



Interview with John Livingstone

Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
125 Symmes Drive, Manalapan, N.J.
Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

Date of Interview: March 13, 2000
Name of Interviewer: Rhoda Newman
Premises of Interview: Mr. Livingstone's home, Ocean Grove, NJ
Birthdate of Subject: November 6, 1926

Ms. Newman: Mr. Livingstone is presently the State Librarian of New Jersey, and was formerly the Director of the Monmouth County Library. When did you first come to Monmouth County, Jack?

Mr. Livingstone: Well, I came to Monmouth County as a kid, actually. My parents bought a summer home right here in Ocean Grove: 32 Heck Avenue. It was known as the Livingstone, and we had eighteen rooms. This was back in the early 1940s, the World War II period. Of course, everything was a lot different in those days. We were here in the summertime, we got to know Ocean Grove by coming here for vacations at a place on Embury Avenue the next street over. My parents liked it so they bought the Heck Avenue place, which is still there.

Ms. Newman: Where did you live the rest of the year?

Mr. Livingstone: In Philadelphia. We were among the few Philadelphians who came to North Jersey, actually. And I really got to enjoy Ocean Grove as a kid. I worked in the casino in Asbury Park during the summer; I worked in the Sampler Inn one summer as a bus boy - we were right across the street from the Sampler Inn, which, of course, is still there. I can still remember going in the casino. They had a ballroom on the ocean side, and they had a big band there on the weekends, and probably during the week, I can't remember how many nights



**John Livingstone,
former director of
Monmouth County
Library, 1989**

during the week. I can still remember one man as though he were there today: a bald headed guy who was a terrific jitterbugger. He used to enter all the jitterbug contests, and I couldn't even dance in those days. I used to sit up there and enjoy the music. It was a lively area then. Asbury was in its prime, really, with the big hotels all over the place. In fact, the father of a good friend of mine who has a meat market in Loch Arbor was also in the meat business, a butcher, and he tells me that he used to come into Asbury Park in the summertime with a truck and just go from hotel to hotel dropping off tons of meat in each one of these places. There were a dozen or more big hotels -

Ms. Newman: The hotels all had dining rooms.

Mr. Livingstone: They had dining rooms, yes. At Berkeley Carteret, they used to have an open garden area where people would sit and eat and drink in the evening. I can remember peeking through the fence listening to Tommy Tucker's band. Those kinds of bands were here in those days. And the Paramount Theater, which is still there, was a nice place in that time. WJLK was on the boardwalk at Convention Hall. You'd walk out over the ocean and there was the studio WJLK. I remember that.

Ms. Newman: You came each summer?

Mr. Livingstone: We came each summer, yes, but we sold the place right after World War II. After I got married, Marlene and I used to come down here sometimes in the summertime, but I didn't get down here again, really, for a long period until 1968 - when I came here to become the Monmouth County Library Director. We were living outside of Philadelphia then. By that time I was married and had four children.

Ms. Newman: Where had you gone to Library school?

Mr. Livingstone: I went to Temple University and then to Drexel. But it was a long time between Temple and library school because I was doing other things.

Ms. Newman: Librarianship is a second career for a lot of different people.

Mr. Livingstone: Right. Actually it was fourteen years before I went to library school.

Ms. Newman: What made you decide?

Mr. Livingstone: Well, believe it or not, I had an Atlantic service station for ten years on Roosevelt Boulevard in Philadelphia in the Northeast section, a very busy place. It was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year, and I was just getting worn out. It was tiring. I quit doing that work, and a good customer of mine, who was a teacher in New

Jersey, suggested that I look into librarianship. And I said, "What are you talking about, librarianship for a man?" "Yes, yes, we have some in our school system, they're paying better salaries, you can afford -" So I went down to Drexel and took a course at night. It was the worst course I could have possibly taken, for me, anyway. Cataloging. And I knew nothing about any of this stuff. Somehow I muddled through that course and I said to Marlene, "Well, if I'm going to make a change, I better sell the business and go full time. Because if I keep the business, it will take six years, I can't take that many courses, I don't have the time. By that time I'll be too old to do anything." So that's what I did. I sold the business, went to Drexel full time and started, strangely enough, working at the State library in Trenton. It was my first library job, in 1965. I was older than anybody else who was starting, and I had a family, so I was very, very gung ho. I would have done anything. I didn't know what I was doing, but I worked on the Reference Desk, and that phone couldn't ring twice because I'd grab it and I had no idea what I was doing, but I was determined; I had to learn and I had to learn in a hurry. So I guess Roger McDonough, who was then the State librarian, must have liked that attitude, because he came to me and said, "We're starting a reference referral service," and he explained what it would be. "Would you like to head it up?" and I said, "Absolutely." It was a service offered when local libraries couldn't answer the reference question. They would call me as reference referral. I would guarantee to answer their question in twenty-four hours or get back to them and tell them what I was doing. So it was a great opportunity. I would either fall on my face and everybody would say, "He's no good," or people would learn about me right away because they would be calling me from all over New Jersey. And that's how I heard about an opening here in Monmouth County. The director was going to retire and her reference librarian suggested she call me and see if I would come down for an interview, which I did, and I got the job. That's how I wound up here in Monmouth County. In those days, the county library was much different than it is today.

