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Adventures in Librarianship-Desperate Ax

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I received an email query several days ago from the U.S. embassy in Kenya. They're trying to rebuild their small, uncataloged reference collection, destroyed by the bombing of 1998. As you might imagine, their want-list includes some old, obscure, "gray lit" of the governmental and semi-governmental breeds. As you might also imagine, I'd like to help the Nairobi Embassy rebuild in any way possible. I'd like to place all my imagined virtues at their disposal: my years of tracking down the obscure, my understanding of the out-of-print marketplace and government publications, my devotion to aggressive service. Then I took a good look at the list.

Have your eyes ever glazed over from trying to read long strings of acronyms? I had a hard time focusing. I checked to make sure that these were English citations. Yep, the acronym-laden titles were peppered with "and" and "the's" and the occasional "agency" or "conference."

Then there were the vague titles like Voting Handbook—no author, no imprint, no date—titles that could have been published by any county, state, federal, or international agency from now back to 1776. And the Anti-Fraud Handbook, again without a hint of source or date. I imagined the most obscure vest-pocket, gutter-stapled pamphlets, perhaps products of Roosevelt's WPA, impossible to find or replace.

So, what to do.

First things first: I clarified as many citations as possible on OCLC. Then I bit Books in Print for those that might possibly be current. Then there was the grab-bag of online resources—the out-of-print sites, GPO and other Web catalogs—and when you are truly desperate, straight Web searching with titles as phrases. I felt a bit like a structural engineer inspecting an old building for restoration. You shine the flashlight in the darkest cracks, brush some ancient dust away, jab the walls, climb up and down and back up again and say to the customer with a deep sigh, "well, we can do this and we can do that, but the other thing? Can't be done."

Though it's probably true in any career, after a decade or so in the business of acquisitions, you like to imagine there's not much you can't find, or (for the truly long-lost) that you can't officially pronounce dead. When someone hands you a list where, despite your most imaginative searching, half of the titles remain not only unfound but unidentified, that feels a bit like failure. "Well," you say to yourself, "I'm no magician. I can't make those things materialize, especially when I've got so little to go on."

True enough, but isn't that what you really want? To be the magician? When that call comes in asking you to purchase Jane Wildwoman's new History of Ashville County, you'd like to respond, "ya know, when I saw that title in last month's Dingus Review I thought of you and bought a copy. They just finished cataloging it and the circulation delivery ought to be reaching your office right about... now!"

I think we'd all like to take those (romantically named) desiderata lists and make the dreams come true. We'd all like to take the flimsiest citations from our patrons and say, "yes, I know exactly which book you mean." And there's a little taste of failure when we can't.

Looking at the Nairobi Embassy's list, scratched now by my red-linked question marks, I took a deep breath and began to type a reply. "...this one is available... that one is out-of-print... as for the rest, unfortunately..."

And I'm tempted to add, by way of apology, that I'd like to make his walls, his shelves, his books and newspapers reappear. I'd like to turn back time and erase his tragic loss. But I'm just an acquisitions librarian.