RODMAN PUBLIC LIBRARY

PRESENTS…

Reminiscences of Cathie Bixler

April 17, 2008

Interviewed by Karen Perone

PERONE: Hello, This is April 17, 2008. I'm Karen Perone and I'll be interviewing Cathie Bixler today who is retiring from Rodman Library after 35 years of service. Okay, and we are here with Cathie Bixler and do you want to start us off by saying where you grew up and how you decided to get started in working at the library.

BIXLER: I grew up here in Alliance, Ohio. I attended Regina Coeli Elementary School, went to State Street Middle School and then from there to Alliance High School. I graduated in 1970. In the fall of 1970, I went to Franklin Institute in Canton. I took a programming course.

PERONE: That was a technical training school?

BIXLER: Yes it was. I was taking computer programming. I didn't really care for the programming, but through the programming course I did learn the skill of key punching.

PERONE: Okay, do you want to explain what a key punch is?

BIXLER: A key punch is very similar in operation to a typewriter except a card— I can't quite remember the dimensions—I think they were about 3" high and about 7" wide. It would feed through a machine and little chips would be punched out of that card as you typed and that card would be used in other machines—your first computers. So you were using those cards to put data into the computers.

PERONE: They were kind of similar to the voting machine cards that we had recently?

BIXLER: You know that's a good comparison. They were similar to that card.

PERONE: Okay. They had the little chads on them.

BIXLER: They did. There was a little wheel in the key punch and you put a program card on that and when the card would feed down, it would know exactly what fields to go to. At that time, I was ordering books for Rodman Library and also doing the payroll with those cards.

PERONE: And, the cards had to be typed every time you ordered books or did payroll?

BIXLER: Yes, each card would have the name of the book, the author, the publisher, the price—everything that's needed to order a book. We didn't have ISBN numbers at that time.

PERONE: Okay. So everything on the cards then was like author and title and publisher, that kind of information?

BIXLER: That's correct and it also had the department to where that book was ordered for. So whether it was ordered for the bookmobile or ordered for the main library or children's that was all on that card. When I began in 1971 we were also processing books for other libraries so that was also coded into that card.

PERONE: Well, what other libraries were you ordering things for?

BIXLER: When I first came, I think it was only Rodman Library and Minerva, but then a few years later we were ordering for, I remember, Louisville, I believe Cuyahoga Falls. I think there were like six--Salem. We were ordering for like six libraries.

PERONE: Wow.

BIXLER: So when we would order one title for us, we'd only have one key punch card and then it would be coded as to what libraries were getting that book.

PERONE: Oh well, that's interesting. I didn't realize that. Can you tell me about how many people were working in the data processing department?

BIXLER: It was two.

PERONE: Two people.

BIXLER: Yes, myself and Evelyn Flenniken.

PERONE: Okay and can you spell that name for us?

BIXLER: It was F-L-E-N-N-I-K-E-N.

PERONE: Okay, and what was her job in the department?

BIXLER: We both pretty much did the same work. So we would both key punch and use those cards then in both the collator—sorter and then we had the computer was called an IBM 407. It was a huge piece of equipment.

PERONE: I understand that they had at the time the data processing department was basically that whole west side of the basement floor.

BIXLER: That's correct, yes.

PERONE: And the machinery was pretty big?

BIXLER: It was big and it was loud. (Laughing)

PERONE: You had to wear ear plugs?

BIXLER: Well, not exactly, but it was…It could be very disturbing to other people; especially when we were running the sorter. It made a lot of noise.

PERONE: Okay, so you get the book order into the department and you punch the key punch to make the card for it. What would be the…follow us through the rest of that process.

BIXLER: Oh boy, I have to think about this. (Laughing) I believe after all the orders were done, after we had all the titles in, then that…those cards would be put into the sorter and I think we sorted them by publisher or jobber at the time.

PERONE: Okay.

BIXLER:: So then those cards would then be used to print off the order that's going to that jobber or publisher. So I am pretty sure that we sorted those either by...I think first of all by publisher, and then you could sort by title or any other field on that card.