Ms. Newman: What year was that?

Mr. Livingstone: That was 1968. I came here in July. The Eastern Branch was just being completed in Shrewsbury. In fact, it opened in October. The Eastern Branch was the first real public library building in this county that was up to date. We had some real old buildings but nothing of recent vintage had been built. So it was a show place. The headquarters of the county library was in Freehold, the county seat. That's where most county libraries are located. We were in a big old house. We had hundreds of thousands of books packed into these rooms, it was amazing how many books they got into that place. Then we had a garage across town where we kept another collection of books because we had a department there that loaned the books to what we call member libraries. These are libraries in the county that pay tax support for the county system. So we would send them any book they requested plus hundreds of books that they could keep on their shelves for months and months, and then we'd go back and change the collection when they wanted to - that kind of thing.

Ms. Newman: Did you serve the public as well?

Mr. Livingstone: Oh, yes, we served the public out of this big old house. As I say, this was at the time Eastern Branch was being built. For example the children's library was just a collection of books in the garage, and in the wintertime that garage was cold, let me tell you. We had a space heater in there, but no kid would ever spend much time in there, I can tell you that. And there was no place to sit, because it was a garage with books in it. We had two bookmobiles, and they were ancient, and I still remember the first or second day on the job.



**Library Quarters
80 Broad Street, Freehold
1940-1971**

We always had trouble starting those things in the winter, and that day one bookmobile wouldn't start, so sure enough my gas station experience came in handy, and next thing I knew, I was putting parts and that sort of thing in this bookmobile to get it going. We had two bookmobiles, we had headquarters, we had Eastern Branch, and then we started a branch system going. And now, of course, the library system has ten branches and we have a new headquarters library in Manalapan instead of in Freehold. I should mention before that we moved out of that Freehold house after several years to an empty building about two blocks away on Broad Street in Freehold, and this empty building had at one time been a Pathmark supermarket. Pathmark had gone out of there because they couldn't make it, and the town had made it into a teenage hangout called the Hullabaloo. Then, for whatever reason, the town stopped supporting it, the kids got mad and set the building on fire, and when we looked at it, it was a mess. The roof had huge holes burned in through it, it hadn't been occupied in quite a while, and the steel gutters were bent and whatnot, it looked awful, and there was water on the floor. But we had no choice; the Freeholders said, "You need more space, that's what we're giving you." So the county renovated it for us. It had a meat locker in the basement which we used to stack books. If you could have seen that place! We had wooden shelving down there, packed with about one hundred fifty thousand books. Couldn't be a worse place to keep books; it was always damp, and the lighting was poor. The building was eight thousand square feet, that's all; it was not big, but it did have a larger area than what we had been used to in the house two blocks away. It was still small, the staff were shoulder by shoulder, so you got to know everybody pretty well.

Ms. Newman: How large a staff did you have?

Mr. Livingstone: I guess we had maybe thirty, thirty-five people, something like that in that building. We were under Civil Service. As you probably know, your choices are sometimes very limited as to who you can hire. They have to be on a list. If you're not happy with that list, that's just too bad; somehow or other you have to commit to those people who all want the job. Many times you hire when no list is available. Then a list comes down from Trenton that you didn't know

about. The person already in the job can be bounced by a person on the Civil Service list. I had to develop techniques to protect the person already in the job. One of the techniques was to show these people the basement. They used to laugh in the Technical Services Department when I'd walk through the department and go down these stairs into the meat locker with these people. They'd laugh, shake their heads, and say, "Oh uh, there's somebody wants a job," and I'd go down there and show them all these books down there and this dank semi lit room, and I'd say, "You can see we've got a space problem here, this job requires shifting these books." And most everybody would say, "Oh, I'm not interested." And I'd say, "Fine. We'll keep you on the list, just sign here and say that you're not interested in this job." So that's the way that meat locker used to work to protect jobs. The infamous meat locker.

Ms. Newman: And were the kinds of requests you got very different from what you had been dealing with in Trenton, or was it rather the same? Or did you have different clientele?

Mr. Livingstone: We had different clientele. What I got in Trenton was usually a more sophisticated reference request, because the local library had already worked on it. Of course here it was different. We dealt with a variety of people who came into the libraries. Of course we had the usual crush of school assignments.

Ms. Newman: Well, the 1960s were obviously before computers.

