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Timothy Pearson
Molesworth Institute

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A Seriously Amusing Interview with Norman D. Stevens

Director, The Molesworth Institute & Director of University Libraries Emeritus,
University of Connecticut

by Timothy Peason (Molesworth Institute)

Some of you may have heard of the Molesworth Institute but few people really know much about its founder and the work of that prestigious organization. When we heard that Norman had retired as Director of University Libraries at UConn, we asked Timothy Peason, his long-time assistant at the Institute, to interview him about his distinguished library career. — KS

ATG: *Hey boss! What do you think of the state of librarianship now that you are no longer employed as a librarian?*

NDS: For a librarian in the twilight of his career, one educated and trained in a far more casual environment, the policies, procedures, and regulations that now dominate Our Profession represent a whole new way of life. For an administrator, who spent his entire professional career in academic libraries, the increased emphasis on accountability, which inevitably has led to a focus on quantitative judgments, represents a new approach to the administration of the academic enterprise. To be honest, I don't especially like it. I'm glad I was able to retire when I did!

ATG: *You sound a bit bitter. Looking back, how would you evaluate your career?*

NDS: Not bitter, just lucky and happy. Fortunately, I managed to escape time cards, formal evaluations, performance and promotion reviews, applications for tenure, and such nonsense. So others will have to judge the accomplishments of my professional career. Sometimes, but not often, I feel as though I may have missed something without knowing what it is.

ATG: *Okay. Reflecting back on your almost 45 years in libraries, there surely must be some memorable accomplishments and highlights to be totaled up in the Great Record Book of Librarianship. So how would you evaluate your career?*

NDS: As a native New Englander, with at least some of the eccentric traits for which New Englanders are noted, I'd use the model advocated by my fellow New Hampshireman Donald Hall. He developed a complex system of what he called Yankee Points. As he put it, "Sometimes it seems almost arbitrary; certainly it perplexes newcomers . . . It's worth points to be destitute, abandoned, despised, defeated, overworked, injured, and unappreciated—especially if you claim that everything's just fine." So, with profound apologies to Donald Hall, I'll answer questions about my accomplishments in terms of how many library points I've accumulated. You know I never boast but I think I might have set a career record.

ATG: *You began your library career at the Library of Congress?*

NDS: Yes. Not counting any library points acquired as a user of

the Nashua (NH) Public Library in my youth, my accounting surely must begin with my pre-professional days at the Library of Congress between 1949 and 1954. There I had the good fortune to work at such routine tasks as bookplating, marking call numbers on the spines of books, shelving government documents, and organizing and filing maps. My library points were received for learning how to shoot cockroaches with rubber bands (510 points), indexing Japanese maps with no knowledge of Japanese (325 points), and partially organizing a dust-coated collection of World War II military camp newspapers (930 points). Off to a good start, I earned 1,765 points there.

ATG: *So what happened next?*

NDS: After that kind of start, how could I fail to go on to library school? Accumulation of points became my driving force. In two intervals, first from 1955-1957, while I earned an M.L.S., and then from 1959-61, while I earned a Ph.D., I was in most respects a typical graduate student. I did earn some more library points for such accomplishments as learning the importance of the verb in the reference question (210 points), creating the grunge look before it became fashionable (650 points), and teaching a bibliography course with a days' notice less than a year after I'd taken it (875 points). Whether I earned, or lost, points for completing my Ph.D. in two years is open to question. I racked up 1,735 more points at dear old Rutgers.

ATG: *I know you spent a substantial portion of the first part of your career at Rutgers. How did that happen?*

NDS: Just luck I guess. Actually I liked it there. My distinguished pre-professional career continued when I landed, as a graduate student, a part-time job at the Circulation Desk at the Rutgers University Library. I shared that job with my good friend Francis Johns who was instrumental in launching the Molesworth Institute. It was followed by my only real professional job as a practicing librarian: a cataloger, no less. Notable accomplishments there were announcing the library's closing over a public address system (55 points); twice reshelving the entire bound journal collection (430 points); regularly cataloging, using LC proof slips, 100 or more books in a day (250 points); and becoming a serials cataloger with less than a year's experience (720 points). Another 1,455 points!

