

USAIN Oral History Special Project

Interview Transcript

Narrator: Mary Ochs

Interviewer: Suzanne Stapleton

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Interview Introduction

[addition from original recording: 00:04:02]

Stapleton: My name is Suzanne Stapleton and I'm here on January 28th, 2020, with Mary Ochs, who is just recently retired as the Director of Mann Library, Cornell University. Mary, as you know the USAIN Oral History Special Project launched during USAIN's 30th year to document USAIN's history as experienced through its members and close affiliates. The goal of the project is to document personal memories, experiences and perspectives of the impact of this professional organization. So we really thank you for your interest and consent to participate in the oral history special project for USAIN. You and I previously reviewed the process and the permission agreement form. The interview consists of ten questions and we've set aside an hour for the interview....So, are you ready to get started?...

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Stapleton: Since 1990 USAIN has hosted a biannual conference. If you have attended USAIN conferences, and I know you have, which USAIN conference was your favorite and why?

Ochs: Oh, gosh. Ah, well. I think the first one I went to was the one at Kansas State and that would have been '99 Maybe? And, it was... it felt like I went to a party and everyone knew everybody and I was new. So that was a little awkward at first and then everybody found out it was my birthday. And so I have vivid memories of spending my birthday at my first USAIN conference in Manhattan, Kansas. And my mother went to Kansas State for one semester so all those pieces and parts about going to Manhattan Kansas were just really fun. And to meet the group, it was just such a warm welcome... and to see that everybody knew each other as colleagues and friends. I thought: Wow! This is going to be a great group to be a part of! So, and I've been to every conference since that one.

Stapleton: And what I notice is the balloons continue in your theme, with your birthday being...[laugh; balloons in background from Mary Ochs' retirement party]

Ochs: Yes, that's right, [laugh] so ... I think I've spent, it's either three or four USAIN conferences when it's been my birthday because my birthday is the 23rd of April

Stapleton: Yes, so it overlaps often

Ochs: . it often overlaps, so, anyway, I've had some fun USAIN birthdays! [laugh]

Stapleton [laugh]

[end of addition]

Stapleton: Can you describe a little bit—obviously it's very extensive, but can you describe your involvement with USAIN? Why did you decide to join the organization? Are you currently a member? What leadership roles you've had? That sort of thing.

Ochs: OK. So I joined that first year when I went to the conference in Manhattan, Kansas. As the director of Mann Library, I tell my staff, or I did tell my staff until yesterday, that going to conferences is all about sharing the work that you're doing with other colleagues and learning from other colleagues and building a network. And I feel like USAIN over the years has done all three of those for me, very effectively.

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Ochs: So once I joined, I really wanted to get involved. And so I forget what year I got elected to the board, but that was my first involvement. I was elected as a director on the board. And I did that for a term. And then I've been involved with the collections interest group and the technology interest group. We started the international interest group. I think it was Marty Kesselman and I that started the international group at one point. The AgNIC interest group, because I've been involved with AgNIC also. And then I was the president—I was trying to remember what year I was the president, but I think it was 2011-12. So for that three-year stint, I was incoming and then president and then past president.

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Ochs: I have continued to be involved with some of the interest groups since then.

Stapleton: Great, yes. Lots of ways to get involved, and it sounds like you've taken advantage of all of them. [laugh]

Ochs: Yes. Yep!

Stapleton: Mary, this is question three. How have your professional responsibilities changed during your involvement with USAIN? So you said you've been involved since 1999. I imagine they've changed a lot.

Ochs: They've changed a lot. So at that time, I was working trying to get the TEEAL project off the ground. I was the like systems designer for TEEAL. Then I became the head of collection development at Mann Library. And Mann's preservation work came under my direction, so I was involved with the USAIN NEH preservation projects.

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Ochs: And then in 2008, I became the director of Mann Library. And so then, everything USAIN was doing was relevant. Yeah, so it's, what, 20-plus years.

Stapleton: And for our listeners that may not know, can you describe what TEEAL is?

Ochs: So TEEAL is the Essential Electronic Agricultural Library, and it was and still is a system of—a digital library of key agricultural journals that Mann Library created to help libraries in the developing world get access to the research literature. So it was a special outreach project at Mann Library.