Mr. Livingstone: In fact, they were tough days. The county wasn't doing a whole lot to fund us, and I used to have to go up to the Board of Freeholders and argue about raises for my staff, and the trouble in those days was that members of the Board of Freeholders knew most of the people in the county, and they knew a lot of people working for me. Some of those Freeholders had the idea, "Wow, this is so and so, and her husband's got a good business, so what does she need a better salary for?" It was that attitude: the woman doesn't need the money anyway, it's a second income type of thing. And many times, as you know, that's far from the truth. But even if it was the truth, it has nothing to do with doing the job. Budget time used to be a real interesting time. It became a problem to get a little increase in the budget for my staff, and ultimately that kind of attitude on the part of the Freeholders in those days lead to unionization. I'm convinced it led to unionization in the county; it certainly helped to stir our staff towards unionizing so that even to this day we have in the county system Civil Service and unions, so in a sense you've got an interesting management puzzle to solve all the time because you want people to do what you want done, you want the best people, but at the same time you're dealing with the union, and then you're also dealing with Civil Service, which is on top of that. When we moved, we maintained the garage on Marcy Street. People worked on the first floor or the second floor. The first floor was just a big warehouse type of thing, and in the summer it was blistering hot, because there was no air conditioning. I remember an incident with

Sam Venti, who was one of my bookmobile drivers and also a maintenance man, and a real fine guy who could fix or build anything that you asked him to do. The county had been getting ready, prior to my coming there, to move a big collection of books over to the Eastern Branch before it opened in October. When I happened to go over in late July on a blistering hot day to check the packing and found hundreds of boxes with the books thrown in them in no order. It was a total mess. So I called Sam Venti and said, "Sam, come over here, we've got to rig something together here, and you and I are going to spend the night putting these books in order." Which is exactly what we did. We packed them and marked each box, and we had every box properly marked and in order when we moved the whole collection over to the Eastern Branch. I would say aside from the opening of the Eastern Branch, one of the most important things that happened for us in the library was when I started the jazz series. We never had any kind of meeting room space, or anything like that until we had the Eastern Branch, but that meeting room is quite small, holding about eighty people.

Ms. Newman: What gave you the idea of the jazz series?

Mr. Livingstone: Well, I was always a jazz lover, but just a fan; I didn't know any musicians or anything like that. At that time there was a radio station in Long Branch that had a jazz show. Art Vincent was the MC of the show, "Art Vincent and the Art of jazz." He had a call in time, and I guess I must have called in and requested something, and one way or another he and I seemed to hit it off and I got to know Art Vincent. Art was an angle man, and he was always playing some kind of an angle, and he said to me that he had a musician acquaintance, Al Main, who was from Philly, as a matter of fact, who taught jazz guitar at Burlington County Community College. Al had some unusual musical theories that he wanted to present in concert format and he didn't know where to do it. And out of the blue I just said, "Why don't we use the library?"

Ms. Newman: What year was that?

Mr. Livingstone: This must have been in 1972 or 1973. The Eastern Branch wasn't open on Sundays, and I said, "Look, he can have it for nothing because the library's there, it's closed, it won't cost me anything to open the doors, I'll be there, I'll come over there, so we won't have any staff to worry about, but he'll have to provide the musicians, because I don't have any budget. If he can provide the musicians, I'll get a stage from somewhere, and we'll use the big reading room of the library as a concert hall." And so I met Al, and he said, "Yeah, great, I'd love to do that. Don't worry about the musicians, Jack, I've got plenty of musicians, they're all good, I'll come with an eight or ten piece band. It's a great opportunity for me, I want to present a few of my musical theories." Well, I'd never done this type of thing before, but I knew enough to know that I didn't want him to be too cerebral in his presentation. I said, "Al, don't forget it's a public library, it's not like Burlington County Community College, if these people learn something, that's great, but they're primarily going to come to be entertained. So