ATG: *So, when you completed your Ph.D., why didn't you join a library school faculty? And what did you do instead?*

NDS: I didn't want to teach the kind of students I had been associated with. Plus, I naively thought I was cut out for bigger and better things. So immediately after receiving my Ph.D., I was appointed Acting Director of University Libraries at Howard University. For becoming a library administrator with little more than

continued on page 39

Stevens Interview
from page 38

one year of professional experience, and absolutely no managerial or administrative experience, I automatically earned 10,980 points. Fortunately, **Dorothy Porter** — now **Wesley** — was there to keep an eye on me and bail me out.

ATG: So then it was back to Rutgers. You must have really liked that place.

NDS: Either that, or nobody else would have me. In any case, in 1963 I returned to Rutgers as Associate University Librarian for Public Services. **Donald Cameron** was a great boss who pretty much let me do what I wanted. I managed to accumulate an appropriate quantity of points. For occupying, for three years, an office with a glass window overlooking the card catalog (remember them?), I earned 980 points. My major reward was earning an additional 15,000 points for my second stint as an Acting Director of University Libraries from 1966 to 1968.

ATG: And then UConn. Do people always want to know if that's in Alaska?

NDS: Either that or they want to know about cow tipping. UConn is in Connecticut, of course, and the fact that the school mascot is a husky has nothing to do with UConn/Yukon. And cow tipping is as much of a myth as that Alaska connection.

ATG: What, if anything, did you accomplish at UConn?

NDS: I joined the administrative staff of the University of Connecticut Libraries in 1968, and managed to stick it out until I retired at the end of May, 1994. **John McDonald** was the best boss anybody could ever have. He really let me alone! For sheer longevity, at a time when most of my colleagues flitted from place to place, I garnered 25,000 points. A third stint (1973-1975) as an Acting Director of University Libraries brought in 20,000 points. For outlasting five presidents (and almost a sixth), I bagged 30,000 points. Allowing staff to display in the main lobby a mobile constructed of contraceptive devices for the first Earth Day in the early 1970s was worth 1,300 points. For enduring early participation in the Association of Research Libraries' MRAP (Management Review and Analysis Program), I earned 995 points. My ability to keep virtually no paper on my desk was worth 3,560 points. A casual dress style, including frequent removal of necktie and somewhat less frequent removal of shoes, brought in 2,300 points. In all I racked up 83,155 points at UConn — the total I'm most proud of.

ATG: Why do you so seldom go to ALA meetings? And why weren't you an active member of ALA?

NDS: That was all part of a grand strategy. Soon after graduating from library school, I became a life member of ALA thus automatically earning 245 points. For a short period I made the mistake of serving on several ALA committees. The best part of chairing the Resources Committee was that, in typical ALA fashion, I had no responsibility for collections at Rutgers and most of the other committee members were senior administrators at ARL libraries. That was in the good old days of what I once described as the "resources and TECHNICAL SERVICES division." I always thought that the chief role of the Resources Committee was to allow ARL to make sure that ALA did nothing about library resources. Given that point of view, and the even then cumbersome ALA bureaucracy, you can be sure nothing did happen. I then managed with one exception to avoid further service on any other ALA committees and, by doing so, garnered 75,000 points.

ATG: What about your ill-fated campaign to become President of ALA?

NDS: Hey, what do you mean ill-fated? Everything turned out just as I planned it. I had fun and persuaded about 2,500 others to voice their opinion that there isn't much point to ALA. Still it would have been fun if I had managed to double my vote and win. Such is life! But, for not being elected, but receiving a respectable number of votes, on a do-nothing platform after virtually no involvement in ALA for nearly twenty years, I garnered another 75,000 points. If I had had the misfortune to win, I might have lost all of the points that I'd amassed before that time, including 32,000 points for regularly ignoring ALA conferences — but I would have earned more points for regular attendance since suffering counts for so much. I ended up with 183,585 points for my non-involvement with ALA. Not bad, you'd have to say.

