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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — On the Road in the 1970s, Looking for Authors

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I don’t know how much traveling acquisitions editors in publishing houses do nowadays in looking for potential authors for monographs and upper-level texts, but I suspect it’s less than I did when I had such a job at Wiley back in the latter half of the 1970s. I must have been on the road for at least four or five days six or eight times a year (maybe even more, if I can remember). Trips to the West Coast always lasted over a weekend, and there was a Midwest trip that included a weekend in Chicago, when my wife joined me for a two-night stay in the grand old Palmer House. Sometimes I combined days of editorial scouting with taking out the Wiley booth at a convention, such as the annual ASME meeting. Sometimes I flew somewhere, rented a car, and drove from one campus to another for pretty much an entire work week.

I’d travelled somewhat before I took the Wiley job, but it did give me a wonderful opportunity to get to places I’d never been to but always wanted to go to or places I’d already been but wanted to revisit. Of course, every city and town I hit wasn’t the most smashing place on earth. For every Seattle or San Francisco, there was a West Lafayette or a South Bend, Indiana, which might be, for all I know, vastly different now than they were then. I hope so, but I wouldn’t count on it. My attention ought to have been focused on chatting up professors at Purdue or Notre Dame, but I did have to find places for dinner, and my desires for good meals could be hard to satisfy. In those days, as I recall, West Lafayette had but a single Chinese restaurant, which didn’t much matter, because everyone from publishing seemed to end up at a famous and ugly steak place out on the highway called Sarge Million.

There wasn’t any lunch-time drinking on the road, of course. Sitting down in a small office to talk with a professor with booze on my breath would have been a non-starter, to put it mildly. I had no idea whether a professor was a teetotaler or a reformed alcoholic or despised Demon Rum on religious grounds. There was no charm in getting any professor off topic, as it were. I was there to get leads on new projects that would help me fulfill my basic goals of twenty author signings, twenty manuscripts in production, and twenty books published during a fiscal year. (Acquisition editors deal with nowadays as a packager, essentially, of engineering handbooks seem to have much more ambitious goals.)

When I visited an engineering school, I needed to canvass two departments — mechanical and industrial — which were the core of my editorial program. As a rule, I didn’t make appointments in advance. One notable exception: I once visited Michigan Tech in the dead of a typical brutal winter, which earned me the gratitude of a delegation of professors, who met my plane on the runway when it landed. I was a celebrity on that campus for forty-eight hours. “I’m from Manhattan, Kansas, and asked the occupant of an office with the door closed. I didn’t ask whether there might be a manuscript already in preparation. That would have been much too crude, and quite possibly a conversation killer, to boot. Instead, I would draw professors out on what books they thought might be needed in their specialty or, more broadly, in their discipline, and whom I might contact about submitting a proposal. If someone was actually in a position to have started on a manuscript or had been thinking of a book project, that would all the better. I kept it for full working days. In brief, what I did worked.

My conversations with professors weren’t relegated only to business. I talked about their worlds and mine, about spouses and kids, about their likes and dislikes, about the world in general and how they saw it. I had no illusions about what I was doing. I was a salesman, after all, selling the idea of a person taking a considerable amount of time to write a book which very likely wouldn’t make him or her rich. That’s nothing to be ashamed of. At one time or another during our lives, most of us, even those gifted with extraordinary talent or looks, are selling something. It may be an idea, or a product, or ourselves — to a boss, an investor, a gatekeeper of some sort, or someone we’ve fallen in love with or would just like to get close to for a time. I think that’s the way the world works.

Over the years, I met many people, some interesting, others deadly dull, although that didn’t matter if a book idea, or even an actual book, came out of a conversation. There could be a pleasant surprise when a reserved professor came to Wiley’s offices with an attractive, outgoing spouse in tow. Sometimes a professor said could stick in the mind for years, such as the comment when I walked into an office in Manhattan, Kansas, and asked the occupant how he liked it in that part of the world. “I’m 500 miles from anything,” he grumbled, “skiing, shopping, theater, good restaurants, you name it.” One morning, I had to conduct an editorial conversation while jogging around the lake in Madison, Wisconsin. I don’t remember whether or not I actually got a book out of that run, and I’d have to do a lot of research to call up the name of the professor who had no time to talk with me except during his morning jog, but I do have a memory of that beautiful early spring day, which was delightfully warm and dry.