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Lyman Newlin
Book Trade Counsellor

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Papa Lyman Remembers

Halsey William Wilson

by Lyman Newlin (Book Trade Counsellor)

In July, 1944, Wilcox and Follett needed a manager for its first non-Chicago enterprise: the Minnesota Book Store in Minneapolis. It was the first of what was to become a chain of hundreds of Follett stores on campuses all over America. It was decided that I could be spared temporarily from Follett Library Book Company to act as Minnesota's Manager until the war ended and more management personnel could be available.

During my "temporary" tenure, which

lasted four years (1944-48), the company acquired management of the bookstore of Macalester College in St. Paul and in 1947 it purchased the Minnesota Coop, a bookstore just off the University of Minnesota campus which had been founded by Halsey William Wilson over half a century earlier. It was in this store that H.W. Wilson's frustration in trying to locate sources of books culminated in his beginning the catalog of new books of American publishers, *The Cumulative Book Index*.

In 1913, Wilson had moved his indexing Company to White Plains, New York, and later still he moved it to the Bronx where it is now (midway between Yankee Stadium and the Polo field). Because of this, Wilson sold the bookstore which he loved to **Harriet and Hilda Johnson** who operated the store until Follett bought it in 1947.

Halsey Wilson's contribution to scholarship in general and to the dissemination of information through printed material was incredible. Can you imagine life without CBI or BIP?

Before the CBI, booksellers had to depend primarily on the separate catalogs produced by individual publishers.

This was a time-consuming and often fruitless effort for Wilson, the alert young bookseller who had built his store into the best in the Twin Cities. This is what it was like before H.W. Wilson decided that a tool like CBI was necessary. Wilson and his clerks took the individual publisher's catalogs and collected them into the CBI.

For an old timer like-me who cut his teeth on the CBI, it is difficult to describe the use to which we put it in the days before Bowker's *Books in Print* which first appeared in 1948. I have often compared the "pricer-quoter" (that was what they were called back then) employed by library booksellers such as Folletts or McClurgs or the old Baker & Taylor to a timpani player in a symphony orchestra. This clerk was surrounded by the CBI beginning with the 1908 cumulative volume and others up to the current volume. Each large volume had its own stand and it was often necessary to consult several volumes before the proper information about publisher and price could be located. You have it easy now and you don't even know it!

Richard Abel reminded me that be-

International Dateline

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memory, arithmetic mind, and unflinching honesty, this had developed into a \$6 million a year business. He retired in 1978 and was honored by the Library Association of Australia with its Redmond Barry Award for "outstanding service" to libraries. On that Award, **Harrison Bryan**, Librarian of the University of Sydney, wrote: "When the full story of library development in this country comes to be written, one element of that considerable revolution will be given its due measure of recognition — namely the sources of supply for all the new material that was acquired so quickly. When that happens, the name of James Bennett will be properly recorded." Jim Bennett's memorial is the company he founded and the millions of books that are on library shelves today because he did so well.

KNIGHT RIDDER PURCHASES EQUINET — From *ONLINE CURRENTS*, v. 8, no. 3, November 1993, comes this item of interest to librarians and others interested in accessing Australian financial information.

Knight-Ridder Financial, Inc., a subsidiary of the US-based Knight-Ridder media group, announced that it has agreed in principle to purchase the Equinet equities market information service from McIntosh Securities, Ltd.

The Equinet service was designed and created by McIntosh Securities in 1986 to provide financial markets clients with access to live prices, news, and historical data covering the Australian and New Zealand Stock Exchanges, futures and options exchanges, and international currency markets. Knight-Ridder is the owner of *DIALOG* and *Data-Star*, with strengths in the provision of business, science, technology, the social sciences and news information services. The

Equinet equities service already carries live Knight-Ridder news and will no doubt be looking to provide their clients with access to an even wider range of financial news services.

