

Mary Ann Mongan Oral History Interview Transcript

MAM: Mary Ann Mongan – narrator

JMM: Jan Mueller – interviewer

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Location of Interview – Residence of Mary Ann Mongan
3729 Broadview
Cincinnati, Ohio 45208

JMM: The following is an unrehearsed taped interview with Mary Ann Mongan, the retired director of the Kenton County Public Library. The interview is conducted by Jan Mueller for the Kenton County Public Library at Ms. Mongan's residence in Hyde Park on Friday, March 6th, and its approximately 10:05 a.m.

JMM: And again, I'd like to thank you for allowing me to visit with you today to discuss your career and your experiences and memories...I appreciate the opportunity...

MAM: You've got more besides what I said last time?

JMM: [laughing]

MAM: I think I went through about everything at that point.

JMM: [laughing] You did...you did cover a lot...and I wanted to make sure on...like...certain things I wanted to make sure that we had covered bases...and I wanted to show you a few more photos...different things like that...just make sure that I had been as thorough as I could with everything because...there's a lot to cover [laughing]...And, we talked last time about the fact that the petition drive, that that was one of your...that was your...what you thought was your greatest accomplishment at Kenton County, and...

MAM: That was the base of what's happened since.

JMM: Yes. And I was wondering...it moved so very quickly because it started in April of 1967 and then by the summer you had the 16,000 signatures, so that's pretty rapid...and it had to be a lot of work.

MAM: There were a lot of people working on it...

JMM: That's...

MAM: A lot of volunteers.

JMM: I was wondering what...that...about that, what you remember about that time, that it...that it must have been very exciting...very busy...was it a lot of meetings?

MAM: Yeah.

JMM: What about some of the individuals...like the key players that were involved besides yourself...and Clyde Middleton, George Weidner...Lawrence Grause...

MAM: He was the Board's chairman at that time.

JMM: And...they were...was it, I think...Clyde Middleton and George Weidner started out as the co-chairmen of the committee?

MAM: Yeah.

JMM: And that was how it...and it was interesting because that...well...the booklet that I had brought that you had a copy of from Hoyt Galvin...how they did that comparison with the staff, and books, periodicals and films, comparing ALA standards to what Covington had at that time...

MAM: It wasn't particularly close.

JMM: [laughing] No...not at all...and no films at that point...and that was something that was emphasized heavily after that, wasn't it...with...with bringing in films and movies...

MAM: Sort of telling people this is where we are lacking but we can make that up if you can...if enough people will sign this petition and get us some money.

JMM: That's right...and getting the new building...and everything...that's showing them that there was...they were getting a return for their investment...they certainly did [laughing]. That was one of the things that I thought was most interesting that I wanted to just mention...I didn't know you had any particular memories about Clyde Middleton or George Weidner or any of those folks that worked closely with you during the petition drive.

MAM: I guess I remember mostly that he pronounce his name WIDE-NER.

JMM: Oh my! Thank you for that correction here [laughing].

MAM: That was what [unintelligible]...I don't know, it didn't look logical, the way its spelled, you'd think it would be WEED-NER.

JMM: [laughing]

MAM: He said WIDE-NER so I guess anybody can choose how they want to pronounce their name.

JMM: This is true...this is true...well, and that's...that's what I was...he eventually withdrew for the part of the time, didn't he...through...he was on the committee but then had to withdraw for a short period of time...but...and then the other...a lot of the people who were originally involved became Board Members when the county system was formed...so I thought that was...that was interesting. I wanted to bring...I had found a few additional photos...and these were actually also from the Post archive...it's actually...its how they...when they gave the

archives to us, this is actually how they appeared...where they actually had their cutlines written in...about what they were going to put in the paper...And they're all pictures of you arriving on the...on the last day there and they all have different little captions...and...and it shows...it...you...obviously your...your emotion at the time showing on your face...you're very jubilant and...it says you arrived in a white limousine...you were declared "Queen for a day" and...and...you know, there was a surprise party and that there were different recognitions by the state, and by the Kenton County city...or...the County residents and... and officials, Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives, and also the City of Covington...they declared it "Miss Mongan Day," didn't they?

MAM: Yeah.

