Interview with Elinor Swaim

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by *Thomas Kevin B. Cherry*

About Elinor Swaim ...

Elinor Henderson Swaim began her work with libraries in 1946 when the Asheboro Public Library Board asked her to write a radio show to celebrate that library's tenth anniversary. She soon joined the Asheboro board and served on it until 1962, becoming as she has laughed, a "fly on the wall" at state-level discussions regarding issues such as public librarian certification and suggested salary levels for librarians. Moving to Salisbury, NC, she became a grassroots organizer for the then quickly growing Republican Party in North Carolina. Her political work led to appointments — and she always asked that some of them be library-related.

She joined the Rowan Public Library Board of Trustees in 1979, serving as trustee chair from 1984-87. In 1986, she led Rowan County's first successful bond referendum effort in 25 years; the drive was for a new library headquarters building. Appointed to the North Carolina Library Commission, she chaired that body from 1985-1989. She became a member of the United States National Commission on Libraries and Information Science in 1988, and was elected the Commission's vice chairman in 1990. From 1993 until 1994, she was the acting chairman of the Commission. While on the National Commission, she took special interest in library and information services to Native Americans. In 1987, Swaim served on the National Planning Committee for the Second White House Conference on Library and Information Services.

Swaim has served on the North Carolina Governor's Commision on Literacy and Basic Life Skills, the Alliance for Math and Science, and NC 2000's National Education Goals Committee. She has been a member of the Presbyterian Synod's Committee on Colleges and Universities, was a delegate to the First National Congress of Church-Related Colleges and Universities, and was the first woman to serve as a trustee of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA. She has been a trustee of the North Carolina Symphony Society and a board member of the North Carolina Arts Council, helping to establish the Association of Symphonies of North Carolina.

Swaim, a member of the first graduate class in Health Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was one of the first health educators in North Carolina. In 1988, The North Carolina Public Library Directors Association gave her its Distinguished Service Award. In 1995, the North Carolina Library Association made her an honorary member. In 1996, the American Library Association Washington Office honored her on its 50th anniversary celebration, and in 1997, the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science gave her its silver award on the occasion of that body's 25th anniversary.

For more than fifty years, Elinor Swaim has worked for libraries. With her rambunctious wit and quiet determination, she is a tireless campaigner and always among friends— that's because it doesn't take long to become a friend of Elinor's. Making friends is her talent, and she has put it to good use, especially in the political arena. Noting her family's history, she laughs, "I've been interested in politics for many generations. My great, great grandfather was in the legislature, and three of his sons. And one of his sons was the first Secretary of State of the Republic of Texas and a member of Congress." Libraries have benefited greatly from Elinor Swaim's genetic disposition.

NCL: We're going to talk with Mrs. Swaim about one aspect of her many-faceted career as a ...

ES: General busy body.

NCL: As a mover and a shaker. What's your earliest memory of a book or a library?

ES: Well, I was a reader growing up. And my favorite thing to do was to go away and hide somewhere with a sandwich made of bread and tomato catsup, have you ever? That was the Depression and there probably wasn't much to make a sandwich of, but I would sometimes climb up in a tree or somewhere with a book and read and read to my heart's content.

NCL: What was the first library that you really got active with, worked with?

ES: Well, my whole life has been filled with accidental, pre-destined events, and I truly believe there is a wonder-

ful Providence or a good angel, or somebody, leading me around. Because most of the good things that have happened to me have been totally unplanned, unsought, and wonderfully serendipitous.

I went to Asheboro after World War II with my husband. I had been working as a health educator and had a weekly radio program in Fayetteville in the Fort Bragg area where I was assigned during the war. I was working in venereal disease control. My theme song was "Some little germ is going to get you someday." People in Asheboro learned that I could write a radio program, and the second program that I was asked to write, other than some that I was doing for the Health Department there, was the Tenth Anniversary Celebration of the Asheboro Public Library. Before television, the way that people celebrated was to get a special radio program on the local radio station. So, we wrote one about the way the Asheboro Public Library was formed. A group of young women there met to play bridge, and they decided they would form a bridge club. The more they talked about it, the more they realized they would rather form a library. So, they went around door to door and collected books, and secured a place for the library up over the drugstore that was operated by one of the important men in town. And the volunteers actually operated the library themselves.