Melbourne — PUBLIC LIBRARY CONFERENCE HELD — Public librarians from all over Australia met in Melbourne in February for their "Trading in Futures" Conference. The talk of the conference was **Charles Landry** from Comedia, Consultancy Research Planning, UK, who I believe spoke around his research published as "The future of public library services" by Comedia. As your correspondent was working hard on the Trade Exhibit, she did not hear the papers he presented. However, it was reported that he told the delegates that dynamic librarians were all working out in the Trade Exhibition — hear, hear! ☺

fore BIP small bookstores could not afford a set of the *Cumulative Book Index* and they had to rely on what Dick calls the "Big Green Pig" Bowker's *Trade List Annual* which was useful if you knew the publisher of the title you were searching for. Lacking that knowledge, you needed Wilson's help, that is, if you started searching for bibliographic information before 1948. If you were weaned on BIP you don't know what a real tough job bibliographic searching was back then. My personal library contains the "big brown book," CBI from 1928 to 1984. I use it almost daily. Readers of ATG are invited to call me at 716-754-8145 if they are stuck with bibliographic questions hard to solve through whizbangery.

The idea of managing the store where *Cumulative Book Index* was born was a great thrill to me, who had come to know CBI as the alpha and omega of information about books, their authors, publishers, dates and prices. Soon after I assumed the management of the Minnesota Coop, I began gathering as much information as I could about the founder.

The Minnesota Coop was directly across the street from Folwell Hall, the building housing the University's English Department, many of whose members were regular customers. These included Robert Penn Warren, Saul Bellow, Henry Nash Smith, and several other immortal American writers. From these faculty members and from the Haycraft family (Howard succeeded Mr. Wilson as president of H.W. Wilson company), I was able to gather considerable information including knowledge that 1948 was the fiftieth year of the Wilson company's existence. Some members of the English Department (two E.D. wives were employed in the Follett store) and the University librarian, E.W. McDiarmid were discussing this anniversary one day in our store back in 1948. It occurred to me that the Minnesota Coop would be the right place to headquarter Minnesota's efforts to celebrate.

We felt that Halsey Wilson deserved proper recognition by his Alma Mater. Our ad hoc committee approached the University administration with the idea of awarding an honorary doctor's degree. In spite of our persistence we were able to secure only an "Outstanding Achievement Award" for the creator of *Cumulative Book Index*. In our contacts with University hierarchs we soon learned that had Wilson been an athletic coach we would have easily secured an honorary Ph.D. in Physical Education. I

have learned from **Barbara Stelmasik**, Library Manager, University of Minnesota, and **Charleston Conference Alumna**, that Brown University conferred an honorary Doctor of Letters on Wilson in 1939. I don't seem to have any memory of knowing this previously. If any Minnesota alumni read this, I trust they will not suffer too much shame with this knowledge. Just remember that "a prophet is without honor . . ."

Barbara Stelmasik also furnished me with a profile that confirms the fact that in the summer of 1948 Halsey Wilson was honored by a series of dinners given by booksellers and librarians in Minnesota. I had the honor of hosting one of the affairs sponsored by Minneapolis and St. Paul booksellers. I remember Halsey Wilson as a very modest man who nonetheless waxed eloquently conversational when one asked him about the *Cumulative Book Index* or his publishing ventures in general. I remember that Mrs. Wilson was another Minnesotan to whom her husband gave much credit for help and support. **Justina Wilson** was for several years an editor for *Book Review Digest*. She was also very active in the Women's Suffrage movement and, working very closely with **Carrie Chapman Catt**, made lectures in several cities on the Eastern seaboard.

In preparing to write this column, I spoke to several librarians about the

present-day usefulness of the *Cumulative Book Index*. Younger librarians know it only by the name and that "the big brown books" are used in its printed format by scholars in searching for titles, publication, dates, prices, etc. Even though bibliographers go to OCLC or other utilities for information, libraries still subscribe to CBI and keep their subscriptions up to date.

Some sources you can go to for more information about H.W. Wilson and his company are: 1) John Lawler's *The H.W. Wilson Company*. Minneapolis, MN: Univ of Minnesota Press, 1940 or Boston: Gregg Press, 1972. 2) Creighton Peet. "Profiles: A Mouse Trap in the Bronx," *The New Yorker*, October 29, 1938, pp. 25-28. 3) Jack Harrison Pollock, "Giant of Bibliographers," *The Saturday Review*, February 5, 1951, pp. 32-34. 4) *Current Biography*, 1948.

I am indebted to Margaret K. Brennan, The H.W. Wilson Company, Barbara Stelmasik, University of Minnesota Library, and Penelope Krosch, Head of the University of Minnesota Archives, all of whom helped me with this reminiscence. Another thanks is due to Kenneth Narland, Grover City, CA, who was an employee of the Johnson sisters and then for Follett at the Minnesota Coop. — LWN

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