don't preach too much about the musical theories because people won't care." And that's how we got started. My two oldest boys were in high school at the time, and the three of us went over to the library the night before, took books off shelves, picked up the shelves, moved them over to the perimeter of the room, and opened up the whole room. I got Mr. Parriot from the music department of the Asbury Park High School -- he's still playing the saxophone -- to lend me the risers from Asbury Park High School, so we had a stage, and then we set up chairs like an auditorium. Well, we packed the place! And I didn't have anybody there that anybody had ever heard of. The unfortunate thing was Al Main didn't take seriously my admonition not to talk too much about his musical theories and he brought a blackboard and he went on and on and on and the next thing I knew people were walking out. So I was at my wit's end. I passed up notes, "Start to play, start to play." To top it off, the trumpet player was coming from Philadelphia, and he got lost, so we were delayed in starting the concert. At any rate, we had a terrible program, but it had been a great idea. So the question was, "What can we do from here?" I didn't know. Al Main did a couple more of these things, none of which was as successful as the first one, as far as getting people in. None of them were that great. One day my wife Marlene and I were in a watering hole in Spring Lake and Kenny Davern, one of the finest jazz clarinetists in the country was playing there. He lives in Manasquan. I went up to him and introduced myself, and I told him what I had done, and I said, "I'd love to do another jazz concert, but I don't know what to do." He said, "I'll bring a quartet over to the library and play." I said, "Well, Kenny, I can't get you very much money." "How much can you get?" I said, "Maybe a couple hundred dollars." "I'll do it," he said. He named some musicians he would bring, and they were musicians whose records I have been buying for years; I couldn't believe it. So he came with a quartet, again we jammed the library, and it was a fantastic afternoon. I had found the key. I knew right away I had to do something else besides jazz, because a lot of people have this feeling that jazz is rock type music and you're going to have problems and that sort of thing. They don't understand that it's not that at all. I've had occasions when one of the Freeholders came to one program because she was told we had to be careful of all these people who were coming to these jazz concerts. Well, she got there and she saw all these sedate middle age people sitting there clapping. That's all they were doing. They were too old to do any harm, even if they wanted to. So from then on she was a great fan. Then we started a classical concert series, and one Sunday a month we had a classical concert. Morey Berger, my Assistant Director, booked those. I booked the jazz concerts, and we had one concert a month on a Sunday afternoon. Then we started an author series. We had one of those a month. And then we would have ethnic programs, and we had one of those a month. So we started all these programs, and we had that library humming every Sunday afternoon. It took a lot of time, but we did this for many years. We started in 1973 and kept it up year after year after year, never missing a Sunday. People would say to me, "Oh you love jazz, that's why you're doing it." Well, believe me Rhoda, I love jazz, but my family would have been happy to see me on a Sunday. I was never home on a Sunday, I was always working, every

Sunday I did this for, I guess, twenty years, worked every Sunday. Then foolishly, I expanded it even more. My son, Steve, was interested in old movies, and we became a state designated regional film center, which is *the* state designated regional film center. So we had a lot of these old sixteen millimeter movies at the library. And Steve loved those things, so he would borrow a projector and show them at home because he wanted to see the old movies. We were talking one night, and I said, "Well, Steve, why don't we start a movie series at the library?" He was in high school, but he knew a lot about movies. "You can introduce these movies, Steve," I said. "You know more about them than I do. And we'll put together this series, we'll pick out the movies, and let's see who comes." So we started what we called "Friday Night Flicks." So every Friday night Steve and I were at the Eastern Branch showing old movies. This was a great experience for him, because he'd get up in front of the group and talk about the movie, or the actors in the movie, or the producer or the director, and that sort of thing, and people really enjoyed it. Well, from that we developed a loyal following of forty to fifty people who for years attended Friday Night Flicks. Steve eventually abandoned me when he went off to college, but I kept it going. I had people who came there every Friday night for ten years. They got to know one another. We had such a good time because I would kid with them. We became a family. They knew more about the movies than I did. I used to do a little research before I came over on a Friday afternoon, and I quickly learned that they loved to learn any gossip, so any gossip I could find about one of the stars, or the director, I would relate. They would correct me if I was wrong, and I would kid them, saying "You have no right to correct me, I'm the instructor." We had a walk-in closet, and we knocked a hole in that closet and put the projector behind that hole and projected on the wall with a screen. We had to put it in a closet because these projectors made a lot of noise. So I learned something: if you're going to put on a program, you've got to do it in a professional like way. Just to put a projector in the middle of the room, with all the noise that thing makes, and then show a movie on a screen and not pay attention to how it's being projected, maybe it's too low for people in the back to see, won't work. Attention to all these little things makes a professional show. People will stop coming if it isn't done well. So we always kept two projectors, because that way I can go from one to the other very quickly and without a break, and I'd rewind the first projector after switching to number two. Most libraries had just one projector, and you'd have to wait while they take the reel off, and then maybe they'd wait while the switching was made. That's going to do it, not in this day and age. So there were those kinds of things that I learned. The other thing I learned, and I'm leading up to a point here, I learned to schmooze with the audience. It's one thing to put on a concert or a program, people come in, of course all of our programs were free, because that is the Public Library philosophy, come in, see the program, and leave. But I would walk up and down the aisles, I'd talk with the people, I'd kid with them, it was like they had come into my living room, they were my guests, that's always the way I felt about it. So it was more than just a jazz concert or a classical concert, it was an experience of a friendly welcoming place to be. So my argument for libraries was always this: everybody has sort of a warm feeling

