Dr. Paul H. Spence: Librarian, Teacher and Leader

Irina Stanishevskaya  
*University of Alabama at Birmingham, stan003@uab.edu*

Christy Hogan  
*University of Alabama at Birmingham, chogan@uab.edu*

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Dr. Paul H. Spence: Librarian, Teacher, and Leader

by Irina Stanishevskaya (Cataloging Librarian, University of Alabama at Birmingham) <stan003@uab.edu>

and Christy Hogan (Library Assistant III, University of Alabama at Birmingham) <chogan@uab.edu>

Dr. Paul H. Spence has dedicated more than 60 years to libraries and librarianship, including more than 40 years of legendary service to the Mervyn H. Sterne Library at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). Throughout his life, he has invested colossal energy, enthusiasm, and altruism into his work as a librarian, scholar, teacher, mentor, and administrator.

Paul H. Spence was born in a small farm-house near Geraldine, Alabama on Christmas Day, 1923, to John Clardy Spence, a farmer, and Leila Gertrude Carroll. His mother was a school teacher prior to marriage, and it was under her tutelage that Spence learned to read before even entering school. As a result, he developed a great fondness for literature and looked forward to receiving books as his birthday gifts. After high school, Spence headed off to Duke University in 1942 to pursue a degree in Religion with the hopes of becoming a teaching missionary in China. However, in 1943 he made the decision to forgo his studies deferment and signed up for military service in World War II. Spence was assigned to the European Theatre as a member of the 1st Combat Battalion, and for more than two years he battled heroically against Nazi Germany. Afterwards, he continued his college studies at Emory University and completed the A.B. in History in 1948.

Dr. Spence credits several people with supporting and encouraging him to take the journey to the world of librarianship: Rick Harwell, his first library job supervisor, Dr. Jerrold Orne, former Director of Air University Library in Montgomery, Alabama, and Dr. Robert B. Downs, the former Dean of the Graduate School of Library Science and the former Director of the University of Illinois Library (Spence, Stanishevskaya, and Hogan 2011). Spence’s first exposure to librarianship as a career path began when he took a part-time library job at Emory under the supervision of Rick Harwell. Harwell encouraged and supported Spence as he began and eventually completed the M.A. in Library Studies at Emory in 1950.

Shortly after graduation, Spence took the position of Assistant Reference Librarian at Emory. He loved the job and planned to spend the rest of his life there. He changed his mind about that after a chance meeting with Dr. Jerrold Orne during the Southeastern Library Association Conference in 1953. At the time, Orne was the Director of the Air University Library in Montgomery, Alabama and well-known for his coaching and mentoring of young professionals. He immediately recognized a high-potential leader in Spence and made him an offer to join the staff at the Air University Library as Chief Librarian of the Periodicals Reference Section. Spence recalled that Dr. Orne made him a financial offer that he just could not turn down, “… So I went to Air University, not wanting to go, really, but got down there and liked it very much” (Spence, Stanishevskaya, and Hogan 2011).

Under the guidance of Dr. Orne, Spence was introduced to a new concept of bibliographic assistance through a subject-specific liaison program (Orne 1955, 353-359). Spence would eventually implement that same concept at UAB’s Sterne Library. It was also in Montgomery where he met and married his wife, Ruth McColough Schmidt, who became a strong supporter of her husband’s professional efforts over the years. Together they would raise three sons: John Carroll, born July 21, 1955, Peter Schmidt, born November 27, 1956, and Robert McColough, born April 15, 1961.

Jerrold Orne continued to have a major influence on Spence’s academic career through the years to come. In 1957, Spence was promoted to Director of the Library at the Air Force Institute of Technology. Dr. Spence recalled that, “Dr. Orne kept pushing me to obtain a doctoral degree (Spence, Stanishevskaya, and Hogan 2011). At that time, Spence had two children and really could not afford to quit his job to attend classes. In 1959, also encouraged by Dr. Orne, Ruth obtained a better position at the Air University Library in Montgomery, making it possible for Spence to attend the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in pursuit of a Ph.D. in Library Science. While in Illinois Spence would cross the path of Dr. Robert B. Downs.

Dr. Downs, as the Dean of the Graduate School of Library Science and the Director of the University of Illinois library, “consistently evidenced a personal concern for graduate students and their struggle to obtain the doctorate” (Young 1983, 79). Spence recalled that “Downs personally paid his tuition to enable him to stay in school” (Young 1983, 79). While completing his Ph.D., Spence continued to grow professionally by working at the University of Notre Dame, University of Nebraska, University of Illinois, and University of Georgia. In 1969, he successfully defended his dissertation, entitled “Comparative Study of University Library Organizational Structure.”

