest of eternity reading.
- LD : That's a pretty good heaven, actually. I would be very pleased to be there as well.
- ES : You know, I came across in a book, that I listened to the other day. And there was a sentence that really struck me and it's true....All that you take with you when you leave this plain, is love and knowledge. Whatever else you have, you can't take with you.
- LD : So hopefully you have devoted your life to those things.
- ES : Well, when I was six, I promised myself that I would read every book in the world. I haven't yet.
- LD : But your still working on it. Didn't you tell me that you listen to two or three books a week?
- ES : Yes, I do.
- LD : Which is a wonderful piece of technology. The books on tape. There so great when your driving, they can give you so much to think about.
- ES : But really, I think to know is more important than to have.
- LD : So you still, you really have come full circle in your life, in that sense.
- ES : I feel I have.
- LD : You believed that from the very beginning.
- ES : I think I was programed before I was born.
- LD : I am beginning to think so too. Well, I really appreciate the time that you have given me today. And I, if you decide that there is something that we have not covered, that you would like for me to come back and deal with.



- ES : Well, there is so much that it is simply that you were there to find the person what they needed.
- LD : And all the other things that you did, those were secondary, weren't they? Service to the public, that's a wonderful way to live your life. I really appreciate your sharing some of those things with us. I think this tape will be used again and again and again.
- ES : But you know it is wonderful, that acknowledge means a lot to you, that you have the opportunity to share it with others. It is in the sharing that knowledge becomes important.
- LD : I agree. You would have been a great teacher too.
- ES : No, I have no patience. My daughter always says, "Mother if you don't learn patience now you'll have to come back."
- LD : So we may see you again. Well, I don't know, I think you're pretty patient. You have put up with me all afternoon.
- ES : I like to share.
- LD : Yeah, that's obvious.
- ES : When I was young, there were so many older ones who shared.
- LD : That was a great advantage of the communal experience. Well, thank you again. And Elizabeth we will be sending a tape back to you, so you can listen to yourself on the tape.
- ES : Oh, thank you.
- LD : It seems to me that it's the least we can do, since you enjoy listening to tapes.

