

USAIN Oral History Special Project

Interview Transcript

Narrator: Eileen Herring

Interviewer: Leyla Cabugos

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Interview Introduction

Cabugos: It looks like we're recording, so is this a good time to start?

Herring: Let's go for it, because my brain cells aren't going to get any younger later. [laugh]

Cabugos: [laugh] Well, first, then, I'll just say that my name is Leyla Cabugos, and I'm recording myself here in West Sacramento. I work at UC Davis, where I'm the plant sciences subject specialist librarian. And I'm interviewing Eileen Herring. Where are you seated, Eileen?

Herring: My name is Eileen Herring, and I am in Honolulu, Hawai'i. And I am in my house, because I no longer work as a librarian. But I was the agriculture librarian at UH Mānoa, and I was there for 20 years and retired four years ago.

Cabugos: Wonderful. And I will note that the reason I asked to interview you in particular is because you were the inspiration for me to get into librarianship—

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Herring: Yay! [laugh]

Cabugos: When I was a grad student in agriculture, you were my librarian. So first off, I just have to make sure that you've read our permission to record you—

Herring: Yes, I have.

Cabugos: —and that you agree with all the terms?

Herring: Yes, I do.

Cabugos: Great. Thank you. And we've already gone through your institutional affiliation, so let's go into describing your involvement with USAIN.

Herring: OK, I actually had to go back and look at my CV and some of my promotion documents to remember everything, and I have it all right here. I was a member—well, actually, OK, so let's just start with the fact that I got my library degree after several other different careers that were not library-related.

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Herring: And I graduated from library school in 1992, and I got my job at UH Mānoa in 1995, and I was hired as an agriculture and plant sciences librarian directly. My vague recollection as to how I heard about USAIN was that I was going through the files of the librarian that had had the position before me, who had not been a USAIN member but somehow had a brochure in one of the files. And I saw this and I went, "Oh!" And so I think it was like a year and a half later that I actually joined USAIN and started participating. So I was a member of USAIN from like 1997—oh, should tell me somewhere; where did I put that up?—through when I retired, 2015. Yeah, that's right—2015. Oh my god!

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Herring: And I had a variety of positions in USAIN, because it was my favorite organization, and it was really an amazingly helpful organization for me. As the only agricultural librarian in Hawai'i, I didn't have any real support group that was of the same subject area. So the people in USAIN were really important to me, and so as a result, I was actually quite active. I was the secretary-treasurer from 2002 to 2006, and then I was president-elect 2011 to '12, president '12 to '13, and then past president from 2013 to 2014. And before that, I had been in pre-conference coordinating committees, budget task forces, exhibits and sponsorship committee. So I had done a variety of activities related to USAIN over the years.

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Cabugos: You mentioned seeing the brochure in that file folder. Do you know or can you recall what inspired you to get involved based on that?

Herring: Well, just the fact that it was a subject-specific organization. In Hawai'i, we do have—we have an SLA chapter. We have a Hawai'i Library Association, which is the local ALA chapter. And then we have MLA for the medical librarians. But there wasn't anything that really supported any of the subject areas that I was responsible for. So to me, that was—and plus, OK, I had been in horticulture as a working person before I became a librarian, so for quite a number of years, I had done landscape maintenance. So I was like, "Oh, yeah, this is my—this is my stuff." And I wanted to meet other people who really engaged in the subject matter.

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Herring: I was also a member of the Council for Botanical and Horticulture Libraries, and I did go to some of their meetings, but I really found USAIN to be more helpful in my role as an academic librarian. I liked both, but USAIN was my favorite, or was the best for me.

Cabugos: Wonderful. Let's see. So—

Herring: I'm not currently a member, and—yeah, I think we covered most of that question.

Cabugos: We did. So the next question is describe how your professional responsibilities have changed during your involvement with USAIN, or did change.

Herring: Yeah. So like I said, I was at UH Mānoa for 20 years, as the agriculture librarian. And early on, I did become a member of USAIN. And so when I started, having come from not a library background but from in the field, so to speak, I had good support from my fellow librarians, but having all these other academic librarians who had more experience really showed me the pathway to actually be—ending up being a tenured librarian at UH Mānoa.

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Herring: So when I first started, I was the subject specialist, but of course I was a librarian 2, I think? So I had to go through a couple promotions—well, promoted to librarian 3, and then I got tenure, and then I got 4, and finally I left as a librarian 5. And I think that all of those parts of my journey were supported and helped by the people that I met in USAIN. And then I hope that I, as president and all those other things, supported the next generation. Because when I looked at the USAIN website, it looked like they were actually all becoming much more of the leadership, and it makes me very happy to see that.

