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At 50-Year Mark, Law Library Futurist Betty Taylor Looks Forward, Looks Back

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Perhaps Minds should come with a Notice: "Will stretch greatly with use."

Professor Betty Taylor, J.D., internationally known library-automation pioneer, NERDC Policy Board member, and chair of the NERDC Instruction and Research Users' Committee, will celebrate a rare milestone in 1997 -- fifty years total service to the State of Florida! Before flying to Brazil for a consulting engagement last month, Professor Taylor spoke with /Update editors about her ever-expanding professional life.

Professor Taylor began her career with the state in 1944, working as a secretary for two-and-a-half years prior to starting college. Today, she is head librarian and director of the Legal Information Center at UF's College of Law. In the interim years, she graduated from library school in Tallahassee; worked at the main UF Library for six years while earning a law degree at UF; married and had two daughters; moved to the College of Law in 1956 as assistant law librarian; became head law librarian in 1962; and, starting with a hands-on introduction to mainframes in the 1960s, envisioned and championed the concept of the computer-centric law library to national and international audiences.

In June 1997 Taylor will be the recipient of the prestigious Marta Lange Congressional Quarterly Award for distinguished law and political-science librarianship. The award committee was impressed with Taylor's talent for melding law, librarianship and computers -- and by her "substantial record of sharing (her) knowledge and expertise through publications, presentations and committee service."

"NERDC and NERDC's users are fortunate to have a professional of Dr. Taylor's caliber and vision chairing the Instruction and Research Users' Committee," said NERDC Director Ron Schoenau.

"You have to have a certain amount of imagination," Taylor says of her role as a futurist. "That has been my place at the law school: to spark the interest and show the potential, then pass the reins to others (for implementation)." In March, when NERDC Network Services Coordinator
Dave Pokorney and CIRCA Director Mark Hale visited the Center to talk about UF's participation in Internet2, a planned 45-minute talk stretched to two hours as Taylor thought out loud, asked questions, and involved faculty and staff in pondering applications for fast, high-bandwidth data pipes -- networks capable of moving vast amounts of information quickly and reliably. The group discussed ideas including the electronic exchange of entire manuscripts for peer review, new horizons for digital libraries, and the simultaneous transmission of CD-quality sound, video and data.

"My first experience with computers was in the early sixties," Taylor said, "when I was asked if the law library could take advantage of unused computing cycles on a campus mainframe used by scientists and statisticians. I had the idea of indexing the Florida Bar Journal on a computer, and worked with Heinz Dinter, manager of what was called the UF Computing Center, to come up with a process. We went through the whole (design) process: setting up fields for author, subject, date, et cetera, and keypunching data onto (80-column Hollerith) cards."

"Soon after, one of our faculty members came looking for a subject to write about -- the 'publish or perish' thing -- and chose to write about the indexing of the Bar Journal. After the paper was published, he received a letter inviting him to speak about (the project) at an international conference in Geneva."

"I can't talk about this; all I did was write the article,' he told me. ' -- You should go talk to them."

"I made the trip to Geneva in 1967. I took a three-poster exhibit and a ten-minute speech. When I got there, the conference had been moved from a 100-person room to a 500-person hall, and there still wasn't enough room for all the attendees. Computing was a man's field; in that whole hall were only two women -- another person and me. The early speakers got carried away, and an announcement was made: the remaining speakers would still speak -- but speeches were reduced to two minutes."

Taylor left her speech on the table and walked to the podium.

"There I was, speaking to all these people. In the background, I could hear my text being repeated simultaneously in other languages. I got noticed. I was the only woman who spoke. People wanted to talk with me. I had lunch with a justice from Sweden and one from Australia. An Israeli wanted to put deeds on line, and spoke to me about that. I received recognition! I launched into computers and went to Rio de Janeiro for another conference. People kept asking me to give speeches and write papers, because I had a vision. I just knew where libraries were going, and the more I wrote and spoke the more convinced I became that libraries were to be fully automated. Early on, I started mixing in the law aspect as well."