JMM: And gave you the key to the city...What did...how did that make you feel when you...did you expect anything or was it a complete surprise?

MAM: No...I didn't...I had no idea any of this was happening. Including the...the party. There...actually...there were two—they had one on a Sunday night...formal one with a lot of people invited and I knew that was happening, but I didn't know about the staff one later in the week.

JMM: It was quite a surprise...was it a...did you enjoy it? Do you remember being completely taken aback when you saw everyone out front? [laughing] You look like you had a really good time!

MAM: Well...that sort of thing doesn't happen very often, you might as well enjoy it while its on.

JMM: That's true. You're...you're the guest of honor...the center of attention, which is...which is the way it should have been. And was there a particular thing that you enjoyed the most about that...that day's events or one particular memory...or...

MAM: You mean about the one with the staff?

JMM: Mmm-hmm.

MAM: I guess it was being with the whole staff...you know...you work with people that long you get pretty close to them.

JMM: Yes. So you got to spend the whole...that time period all together, which probably didn't happen, except for Staff Day...which...that's...that's nice...that everybody gathered together for that...got to be a part of it. I was also wondering about Wayne Onkst because I know that...that he worked closely with you for many years...and you're still in touch with him...and...what...he was hired in 1979? I've got a photo of you and he here...that was also one that appeared in the Post...and he...of course was made the State Librarian in October of 2006...and do you feel...how did you feel when you realized...you know...he had been made the State Librarian...and...and...

MAM: Well, I...I was glad and sorry...I mean he deserved being made State Librarian—I knew he could handle it, but I was sorry to see him leave Kenton County.

JMM: That's true...that's true. Would you say...were you...sort of a mentoring influence on him through your...through the time that you worked together...because I know...he was...you said...he was the Associate Director...was it, after Mike Averdick, I believe?

MAM: Right.

JMM: I was...OK...and...would you consider that you were mentoring...a mentoring influence for him?

MAM: Well, it was obvious that he was going to be able to do a good job on this, which made it easier for me to retire. In fact, I guess that was a deciding factor...that there was somebody that

could take over that I thought would do an excellent job...actually, much better than I ever could have...

JMM: No...I think you're not giving yourself nearly enough credit at all [laughing]...but I think its good that...you know...it's a sign of good...being a good manager to be able to hire good managers...and...and to mentor them, so I think you need to give yourself some credit as well...[pause to check recording equipment] Let me make sure this is working for me, here...looks like it is...let me pause it one moment...OK...And...that...I just wanted to bring that by because I thought that was a nice photograph...I'm going to actually interview Wayne as part of this project as well, because eventually, I'll have to write something about the experience...and they hope to take some clips from the interviews and put them on...on the Web site...so...you know...that's something that I want to interview Wayne and perhaps Alice Clay...I think, might be interesting...There are a lot of people that I'm sure...

[EDIT – SECTION DELETED]

Well, that's probably one of the biggest challenges of being in management, is having all of these different views and opinions... and...and its...it can be quite challenging, I'm sure, especially when you're going through a big transition like that...OK...so I've made a note of that, so don't worry about that at all. And here's a...this is sort of an off-the-cuff type of a thing, but it was interesting and I...since I've been taking this management class a lot of the things that I'm learning about you and about the system itself...and about the other managers...and my own experiences...you know...being at Kenton County and knowing that there's always, like, myths or stories about the previous leaders in any organization...you know, in a corporate organization, or even a nonprofit or libraries, or anything...can you think of any myths or stories that might be told about you at Kenton County...that...like...one thing I can think of is that...the thing that comes up a lot or people always say that you were always...always had a pres...a presence on the Reference Desk, and you had mentioned that last time, too, and they...that's something that always impressed people about you and I think that's a thought...I think people were very...very...felt very positive about that.

MAM: Well, I didn't do it for anybody's benefit except my own 'cause I really enjoyed doing the Reference Desk. You know...you...you sit in your office, you sort of lose track...or lose touch with people.

JMM: Then you could be out....

MAM: So I looked forward to my daily stint with the public.

JMM: [lauging] That...that most definitely...one of them...but can you think of anything else that they will remember about you...any kind of anecdotes or stories or anything like that?