about libraries, nobody really is against libraries, but there's no real what I call "Little League Enthusiasm" about libraries, or very limited anyway, and what programming brought to Monmouth County was "Little League Enthusiasm." The Board of Freeholders couldn't care less what my book collection looked like, they had no interest in that, and I knew that. They're interested in votes. And I can understand that if I was a Freeholder I'd be interested in that, too. So when I invited them to come to the Eastern Branch on a Sunday, and they showed up, of course I put them right up on the platform, told the audience what great people they were, how they funded these programs that we had here, and they saw five hundred happy people in front of them. Nobody was asking them any tough questions, they were always happy. Now what could be better publicity for the library? I'd introduce Ted Narozanick, who was very loyal to the library, and it got to be a kidding thing, "The Great Ted Narozanick, he's done this for the library - ", and he'd come up and say, "Jack Livingstone is the finest library director in the United States." It was all baloney, but I'd say to Morey, "That's a million bucks in our budget next year, what happened right there." And I actually saw people come up--I saw this happen on more than one occasion--people came up to Ted Narozanick and said, "Mr. Narozanick I'm voting for you, my whole family is voting for you because Jack told us to." Just like that! Now how could he ever say no to me?! He couldn't, and he wouldn't. We're still great friends to this day. So I was pushing the library in that way. That's the way I felt most comfortable pushing the library. So programming became a budget item and I used to refer to it as the engine that drives everything else in this library. I could get a great book budget, I could get more staff, I could get all kinds of things simply because those programs made the library very visible to the Board of Freeholders. Also, to the county administrator, the county treasurer, and people like that. So I could really get almost anything I asked for after a while. But it didn't happen overnight. It was many, many years of being there every Sunday, every Friday, for these programs. It's not an easy thing to do, but it can be effective if you're willing to do it. I always laugh at people who do a program and it's successful and they sit back and relax and they're very pleased, and I say, "Well, are you ready to do it again next Sunday, and then the Sunday after that, and will you still be doing it every Sunday five years from now? Then you have a reason to feel pretty happy about what's going on, if you can do that." Then Morey Berger came up with the American History series, and I loved that series because I love American History. He used to get great authors to come in, such as Stephen Ambrose, who just wrote the best selling book on World War II. He also wrote the biography of President Eisenhower. We had one after the other: Richard Current, who was a famous biographer of Abraham Lincoln, who finished the G. Randall biography of Lincoln after Randall died. We had people like Donald Goldstein, who finished Gordon Prange's book, *At Dawn We Slept*, about Pearl Harbor. We had Joyce Carol Oates and Isaac Asimov and David Eisenhower - people of that caliber.

Ms. Newman: And you had good turnout for these?

Mr. Livingstone: The biggest turnout came, and still does, to the jazz programs. I was never happy with the turnout for author programs, but we would get thirty to one hundred people, depending on what the subject was and who was speaking. David Eisenhower brought a big audience out. So we had all of these great programs, and it was very interesting to see the people who would come. Generally they were older. World War II was, and still is a hot topic with my generation. We had one evening program on World War II when a retired Episcopal priest who wrote about the US Navy in the Pacific talked critically about Admiral "Bull" Halsey, and after he was done, somebody got up on the far side of the room and said, "Sir, I want to compliment you for telling the truth about that no good drunken bum, Halsey." And somebody on the near side of the room got up and said, "I take issue with that statement, sir." And I thought for a minute that we were going to have World War II all over again, and then I realized they were too old to do any damage anyway. We had those kinds of things happen. In the meantime, we were building the branch system. We added branches in Ocean Township, we added branches in Wall Township, Marlboro Township, Holmdel, Allentown, and Hazlet.

Ms. Newman: Why does the county also have several Township libraries that are not affiliated with the Monmouth County Library System?

Mr. Livingstone: We had about fifteen towns that had their own independent libraries, but they still chose to support, by tax money, County Library system. Funding for county libraries is a very strange animal. For example, residents of towns that do not offer tax support to the County Library system can use the facilities of the county system, but if they want to borrow something, they have to buy a library card. A lot of people get upset by that, not completely understanding why this should be, but the law is written in such a way that a town can always remain out of a county system if they're not happy with the cost and with the services. So you walk a very fine line in trying to provide a different level of service to those towns because some support you, and some don't support you.

Ms. Newman: How did you decide which towns to set up the branches in? Was that by popular demand?

Mr. Livingstone: It was by a lot of different things, generally it was by economic necessity. The old story. For example, right after I got here, the Mayor of Holmdel would bad mouth the county library system constantly. Holmdel had a little library that was independent, but they paid taxes to support us, and the person there hated the county. He called me one day and said, "We're thinking of pulling out of the county system, I just thought I'd let you know." I said, "Well, look, could I meet with you and talk this over?" And he said, "Sure." He was David Cohen, a real fine man. And right away I worked out a branch proposal. I knew I wouldn't keep them in the county system any other way, so I sat down with him. I said, "Look, we'll make you a branch, we'll put in a professional here, you don't have one here now, we'll bring in a children's program, you don't have a children's

librarian now, we'll provide you with more books than you have now, we'll provide a book budget to help you save money." And so he went for it, and he took a lot of criticism from people who felt that we were driving out the person who was the township resident, that sort of thing, but it worked out very well. They then built a library in the municipal center, and they're still a branch, and they're still very pleased with it. That was many years ago. So it was that kind of thing. You had to balance off needs of the library with service, and you can't give any service if you're not in business, that was my feeling, so some of the branches came about because of that type of thing.

Ms. Newman: You remained as County Librarian until when?

Mr. Livingstone: I retired from the county library in 1991.