Stapleton: Did that effort predate the open access movement?

Ochs: Yes, absolutely. When CD-ROMs for journals started to become available, the former director of Mann Library, Jan Olsen, who was one of the founders of USAIN, she and her husband Wally Olsen came up with the idea to use CD-ROM technology to distribute journals to libraries in Africa and Southeast Asia and Latin America on CDs.

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Ochs: There had been programs to distribute print journals out to libraries all over the world, but it was so expensive to send things that it just wasn't viable. So TEEAL started as a set of—oh, I think it was like 200-plus CD-ROMs with all the content on them, that got mailed out in a giant box.

Stapleton: Wow.

Ochs: I've now forgotten your exact question, but I think I answered it. [laugh]

0:05:02

Stapleton: Yes, yes. I was interested in TEEAL and how it got started. And today, we have open access journals, which might meet some of those institutions' needs, the developing countries' needs.

Ochs: Yes.

Stapleton: But you say TEEAL does still continue, so is TEEAL continuing today with subscription-based journal access?

Ochs: Yes. So we just did the last update of TEEAL, and we're in the process of distributing sets out for free to a certain number of institutions, trying to update as many institutions as we can before we close out the TEEAL project. Because so many libraries in the developing world can now get online. And we were also involved with getting the AGORA Research4Life program up and running, which is an online free journal access program for developing-world countries.

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Ochs: So we're trying to transition everybody from TEEAL over to AGORA.

Stapleton: Perfect, yeah. Thank you for the background on that. OK, so question four. And this may be multifaceted for you. But how has USAID contributed to your professional development, and can you share—

Ochs: Oh my gosh!

Stapleton: [laugh] Can you share a few specific examples?

Ochs: Oh, just so many ways. Oh. I guess having that network of colleagues. I love the fact that I think I know somebody in every land grant in the country. And if something comes up about something related to Florida ag information, I email you or Val. You see it all the time on the USAIN list; there's just that network of friends and colleagues that just works.

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Ochs: And I think that the conference is so valuable because of that. You've got a group of colleagues who have a lot of common interests and common responsibilities, so it's really the right people to learn from, both virtually through the listservs and webinars now, and when we get together, it's just great. You can see what people are doing in a very similar context.

Stapleton: Right, right. Neat. Well, that leads right into the next question. Can you describe any collaborative research that you've participated in that grew out of your relationships with USAIN colleagues?

Ochs: Absolutely. I think I mentioned the NEH preservation project, but I think that was a really nice USAIN collaboration.

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Ochs: So 29, I think, different states participated in identifying the key state and local agricultural literature, and then were able to—well, early on, to microfilm the materials, and then later to do the digitization. And so it was a wonderful collaborative effort where every two years, we would put in a proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities and get funded for both the bibliography development and the microfilming or the digitizing. So that project actually has led to what's now the CERES mini grants out of the Center for Research Libraries. Because there was that underpinning of a collaborative preservation program, Center for Research Libraries was able to tap into that and continue getting titles digitized.

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Ochs: So I think the first NEH grant maybe was 1997 or thereabouts? And then it ran for—gosh, I can't remember the date on the last one, but it was a good run. And it's too bad we didn't do all 50 states, but everything was changing with preservation practices, and so—anyway, CERES has kind of continued some of the work that didn't quite get finished in that first effort. So that's one. And then a lot of us participated in the Ithaka S+R project. Florida did it, right?

Stapleton: Yes.

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Ochs: Our experience with that was really fabulous. The interview process with the faculty just gave us so much good information. And learning that interview research protocol was a valuable opportunity for all of us who participated. And then to see the reports coming out of all the other states that participated as well as NAL—I mean, we learned a lot across all of our groups about how our agricultural researchers were doing their work. So those are the two that I think have had the most impact for me.

Stapleton: Great, great. OK, question six. Share a funny or silly memory about USAIN. For instance, what theme song would you suggest best embodies this organization? [laugh]

Ochs: [laugh] Oh my goodness.

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Ochs: A funny experience. [pause] Oh, boy. I'm having a—I mean, I know there are a million. I'm having a hard time just coming up with something that—the theme song, I might have to think some more about that. [laugh]

Stapleton: That's completely fine.