MAM: No, I don't really know of anything.

JMM: I thought I'd check, just to see...Then...I...it was interesting 'cause...in coming up with different things...when I was researching...this is a folder that Dave had also let me take that has a lot of information in it—some of the minutes that you did for the committee for the petition drive, and there was this...and...I...I didn't realize this at first when you were named the Head Librarian in Covington that there was this outcry from...you know...the general...you know...the community because someone from out of the state was being hired for that position, and I...I didn't even think about...you know...that coming up, and I wondered if you were aware of that...that that was happening...did you anticipate that something...

MAM: Yeah...I was very much aware of it.

JMM: Did you think that something like that would...would be an issue at all when...when you took that position?

MAM: Well, I...I...didn't at the point...at the point I took the position, I guess I didn't know, but I was not surprised by it.

JMM: How did you...how did that make you feel...did you feel more...when...when you found out about that...when this...I know there was an editorial that came out that was...and that's what this is [passing original editorial clipping to Ms. Mongan] ...and it was...and I...someone...Elsie Harriet, someone who lived in Covington had written it...and I just wondered if that would...how you felt about that?

MAM: I replaced somebody...a woman who had been the librarian for a good many years...and it...it was native Covingtonian...and I knew that was going to be difficult.

JMM: You apparently rose to the challenge very well...because...and you did so much for the...for the city and for the county, that I'm sure that was something that they very quickly forgot about [laughing] once...once you...once you got into action...and...you had said last time...I know...I was curious because I know that so many different construction projects and renovations and things had gone on while you were...while you were Director...and...that you had said that...like, with the Erlanger branch, when the new building was constructed was...that was primarily under the jurisdiction of the Associate Director...

MAM: No...not the Erlanger...the Independence...

JMM: The Independence one...OK...so Erlanger, you were in...directly involved with that...OK...I wanted to clarify that, because...and I brought some pictures from that, too, just because I...it was...it was interesting to see some of the young...the different...this [photo of Erlanger branch opening] did not have everybody identified, which we need to do at some point...with the accompanying information from the Post photos...they did not...of course we know...we know who that is...they don't have everyone on there...but they're just some photos from the dedication...photos of the new building, and...

MAM: Some are Board Members, some are city and county officials, some are Erlanger...there was a woman who had...here...who had been in Erlanger for many years, Mrs. Carl...

JMM: OK...

MAM: And the architect is over there...

JMM: He just recently passed...Robert Ehmet Hayes over the last...I think the last month...it was sad...

MAM: So I can identify a few of them...the famous George "WIDENER" [Weidner] is in the back row, here...

JMM: [laughing] I will never forget that...that name...I thought that was interesting because it shows everybody there...and...proudly on the first...opening day...

MAM: I think probably the State Librarian is on here somewhere but I can't identify him right now...

JMM: Was it Jim Nelson?

MAM: Right.

JMM: And...why was...why was that site chosen? I know they were...was it because of the high visibility and the...the traffic...was that...I know there were several sites that were considered. Do you remember why that one, in particular, was selected?

MAM: Yeah...it was the closest there was shopping center...and it was a poor shopping center... and...then we didn't have much choice...it was all there was...and we had...the Book Mobile had stopped at that shopping center for many years...

JMM: Oh, OK...OK...

MAM: So we knew there was a base there of people who would use the library.

JMM: It was a...a good strategic spot to put it...and Nancy Moore was the Branch Librarian there...the first Branch Librarian?

MAM: Yeah...now I'm getting my stories mixed up...take back that BookMobile one...that was for Independence.

JMM: OK...OK...well, I mean, its confusing because they're...they're...so the...where the Ind...where the first Independence was located was where...

MAM: The one that was actually in Independence.

JMM: OK...and, so you've been through this now, with the...you know...with the Erlanger, and then with some of the renovation...you know...of course Covington, then Erlanger, and different renovations...do you like that aspect of administrative work?

MAM: Yeah..that's...that's the most fun.

JMM: [sneezing] Pardon me. The construction and everything like that?

MAM: You can see what you've done, when you're...when it's done.