0:07:07

Cabugos: Good. Yeah. Perhaps you'll have a chance to hear from some of them in these interviews as well.

Herring: I hope so. OK!

Cabugos: All right, so how did USAIN contribute to your professional development? And if you could share a few specific examples.

Herring: I kind of tried to review this. A couple of things that came to mind are—well, first of all, just the opportunity to go to professional conferences, because there really aren't many, as I noted, here in Hawai'i. So the fact that I could get funding partly from the library, partly from the campus, as a new faculty member. And then sometimes later on, when I was an officer, I got some funding from USAIN, I think.

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Herring: So that helped me get to the professional conferences, and that was really important, as far as what the library and the campus look at for tenure and promotion. It's just that simple. And then of course the opportunity to give presentations, the opportunity to go to presentations and learn what everybody else was doing was really fabulous. In addition, there was things—like the library, through me, applied to participate in the [National Endowment for the Humanities] NEH Agricultural and Rural Life preservation project, which we got, so we got some money from them to—we weren't digitizing at that point; it was very early—we were microfilming—but we got a chance to microfilm and evaluate a lot the significant agricultural documents from Hawai'i, from both the kingdom and the territory and eventually—the kingdom and—yeah, that's it.

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Herring: I don't think it went any further than that. So all the early ag documents were up for review and possible preservation. So I learned a lot about the collection and the history of agriculture in Hawai'i by doing that project. But that was through USAIN.

Cabugos: Certainly. Wonderful. Since 1990, USAIN has hosted a biannual conference. Which one was your favorite, and why?

Herring: Which one was my favorite? They were all fabulous!

Cabugos: Which one was your favorite?

Herring: My first one was Arizona, and as my first one, it was really significant in a lot of ways in that I formed friendships with people that lasted throughout my time in USAIN. So in a way, that is really what got me involved, is making the personal connections with people in USAIN.

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Herring: So I went—where did I go? I will tell you. I went to Tucson; Manhattan, Kansas. I loved the farm tour in Manhattan, Kansas. I remember that, still. Lexington, Kentucky was really wonderful. I may just mention the two—the Arizona one and the Lexington, Kentucky one were both combined conferences with IAALD, the International Association of Agricultural Information Specialists, and that was really special, to actually get a chance to interact with people from other countries who were doing the same thing. Because in my role at UH Mānoa, I was part of a grant that reached out to the Pacific, so I was interacting with people in Fiji, and in Samoa, and other smaller places, but still an international group of librarians who were involved in Pacific agriculture. So that, I really appreciated.

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Herring: I also went to Champaign and Raleigh, Ithaca, Minneapolis, Burlington. When I think about these, I don't always remember the actual specific presentations at the conference, but I remember the fun things. The tours. Going to the race track in Kentucky. Going to the Twins ball game in Minneapolis. So some of those are highlights because that's what I remember, and it was just sort of also the building of the community of librarians. Oh, and the winery tours from Cornell. Yeah, so those are the things that long-term [laugh] I guess, stick with you, as much as the individual presentations or the specific things that I learned in any of the conferences.

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Herring: In general, though, let me just say that one of the things I valued highly about all of the conferences that I think is very different than the national general librarian groups is that they had subject specialists come and talk. So in addition to hearing from other librarians, you actually hear from the people those librarians are serving, or somebody's doing some really interesting work in agriculture. And I loved that. I just loved the subject information that we got in USAIN. That's not a specific conference, but that's kind of what I liked about the conferences.

Cabugos: Great. Thank you. If you would, describe any collaborative research that you were or are involved in that grew out of your USAIN relationships.

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Herring: I'm a little unclear as to exactly what this question is, but a couple things that maybe get to the answer here—well, for the Raleigh conference, which I forget when that was—2001—I worked with some of the librarians where we did a review of AGRICOLA on a variety of platforms. That was back in the day when you—[laugh] it was like different companies that would—because AGRICOLA was of course a public database in so many ways, they would put their own front end on it, and then do a cross-platform comparison. So that was one collaborative research within the librarian membership of USAIN. The other one is the thing I already mentioned, which is the NEH preservation grant that we worked on. So that was part of the whole Cornell and USAIN preserving of—agriculture and rural life.

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Herring: And so that—we went to a lot of meetings, and we went and hashed out a lot of things about that, and it was really a long-term project that I would not have gotten involved with if it hadn't been for USAIN. So I think that would probably be the two that I can think of, right off.

Cabugos: That sounds like what we were driving at. Thank you. Next one is—well, yes, share a funny or silly memory about USAIN.

