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Papa Lyman Remembers

Kroch's and Brentano's — Part II

by Lyman Newlin (Book Trade Counsellor)

In my June column I bemoaned the approaching shut-down of the main **Kroch's & Brentano's** store and all but three of its branches. The ink was scarcely dry on that page when I stopped in at 29 South Wabash during ALA's Chicago convention. "Going Out of Business" signs were in the windows. Half the store's shelves were empty — the rest bore "50% off" placards. A brief questioning at the Information Desk elicited the not-too-surprising but shocking answer that the entire chain was in Chapter 11 and every store would be shut down within a matter of days.

Perhaps my readers will question use of the word shocking. I'll admit it wasn't like viewing one's home in ashes as I had done three and a half years earlier. But it was still a personal shock. For years I had been stopping in whenever I was in Chicago. Although I could sense in recent years a deterioration, I never dreamed that this place which had for forty years been the Mecca of authors, publishers and yea, great booksellers would come to such a sad ending.

If there is any truth in the old saying that "Misery loves company," then I felt some comfort as I walked north on the east side of Wabash Avenue toward Randolph Street. Here are some of the shockers I encountered: At Monroe and Wabash on what was once the site of the hustling ticket and travel center for TWA (or was it **Pan Am**?) now sits a fast food hamburger joint; then the vacant **K & B** store; nothing worth remembering remains until Madison Street. I was sure I'd next pass **Capper & Capper**, once one of Chicago's most prestigious men's clothing stores — the two or three suits I was able to buy there bore their "Madison Clothes" label — I couldn't afford the C & C label. (I did once buy a **Borsolino** hat on sale for an Easter splurge!) Going farther north a few doors was the decade-long site of **VL & A**, the extra-elite sporting goods vendor which eventually became **Abercrombie & Fitch**, now gone for nearly a generation. Then Washington Street, where the old **Brentano** store sat a few doors east. Between Washington and Randolph, in the good old days, were located the **Eastman Kodak** store and the **Blackhawk Restaurant**.

Ah, the **Blackhawk**(!!!) **Benny Moten** and his "Twelve Clouds of Joy," Count Basie! The **Blackhawk** where during Prohibition you could order, with your dinner, a bottle of **Cliquot Club** (ginger ale) with a bucket of ice for 75 cents. These could be visible on top of the table cloth — your bottle of Cicero Hootch should show only as a lump under the linen. I've just looked up "Blackhawk" in my *Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music* — but there's no listing for this hotbed of Chicago jazz.

Around the corner on the right was the north entrance to the **Chicago Public Library** and the steps down to the **IC** (Illinois Central) and South Shore suburban trains. But the library is not **The Library** anymore and the train station is a filthy hole in the ground from which I would be loathe to board the **IC**.

On the other side of **Randolph** was **Dennison's** party goods store which became a **K & B's** branch in the fifties. At Randolph and Michigan was the **John Crerar Library**, created by a famous Chicago industrialist as a special library for industry and business; since incorporated into the **University of Chicago Library**. For years it was under the direction of **J. Christian Bay**, a Dane who

was a specialist in Western Americana.

Now I want to talk about some of the people at 29 South Wabash who made it such an attraction to book readers and buyers as well as to book authors, publishers and sales reps.

From the customers' standpoint, the compelling reasons for patronage were: First, the people who sold these books and second, the selection of merchandise at their disposal. Chicago boasted quite a few good bookstores and a good many knowledgeable people to handle them. **K & B** had the collections of books, to use a term dear to a librarian's heart. Not only was this the best collection of books under one roof; it was, more importantly, the best collection of booksellers under one roof.

The main store, as a rule, carried more books on more subjects than did most specializing book stores. For example the selection of economic and business books was larger than those in area college/university bookstores. The cookbook and home planning selections were larger than those in the book sections of leading department stores. The fishing and hunting sections were bigger than in **Abercrombie & Fitch**. So on and so on. The science and technical books department, where I labored for nearly fifteen years, was acclaimed by publishers and customers to have few peers. Children's

books, technical books, history and current events books, fiction books, foreign language books, art books — **K & B** was the place to find them.

But it was the people; the curators (and their assistants) of these collections who made **K & B**

B one of America's most distinguished book stores for decades. **Oswald Brod** began his bookselling career in Central Europe. Early in this century, he came to America and was employed in the art books department of **Brentano's** in New York and was later transferred to their Chicago store. Ozzie, as we all called him, was one of the most valuable of all the assets Papa Kroch got in his acquisition of **Brentano's** midwestern holdings. Sometimes he affected a grouchy visage which betrayed many lovable attributes. His accent was so heavy that a listener had to pay close attention to grasp the conversation of this man, one of the most knowledgeable art book experts our industry has ever produced. His customers included wealthy art collectors, museums, art historians and teachers as well as struggling students in the **Art Institute of Chicago**, just three blocks distant. Ozzie was also an authority on music and dance. He was an aficionado of classical music; **Mahler** was, I believe, his favorite. As an expert on literature of the dance he greatly aided **Leon Morgan** in putting together the books of the **Morgan Ballet Collection**, now housed in the **Berkshire Athenaeum**, Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Ozzie retired from **K & B** in 1965 and moved to Vienna. It was my good fortune to visit him in his Vienna home a couple of years before his death in 1980. His widow, Rose, visited our home a couple of years ago on one of her frequent trips to the U.S.

Henry Tabor was the art department's assistant manager under Ozzie and continued as manager from 1965 until shortly before the

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Papa Lyman with C. Northcote Parkinson

store's closing. Hank is an expert, in his own right, on literature pertaining to the Fine Arts.