PERONE: Okay, and then the orders…how were the orders transmitted then? Was something printed off to mail or…

BIXLER: Yes, it was.

PERONE: And you were nine years in that department?

BIXLER: Yes, I started in 1971.

PERONE: Okay.

BIXLER: I answered an ad that the library had put in the *Alliance Review* for a key punch operator so that's how I started in September 1971.

PERONE: Okay, and how did things progress during that nine years? I mean now technology just goes crazy, you know, with Moore's law doubling every couple of years.

BIXLER: We had that IBM equipment from 71—1971 to I think around 1980 before that equipment was replaced with something newer.

PERONE: Okay, and was that any smaller or is that still a big machine?

BIXLER: It was still a big machine, but it wasn't nearly as big or…We still used key punch cards, but a lot fewer. That information from the cards then went on disks which were sizeable; it's not like our little floppy disks of today. I mean and it was probably 18" in diameter maybe and several platters were on this disk and then they fit onto a disk drive which was considerable size not like anything we have today. In 1980, the new equipment was from Honeywell.

PERONE: Okay.

BIXLER: I do remember that.

PERONE: And you showed me a picture where you're standing next to this big machine that looked like it was about 3 to 4 feet tall and had a big door or something on it?

BIXLER: Yes, yes, that was our IBM 407.

PERONE: Okay that was the first machine.

BIXLER: Right. That was actually the first computer. That was the printer also. It had a large door—it looked like an oven. You pulled that door down with two hands and then you would insert a board that had circuits on it. And they were heavy. It took two hands to put that board in and then you'd close the door like you would close an oven door and you would do certain processes and then you would take that board out, put another board in. I believe for payroll we changed that board maybe four or five times. We changed it even more for the ordering of books, but we also printed the checks for all the materials that were ordered here for the library and did the payroll as well—did the payroll checks.

PERONE: That's amazing. I mean just thinking of how huge that was and how small computers are nowadays. It's just amazing. So then after your nine years in data processing you decided to drive the bookmobile.

BIXLER: I didn't decide to drive the bookmobile.

PERONE: Okay, how did you end up with the bookmobile then?

BIXLER: In 1981, my pregnancy was for twins and so I decided to take a year off and when I came back to the library they still had my data processing job, but they said it was no longer a full time job.Things were scaling back and that I was asked to work in the bookmobile department. I wasn't too sure how I felt about this and my husband thought it was very humorous that I would be driving a 26-foot plus vehicle, and that this bookmobile was stick shift.

PERONE: Had you ever driven a stick shift before?

BIXLER: No, that was part of his amusement that I was going to drive this huge truck and I didn't know how to drive stick so it ….

PERONE: So how did you learn?

BIXLER: Well, at the time Betty Jo Sutherin was the department head and she took me out to what is now Value City, at the time it was King's Department Store…

PERONE: ..With a big parking lot…

BIXLER: …Huge parking lot. We started out there. At the time there was—I think King's had gone out of business and so there were no cars. It was a huge parking lot so we started out there. She was teaching me the basics of stick shift and I think after two times out she asked me if I wanted to take the bookmobile back to the library.

PERONE: She was brave. (Laughing)

BIXLER: She was brave and I was brave too. So I said okay if you really think I'm ready we'll take this truck back and the whole time she kept saying, "Hug that center line. Stay away from those mailboxes." But, we got back here to the library just fine and as I approached the garage, I thought, well she'll take over here and take it on in and she said, "Oh, I think you can do this." I'm like, "Oh, I don't know." (Laughing) So I managed to get the bookmobile back in the garage and I turned off the ignition and when I went to stand up, my legs were like Jello and I thought, "Oh I don't think I like this," but eventually I learned to love it.

PERONE: Good, and now you're driving a how big truck?

BIXLER: It's 30-foot long. It's a 1986 Gerstenslager on a, let's see, I think it's a Chevy chassie and the truck goes—Gerstenslager was the company that made it. They were out of Wooster, Ohio, and that's where they had purchased their other trucks.

