Bulletin of the AAS • Vol. 53, Issue 2

Ruth Steinmuller Freitag (1924–2020)

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¹The New York Times

Published on: May 24, 2021

DOI: 10.3847/25c2cfcb.82c40969

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Isaac Asimov was enthralled with her and wrote her a limerick. Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan wrote in their introduction to “Comet” (1985) that “one of the most pleasant experiences in writing this book” was meeting her. Numerous other science writers acknowledged their debts to her in forewords to their books.

Ruth Freitag, a reference librarian at the Library of Congress for nearly a half-century, was unknown to the general public. But she was, in more ways than one, a librarian to the stars.

Known for her encyclopedic knowledge of resources in science and technology, Ms. Freitag (pronounced FRY-tog) was sought out by the leading interpreters of the galaxy. She developed a particular expertise in astronomy early in her career.

Her learnedness became so comprehensive that she opened up new worlds to Mr. Asimov, the pre-eminent popular science writer of his day, and Mr. Sagan, the astronomer who introduced millions of television viewers to the wonders of the universe.

“She was absolutely the go-to person for getting manuscript material and books,” David DeVorkin, the recently retired curator of astronomy at the National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institution, said in a phone interview.

Ms. Freitag died at 96 on October 3, 2020 at a nursing home in Falls Church, Va., where she had been living for 11 years. Her death went largely unreported at the time,

Ruth Freitag in 1985 with the crowning achievement of her long tenure at the Library of Congress: an illustrated, annotated bibliography on Halley's comet. Photo Credit: Library of Congress

announced only in a [short obituary](#) by the Charles E. Snyder funeral home in Lancaster, Pa., where Ms. Freitag was born and raised and where she was buried, with military honors. Her friends at the Library of Congress were unaware of her death.

Constance Carter, a longtime colleague, visited Ms. Freitag last year just before the Covid-19 pandemic shut down nursing homes, then lost touch. She finally looked her up on Google this spring and came across the obituary.

In a way, Ms. Freitag was her own analog version of Google, providing answers to a wide array of queries from writers and researchers in astonishing depth and detail decades before computers and the internet transformed the research process.

“Ruth was known for her ability to find a needle in a haystack,” Ms. Carter said.

Her strong suit was compiling epic bibliographic guides and resources. Her notable subjects included the [star of Bethlehem](#), the [flat earth](#) theory and [women in astronomy](#). But her crowning achievement was her illustrated, annotated, [3,235-entry bibliography](#) on [Halley’s comet](#), replete with citations of books, journals, charts and pamphlets, as well as references in fiction, music, cartoons and paintings. It was indexed and bound and published by the Library of Congress in 1984, just in time for the celebrated comet’s last pass-by of Earth in 1986. Even the Halley’s Comet Society in London called Ms. Freitag for information.

“These bibliographies would take months and even years to do,” said Jennifer Harbster, head of the science reference section at the Library of Congress. “It wasn’t like you just found a title and put it in your bibliography. She would annotate it all.”

She also compiled bibliographies on general-interest topics, including presidential inaugurations and whether a new decade or century is considered to begin in the year ending in zero or the year ending in 1. Ms. Freitag, along with other authoritative sources, firmly believed that they begin on the 1 — that the 21st century, for example, started in 2001, not 2000, despite the many celebrations to the contrary.

As the third millennium loomed, she assembled a pamphlet, [“Battle of the Centuries”](#) (1995), with lively quotations about the dispute over the ages.

“Bibliographic work may sound dull at first,” she told an internal Library of Congress publication, *The Gazette*, in 1990, “but it can really grow on you, to the extent of becoming a vice.”

Ms. Freitag spoke several languages and knew all the proper accents to place on words — “all the unusual ones for whatever language she was writing in,” said Brenda Corbin, the former head librarian at the Naval Observatory. When computers first came along, Ms. Corbin said, Ms. Freitag “wasn’t happy” that they didn’t have accent marks, which meant that she couldn’t write correctly. “She was meticulous.”

Ms. Freitag often helped researchers with their writing.

“She was one hell of a copy editor,” said Mark Littmann, the former longtime director of the Hansen Planetarium in Salt Lake City, who researched some of his popular astronomy works (including “Planets Beyond” and “Totality: Eclipses of the Sun”) at the Library of Congress.

In describing Ms. Freitag’s relentless quest for precision, Dr. Littmann noted for example that while many people would say that the sun’s corona was white, that was not exact enough for her. “I prefer ‘pearly,’” he quoted her as saying, “because it conveys a luminous quality that ‘white’ lacks.”

Ruth Steinmuller Freitag was born in Lancaster on June 8, 1924. Her father, Albert, an immigrant from Germany, was a purchasing agent for a Lancaster lock company. Her mother, Lina (Steinmuller) Freitag, his third wife, was a homemaker and an expert seamstress.

Ruth’s love of libraries — and history — manifested itself early. In 1941, when she was in high school and won a trip to Washington, according to a front-page article in The Lancaster New Era, she “almost persuaded the chaperones to let her spend the evening in the Library of Congress rather than the theater.” She wanted to read about Andrew Johnson, the impeached president, who had always fascinated her.

She attended Pennsylvania State University, where she spent two years in a biochemistry program, then switched to liberal arts and majored in history. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1944.

Although World War II was almost over, she joined the Women’s Army Corps in June 1945 and spent three years in China. She then joined the Foreign Service, serving for four years as a communication specialist at the American Embassy in London and two in Hong Kong.

After her father died in 1950, her mother joined her in London, and they lived together until her mother died in 1977. When they left Hong Kong, Ms. Freitag and her mother

traveled all over before moving to California.

“She was a woman way ahead of her time,” her niece Mary Ann Zittle Robson said in an interview. “The fact that she joined the Army and took off for China — young ladies didn’t do that in 1945. And for two women to be traveling, alone, around the world in the 1950s — that was incredible.”

Ms. Freitag with Isaac Asimov, one of her many admirers, on an astronomy-focused cruise in 1980. Photo Credit: Library of Congress

Ms. Freitag earned a master's degree in library science from the University of Southern California in 1959. The Library of Congress recruited her that year as part of its elite program for outstanding graduates of library schools. After six months of

training, she joined the library as a full-time employee and stayed until she retired in 2006 at 82.

She is survived by two other nieces and a nephew.

Ms. Freitag's writings and compilations on astronomy and space began appearing in the 1970s. She was a member of the Historical Astronomy Division of the American Astronomical Society and enjoyed attending conferences and visiting observatories and libraries all over the world.

On an astronomy-focused cruise in 1980, she had dinner with Mr. Asimov and others. He was famous for writing limericks, and on the spot he dashed off a racy one for her:

*Said a certain young damsel named Ruth:
"I sit here enjoying my youth!
Between Isaac and Peter
What need for a heater?
I'm burning with love! That's the truth!"*