Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — The 2006 Charleston Conference

Column Editor: Bob Nardini (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

One more Charleston Conference has come and gone — the twenty-sixth annual early-November confluence of librarians, vendors, and publishers upon this distinctive southern city. Attendance was up, as it usually is. Why, after this many years, do people keep coming back? And why do so many newcomers find Charleston?

Not that people don’t gripe about Charleston. Like any conference, Charleston draws its share of criticism. Unlike American Library Association meetings, though, where the default complaint is everything wrong with that particular ALA locale, this option is off the table at Charleston, where the namesake city is a big reason to go in the first place. Instead, the standard knock on Charleston is, “It’s gotten too big.” Even when delivered in the most heartfelt spirit of complaint, though, that’s at the same time a compliment, proof in itself not only that people do come back, but that they spread word to others. Still, a complaint nevertheless.

“Too big” is of course a relative term. Is Charleston too big in relation to other conferences? Well, surely not the ones where size really does matter. You could take everyone who’s ever attended a Charleston Conference, count them up, and you’d still have a number well below what you get for a single large ALA. You could take everyone who attended this year’s Charleston, march them into a ballroom at 6 PM at any one of the official ALA conference hotels, hand out drinks on the way in, and what you’d have would look like a reception you couldn’t tell from six or seven others occurring that very hour. You could take all the vendor giveaways from this year’s Charleston, drop everything into a heap on the King Street sidewalk in front of the venerable Francis Marion Hotel, and it would be a molehill compared to what could be foraged from the vendors occupying maybe three aisles at the ALA exhibits.

Is Charleston too big in relation to itself? Meaning, to Charleston past, where legend has it that the earliest conferences were held with a dozen people, or maybe it was two dozen; or was it three? In any case it was a small number, everyone knew everyone, name badges served no purpose, debate and discussion were wide open, and nobody got to bed at a decent hour, what with nightly opportunities for dining, drinking, and dancing, revelry and camaraderie sustaining everyone until it was time, much too early the next day, again to take up the Big Issues in library collections and acquisitions. Probably things were never as ideal as that. But today every library conference, Charleston itself not excepted, competes with the legend of Early Charleston. It’s a legend known even to Hollywood. In the 1995 Parker Posey film “Party Girl,” when one librarian-character snidely says, “She gets to go to all the acquisitions conferences,” what else could she have meant but Charleston? ALA, do you think?

Charleston is certainly bigger than it used to be. This year there were about 1,000 attendees. Not long ago everyone marveled that registration had reached 600 — better pin on that name badge. Old Charleston hands don’t seem to mind that the conference has grown to this size. They seem energized, in fact, by so many new faces. It’s the relative newcomers who sometimes complain, those who’ve not

continued on page 76
issuE in Vendor/Library Relations
from page 75

gotten used to coming back to find the conference grown larger, and who might wish they had grown out of that time. It’s easy to say, but difficult to practice.

Is Charleston too big in relation to its space? Now, maybe we’re on to something. The conference is anchored by the Littey Conference Center, a facility since closed by its owner, the College of Charleston, leaving the conference unmoored. Home base ever since has been the adjacent Francis Marion Hotel, always a venue integral to the conference and one perfect in that supporting role, with a wide light-filled lobby providing just the space to meet dinner companions or business contacts; a café steps away where coffee, fresh juice, or a snack were always available, served up by reliably efficient, multiple-pierced student-workers from the nearby campus; or best of all, the Swamp Fox Bar, downstairs and slightly out of the way, a small comfortable room, dark and enclosing, where no matter the registration numbers, a table or seat always seems available for escape from the demands of the conference or, later, to extend an evening begun at one of the city’s restaurants.