Ms. Newman: Computers?

Mr. Livingstone: Oh, computers, yes. Oh that was interesting. Actually, when I first came here back in 1968, all the librarians were locked in a room upstairs in that big old house I described, underlining with crayon, color pencil, whatever, different parts of each library card, each catalog card, the main card, subject -

Ms. Newman: Were they done manually at that time?

Mr. Livingstone: Yes. At that time, we did everything manually. So we wanted to have a book catalog that could be computerized, and we used IBM cards, these big IBM cards. The county had purchased a computer, and it filled up a whole room in the county offices, and they needed justification for buying that computer, so one of the ways they justified the expenditure was that the county library would be using it for printing up book catalogs.

Ms. Newman: This was around 1970, would you say?

Mr. Livingstone: I came here in 1968, and we were starting to get ready for this. So we were way ahead of the curve on things, and it was a mess! We had a period of time at the Eastern Branch when we literally had no catalog; it was like a gigantic book mobile. You had to use *Books In Print* to find anything, you can imagine, that was not an easy life for those people there. I used to work every Tuesday night on the reference desk, simply to keep my hand in and to understand what was happening, and I used to learn a lot more in those few hours of Tuesday nights working there than just walking around and looking. But this working without a catalog, or with a book catalog, was really difficult, because what happened with the book catalog, of course, was you constantly have to print supplements to keep it up to date. So people would be looking in three, four, five places if they wanted to find out what we had. The computer, of course, was very slow. The County was going to do it all. Well, it turns out the County had no idea what to do. For example, the first book catalog we got from

the county was not in alphabetical order. They couldn't figure out how to put it in alphabetical order. What we learned, we learned the hard way. We didn't know enough to ask the right questions. We found that with this computer, punctuation would come in between certain letters of the alphabet. So if you had a period in the card, it might come between M and N. So that would throw the whole alphabet off. It was really a mess. On the recommendation of one of my commissioners, we hired someone, Bob Maier, a young man who was very sharp, and he straightened us all out. It took a lot of work on his part. He got permission to get a key, and he'd come into the county offices in Freehold and literally spend the entire Saturday night running these cards off the IBM machine because the county had other things like voter registration lists and so forth that had top priority. We were bottom priority, naturally. So everything we did was always late. So he would do this for us. He used to tell me about the American Hotel facilities, which is where he would stay. It was a pretty primitive hotel. He'd sleep on the computer sometimes while it was grinding away, pumping these cards out, little by little, all night long. That's how we got started, we had the book catalog for years and years, then Bob Maier put together an automated catalog for us before anybody else had any of these newer more sophisticated systems. They are just now replacing it - it should have been replaced sooner - and the new system will do a lot of things that this system can't do. That was the introduction to computers for us.

Ms. Newman: Did the staff adapt to it?

Mr. Livingstone: They hated it. Everybody on the staff hated the book catalog and I couldn't blame them, I did too. And yet we had no answer, we were married to this darn thing. The catalog cards were gone, and nobody was keeping that up to date anyway, so everything was going into this book catalog which we had for years. It was awful. It was a tough period; somehow we weathered it and kept going. And of course, now with computerization so modern and the way everything's changed, all that's just a bad memory at this point.

Ms. Newman: And the public got used to the book catalog?

Mr. Livingstone: Nobody ever liked it, I think, but they were forced to like it, unfortunately. But this system just kept growing by leaps and bounds. The use that we would get, and now even more, was just unbelievable. And, of course, when we built the headquarters in 1986, much of the push for that building was because of the people who came to our programs. They complained they didn't want to drive a half hour from the Western part of the county for these programs, we needed a library out there in the Western part of the county. So that became the cry, and with the help of the Friends organization that we had, who worked with me, hand in glove, and my Library Commission, we got the then Mayor of Manalapan, who was smart enough to know that Townships have no center to support us. He said, "I want Manalapan Township to have something special that will separate it from other Townships." And he knew that we were talking about

moving out of Freehold. "I'll give you eighteen acres of land in Manalapan if you'll build a library within two years." The Freeholders were smart enough to grab that offer. The new building was eighty five thousand square feet. At the time we built it, it was the largest public library in the state. It had a separate area for programs and concerts and meetings and that sort of thing, which the public insisted on. You had to have it. So now they've expanded it. They just added thirty two thousand square feet last year, so it's an immense place, packed with people all the time. I should also mention, going back a little bit, in Freehold, when we were still in the supermarket, the roof always leaked. It was a flat roof, it never stopped leaking. And when I say leaked, I mean BAD leaks. And I can still remember waking up New Year's Day, many years ago, and it was pouring rain. My family lived in Ocean Township and I said to myself, "I'd better go out to Freehold just to see if everything is alright out there." So I drove out to Freehold and I opened up the door and I could hear rushing water as I opened the door. The whole library was under five inches of water. It was pouring through the ceiling as though there was no ceiling. I went to the basement and got all these plastic tarps, threw them over the bookshelves, but we lost hundreds and hundreds of books. I called our Buildings and Grounds Department and said, "You better get over here right away 'cause I'm going to be drowned if I don't get this thing fixed right now." So they worked all day New Year's Day to stop those leaks. We threw out gallons and gallons of water all day long. It was awful.

