Future Conference Dates

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Notes From Mosier — Of Buckeyes, the Y-Bridge, and Wrestling with Hogs

Some Thoughts On Library Innovation

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In my last column I made mention of Nettie Metcalf, a Warren, Ohio resident who in the 19th century developed a breed of chicken known as the Buckeye. Buckeyes are indeed a rich mahogany color, and hence resemble the chestnut-like cousins of the state tree.

I bring this up because Nettie was responding to a challenge. Ohio can be cold in winter, and Nettie sought to develop a breed of chicken that could be better suited to the weather. Buckeyes have small combs — less exposed skin to freeze — and are feathered in such a way as to provide better insulation.

Nettie was, in a word, an innovator. She pursued a strategy hitherto untied, and the result is a breed still with us today.

Another notion of representing innovation occurs to me in a metaphor I can draw from my home town of Zanesville, Ohio. Bridge-building, bridging a gap, and other bridge-related ideas are often invoked to link different ideas, or suggest a need to move from one position to another. Most bridges are, by necessity and design, linear. However, when confronted with the need to link three banks defined by the confluence of the Licking and Muskingum Rivers, the town fathers came up with the really quite elegant solution of building one bridge consisting of three spans which meet in the middle — thereby eliminating the need for three wholly separate structures. (Also, they set the stage for a long-standing local joke — when travelers ask how to find old route 40 out of town, they’re told “go to the middle of the bridge and turn left.”)

The Y-Bridge seems a more apt way of thinking about how libraries and the academy in general must try to navigate change — the issues aren’t two-dimensional or linear; they’re more complex.

All of this is to say we face times of elevated expectations, more robust competition, revolutions in content, discovery and delivery, reduced budgets, and stretched and stressed staff. Innovation needs to be genuine, not merely an exercise in re-labeling ourselves with more politically correct vocabulary. In the next few columns I’ll be looking at how libraries are dealing with changes in acquisitions, collection development, and technical services. This seemed a good place to start.

Finally, on one more Ohio note: a part of wise leadership and planning is to consider one’s resources, political capital, and current position, and choose one’s battles carefully. Or, as my old friend and mentor Charlie Coyle was fond of saying, “Never wrestle with a hog. You and the hog will get dirty, but only the hog will like it.”