But as conference mother ship, the Marion creaks in the gales of registration, pre-conferences, plenary and concurrent sessions, vendor fair, juried forums, coffee breaks, breakfasts, and the scores of densely-scheduled events comprising the rest of the conference. A thousand attendees move from session to session up and down hallways and staircases like so many sailors finding their stations among passengers too narrow for a crew of this size. The hotel is a 1924 building honored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as one of the country’s “Historic Hotels of America,” ones that have “faithfully maintained their historic architecture and ambiance,” as the HHA Website puts it.

That the Marion has. No sterile, lookalike, modular meeting spaces here. Never are there enough seats for the plenary sessions, for example. Even the overflow accommodation, where one floor up telecasts of live events are shown in a grand, wooden-flooring, chandeliered ballroom, flows over with standees who fall into willing conversation with one another, just as live standees are at the downstairs side the main, live, Carolina Ballroom. The smaller sessions that follow, held in meeting rooms named for South Carolina statesmen Pinckney, Rutledge, and Calhoun, are more accessible; unless, that is, a topic or speaker overmatch the concurrent offerings, as, for example, a Google representative did a couple of years ago, creating impossible logjams outside the room and leaving the earlybirds who managed seats inside, in the heat and crowdedness, envions of the those outside who didn’t.

Charleston isn’t principally about sessions anyway. By Friday afternoon, frequently sooner, many conference-goers have had their fill. Programs held in ballrooms begin to resemble the stands at a baseball game toward the end of a rain delay, with diehards scattered here and there but everyone else gone. By then Charleston attendees have taken the conference to the streets; that is, to visit the city’s first-rate shops and restaurants, steps away; or to see the exquisite neighborhoods that are only a few minutes beyond that; or to enjoy memorable views from the Battery, a somewhat longer, utterly pleasant walk. Charleston is, far and away, the best conference there is to get away from.

What Charleston is really about though is not the tourism, invigorating as that always is, and not the sessions, invigorating as they sometimes are. What people come back for are those close encounters in the hallways, that sense of bumping into someone, often literally, whom you wish to talk to, or need to talk to, or would like to talk to. You can scheme to bump into people easily enough, if you want. You’ll also bump into people you don’t know, and can talk to them as well, if you feel like it. You can keep an eye on your vendors, your customers, your competitors. Nobody will be far away; that’s guaranteed. It’s the clusters of conversation that occur all day long, at seats by the iron railing of the small mezzanine overlooking the lobby, or on the lobby sofas below, or within the fastness of the Swamp Fox, or in any hallway connecting the meeting rooms, or at the coffee urns at breaktimes, or anywhere the length of King or Market Streets, that make Charleston unique.

Charleston is mainly about conversation. You can have as much as you want as long as you start early at breakfast if you like (of course many do not; sign up for a “Lively Lunch” if you need more, for moderated table conversation and a boxed meal; then hit the stride in late afternoon over a drink or two; not to forget the Conference Reception, if it’s Thursday; to put you in form for your dinner group, any evening, before winding down prior to bed at the Swamp Fox or some other welcoming nightlife venue. It’s not, of course, the virtues of open access, the meaning of Web 2.0, or the future of the MARC record that everyone is necessarily talking about the day long. Personal updates, gossip among friends, acquisitions, or anyone at all, and normal small talk more than hold their own against weighty concerns in the precincts of conversation at Charleston.

Conversation and all of the more perfunctory forms of personal interaction handshakes, arm squeeze, pats on the back, full embraces, waves of the hand across a room or street; how are you? excuse me, good to see you; silent eye contact, avoidance of eye contact, unsureness on whether there was any eye contact, furtive glances at the name badge — these take a serious toll on most of us. A toll, that is, when the density of contact — and there must be some scientific study on this sort of thing — reaches the level of a Charleston Conference, where it seems that no moment passes without some degree of personal contact.