PERONE: And this is—how many bookmobiles have there been. Is this the fourth, third?

BIXLER: Not counting the trailer, this is the fourth bookmobile.

PERONE: Okay.

BIXLER: The trailer was a 1938.

PERONE: Okay.

BIXLER: And pulled by a DeSoto, as I understand it (laughing). And it wasn't until 1949 that they had their like self-contained bookmobile—more like a motor home.

PERONE: Okay, and do you have any stories about the bookmobile that you can share with us?

(Laughter)

BIXLER: Driving-wise or patron-wise or a…?

PERONE: Anything.

BIXLER: Okay.

PERONE: Anything that comes to mind.

BIXLER: I know when I first started and we would go to the schools, one little boy walked up to me and he said, "You're pretty," and I'm thinking well this might just work out okay. I loved going to schools. I loved being with the kids. That was a lot of enjoyment right there to be able to serve, especially the children at the schools.

PERONE: And anything in particular about driving a big truck that … I know that you have a bumper sticker that says, "Real Women Drive Trucks," or something.

BIXLER: Oh, that's on my desk. That's not on the bookmobile. It took me several months to really become comfortable with the driving. That was one of the hardest things I had to overcome. I loved once I got there and to be able to

work on the bookmobile and recommend books and do all the circulation procedures, but I was uncomfortable for quite some time driving, and I found out that even though that bookmobile was good in the snow and the ice it's just like any other vehicle, it's going to slide, but we had pretty good winters and the more I became comfortable with it, it was just another part of the job.

PERONE: And in the 26 years being on the bookmobile you've seen a lot of changes as far as technology is concerned too.

BIXLER: Oh, absolutely. We went from the old Gaylord card system check out machines to...

PERONE: Do you want to describe what a Gaylord check out machine--I mean the sound was kerchunk, kerchunk.

BIXLER: Yes, it was. It took a small little piece out of a card each time it was put in – you used the library card which had a metal plate...

PERONE: Okay.

BIXLER: And then you put in the book card which would stamp the number from the metal plate on to the book card so that's how we knew who had the materials and then a date due card was put in the back of each book in the pocket.

PERONE: And then from that we went to the Innovative system, but the bookmobile still wasn't online, right?

BIXLER: That's true. We had--I'm not sure if that's when we started with the Percons.

PERONE: I think so.

BIXLER: Okay? We had a little hand-held device and it recorded the person's library card number and it recorded the barcode from the item that they were going to check out.

PERONE: And if they didn't have their library card, they couldn't check anything out, right?

BIXLER: That's about the size of it, yes. If they didn't have their card, we weren't able to scan it and check it out.

PERONE: Okay. Then we finally got the bookmobile online, right?

BIXLER: Hallelujah! Wonderful! (Laughing) We were allowed to give--We were able to give full services then and let people know what books they had check

out, if they had anything overdue. Before that time, we were just kind of operating blind. We checked out materials. We checked in materials. If anyone asked us a question as to whether or not all their books had been returned, we weren't able to answer them. They would just have to wait for an overdue notice if their books were overdue.

PERONE: So the kids were kind of on their honor that they really only had, what is it, five items checked out at a time?

BIXLER: It was five items at a time. They--Yes, they were on their honor, but after awhile after the notices came out, we would know who had overdue books and not right away, might have taken several weeks for us to know and those we try and keep track of with just little lists of letting them know they had overdue books, but it really was an honor system and for awhile it worked pretty well, but it was marvelous being online and being able to do holds and do reserves online.

PERONE: So what is the technology that you're using to be online?

BIXLER: Okay, right not we're using an air card. It's very similar to the cell phones we were previously using and for the most part it works pretty good. There are certain areas we have difficulty in...

PERONE: Okay.

BIXLER: But, it's great. I mean it's fast. The equipment is small. We love it. When we get a signal, we're in heaven. (Laughing) And keep that signal.

PERONE: That's true. I know you get bumped off every once in awhile.