Ochs: "How You Gonna Keep 'em Down on the Farm," right? [laugh]

Stapleton: [laugh] Yep, that would work. [laugh] We can come back to that if something occurs to you. But it sounds like you've started off that way with your birthday party overlapping. [laugh]

Ochs: Yes. Yeah. That's right.

Stapleton: The next question I think is one that you might have gotten ahead of time. The practice of information exchange has been revolutionized by the internet and social media since USAIN launched. How do you think information technology has impacted USAIN's organization and mission?

Ochs: One thing that comes to mind is the—when we first—when I was first in USAIN, a lot of the work of the organization happened at the conference.

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Ochs: Like the board would only meet once a year, in person. And there was sometimes an ag update at ALA, but basically you couldn't do much of the business of the organization except in person. And I think it was Sheila Merrigan, maybe, who started having the monthly conference calls to do the business of the organization. And so that practice has continued. And of course we have Zoom. And so the ability to do work over the course of the year virtually has totally changed what the organization can do and how we do it.

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Stapleton: Yeah, yeah. And thanks to Zoom, the video conferencing program, we're having this oral history interview remotely. [laugh]

Ochs: Exactly. Yeah.

Stapleton: As one example. Did you have another thought? I didn't want to cut you off.

Ochs: So I was just thinking about—because people in the organization know each other so well—that's the other thing, is once you've got that personal connection, then the technology just makes things so easy, because you're—it really is just like talking to you in your office. So I think it took people a while to get used to the whole idea of video conferencing and having it not feel like the Jetsons. But it really—it works great!

Stapleton: But as you say, especially because you've got the foundation of the face to face relationship.

Ochs: Exactly, yes.

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

Ochs: So I guess one thing I would say is that the whole big data thing—if you think about the kinds of data coming out of digital agriculture and climate research and other areas, it has required librarians to embrace the idea of being data managers. So that has been a sort of wonderful add-on to a lot of our jobs, where the same skills that worked for managing other kinds of information have been translated into librarians being able to help researchers with the managing of really big data and planning the data management plans for their grant proposals.

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Ochs: So I think that's an area that has really taken off for the profession. I'm trying to think of other—I guess across the United States, the farms have consolidated, and they're bigger. And I think it just means that fewer of our students come in as coming from farms. And here at Cornell, we have a lot more interest in the whole alternative agriculture and organic and locally produced foods, and so that creates a whole other area of interesting research going on.

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Ochs: And it also, I think, has added to the value of that historical literature that's up online. Going back and digging. So if I use an example of the—you know, the new regulations on growing hemp—there's all kinds of materials from pre—before hemp was not—before you were not able to grow hemp, there were all kinds of things published on how to grow it, which people are tapping into. Isn't it Suzi Teghtmeyer who has done a LibGuide —

Stapleton: Yes. And I think she has done either a recent book review or a recent article about the resources about hemp production.

Ochs: Yeah. And so because we can still find those old things, there's value in that, so that has been kind of fun to see.

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Stapleton: Right. Leading off of that, Mary, can you talk a bit about Cornell's role in preserving the information that the—is it eCornell [sic], your repository?—and particularly how that ties into USAIN?

Ochs: Oh, yeah. So Cornell's repository, eCommons, has been around for a while, and somewhere along the way, Cornell volunteered to be the archive for the USAIN conference proceedings. So we have a collection of many, many years of—whether it's the PowerPoints, and whether anybody submitted articles. But anyway, there's an archive in eCommons for USAIN materials.

Stapleton: Yeah. Yes. And I would second what you say about the importance of access to the historical literature, where we're seeing alternative crops interest and different production practices, and some of that material can be still pertinent today.

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Ochs: Yeah.

Stapleton: As well as for history. As well as for historical perspectives.

Ochs: Exactly. Yeah, the social history and the cultivation history. But I was wondering if you're seeing any of the historical material helping with the—what's the citrus disease that's—?

Stapleton: Yeah, citrus greening disease. Yeah. I'm not so aware of the historical material, because that's an invasive disease that came in from Asia. But it may be historical material from Southeast Asian countries might be helpful in that kind of situation.