In 1970, Dr. Spence was appointed as the first Director of the College of General Studies Library at the newly-designated University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB). Developing a library from the ground up was certainly a challenge. However, Dr. Spence had a clear vision of the role of an academic library: “to acquire, organize, make available, and interpret all library materials needed to serve the teaching and research needs of the students and faculty of University College” (Spence and Crow 1976, 3). This vision allowed that a work quickly in several directions: Collection Development, Cataloging and Inventory Control, and Reference Services.

Building a strong research collection was the first priority. In 1970, the Library contained only 10,000 volumes, and it was obvious that the collection could neither meet the teaching and research needs of a rapidly growing university nor satisfy accreditation requirements. “I have felt that the major and most lasting contribution I can make to UAB is the development of a good library collection. A good collection is necessary before good services can be provided, and the quality of the service is dependent to a very large degree on the quality of the collection,” recalled Spence (1979, 7). Spence used several different methods and strategies to quickly construct a basic collection: he acquired several bookstores at a very low cost that were offered for sale around the country; purchased individual collections of well known historians and scientists; actively participated in many book exchange programs that allowed obtaining duplicate materials from other libraries; and accepted private donations.

Considered innovative at the time, Spence initiated an approach to organizing library resources by using the Library of Congress Classification scheme. During the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a lot of discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of the Dewey Decimal Classification System (DDC) versus the Library of Congress Classification System (LC). Dr. Spence’s decision to go with LC was based on a fact that LC was better suited for larger collections and gave better coverage of some subject areas. The use of LC scheme also helped to speed up the workflow due to the ability to incorporate the time-saving cataloging and classification work already established by the Library of Congress and reproduced on LC cards (Downey 1964, 2293). Spence formulated the initial collection development policy for Sterne Library, where he summarized the goals, priorities, and principles of the Library and prepared a plan of action for matching library resources to academic programs. From that point on, he made phenomenal progress in collection development, and, as a result, from 1970 to 1985 the number of books and other materials at Sterne Library increased significantly from 10,000 to more than 750,000 volumes. His hard work did not just build a collection but formed the foundation of what is the Mervyn H. Sterne Library today.

In 1970, Spence implemented what at that time a very unique, subject-specific Liaison Program as a communication channel between the Library and the other academic departments. According to Dr. Jerry Stephens, Sterne Library’s current Librarian and Director, Spence “believed in the concept of the reference librarian as a subject specialist. He also believed that the first-hand information that the front-line reference librarian gained from working with students and faculty was valuable input into collection development decisions” continued on page 37

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(Dr. Jerry Stephens, email message to authors, May 25, 2011). Spence employed a group of subject-specialist reference-bibliographers who had “special competence in a particular subject and who worked closely with the faculty in teaching departments in that subject area to build the library collections and to promote their use in teaching and research” (Spence and Crow 1976, 3). The program supported a strong partnership between schools and librarians and gave librarians an opportunity to satisfy the information needs of users and increase the quality of the reference services through subject-specific bibliographic assistance, collection development, and classroom teaching. Spence built a very successful program that continues to enrich the community today and maximizes the value of the Library in academia.

Dr. Spence’s impact on UAB’s campus stretched beyond his role as director of the campus library. He established himself as a leader able to motivate and inspire, evidenced in his ability to align members of the UAB community to a new direction. His vision of librarians as equal partners of the teaching faculty led their inclusion in the academic group. Under Dr. Spence’s leadership, Sterne Library was “designated in the [UAB faculty] Handbook as an academic unit of University College so that librarians were accorded the same opportunities … as teaching faculty (Spence 1979, 20-21). As a result, librarians received faculty status, which has allowed them to engage in scholarship and faculty governance, as well as enhance Sterne Library’s visibility.

Spence’s outstanding leadership and revolutionary vision of the Library helped to build the first computerized circulation and acquisition systems in Alabama. Under his direction, Sterne Library was one of the first libraries in the U.S. to transfer all its bibliographic records into machine-readable formats (Mervyn H. Sterne Library 1985, 1). Recognizing the importance of cooperative approaches among libraries, he was one of the first adopters of the OCLC’s shared cataloging system in the state. “Dr. Spence had a vision to maximize the use of technology to improve services and to make the library operation more efficient and effective,” recalled Dr. Stephens. Through the efforts of Dr. Spence and his staff, the “Library has made significant progress toward becoming a highly-respected academic library” (Mervyn H. Sterne Library 1985, 1).

Sterne Library continues to contribute to the prestige of UAB by providing the critical resources and services needed to support the university’s educational and research activities.

