

University of North Texas
Oral History Collection
Number 878
Interview with Sarah Janice Kee
February 29, 1992
Pages 23-24, 40-43

Sarah Janice Kee worked for the Missouri State Library from 1946 to 1950. She was a field consultant from 1946 to 1948, and then became director of, and was largely responsible for the success of, the Missouri State Library Film Demonstration Project between 1948 and 1950. She also served as interim Missouri State Librarian for 10 months in 1949-1950.

Kee (pages 23-24):

“When the war was over, I went into state library work at the Missouri State Library. I was a field librarian, field consultant, and I was working on developing county libraries. I was in Missouri when the major county libraries in Missouri like Saint Louis County and Jackson County, where Kansas City is--all of the large county libraries--were developed. This occurred in the years that I worked as a field worker. The state librarian was fired, and I was elected acting state librarian, and I served there for one year. Again, I had a bad career experience. When Katherine Meyer, the state librarian, was fired for overspending her budget and not reporting it, I was one of four field librarians--extension librarians, I guess, is what they were called in those days--and she recommended that I be appointed to carry on, which I did. But, they said to me, "Until we can find a man, will you hang on?" Well, I was very happy in Missouri. I was doing what I could do best. I was working out in communities with county boards and public libraries and committees to develop tax campaigns and developing libraries. I was doing it, and I was doing it well. I liked it. Things were happening in Missouri in those years, and I didn't want to leave right at that minute. So, I hung on, and I cleaned up the budget mess and stayed there a year. When they got the man, I left. When I left there, I went to the Wisconsin Free Library Commission.”

Kee (pages 40-43):

“I learned an awful lot about library service from Katherine Meyer when I went to Missouri. She was the state librarian, and she inspired us, all of us, more than any teacher had ever inspired me, as to what libraries are about in this world. I never came out of Texas Woman's University with the feeling that libraries were indispensable. It was just something we had. But, I would fight and die for a library now. I got an awful lot from Katherine Meyer. The reason she got fired in Missouri was – we were developing libraries in counties in those days, in the 1940s. We'd go out and get these committees organized, and the people would vote to tax, and they would be ready, then, to establish their library. The State Library had promised certain basic collections of books. This was part of the Aid Program. so, she had these four field workers, and we were all out there working ourselves to death in establishing these libraries. We would go in on weekends, and we would say, "We need 2,000 to 5,000 books at such-and-such a place." She kept buying books when she didn't have money to buy them. Her thought was that she would get over this year, you

know. She would get over this hump. She didn't have the money in this year's budget, so she'd pay for them from the next appropriation. They caught up with her, and they fired her for it. It was just that an overzealous Katherine Meyer had gotten into trouble--kind of like a Greek tragedy, you know. She just destroyed herself.

But, she worked, and she worked. She worked so hard, and we all worked so hard. We just knocked ourselves out. She sent us, the field workers, to San Francisco to the American Library Association meeting. I guess this was about 1946 or 1947, along there. We had a little state car, but you weren't supposed to take these cars out of the state. I didn't know that. I didn't know we weren't supposed to, but she did. She sent us in the what we called "The Little Red car" in which to travel the state. We went to San Francisco, and she arranged for us to have breakfast with Carl Mylan, the great Carl Mylam, who was the executive secretary of the American Library Association for many years. She knew Carl Mylam. She had worked at ALA, and she wanted Carl Mylam, you know, to inspire us, you know. And, he did. He said, "You're great! What you all are doing down in Missouri is great!" And, we were great. We were really working at it.

I loved Missouri. I've often thought about what would have happened if things hadn't turned out the way they had. I had no intention of leaving Missouri. Missouri was an underdeveloped country, as far as library development was concerned. We were really making progress. But, it's also an interesting state in that it may be Republican or it may be Democratic, so you were always on your toes. You had to be a real independent to work in Missouri. It was kind of exciting politically to work in Missouri. First, we had the advantages of Kansas City and Saint Louis for cultural outlets, and there was a real fast train. We were in Jefferson City, right in the middle of the state. There was a real fast train that came through from Kansas City to Saint Louis and would get back by about 3: 00 in the morning. We often did things like that. We enjoyed Missouri. There are only two of us who are left from that group. That was a long time ago.