BIXLER: Every now and then there are some areas that we have difficulty in, but for the most part it works very well.

PERONE: And it's much better than it used to be as far as service.

BIXLER: Without a doubt, without a doubt, it is much better.

PERONE: And we're going to talk a little bit about the Homebound Service. Can you give us a little background on the Homebound Service?

BIXLER: Sure. The Homebound Service I know was in place in 1982 when I started in the bookmobile, and at that time, we just kind of worked it in whenever we could. We didn't have a whole day that we would do homebound service, but that service is for those folks that can't get here to the library whether or not it's someone that doesn't drive or they're temporarily disabled, maybe they've had surgery, and so they'd like us come for a short time. Then there's those folks who simply don't get out anymore so we take materials to them and we take

them on an extended loan. We deliver it to their home. We also serve the nursing homes and assisted living and in the beginning, I believe we had around 29 folks that we were doing this for and the service has become more widely known and we currently have 60 or more folks that we take materials to once a month and we now have designated Fridays as homebound delivery day and so that's when we make out deliveries, but behind the scenes we have several staff members that collect materials for these people. Some people may take only two or three items. We have some people that take 30 items. Some are just taking videos or are just taking DVDs.

PERONE: How do you keep track of all of that?

BIXLER: Luckily, we have a wonderful homebound module in our computer system that keeps track of all the materials that we've had or that we've given our folks and our staff then can look at that list through the computer, it's automatically updated when we check their materials in, and we take a look at that. Beforehand when we first take someone on as a homebound patron. we get a profile. We want to know what kind of things they like. Whether they're interested in only books or a combination of audio books, books on CDs are available to them, music CDs. Anything that we have here in the library is basically something that we can give them and so we keep track of that and we make a profile so that when our staff is pulling for items we know their favorite authors. We know whether or not they need large print or regular print. So we've got that little profile to refer to and then we keep a list of all the things, all of the materials that they've had, so that we don't duplicate them. Some of our folks don't care it they're duplicated. They like Tom Hanks and maybe they've seen Tom Hanks 25 times, but they want it again, so that's fine with us.

PERONE: Any good stories that you can share with us about, about any of your homebound...?

BIXLER: Oh, my...

PERONE: Without mentioning any names? (Laughing)

BIXLER: It's a real adventure. We've had some...Most of our folks are very nice, but you have to realize you're working many times with the elderly and they can become forgetful, they can become a little crotchety. Most of them are very nice. Some get very picky. Most times we just take the box and make a switch and other times the folks want to go through their box item by item and let you know what they like and what they don't like.

PERONE: Well that's good.

BIXLER: But, for the most part they're very happy and very appreciative of that service. We go out in all kind of weather. We're toting boxes when it's pouring

down rain. Of course, you can't put the boxes on a cart and hold an umbrella at the same time. So you're going out in all kind of weather and into homes that you know its..many homes in different situations. We've had folks that maybe we're the only people that they see for the whole month so maybe they ask us to take out their garbage or pick up their mail or put their pet out. We've also replaced light bulbs when its...

PERONE: Full Service operation.

BIXLER: ...When there is no one else to do it. (Laughing) Then we will take care of that for them too.

PERONE: Well that's good and it gives the library a good connection with the community too.

BIXLER: It think it does, yes.

PERONE: Is it always people who are elderly or are there times when there is just someone maybe younger who...

BIXLER: Well, most of our--most of the people who we serve are probably 60 and older.

PERONE: Okay.

BIXLER: We have a few who--we have one that's in her 30s, but she's not physically able to come to the library.

PERONE: But she's still able to use the services.

BIXLER: Absolutely. Absolutely.

PERONE: Very good. Good. Is there anything else you want to tell us about, I mean next week's your big week, you're retiring...

BIXLER: It is. It is. And I'll probably think of more things then but for right now if you have, if you don't have any other questions...

PERONE: Okay. I think we've covered just about everything. Thank you for joining us today.

BIXLER: Well, thank you for interviewing me.