ATG: I guess so. Did being a prolific writer make up for avoiding associations, organizations, and meetings?

NDS: In a way. But mainly I just like to scribble. **Paul Dunkin** on the Rutgers library school faculty got me started with the help of **Esther Piercy**, editor of **LRTS**. Remember that title? When I told them in great detail how bad an issue of **LRTS** was, they asked me to write reviews. So far I've published 779 articles, books, letters, miscellaneous items, or reviews. Those publications represent, depending on point of view, either a remarkable contribution to Our Profession or a major nuisance that has cluttered up library literature with distressing regularity. Had I attained my career goal of having had something published in every library journal, my points for that accomplishment would be astronomical. Getting something published in **Library Quarterly** has evaded me so far. But, especially now that my friend **John Richardson** has become editor of **LQ**, I might still make it. Of course, I'm counting this interview as a legitimate appearance in **ATG**! That's a great feeling. As it is, I must modestly settle for 100 points for each contribution, or a total of 77,900 points.

ATG: Now for the good part. I'm sure **ATG**'s readers want to know a little more about **The Molesworth Institute**. But please keep it brief.

NDS: Are you saying I sometimes wax too prolific about the good old MI? Remember it was, and is, my baby, which I founded while I was still in library school. It began as a joke in putting together a class project. From that humble beginning the Institute has managed to survive for about thirty-five years as librarianship's premier non-organization. Achievements such as obtaining entries or listings for the Molesworth Institute, and/or members of its staff, in various reference books, including the **American Library Directory**, brought with them 12,300 points. Tricking **Library Journal** into announcing the appointment of **Nouleigh Rhee Furbished** as **NELINET**'s Preservation Office was, in itself, worth an additional 2,400 points. The appointment of 71 Fellows of the Molesworth Institute contributed 7,100 points — plus an additional 2,400 for the appointment of the infamous **Josiah S. Carberry** of Brown University as a Fellow In Absentia. Other contributions of the Molesworth Institute to the amusement and edification of Our Profession add another 13,330 points.

ATG: Would you like to tell us about the **Bibliosmiles**?

NDS: Sure. I began or revived **The Bibliosmiles: A Rally of Librarians Who Are Nevertheless Human** in 1993. Apart from just

continued on page 40

A Serious Sidebar From Your Editor

This humorous interview is hard to resist. But, seriously, you should all know what a larger than life figure **Norman Stevens** is.

Trained at **Rutgers University's** School of Library Service (MLS, 1957, PhD, 1961) he held preprofessional jobs at the **Library of Congress** where he worked bookplating books and putting labels on books. He says he got to know a lot of people and that he worked the longest actually in the map library.

Why did he go to library school? Norman says that his brother was a librarian at the Library of Congress and his sister-in-law was also a librarian. After he graduated from high school, Norman couldn't afford to go to college so he lived with his brother and his sister-in-law and got a job at L.C. Then, after he went to college and spent a year in New Zealand as a Fulbright Scholar, he wanted to get a PhD in Political Science. When he couldn't get a scholarship, his brother persuaded him to go to library school at Rutgers.

The first PhD graduate in Library Science at Rutgers, Norman held various jobs at Rutgers from 1955-1961, including a cataloger for one year (1957-58). Norman was appointed Director of Libraries at **Howard University** (1961-68). In 1968, Norman moved to Connecticut where he was appointed Dean of Libraries, a position which he held until his retirement in 1994.

I asked him how he came to be appointed Director of Libraries Emeritus. Norman said that the Dean of Libraries usually didn't hang around long enough to be elevated to that distinction (which requires approval by administrators, the president of the College, and the Board of Trustees), but that he was lucky enough to have qualified.