"The 1970s were good financial years, and (I saw to it that) we were the first law school in the country to have both WESTLAW and LEXIS databases. It was unheard of to have both of these services. I was invited to speak at conferences where the other participants were professors, judges, and deans. Everybody else read papers; I went with slides, no script, and ad-libbed. I was being invited to be the humor on the agenda, I decided, but that was all right. People were listening to me. I photographed our dean at his desk with a (huge) mainframe terminal on his lap. I showed audiences this slide and told them this was the future: 'You'll be riding the bullet train with a computer in your lap.'"

"I read the literature, spoke often, and talked with vendors to see what directions they were headed, and how that might apply to law and libraries."
Taylor also joined the desktop computing movement.

"I bought my first computer, a TRS-80 Model 1, in 1978. It had 4k of RAM, and let you type into memory two full pages, double spaced. I upgraded through models 3, 4 and 12. I have bought numerous other computers since and many upgrades. Now, my two daughters have children, and I buy computers for them! At home, I have cast-off (machines) so when my grandchildren come visit they each have a computer."

Under Taylor's stewardship, the law library became the Legal Information Center, comprised of the library and two departments, Computer Services and Media Services. Currently the Center has 290 computers, all connected to the campus network. The center also has fifty 80486s which belong to LEXIS and WESTLAW, put in for student use. These machines will be turned over to the college in June and will be connected to the (campus) network. Many of the other machines however, are 80286s with 8MB of RAM, "so many of our students can't run Internet software like Netscape."

"One of the most exciting new uses of computers at the law school," Taylor said, "is teaching classes using the Web (to disseminate materials and provide interaction). I put the work for the class I teach on my NERDC account home page. Someone had to set an example, and that was I. Now, as we approach our second year of helping staff with Web pages, the Law Review and other journals want a home page."

Taylor said, "I think students should understand, that with all that's being done with technology on campus, they should not fear that a technology fee wouldn't be used to their benefit. We really need to upgrade the law school library (for example), to provide better Internet access for them.

Meanwhile, the accelerated pace of change and automation brings its own challenges.

"It is just overwhelming," Taylor remarked, "the amount of literature that's coming through, just on paper -- about the things you can do with automation!"

"Almost every day new issues will arise. For example, some books now arrive with a CD-ROM disk in the back. What should we do -- store the disk with the book, store it separately and check it out with the book, or require the CD to be checked out separately? And, when we're dealing with floppy disks, should we copy them for safekeeping, and make duplicates available? We are duplicating information. In some cases, it is in three formats: print, CD-ROM, and online. Hardcopy storage capacity at the Legal Information Center is now at 92 percent, so more and more we are moving to online information. But then we must rely on publishers to maintain this information. What if we get rid of hard copy, rely on online, and a publisher becomes overwhelmed by the size of the databases that have to be maintained? Will the publisher start archiving the databases (making them much less accessible) or even deleting the data? And where will that leave us? Publishers also don't want to lose their print market, so some of them are requiring us to buy books as well as CD-ROM versions (when we buy titles that are available in both formats)."

As technology moves ahead faster and faster, the role of futurist becomes much harder.

"What will the virtual library of the future actually look like," Taylor asks, "-- a mix of print, video, and online access? We all feel this crunch of uncertainty about the future. Are we going to be a place for communication or research? I don't know. Things are happening so fast I can't visualize what will happen in ten or twenty years."
In a 1995 interview, Taylor predicted that university users would expect academic institutions and providers like NERDC to offer instantaneous and simple access to the data world at a low cost. Has progress been made in this direction?

"NERDC, through the Florida Center for Library Automation, is moving ahead with a digital library, and the University is making great steps -- ISIS (the Integrated Student Information Service, available from a Web interface) is a major stride. This is my professional life, and it is really exciting."

Your Comments are Welcome

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