JMM: That's true. You see a lot of visual return for everything you've just done...[coughing] Pardon me, I'm going to take a drink of water, here...was there...what was different about Erlanger and Covington? Do you remember...of course, Covington was...they were different in that...the district being formed and everything...but, like, the construction projects themselves...do you remember that being different from the other...one from the other? Were...one more challenging, or...

MAM: Well, Erlanger's was on a very small lot...of course, Covington's also was, but there wasn't much space to work with...in the...in the original Erlanger branch...barely enough to put a parking lot in...and that was a small one.

JMM: And that was a challenge, too, trying to find...how to fit everything in that you needed...in that...in that particular space. It had to take some pretty...pretty detailed planning...and...did you like the...meeting with the architect and going over that...and how the...how it would be laid out, envisioning all of that?

MAM: Yeah, I enjoyed that.

JMM: Get your personal touch in there, which is nice. I was wondering...and I'm sort of all over the place with some of these questions, but I thought...you know, just getting some general information about different things that have happened...the...the HAPLR index...the...an independent index that's done...it started actually in 1998...it was...you know...that...that comparative study of libraries by Hennen's American Public Library Rating Service...and, I know that...you know, during your time there, between...you know...1998 and 1999...you know...then you retired that July, the Kenton County Public Library received a very high rating...it was like...a rating of 685...it was listed in the top 20 percent of libraries serving populations of more than 100,000 residents. The following year, 1999, it was...it received the same honor...it was also ranked the top library in the state...and recently, here in 2008, it was again named the number one public library system by the HAPLR Index...and, I thought...I wondered what you thought about those kinds of indexes or ratings for...for libraries. What do you think about...do you think that they are valuable, or just...in...

MAM: They're valuable for the people who come up high on it, those who don't rank so well, I'm sure hate them.

JMM: [laughing] That's probably true...I...I wondered the...how you felt as a...as a library administrator for that type of rating, since its, you know, its done based on different demographics and circulation numbers and different things like that.

MAM: And in categories according to population, as I remember.

JMM: Yes, I thought that was...I think its interesting...and I wondered if you...its sort of like that tradition...that...the tradition of excellence that you established when you were there has, in some ways, continued and I wondered how you felt about that...is that something that...

MAM: I would hope that there was some influence but I can't really prove it.

JMM: I think...

MAM: I guess you get the right person at the right time, which you need...I did fine when we were on a...a starvation diet...not much money...you had to make due, but when they got a little more generous with the income, then we needed somebody like Wayne to take over...and then, I guess now...with....

JMM: Dave...

MAM: Dave.

JMM: Oh, 'cause its...its tight again [laughing], so it'll...it'll be a challenge. And then, you...of course you received many different honors and recognition throughout...throughout your career...and I know, in 1998, the Kentucky Public Library Association awarded you the Margaret F. Willis Award...I wondered how you felt about that...because...you know...for outstanding community library service...how did you...did you feel?

MAM: So I was...so I really thought a lot about Margaret Willis, so that was a great honor...to have my name somehow connected, even if it was in that way.

JMM: She was the...was she the State Librarian at one time?

MAM: Yeah, she was the state librarian before Jim Lew...Jim Nelson.

JMM: And you got to interact with her a lot and...different dealings with the state, since the...once the district was established and everything.

MAM: She was very interested in getting libraries built all over the state...that was...or getting library districts established...so when we were trying to establish the library district and getting the votes...the...the signatures...she used to call me every Saturday afternoon regularly...and I don't suppose she was working on Saturday, but she called anyway to see how was going and if we needed any help.

JMM: That's nice.

MAM: I don't know what she would have done to help, but...

JMM: But that's nice.

MAM: ...she was real interested.

JMM: That's nice that you had that kind of support from the state...that's very nice...it says a lot. And...this is sort of a departure from...it sort of deals with what we talked about a bit last time with technology and with changes in libraries, but, the trends are also now...and I don't know if you have any thoughts about this...a lot of libraries...or not a lot, but some are going from Dewey Decimal Classification System to a more browser-friendly arrangement...so...almost like a Barnes and Noble type of set up where the books are arranged in subject areas in...rather than by decimal classification. What do you think about that? Do you think that's something that should happen, or is it something that's unavoidable, or...