NCL: So where did you go after you left Asheboro?

ES: We left there in 1961 or 2; and came directly to Salisbury. I was not connected with the library in Salisbury, although, my mother lived on Bank Street, and I was in and out of the library. I guess I must have gotten back into the library by way of politics. I got into politics for love, and politics opens doors for people. Almost every interesting job that I have had has been related to politics. I've always thought that politics was not a bad thing because it's related to people. The reason that I became active here in Rowan County is that we had such a lively group of people at that time, who were among the first local elected Republicans, and they happened to be our friends.

NCL: Were you a Democrat before you came to Rowan County?

ES: No, I was a Democrat before I got married. And so was everybody in North Carolina, almost. I remember my father bringing me to the window to see a Republican go by in Catawba County. I got into politics because a Baptist proposed to me. There are several things that are very important to me — one is being a North Carolinian, having been here on both sides for so many generations. It's really a sense of place for me. I cannot imagine living in any other place in the world. And neither could I imagine being a member of any church that was not Presbyterian. So, when the Baptist proposed, I said, "Well, I can't marry outside the Presbyterian Church." And he said, "Well, that's all right, nobody in my family ever married a Democrat. You can become a Republican, and I'll be a Presbyterian."

The importance of being active politically, is that if you do certain work, and you help to elect certain people, then they want to reward their friends. Almost all of the interesting appointments that I have had, have come by way of politics.

NCL: Do you remember what kind of things you did for your first campaign?

ES: Well, I wrote radio spots. And traveled around and spoke to groups about Phil Kirk. But, mainly, my early work in politics was organizing precincts and doing grassroots work — and raising money for his campaign.

NCL: Do you remember your first speech.

ES: I remember the very first speech I made as a health educator. It was to a large PTA meeting, and it had to do with the health of the child, and I fainted right on the stage while I was making the speech and had to be carried off, feet first.

NCL: Tell me about your campaigning for Rowan Public Library's bond referendum.

ES: I meant to bring something that I'm going to give you for your archives sometime. It's just a page out of a calendar, a big calendar that I had stuck on cardboard and written down all the places that we were going to give programs. I believe I counted 65 programs. We went to small senior citizen groups and churches. We went to fire departments, to volunteer fire stations, to any kind of a gathering that would listen to us, to talk about the library. We had a list of all the organizations in the county, and we wrote and asked them if we couldn't give a program. And you know, a lot of groups are looking for a program ...

NCL: Was it an exciting time?

ES: Yes, it was a slenderizing time, too. I lost ten pounds. We were so busy that we didn't have time to eat. We went to a lot of eating events. I remember standing in one of the senior clubs in a church in Landis or China Grove. We were all standing around and holding hands and singing the final hymn. This charming, older man next to me was, I learned, the father of one of our leading Democrat activists in Rowan County. When we said amen, I said, "I'm going to go back and tell your son that you were holding hands with a Republican." And he said, "Honey, that won't surprise him. I married one."

We focused that campaign on the idea that the average homeowner would pay $3.20 more taxes each year to get the headquarters library— "for the cost of a pizza," you can have that wonderful new library.

NCL: Why didn't you ever run for office?

ES: I guess I didn't have time. Or maybe, I just had to stay in one place too much. I never really particularly wanted to run for office. I'd rather elect other people and enjoy the spoils. But that idea followed me all the way to helping elect governors. There were so few Republicans in those early days that when Governor Holshouser was elected, I was invited to be on several different boards, but I couldn't make up my mind what I wanted to be on. That's how I happened to be on the North Carolina Arts Council. Because the first board, if I had known then what I know about it now, was the Archives and History Board, and I turned that down. Then they offered me a couple of other things, and finally the secretary of Cultural Resources said, "Elinor, I'm going to offer you one more thing. If you don't do it, you're not going to be on anything. You have to be on the Arts Council. That's what's left for me to appoint you to."

NCL: How did you meet all those people who made appoint-

ments, etc.? In what capacity would you have met them all?