When I talked to Norman last week, he had just returned from a junket to flea and antique markets in Connecticut with his wife. Turns out that **Norman Stevens** has a large collection of "librarianiana," miscellaneous items relating to libraries in popular culture. This includes postcards of library buildings (more than 25,000 of them) which he began collecting as long ago as 1960 as well as badges, buttons, pins, china, you name it. And guess what? This collection, once organized, will be deposited at the **Centre Canadien d'Architecture** in Montreal (what a coincidence; read what **Michael McCulley** said about this incredible place in this issue, page 63).

And that's not all. Norm says that his most recent interest is collecting postcards which include popular images of books and reading. He already has 150-200 spanning all years. Apparently he is finding an enormous quantity of cats, dogs and bears shown associated with books and reading.

Clearly **Norman Stevens** is a collector. He also has a collection of figurines of people reading and of objects in the shape of books that aren't books at all (candy boxes, cigar boxes, etc.).

I have never met Norman except over the phone and through the printed word, but I hope that I can someday soon. And the next time I am in a flea market, I'll see what I can find.

You can reach Norman Stevens at 143 Hanks Hill Road, Storrs, CT 06268. And I think you should! — KS

Stevens Interview from page 39

having fun, I saw that as a simple way of providing membership in a library humor organization for those who might not be eligible for appointment as a Fellow of the Molesworth Institute. To date 60 brave souls have not only ventured to apply for membership in the Bibliosmiles but been foolish enough to pay the required \$10 one-time fee for a lifetime membership. That includes, by the way, Katina. My self-appointment as Permanent President of the Bibliosmiles, a title held by few librarians, must be worth something, let's say, 18,800 points. Recreating, or creating, another organization whose primary goal is "to formulate a permanent protest against undue solemnity in the profession" is worthy perhaps of as much as 9,990 points, for a total of 66,630 points for those two ventures. Pretty good, wouldn't you say?

ATG: *How does one become a Bibliosmile? And why should anyone want to become one?*

NDS: All they have to do is send me a number 10 SASE (143 Hanks Hill Road, Storrs, CT 06268) and I'll send them basic information and an application form. A lifetime membership is only \$10. That brings you the privilege of listing yourself as a Bibliosmile in your resumé, a membership card, and — from time to time — assorted goodies. I've published two in what will be a series of earlier postcards depicting books and reading. Members automatically receive a small quantity of those cards for their own use.

ATG: *Along the way did you manage to accomplish anything else you'd like to brag about?*

NDS: Now just wait a minute Timothy! You can be replaced with a stroke of the word processor. Much of the rest of my professional career involved a stellar record of non-attendance, non-involvement, and non-participation in regional, state, and/or local library associations with only an occasional lapse of judgment. 50,000 points for that non-record was reduced to 42,000 points with deductions primarily for participation in the 1990 Connecticut Governor's Conference on Library and Information Services. On the other hand, my membership in other, more important, but perhaps little-known, organizations has added a lot to my total. Those include the Library Cat Society (675 points); Fellow of the Murphy Center for the Codification of Human and Organizational Law (450 points); Conductor of Libraries, *In Absentia*, of the North American School for the Artsy and Somewhat Musically Inclined (340 points); and Associate Editor for Information Science of **The Journal of Irreproducible Results** and, more recently, **The Annals of Improbable Research** (1,300 points). That should come to about 44,675 points.

ATG: *So how would you sum up your career? Good, bad, or indifferent?*

NDS: Others have to be the judge of that. By my calculations I have accumulated 487,860 library points over the course of my career. Not too bad for a character whose primary role may have been "to swell a progress, start a scene or two." I lay claim to that as a new career record for librarians. I could, of course, add my 625,693 Yankee points to that total, creating a grand total of 1,032,958 points. But that's a story for another day. Thanks. See you around. 🐭