The beauty of Charleston, once again, is that it’s so easy to escape. If you’re a Francis Marion guest just get on the elevator and in a minute or two you’re back in the stillness of your room, which at that moment seems not as Lilliputian as it did when you checked in, but instead private, protected, wondrously, secure. Twenty minutes, an hour, an afternoon alone, and you will be ready to set out again, ready to face anything the world can throw at a conventioneer. If you are not a Marion guest then your room may be a ten-minute walk instead of an elevator ride distant; or if beyond that, easy enough, until equilibrium is restored, to get lost for awhile in the streets of Charleston. Getting lost for awhile is pretty much a standard part of Charleston, as integral as anything else is to the ongoing success of the Conference. While Charleston now is slightly dressier than in years past, dress is still sufficiently casual that most will be able to hide our name badge and expect to pass on the street as a regular tourist or businessperson and not appear quite so obviously a creature of the convention zone, a sensation hard to shake in the larger host cities. (Attendees who always carry the conference bag, obtained as a giveaway at registration, are exceptions.) Getting away from the usual routine is why we have conventions at all; but getting away from the routines of a convention is a learned skill — more easily learned in Charleston than anywhere else — and one essential in achieving the peak conference experience.

You’ll hear newcomers say, “Everybody here knows other people” (not a remark you’d hear at an actually large conference). At Charleston many attendees do know one another, it’s true.

They’re from the same library or company, the same state or province (Canadians attend Charleston in good number; as do Brits, especially among the vendors and publishers), have worked together somewhere, have served on the same ALA or other committee, have a vendor-customer or publisher-vendor relationship, or for some other reason are not strangers. It’s a reason to come to Charleston. You will see people you know and like. You will stand in a circle at the breaks and talk to them. Or, skip a session clean and talk to them.

For the Charleston newcomer all this public conversation can be intimidating. Why am I the only one here, it’s natural to conclude, doing nothing but listening to speakers?

The complaint begins as a thought. Then it’s a verbal grievance expressed to someone in conversation. After that, conversation moves to a different topic. Then others just

continued on page 77

76 Against the Grain / December 2006 - January 2007 <http://www.against-the-grain.com>
the conversation. By then, the newcomers feel not so new and the original complaint is lost. This might take a couple of hours, a couple of days, even a couple of years. But, eventually, those who come back come back because at Charleston they've found a community; meaning, people they want to talk to.

Why is it that no other conference feels quite the same? In part, it's the city itself. If twenty-six years ago someone had conceived a library conference in Santa Fe, Santa Barbara, Austin, Nashville, Sioux Falls, Madison, or some other small, interesting city, probably Charleston would still be striving for a head count of 600. But nobody did, and so Charleston is the one city that became a destination for a generation of librarians. The Conference doesn't move, the backdrop is always the same one. Not only do you arrive in Charleston knowing you'll find people to talk to, you have a good idea of where you'll talk to them. You know exactly what it will feel like.

The librarian who did conceive Charleston lived in Charleston, of course: Katina Strauch, on the College of Charleston library Website, "Head, Collection Development Department." Because the College was fairly small and Charleston itself fairly remote, travel dollars for librarians, twenty-six years ago, were scarce. Let's have a conference here, then, was her answer, and since then it's been others who've budgeted to spend money in South Carolina.

Another Charleston certainty is that you will regularly spot Katina, who has been at the center of every one of the twenty-six, to make opening remarks in a too-perfect southern drawl, to walk around and make sure things are going as they're supposed to, to meet with conference planners, to ask questions, to answer questions, to introduce people, to be introduced, to welcome newcomers and old hands alike, to oversee crowd control, and in general to perform at once as hostess, constable, centerpiece, and CEO. Her dark features set off by jewelry and colorful clothing, the diminutive Katina Strauch, gypsylike and a bit exotic, would be hard to miss.

And so is the overall character of the Charleston Conference. What truly makes Charleston unique is that the personal stamp of its founder is all over it. With an awful lot of help from an awful lot of willing friends, she has created a twenty-six-year vehicle where formality quickly falls away, where conversation is valued over ceremony, and where a sense of community is prized above all. Where else to find that? Try to find it, say, tomorrow at your workplace, and then maybe you'll know for sure why it is so many people come back to Charleston.