Ochs: Interesting.

Stapleton: Yeah, they're doing a lot of current breeding work to try and remedy it. To try and stop the insect that's the vector of the disease.

Ochs: Yeah, hopefully they'll succeed. I like my orange juice. [laugh]

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Stapleton: Florida orange juice. That's good to know. [laugh]

Ochs: Yes. [laugh]

Stapleton: Yes, we all do. But yes, you point out the whole idea that new challenges emerge, whether it's economic challenges looking at motivating growers to look at different commodities and new production practices, or pests that come in that change things. So some of that historical literature is important to preserve, and you don't necessarily know why or when it will be used.

Ochs: Right, right. Sometimes I joke that things go through like a 50-year period where they're pretty useless. So they're really important when they first come out, then they're just, you know, out of date, and then they become historical at some point. And if you can keep them in that mid-range, then you've managed to salvage them for the future. But that temptation is, "Oh, who will ever need this?" [laugh]

Stapleton: Yes. [laugh]

Ochs: Especially with space considerations and—yeah. Well, and that brings up the whole collaboration on print repositories, and so that's someplace where USAIN—well, you guys in the Southeast have done a really nice job with trying to share responsibility for print archiving.

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Stapleton: How has USAIN been involved in that from your perspective?

Ochs: Well, I think it has been more regional. Here's a case where the existing networks that libraries are part of sort of overlays the USAIN connections. So I think USAIN colleagues who are working within networks like your Southeast network can tap each other to work on the ag material within that other context. But I think it has been hard for USAIN to work as a network for print archiving because the other ones are in place across their institutions.

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Ochs: So like the Big 10 has archiving, and in the Northeast, we're involved with other organizations. But I think it's the mindset and the importance of the agricultural materials that is the responsibility of USAIN members to bring to those other initiatives. We tried to get something off the ground years ago called CROP—Coordinated Retention of Print. [laugh] And everybody's gotta have a good acronym, right?

Stapleton: That's right. [laugh]

Ochs: We ran into those—like this is not the right group to be doing this. And others might disagree with me on that, but it really seems like other existing structures had the infrastructure to do that print archiving. And we put the CROP mindset on top of it.

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Stapleton: OK. And the CROP proposal was coming out of USAIN, or was that from Cornell?

Ochs: No, it was a USAIN group.

Stapleton: It was a USAIN effort.

Ochs: I can't remember if it was USAIN or AgNIC. I think it was USAIN. But it was just not quite had enough momentum at the time.

Stapleton: Now of course you had mentioned earlier the Project CERES awards and the work with USAIN and AgNIC and the Center for Research Libraries has all been successful at issuing proposals to try and do just that—to try and retain the print and make the material accessible online.

Ochs: Right, yes, exactly. All of these things have evolved over the years. But that national preservation plan that was done early on, that was really before I worked at Mann.

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Ochs: But that was a USAIN—somebody must have talked about the national preservation plan amongst the earlier USAIN participants. And I don't know if you've talked to Sam Demas? He was involved with that. And some others.

Stapleton: Yeah, we have not talked with Sam, but we are hoping to reach out to some of the early founders of USAIN, the people involved in it. Nancy Eaton was interviewed, earlier.

Ochs: Oh, nice.

Stapleton: Yeah. But I think I'm also maybe pushing us one way, but you had also talked about this coordinated effort to retain the print under space pressures at each individual library, which was nice. I know with the [0:23:52] group here, the Southeast network, each institution is agreeing to hold on to particular print titles and have an understanding that their regional partners would hold onto others, so that we don't all have to keep duplicate copies.

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Ochs: Right.

Stapleton: Yeah. And so you're doing that as well through the Big 10 and through the Northeast—?

Ochs: Well, we are not doing it. I'm just aware that the Big 10 is doing it. Cornell is still figuring things out related to that. We're somewhat isolated in the middle of upstate New York, so it's harder to share a repository with like other of the Ivies Plus. You've got a significant group of institutions that are right there on the East Coast, and then we're out in the hinterlands. [laugh] So anyway, it's a work in progress.

Stapleton: OK, OK. Well, I think it's important as everybody's going through their collections and making decisions on permanent locations for materials.