ES: Because of the activities of my parents, I met a lot of people in North Carolina who were "movers and shakers" when I was growing up. People like Albert Coates, and Frank Graham, and Justin Miller, and folks like that would visit our home. My mother taught at Greensboro for several years and knew every Chancellor at UNCG, except Dr. McIver, the first president.

We were talking about appointments, and that's how I got on the State Library Commission. And I really didn't know then what I should do. But, I did know that when Governor Martin was selected, and somebody from his appointments office called and asked if I would like to be on the Council on the Status of Women. I said, "No, I don't care a thing about the status of women. I would like to be on the Library Commission, depending on who the chairman is." They said, "Would you like to be chairman?" And I said, "Yes." So, I did not know very much, and I have always depended on the professional librarians to tell me what to do.

NCL: Tell me how you got on the National Library Commission.

ES: Let's see. Because I was a politician, I began going to Washington with library leaders every Library Day in order to visit our congresspeople. I knew some of them, and that's why it was a good thing for me to do.

NCL: What would you do when you visited the congresspeople?

ES: You make appointments ahead of time on Library Day and hope that they will be in—frequently, they are not in their offices. You meet with the staff person who would deal with library issues and give your spiel about why we need federal money, and why we need federal aid, for the states, in library development. But the way that I got on the National Commission — I was up there lobbying, and they had an event at the Library of Congress. The Chairman of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science made a speech. I had never heard of such a thing as the National Commission on Libraries, and on the way home (I was riding with the Assistant State Librarian, Howard McGinn and with John Welch) I said, "Have we got anybody on that Commission from North Carolina?" They said, "No, we did a long time ago, but we haven't anybody now." And I said, "Well, we ought to. We're the best state library in the country, and we're not on that. I believe I could get on that. I know some people in Washington who make the appointments."

A really good friend of mine was working, at that time, in the Appointments Department in the Reagan White House. I had been on the National Board of Republican Women for about 10 years, and I knew a lot of leading, important Republican women across the country. I had known her for a long time, by three different names — long enough for her to have been married several times. I just called her and said I would like to be on that commission. You know, I had first called the commission, and they said, "Oh, that's very hard to get on. Why don't you apply to be on the group that's planning the White House Conference?" I said I didn't want to be on that — I wanted to be on the commission. They told me there was no vacancy on the commission. And I said, "Well, just put my name down." Within about 3 weeks, somebody resigned from that commission and they called and asked me if I wanted to be on it. Sure enough, it didn't take but a couple of months to get on the National Commission, whereas, some real solid library people like Jean Simon, Paul Simon's wife, worked for more than a year. She wrote all these letters, got a lot of recommendations, and was so thrilled when her efforts finally paid off; because she loved libraries and she knew she could do a lot for them. But, I just sort of went in the back door, the way I have always.

NCL: How were you chosen to help announce the Year of the Young Reader?

ES: Well, there's a very important man who's been in Washington many, many years named Bill Cochran. I roomed with his sister in college, and he married the daughter of my first cousin, so I have known Bill Cochran since college and since he and Terry Sanford ran the Graham Memorial while they were in Law School. When he saw my name on the list of people for his Senate Committee to approve (his committee oversees the work of the Library of Congress and all the relations of the government with the Library of Congress), he said, "Well, I'll put my friend from North Carolina, on that." So, there's a reason for everything; and it's not always because you're real important.

To become a member of the National Library Commission, you have to be investigated by the FBI. That was so funny. Two men came to Salisbury and stayed almost a week investigating me. They talked to all my friends, and they asked questions, like, "Would she embarrass the President?" And all my friends said, "Yes, she would dance with a glass on her head." Apparently, they didn't see

Barbara Bush and Elinor Swaim at Library of Congress 20th Anniversary of The National Library Commission. Barbara Bush was recognized for her literacy work; Elinor Swaim was chair of the event. Photo by Chad Evans Wyatt, Washington, D.C.

anything harmful about that. My first appointment did not last too long, so they came back and investigated me again when I was re-appointed by President Bush. That time an FBI man came to my house. He said, "The last time we investigated you," (he had a stack of papers, several inches thick), "a lot of people told us that you would embarrass the president by dancing. What is this about a glass on your head?" I went back in the hall where I had a picture somebody had taken of me with a saucer and a cup and a beer bottle and candle in the beer bottle all balanced on my head. I showed it to him, and I said, "If you could do that, wouldn't you do it?" The truth of the matter is, my head is flat on top, and I don't have any trouble balancing things on it.