MAM: Is it...is it working in the ones that have tried it? That's what I don't know.

JMM: It...it...apparently, yes, it has been well...well-received by people, because they feel like they can almost browse like they do in the big...

MAM: It might depend on the size of the library.

JMM: True.

MAM: Possibly, in a very large library, it would be really effective.

JMM: People could just browse among the...among the shelves and they could...they wouldn't have...they wouldn't...if it was under a certain subject heading rather than the...

MAM: Of course, the public had never really understood the Dewey Decimal System anyway, and would be glad to get rid of it.

JMM: [laughing] I think so...I think its still that way quite a...quite a bit, and yeah...I...its something that folks seem to struggle with sometimes, so, I wondered about that because it seems like its...it's a trend..it...it hasn't happened really around here that much that I'm aware of...the one...one instance that I read a lot about was actually in Phoenix, Arizona. But I thought that was...that was interesting. Its been talked about...and they've tried different kinds of displays and thinks like that...

MAM: Well, as you can tell, I'm not up on the new trends in library services.

JMM: Well, there's ...it's...it's...sometimes I think trends are trends [laughing]...there's something to be said for the tried and true as well...that's sort of what I think. I think there are some traditions that work and you know...and should stay in place, and innovating along the way is...is of course, so important. And...the one thing we talked about last time was reading and everything, and about your...you know...you always read a lot and you like to read pretty much any kind of...of...of any book at all...and I thought...what I probably should have asked was...rather than ask you, you know, who's your favorite author or what was...what's your favorite book, is...you know...maybe more...like...what is it about reading or about books that...that you love and are passionate about that...what...what...what is about reading...

MAM: Mostly because it's available all the time. People get involved in television and sometimes there's something to watch and sometimes there isn't...whereas a book is always available...all you have to do is pick it up and start.

JMM: That's true...that's true. And that...you can...you can go and...its sort of an...I like the escape aspect of it...you can just lose yourself in a story, and the next thing you know, three or four hours have gone by and you're...you know...you've been somewhere else the whole time [laughing]. And its pretty amazing that a book can do that, so...I didn't...I...I think its probably one of the biggest draws, and all the knowledge and information, of course. You know, one thing that came up that I didn't realize about you was that you had a sports car, and that...there was even an article...it was a 1967 article when they were first covering the fund drive...or the petition drive, I should say, and the reporter was talking to you about this, and at the end of the article, she makes this...you know...there's a paragraph that ends... "Shatters...Shatters Image," you know...of...you know...the typical librarian image, and it said that...that you drove a sports car and it had a quote from you that said: "I'm dying to take it out to a track and open it up." [laughing]

MAM: [laughing] I only had that car for a few years—it was an MG.

JMM: What...what color was it?

MAM: I think...red...I've had the red cars for a long time, but...but not MG's anymore.

JMM: What about that car attracted you, at the time? Was it the color, or the speed...or...or the fun?

MAM: I guess the fun...it was...it was a pleasure to drive.

JMM: My brother had one for a short time, but it was plagued with some mechanical problems...and he didn't get to drive it as much as he wanted...but I wondered if you ever got to take it out and open it up?

MAM: No. The best I did was on Columbia Parkway. I remember, once came home for dinner and went back...was going back and going down Columbia Parkway and had a flat tire. I don't know if you know how it is going west on Columbia but there is no place to pull over.

JMM: No.

MAM: There's a little bit of sidewalk, but certainly not enough for a car, so it was not...and it was rush hour, so it was not a happy occurrence, but luckily, the MG had knock off wheels, so I could get it changed pretty quickly.

JMM: [laughing] But that could have been dangerous, for sure. That could have been very dangerous!

MAM: But if it had been regular...regular wheels, I'd have...I'd have not been able to do it, I guess. You'd have to jack up the car and all. I guess...I guess you had to jack this up but the knock offs are very easy to get off.

JMM: I didn't realize that.

MAM: Just a few blows with a mallet, and then twist off the...the thing, and there it comes.

JMM: [laughing] How was it...did you ever get to drive it in the snow? Was it a good car in the snow?