Herring: OK, so the only memory I'm going to say that I can think of that fits this—and I certainly can't do the song—but Burlington, Vermont, we were all in this—it was one of the big conference rooms up on campus and had a big wall of windows on one side overlooking a grassy mall area.

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Herring: And a young moose ran through. And everybody just got up [laugh] and went to the windows, I think including the speaker [laugh], to watch the moose wander through the campus. That would be I think the only really sort of thing that I remember anyway. It was fun.

Cabugos: That's memorable.

Herring: Yeah, it was memorable. It was memorable, [laugh] that's for sure. Especially since I had never seen a moose. So—

Cabugos: But no song associated with that?

Herring: No, I can't think of one, unless you can—Bullwinkle? I don't know. [laugh]

Cabugos: All right, let's see. The practice of information exchange has been revolutionized by the internet and social media since USAIN launched. You got into this a little bit in your earlier questions, but how do you think information technology has impacted USAIN's operations and mission?

Herring: Hmm.

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Herring: Operations as opposed to mission—let's start with operations. I think it really has improved—or at least it seemed to me at the time when I was an officer in the various—over the years—that we went from everything was either like conference call or it was by mail, to things like this Zoom, or Skype, or Google Groups or whatever they call it now. So it's easier to all stay—it's easier to move forward, I think, and it's easier to do it—to see the nuance in the communication between the members, so that there's less, fewer—because you're face to face, and you can give feedback right away. And instead of going, “Well, what did you mean in this letter that I received three weeks—?” [laugh] You know, whatever. So I think in that way, it has been really good. Plus the website—now, the website is interesting to me, because we were really involved in trying to get a new website up when I was past president, I think.

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Herring: President, and maybe past president. And I don't think it's the same website that you guys have now. So I don't know if you've had to go through that process twice, but it was long and really painful [laugh] to try to figure out what did everybody want out of the website, and how were we going to put out an RFP or whatever to get bids on this. And the whole process was pretty involved. So once that's over with, though, having the website obviously improves the visibility, the ability to communicate, the ability to share information. At least I hope it does. That was the whole idea. So as far as operations, I think it's really kind of a wonderful thing. Mission is really a different sort of challenge, because I think the mission is the same, but how we do it might be different.

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Herring: And like I said, it has been four years since I have been a librarian, and so who knows! But I got on Facebook because all the other USAIN librarians were on Facebook. That was the first reason I got on Facebook. When I was teaching the graduate class that I taught, we had one student who was on Big Island, and I did a—what is it—what is the Google—like Skype—I forget—anyway—

Cabugos: Oh, Google Chat or Messenger?

Herring: Yeah, whatever it is. I forget what they call it. But anyway, so I was able to like share my screen, and she was able to talk to the students in the class. So we did sort of this remote thing. Even though we were just accommodating one student, we were able to do that. I struggled as a librarian on Mānoa to interact with all of the extension agents along the other islands.

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Herring: They used to have conferences in Mānoa, but then it got expensive to fly everybody to Mānoa, so they quit doing that. One time, they sent me out to Hilo to do a training, but in the end, it was really challenging. There was no vehicle. And I'm assuming now that there would be some technology that made it a little easier to do that kind of outreach across—in between islands. I know other states have the same issues where there's just long distances, and it's not any easier. So I think as agriculture librarians based in land grant institutions, reaching out to extension personnel is probably a big challenge, and hoping that the information technology improvements have helped in that regard.

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Cabugos: Yeah. Certainly being able to offer webinars has helped with outreach to people across the state and [0:20:09] offices.

Herring: Yeah. So that was a—well, had been a challenge for most—I think almost—it was just changing when I retired, so I'm glad to see that was someplace that it really would help.

Cabugos: Agricultural practices—food science, veterinary medicine, and natural resource management—have changed significantly since USAIN launched. From your perspective, how have changes in these fields impacted the profession of agricultural information?

Herring: There's a couple of obvious answers to that, and I guess I'll just start with them, because I'm sure they're things everybody would say. But one is things like—well, open access, institutional repositories, trying to get faculty members to actually participate in those.

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Herring: And then also encouraging your library to promote open access, and if necessary, challenge the vendors when they are preventing that sort of access. Because a lot of the material supposedly that is created by land grants is supposed to be public information, rather than locked behind some kind of paywall, I think it's an easier argument to make, in some ways, but it didn't mean that it really made it work any better. [laugh] It really depends on the people who are in the key positions. So I think that's a real challenge, and sort of change, because we never thought about that. We were just starting to think about data storage when I left, and it seems like NAL may have moved forward at least a little bit in trying to provide some kind of—like NLM does, where you can store your data.