NCL: You visited the Oval Office during Reagan's term — right?

ES: I would like to tell you one little story about that visit to the Oval Office. I had been attending meetings where the President spoke, and I saw him from a distance. And I was in Washington for a briefing when the speech writer and some of the people who planned his schedule told us about his upcoming trip to Russia. I asked the President's speech writer if he would try to insert some of the lines from "Ulysses," my favorite poem. I thought Reagan could do that so well. "Come my friends, 'tis not too late to seek a better world. Push off and sitting well in order, smite the sounding furrows for my purpose holds to sail beyond the stars of all the Western Seas until I die." He was then the oldest President that we've had, and I just could imagine how he would sound saying that in his waning months of office. And I told the speech writer that I wanted that in one of his speeches. And then, a few months after that, I was in Raleigh at the State Republican Convention when the news came on. It was President Reagan, giving his speech to the British Parliament. He closed saying, "And as your poet said, 'Come my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world.'" I was so excited when I heard that, I just couldn't believe it. I had tears streaming down my face.

When I got to the Oval Office a couple of months after that, the members of the Year of the Young Reader committee all went in, shook hands with the president, and had our pictures made individually with him. We gave him a tee-shirt for "The Year of the Young Reader." He signed the proclamation, and the Librarian of Congress said a few words, and the Secretary of Education said a few words. And Mr. Reagan said, "Well, I am glad to sign this; because I was a young reader ..." Everybody stood around, and it got to be real quiet. Nobody said anything. So I spoke up, "Well, I knew that you were literary when I heard you quote from 'Ulysses' in your speech to the British Parliament." And he said, "Weren't you nice to remember what I said?"

NCL: What is your secret behind building and maintaining a network of people.

ES: Well, of course, in any kind of work that you do, the important thing is the people and the friendships, I think. That's the main thing that's interested me, in every field that I've worked in. The wonderful people that I worked with on the Board of the North Carolina Symphony, like Paul Green, and people that I wouldn't have missed knowing for anything in the world. The same is true of the library people; you get attached to certain folks. That's why I have had so much fun going to Library Day. I'm very fond of a lot of the people who are in the Congress, and very close friends with some of them.

NCL: I want to know what your lobbying technique is. When you walk into a Congressman's office, what do you do?

ES: Well, if the congressman's there, he'll say, "Well, that's just Elinor. But there she is again." The reason that they want me to go on these trips is because the congressman know me, and I know them. And I have had close associations with them for a long time.

NCL: Do you just come out and tell them what the issue is?

ES: That's right. I have lived in the same house for 35 years, and in the last few years, I've been in three different Congressional districts — without moving. You know how in North Carolina, everybody is connected to everything. When I was in the 8th District, my congressman was a Democrat. His administrative assistant was married to the daughter of one of our dearest employees at Carolina Maid, one of our ladies who helped run everything there. There's always a close connection. Like Bill Cochran, even if he's the leading Democrat, he is still my college roommate's brother, my second cousin's husband; so you can't escape the ties that you have back home. And I've always had those, with the Democrats and the Republicans.

Elinor Swaim & husband, Bill.

NCL: Just Elinor's Web. She spins it everywhere. What do you think is your proudest 'library moment'?

ES: There have been a lot of them, a lot of them connected with my Indian friends. One was when I saw my Eskimo friend who was the last Native American to race in the Iditerod. I had known him in Washington, where he had been all dressed up in his three-piece suit, helping me in the White House Conference. And then, I saw him in his fishing clothes — his parka and everything — in the Eskimo village and speaking the Yupit language. I saw the tears stream down his face, when we came, and he couldn't believe that I had come there with the National Library Commission. That was a real moment of pleasure for me.

NCL: Do you see an increasing or a diminishing role for folks like you, sort of library advocates and activists?

ES: I think you will always need cheerleaders and people who love to work for libraries. I can't imagine not needing all the help we could get, especially in the legislature. I love to write to my friends in the legislature and in the Congress about library subjects. It's just a real joy to be able to use your connections, and hope that you do a little bit of good.