Ms. Newman: Were you able to preserve any of these things?

Mr. Livingstone: No, we threw dozens and dozens and dozens of books out. It would have cost us too much money to try to preserve them. We tried to save them. Some we could, but many others you just couldn't do anything with. And then also for years, a number of years, while we were waiting for the new library in Manalapan, we'd run out of space. So we still owned the house, and we used the house as a backup resource where we packed books away that, to all intents and purposes, were unusable because nobody could get there. None of the public could get there. So we had to live with those kinds of situations at times until this library was built, and then it changed everything, of course.

Ms. Newman: A dream come true.



John Livingstone pushing

Mr. Livingstone: Yes, but it was also a very difficult transition. We had been living cheek by jowl, in eight thousand square feet on one floor, and people could turn to their neighbor and say, "I'm behind on doing this, if you're not busy at the moment, would you help?" Or you would say, "I can see you need some help, I'll help you out." Now people were on maybe different floors over 85,000 square feet. All those little things you took for granted, you couldn't take for granted anymore. Now we had a communication problem to deal with that we had never had before. So with all the complaining about the old place, it had certain advantages that we had to make adjustments to when we moved into this new place. But move we did.

bookshelves into place before the grand opening of the headquarters, 1987

Ms. Newman: It sounds very adventurous. And you had good clients.

Mr. Livingstone: When we opened the Library, it was like we were giving out World Series tickets. As a matter of fact, it was in January, and we had a blizzard that day; we even closed the library in the afternoon, the snow was so bad. But people were pouring through the doors in the morning as soon as we opened. It was a great opening, and it's been that way ever since. The circulation now I think is hitting a million a year in just that one building, which for us was unthinkable years ago, anything of that sort. So for us that was a lot of use. It's been a bargain for the County from the very first. It's been a great thing for the County.

Ms. Newman: You retired in 1990 after twenty-four years. Did you just feel that it was time?

Mr. Livingstone: Yes, I just thought it was time. I was sixty-five and I'd been doing this now for a long time, and the new building was built - I didn't see any real challenges there. I could run the darn thing with my eyes closed, and I didn't want to do it that way. It was time for somebody with new visions, new enthusiasms, to come in instead of me doing the same thing over and over again. So I just thought, "I'll retire." And I did.



John Livingstone (center) with county Freeholder Theodore Narozanick and chairwoman of Monmouth County Library Commission, Renee Swartz, 1989

Ms. Newman: But you didn't stay retired for long.

Mr. Livingstone: Well, I intended to. I didn't intend to go back to work. I stayed retired for three years and started doing some other things. I started swimming and that kind of thing. I started teaching an evening program. I taught the History of Jazz at Brookdale, and I did a seminar on The Duke Ellington Orchestra, and the History of Jazz here in Ocean Grove, and things like that. And then I got a call from Renee Swartz, who was the Chairperson of my commission while I was at the County Library and

also the Chair of the Advisory Council to the State Library. She said that the state librarian was being asked to leave, and would I apply for the job on an interim basis. I said, "Are you kidding? I'm not interested in the State Library job. I don't really want that job." But she kept after me for a couple of weeks, and then the Deputy Commissioner of Education, who I didn't know, called me and said, "Come for an interview, even if you're not interested, just come for an interview." And even though I wasn't interested, I got the job. I said I didn't want to drive to Trenton, so he said how about three days a week. And I said, "Okay, that's not as bad." But I knew when I said it that you can't do this job three days a week. So I took the job, and of course I was working five days a week right away. And strangely enough, I liked it. I really did; in fact it's the best job I've ever had. But I'm at the stage again, where it's time. I've just completed another phase, and it's time for some new ideas, a new person, a young person -

Ms. Newman: How does the state library differ from the county library?

Mr. Livingstone: They are very different. There are plusses and minuses in each, but they are much different. The State Library, first of all, is special; it's like the Library of Congress, where you worked. It's a special library with a special collection geared for state employees, the legislature, and so forth. Genealogy is one of our features, and that kind of thing. So the library itself is one thing. And then we also operate the Library for the Blind and the Handicapped across town from the State Library which is on State Street, just adjacent to the museum and half a block from the state house. Then also we devise grant programs for public libraries. We exert some leadership in developing new concepts to help public libraries, and that's how we got involved with technology and started to get a state plan to make sure that every public library in the state, no matter how small, no matter how poor the town, has hardware PCs, up to date Pentium computers, the knowledge and the training to understand how they work and how to show people how to use them. And then has free access to the Internet - rapid, good, dependable access to the Internet. And that's what we've put together with the State now. We've got ninety percent of the libraries hooked up now.