In 1985, Spence stepped down from active administrative duties and became the Collection Development Librarian. In recognition of his distinguished contributions, the Board of Trustees of the University of Alabama System honored Dr. Spence with an Emeritus position on August 22, 1989. Today, he is still active and has continued to devote himself exclusively to collection building at UAB Sterne Library.

Throughout his career, Spence was involved in library education. He taught reference classes at the UAB School of Education in the media program for prospective school librarians, as well as evening classes at the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. His teaching experience was rewarding to his students. They remember him as a great educator who used his own unique methods and techniques in the classroom. Susan L. Spafford, Coordinator of the Non-fiction Department at the Hoover Public Library, said: “I was fortunate to have Dr. Spence as a professor… He was a wonderful teacher and I feel I learned more in his class than any other” (Susan L. Spafford, email message to authors, June 25, 2011). By sharing his experience and knowledge through teaching, Dr. Spence has surely inspired a new generation of librarians to make innovative contributions to the profession.

Over the years, Spence actively participated in professional organizations, associations, and societies. Many years ago, he pointed out that a “membership in a professional association provides an opportunity to share individual and institutional achievements and problems in librarianship with others who have similar interests” (1981, 5). His professional memberships included: the American Library Association, the Association of College and Research Libraries, the Southeastern Library Association, the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries, the Georgia Library Association, the Illinois Library Association, the Nebraska Library Association, the Alabama Historical Society, and the Alabama Library Association.

He served on numerous boards and committees. He served as Vice-President/President-Elect (1980) and President (1982) of the Southeastern Library Association (SELA). For outstanding contributions to SELA, Spence was appointed as an Honorary Member in 1990. He also served as treasurer of the Association of Southeastern Libraries in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.
Research Libraries (ASERL), as well as a member of the ASERL board in 1984-1986. Recognizing the importance of professional cooperation, Spence actively participated in the establishment of several organizations for sharing resources and other services among universities. In 1973, Spence collaborated with a group of Library Directors on a project that created and founded the Southeastern Library Network, Inc. (SOLINET), and for two years he served on the initial Board of Directors (1973/1974 and 1974/1975) (Gribbin 1988, 103). Also, in 1984 he was a member of the group of librarians that founded the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL) as well as served as the first chairman of the NAAL Collection Development Committee. Dr. Spence’s work with the board “was invaluable,” recalled Sue O. Medina, former Director of NAAL. He “demonstrated great patience shaping the committee’s work and in overseeing the development of the first draft of the [collection development] manual” (Medina 1987, 10).

Spence has made legendary contributions to academic librarianship through innovative application and practical realization of the best library services and collections for users. Dr. Jerry Stephens, summarizing Spence’s achievements, said: “Dr. Spence has contributed so much to UAB and to the library profession. He has always been thoughtful, inspiring, and understanding. He has always presented ideas and challenges in a positive way and has been supportive in assisting colleagues develop their careers. He has been a great mentor to so many, not just at UAB, but across the country. He has been a great sounding board for ideas and he always listened to ideas regardless how unorthodox they might have sounded. He has influenced so many in such positive ways and personally has been a great friend for many years” (Dr. Jerry Stephens, email message to authors, May 25, 2011). Spence’s educational background, experience, deep understanding of professionalism, affiliation with many library associations, and hard work helped him successfully translate his concept of librarianship into leadership roles within the profession. Approaching his 90th birthday, Dr. Spence is most proud of the library collection that he helped to build at UAB, and he continues to contribute and to serve in promoting librarianship as Collection Development Librarian at UAB’s Sterne Library.

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John R. Ingram, the chairman and acting CEO of Ingram Content Group, continued the discussion but took a different tack. He focused directly on the world of publishing and claimed that in the digital world abundance and access are reshaping publishing. He pointed out that we are moving to a time of self-publishing not agents, limitless visibility as opposed to limited shelf space, production that is patron-driven, increasing reliance on print-on-demand, global rights as an opportunity not a barrier, and distribution that is no longer controllable. He also noted that these developments foster new models like digital first workflows, outsourced distribution, increased role for social networks, new revenue streams, and patron-driven acquisitions. One of John’s core messages was that readers are driving the revolution — publishers are no longer in control. Noting that there is a real need to live up to customer expectations, he insisted that publishers have to be agile and adapt to changes in the market.

Maximizing reach is essential. Brian O’Leary, founder and principal of Magellan Media, continued the emphasis on the customer with his discussion of “Lean Consumption,” a model that “minimizes customers’ time and effort by delivering exactly what they want, when and where they want it.” Brian also highlighted the shift away from a concern with “containers” like books, journal articles, etc., noting that “a viable product can be a book, a chapter, a component, an extract, a snippet — anything that can be monetized.” Citing Hugh McGuire, he continued on page 39.