0:25:03

Ochs: Yes. Yeah.

Stapleton: OK. Let's see. So, this is a good one. This is question nine. Based on your experiences with USAIN to date, what advice would you share with new members?

Ochs: Oh. Take advantage of all the opportunities that come, and get involved. Join a committee. Run for the board. It's just a wonderful organization and great colleagues and an opportunity to learn. So, highly recommended!

Stapleton: That sounds good. [laugh] Is there anything else that you'd like to share about USAIN that we haven't touched on?

Ochs: Oh. Well, I guess I would also say that hosting the conference is also a wonderful experience if there are institutions that are sort of thinking, "Oh, I don't know."

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Ochs: I mean, it's a ton of work, but it's also just a very rewarding experience to have people come to your institution and see agriculture in your context. Yeah. I think that's also highly recommended for the intrepid institutional member. [laugh]

Stapleton: [laugh] When did Cornell host the conference?

Ochs: We hosted in 2006. And it was the year that USAIN transitioned from—so I think the Kentucky conference was 2005 in the spring, and then Cornell did 2006 in the fall, and then the next one was 2008 in the spring again. So we had three, a year and a half apart, and the idea was to transition off of the ACRL year.

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Stapleton: Yeah, just to start becoming alternate years with ACRL.

Ochs: Yeah. So I think Cornell hosted the only fall USAIN conference ever. And fall in the Finger Lakes of course is lovely. So that was fun with our winery tour and all kinds of fall-themed events.

Stapleton: That's great. And all the apples. That's what I remember from Cornell.

Ochs: The apples. Yep, absolutely.

Stapleton: Neat. Yes, and it continues with an even-year conference now, our annual conference. I realized as we were talking that I don't have any questions addressing people's perspective of USAIN into the future. You've been involved with the organization so long. Do you have some thoughts about where we're going with agricultural information and how USAIN may play a part?

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Ochs: USAIN has—at the moment, it's heavily focused on land grant librarians, but I think it started out a little broader when there were more corporate librarians. And we've looked at doing things with extension over the years. And so I wonder if there is an opportunity to sort of broaden the member base—it's really great just the way it is, but if in the future it did branch out in those areas where there's overlap with digital agriculture, and you know, is there potential to branch out.

0:29:00

Ochs: And I don't know, but it's possible.

Stapleton: Yeah. Very good ideas. And as you said earlier, with the industry almost bifurcating into larger and larger corporate farms, and then some of these smaller alternative production locally-focused farms, I could see that there possibly may be a rise of information specialists within that corporate farming community.

Ochs: There might be. Yeah. So is that a potential group to join USAIN? I don't know what professional organizations—what other ones are out there. There are organizations for GIS specialists and librarians. But I just don't really know what's out there for the ag information specialists of the future at the field level.

Stapleton: Well, it sounds like from your plans for retirement, you may be able to come back and tell us in a year or two.

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Ochs: I may find out. Yeah. [laugh]

Stapleton: [laugh] Yeah. Well, thanks. That was my last question, actually, unless you have anything—my last question is if you have anything else you'd like to share about USAIN.

Ochs: Oh, I can't think of anything else off the top of my head. I still haven't come up with a funny story, but if I do, I'll—

Stapleton: You can email it to me. [laugh]

Ochs: Like you said, the birthday story is a good one. [laugh]

Stapleton: It's a good one. [laugh] And here we are with the balloons from your retirement party just yesterday in the background.

Ochs: There we go. There's my balloons. [laugh]

Stapleton: That's a funny story right there.

Ochs: Yes.

Stapleton: Well, Mary, congratulations on your retirement, and we really appreciate you taking time on your first or second day in retirement to talk to us about USAIN.

Ochs: Well, thanks. It has been fun.

Stapleton: It has been great. I'm so glad I had the opportunity to overlap with you for a while.

Ochs: Yes. Me, too. I'm going to be thinking of you guys at the conference. First one I haven't been to in a long time. So anyway.

Stapleton: We'll sing "Happy Birthday" to you. How's that?

0:31:02

Ochs: Yeah. Thank you. [laugh]

Stapleton: [laugh]

End of Interview