MAM: It was a good car in the snow, yeah. It wasn't bad, I didn't have any trouble getting to work.

JMM: And what...

MAM: The most fun with it was going across the Suspension Bridge, which, at that time, was a toll bridge...the toll-taker always leaned down to look in the windows...

JMM: [laughing]

MAM:...to get the money.

JMM: [laughing] He was probably impressed---with the drive and the car, so...I bet that was...that was a fun car to drive. I love car...fast cars myself, so...and I've had a few red ones myself, as well, so...I thought that was interesting, I didn't know that about you. So I...I enjoyed that.

MAM: That was a one time thing—I never did it again.

JMM: But its good...everybody's got to do that at least once, I think...or should [laughing]. And...I have...really, I don't have a lot of other questions, other than...I wanted to see what...was there anything that you could think of that I should have disc—should have asked you, or anything that you would like to be conveyed... if there was a message that you...that you could put on the Web site, or a quote that you could have on there...about your time at Kenton County...is there anything that you would like to add?

MAM: Not about my time at Kenton County...just that I think the Kenton County Public Library, in addition to what the survey says...is...is a wonderful library. Its got wonderful staff, its got a really good library Board...well, they change every year, practically, but they've always been good. And the staff has been wonderful, so it's just an excellent place.

JMM: Well that's good. That'll make...that will be a nice...a nice thing to put on the Web site...because that comes from a...from a reliable source...and its nice...nice to hear. I just...just had those basic follow up questions, I didn't have much more...pretty short and sweet. But I...I didn't...I just wanted to see what your...the one thing I really missed a lot, I think, was the

Erlanger branch...I didn't really mention that a whole lot last time, and I thought, well, I wanted to at least...

MAM: When you speak of the Erlanger branch, this is the old Erlanger branch I'm talking about, not the current one. I had nothing to do with that.

JMM: Yes...yes, the old one—right on Dixie Highway...right on the...I remember that being there. And I actually hadn't gone to that one before—I'd always gone to Covington...even though I lived in Newport...you know...I'd go to the Newport Library, but also, I'd go to Covington, because when I was a student, the book collection was really phenomenal...it still is. We still have a lot of college students come in...you know...I worked at Northern for a while...at...at Steely Library, and a lot of the college students still want to come to the public library and find a lot there when they're there researching. It says a lot about the collection...it...it still draws people from so many different generations, and for so many different...different reasons. It's a great book collection, and now we've got the databases and everything to enhance that, but, its always been a...a great library.

MAM: Things are looking up, huh?

JMM: Yeah. They're definitely looking up, and they're different...they're changing all the time, which is...I know you've got to be aware of...you know, from different things that have happened. Have you been to the Covington branch recently, or, when was the last time you...

MAM: I haven't been to the Covington branch for a couple of years.

JMM: I was wondering about that. Its...changed some...its very, very crowded. The staff in the lower offices are very...confined [laughing]...or, usually two or three people in one of the offices, and uh...

MAM: They're tucked in every corner.

JMM: Pretty much...pretty much...where the staff lounge used to be...and there used to be a little...I think, a sick room, or something, inside there...and then there was an area with lockers and a...and a coat closet across from that...those are both full of...one of...of...staff and offices.

MAM: I think I saw that conversion.

JMM: They've used every...every available niche, I think, in that building.

MAM: I think its time to redo it entirely...or...to...to build a new one—one or the other.

JMM: Yeah...I think I agree...I think everybody thinks its time to [laughing] expand a bit! Well, I just want to thank you for everything, because I mean...I...I've really enjoyed getting to meet you...and its been a very good experience for me...and getting to know about you and your career, and getting to know more about the library and its history, and...it just makes...it enriches the whole experience...you know...of...of working there...and so...I...I thank you for that, I do appreciate it very much, and I will share this...you know...with others, and so...its important that people know about the person behind the name of the building...I think sometimes, it just becomes...you know...you don't want it to become just the name of the building...there is a person behind it...and that's one of the reasons why we wanted to do this...was to get to know a little bit more about...about you, as a person, and your experiences...so, thank you for the opportunity.

MAM: Well, it was a pleasure to have an opportunity to talk about the library. I don't get that much chance to anymore.