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Herring: But NAL [National Agriculture Library] has always been the stepchild, so it's really hard—they have a challenge, and they don't really get the funding and stuff that NLM [National Library of Medicine] does. So I don't know how far they've gotten. To the best of my knowledge, UH Mānoa hasn't gotten any farther than when I left, as far as trying to preserve anybody's data, any of the work that's being done at the university. But certainly that's really critical. The thing that I thought was really fun, and I was trying to get started and promoting, and I don't know if this is something people are engaged in or not, is citizen science. There's actually a fair amount of citizen science that is happening in Hawai'i, from coral reef monitoring to Kamehameha butterfly GPS notifications to invasive species.

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Herring: So there's lots of ways for people to get involved in that, and trying to figure out what the role of a librarian is to bring those people together would be I think something I was interested in trying to work on, but kind of—that was—yeah, I don't know, didn't get much done, other than like putting it up on websites or something. But I think citizen science is great. I think that's important, both in the engagement of the community but also in generating the kind of big data that science is really looking at right now.

Cabugos: We had an identification party in the library this year for a citizen science event, where people came in and we had field guides for them to use.

Herring: Oh, neat. Yeah. Good.

Cabugos: Help with interpreting the software. It was a wonderful experience.

Herring: Yeah, yeah. So I don't know if I've missed anything obvious, but those are the things that really stand out to me as far—I mean, when you look at—oh, it's just everything—I mean the fact that we're even talking about—finally talking about—sustainable agricultural practices on a national scale is obviously a big change for agriculture.

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Herring: How that impacts librarians, I'm not really sure. But there's obviously big changes in the science, which means I guess just that we have to know what's going on. You guys have to know what's going on. I don't need to anymore. [laugh]

Cabugos: And do you see changes in the kinds of information products that people are needing, or that are available?

Herring: I don't—I really—because I really spent four years in—OK, if you think about—like start with my grandmother, who was born in New Mexico and traveled by covered wagon from New Mexico to California, and lived to see, you know, the space shots, so to speak.

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Herring: And me—and it's sort of not exactly the same, but when I went to library school in the early '90s, there was no internet, OK? So by the time I graduated and got my first job, there was an internet. And I no longer try to figure out where—how much change has happened in the last four years. Because if you're not in, you have no clue. I just know it changes very quickly.

Cabugos: Yeah. That's fair. All right.

Herring: [0:25:33 inaudible crosstalk].

Cabugos: ... Let's see. So based on your experiences with USAIN to date, what advice would you share with new members?

Herring: Well, just participate as much as you can. I'm encouraging the woman who currently has my position to become a member of USAIN.

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Herring: It's interesting—I—she was going—she did go to an AgNIC meeting, and since those two are so twinned in so many ways, I think she will absolutely go to the USAIN conference the next time it occurs. So that's really good. Talk to people. Go out and drink with those people! [laugh] Because really the socializing and the tours are a really wonderful way to get to know the other members. And I have had so many mentors that I met that way, and they were really critical to my understanding of my role as an academic librarian as well as my role as an agriculture librarian. So yeah, just participate as much as you can. And don't be afraid to get involved in making presentations, because that's really good for your dossier. [laugh]

Cabugos: Thank you for that.

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Cabugos: All right, well, I think this is the last question, which is—is there anything else you'd like to share about USAIN?

Herring: I think I've already been enthusiastic enough over the other questions. I just cannot stress how important it was to me to be a member of USAIN and to meet the people that I met as a result of that. And AgNIC, which—I mean, I know it's not USAIN, it's a separate organization, but because there are so many people that are in both groups, it's sometimes hard to remember which was USAIN and which was AgNIC. And I don't know where AgNIC is at right now, but all of those people represent resources and friendships that are—I'm never going to see many of those people again, but—and on Facebook, I still see many of them.

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Herring: And sometimes they come to Hawai'i, and I might get a chance to see them. Anyway, it's a wonderful, friendly, supportive organization.

Cabugos: And they will be having their conference right after the USAIN meeting this year.

Herring: AgNIC? Oh, yeah? [laugh] OK. Always—they always do. But USAIN, even without AgNIC, USAIN is just, yeah, wonderful. I'm glad you're involved in it, Leyla.

Cabugos: As am I. And it has been such a pleasure talking to you!

Herring: OK! Good!

Cabugos: I'm looking forward to adding your perspective to this collection that we're building. Thank you so much for participating.

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Herring: OK. Aloha.

Cabugos: Aloha, Eileen.

End of Interview