Ms. Newman: And that's all done with state funds.

Mr. Livingstone: That's been done with a variety of things; it's been done with state money, it was done with a grant that we were able to get, a bond issue that we were able to get for five million dollars for technology for public libraries, and it was done with the help of Bell Atlantic, who provided the routers and the modems for all the public libraries that needed them in the state, plus the fifteen hub libraries. We've set up hubs as centerpieces to provide the access to the Internet. The routers required to do that cost about eighty thousand dollars a piece. Bell Atlantic installed those free of charge in all fifteen hubs. So they were a big part of this. It was a cooperative thing, in that sense. And we also built on the resources of the local community, too, because the state is never going to have the money to do all this by itself. So that was our concept - sharing

resources, sharing the funding, and making sure that we had equity, that we had as much as possible equality in all the libraries of the state for this aspect of library service.

Ms. Newman: And this aspect of sharing, that's true with books as well, isn't it? Interlibrary loans, for instance.

Mr. Livingstone: Yes, exactly, and now we're putting into place the electronic library loan system where we have what we call "Virtual Statewide Database." This means that through the software of the system, a library staff member can sit at a computer and search many collections in libraries around the state to find a book in an instantaneous searching of five to eight libraries at a crack to locate the book that they need for a patron in their library.

Ms. Newman: And with all of this changing, you must have had a large training budget as well.

Mr. Livingstone: We never had a large budget for anything, to tell you the truth.

Ms. Newman: But you needed one.

Mr. Livingstone: We could use one, yes. We are lobbying for money now, of course, we always have been. But, strangely enough, I've been of the theory, and I would never say this to anybody in politics, but it's sometimes better not to overwhelm us with money, because we waste it. Not deliberately, but simply because with the government, if you don't spend it, you're going to lose it. It's just the way the system operates. Sometimes we don't know enough, and as you know, in technology, a lot of people are still learning, because it changes so quickly. If you don't know enough to have a real sensible operation planned, sometimes it's better to be able to start a little slower and try some things out, maybe on a smaller scale that is more manageable, make sure that you're satisfied with that direction, and then go from there. While we certainly needed money, and Bell Atlantic made a big difference, we've never been looking for millions and millions and millions of dollars the way the school systems are. They have money coming in through their ears, and they don't know what to do with their technology, and you'll see a lot of schools around the state that aren't using it very wisely because they just don't know yet how to use it. But they have to use it, so it's an expensive way of doing things.

Ms. Newman: But the library system has been effective.

Mr. Livingstone: Been very effective. I think we are one of the first, and we still might be the only one, I don't know, that has built a technological infrastructure across the state to see that public libraries have access to the Internet and have command of materials that are worth viewing, such as full text periodicals. Through this periodical service, people are able to get the latest information from

over twelve hundred journals from their computer, both in the library and at home through this system; this is at no cost to the public. We are working with state government money and in a statewide fashion to get a very effective use of that expenditure in funds. Bell Atlantic tells us we're saving public libraries a million dollars a year in technology Internet access by the system that has been put together. Their engineers helped design the system to insure that we have an effective way of doing this. So we feel very confident that we've got a system that can meet today's needs, and if we have to go in a different direction tomorrow, since nobody can predict what will happen, we will be able to do it. What we've done in these past few years will have been effective and will have been worth it to the public. So we're in that stage right now where we're able to begin to think about some new initiatives, but I'm not sure what they'll be. And that may be why it's a good time for somebody else to come in - someone who knows more about technology. I know nothing about technology, I've learned just enough to be dangerous.

Ms. Newman: But you have the user's viewpoint, don't you?

Mr. Livingstone: I have the user's viewpoint to a degree, and I learned you don't have to be an expert in technology to put something together and get it going, to get people working on it. Let the experts handle the nuts and bolts and work those things out, which is the way we've handled it here, and it seems to have paid off.

Ms. Newman: And as for yourself, what new directions are you looking for?

Mr. Livingstone: I'm not a very good planner, and don't look forward too far.

Ms. Newman: You've come a long way from that first catalog course, haven't you?

Mr. Livingstone: Oh, yes. A lot has happened since those days, sure. A long way from the days when I was in the service station and working for Atlantic Refining.

Ms. Newman: And as far as Ocean Grove, you came here as a child and then -

Mr. Livingstone: Then I moved back here after my wife passed away. I moved back here and Ocean Grove was kind of mixed at that time. The situation was such that many people told me, "You're crazy to go to Ocean Grove: there is a halfway house situation and all of that." It is certainly different. The hotels were no longer able to operate as hotels, and some of them were halfway houses, and



**Mr. Livingstone
receiving the New
Jersey Library
Association's 1989
Library Service Award**

that sort of thing. But I happened to find this place, and I liked it and took a chance, that's all. And I'm glad I did, because Ocean Grove is obviously coming back. I think we're on the right path.

Ms. Newman: Well, thank you very much; it's been an interesting interview.