Another Brentano's addition to the staff was their rare book expert, **Harold Graves**. Graves was a specialist in Medical and Scientific antiquaria. He moved on in 1955 to succeed **David Randall** as head of the rare book department in **Scribner's Fifth Avenue** store. During this tenure he served a term as president of the **Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America**. But Kroch's still had **Carmin Jones** to handle rare books and its authors' room which held the famous log book and much holographic memorabilia. Carmen also managed the store's history section.

Every bookstore had at least one "expert" on fiction. But only K & B had **Therese Romalis**. "Carriage trade" or, as better known in Chicagoese, "Gold Coast" readers telephoned Therese with *carte blanche* orders for their leisure novel reading. Local and out-of-town authors sought her advice. Among the locals was **Saul Bellow** who would proudly show her his latest piece in *Evergreen Review*. (Sometimes Saul would even slip downstairs to the Technical Book Department for a brief visit with the author of this column!) **James Michener**, **Irving Stone**. Most of our country's literati of mid-century included Therese and **Carl Kroch** on their Chicago itineraries.

Adah Sparling was born to the stage. She came from a family which had been associated with **Ridpath**, a traveling adult educational movement somewhat similar to "Chautauqua." Perhaps I should explain that "The Chautauqua" was a movement from which we middle westerners received some of our education and exposure to "culture" from the late nineteenth century until about the time of the Great Depression. Small cities were visited in summer time by famous speakers (**W.J. Bryan**), musicians (**Susa**, **Galli-Curci**), educators (**Wm. Rainey Harper**), magicians (**Houdini**) et al who performed in "Chautauqua's" tents.

One day Adah, who was in charge of atlas and dictionary sales was visited by the great **Henry Fonda** who came into the store to examine a "Hist-o-Map" which was featured in a display window. Adah was so thrilled to be visited by the famous fellow thespian that she accidentally dropped her dentures. But she was not, as one might surmise, flabbergasted: she slowly backed a couple of steps to where the appurtenance had come to rest; she daintily dropped her kerchief, retrieved it, and with complete aplomb the restoration to original location was accomplished. Mr. Fonda registered no evidence of recognition. A few moments of restrained mirth were necessary on the part of the other two (I was one) staff members who witnessed this event.

While recounting memorable events at K & B I'll include a couple more; to help the stores celebrate the 1953 grand opening of the merger at 29 So. Wabash, **Doubleday** sent several hundred copies of a just-published novel for give-aways to first arrival customers. This event had been sufficiently announced to attract hundreds of people to the opening: they formed a line which stretched for nearly a block behind police barricades. The secretary of our department, **Gretel**, who also read the book, was asked what she thought of it. Unknowingly, Gretel created a brand new K & B malapropism by her reply: "I was disappointed to the good."

Famous authors were not unknown even to our technical and business department. The list of visitors includes **Edward Bernays**, **Peter Drucker**, **C. Northcote Parkinson**. Before a Parkinson visit to autograph we were warned by our **Houghton-Mifflin** representative that the author of the "Law" would expect a very large and visible stack of his book to be on hand for his signing. I arranged to have a "riser" of more than two hundred copies placed right at the foot of the steps leading to our department. This impressed the author so thoroughly that he "dedicated" a copy to me as a "friend and great bookseller."

Many more anecdotes, some humorous, a few sad, could be added to this column. I can't conclude without special recognition of one of the chief reasons K & B achieved its reputation. **Carl Kroch** was greatly aided in his planning by his two vice presidents.

I wrote about his v.p. of merchandising, **W.W. Goodpasture**, in the first of this series (*ATG*, v.7#3, p. 74). The other vice president was **Morton L. Levin**, in charge of advertising, publicity and just about everything that had to do with getting the books that Goody brought into the hands of readers.

After U.S. Army European service in WW II, Mort joined Kroch's store in 1946. I believe he began as a sales clerk and window dresser. He was rapidly given more and more responsibility by Papa Kroch, and by the time of the stores' joining was a full-fledged vice president. One of his main projects was **Booksellers Catalog Service**, a subsidiary which produced **Book Chat**, a bi-monthly offering of new books which was mailed not only to K & B customers: it was eventually produced for several hundred other bookstores with customized covers, order blanks, etc. Mort not only produced this vehicle, he sold its advertising space to publishers.

His frequent trips to New York for this purpose were eagerly anticipated by publishers who recognized the selling power of **Book Chat**. It would take another issue of *ATG* to relay all of his stories but here are a couple of them.

When **World Publishing** company produced **Harry L. Golden's Carl Sandburg** in 1961 (287 pp., \$5.00), the store ordered one

*With Admiration
To Lyman Newlin,
a great bookseller, this
book is dedicated
by his friend,
the author
C. Northcote Parkinson
Jan. 1962*

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thousand copies. The books arrived just before Thanksgiving Day and the author and subject were let into the otherwise closed store on the morning of that holiday by Mort who had been responsible for the high media exposure to this great event: **K & B's** offering of signed copies by **both** notables. Golden had achieved considerable notoriety as an author-editor who had forsaken his native New York for Charlotte, NC, where he published *The Carolina Israelite*. Early in the afternoon, the autographers were feeling the need of sustenance in the form of Old Grandad, which Mort went to fetch. By late afternoon the last copy had been signed and the two writers left arm-in-arm. As Mort was finishing the job of getting books ready for the next day's onslaught of customers, he noticed that among the final piles some autographs appeared a bit unusual. Closer scrutiny revealed that as the Grandad proceeded to do its chore, the writers' spirits of mutual admiration had increased to the point where they were signing each other's name. If you happen to find a copy of this book bearing both autographs, I suggest you consult an expert on handwriting to verify the authorship of these signatures. you just might have a real collector's item!

Mort had the job of maintaining the store's publishers' cooperative arrangements in plac-

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new multi-user pricing program which gives libraries an option to provide users with unlimited access to electronic information. Vista pricing has 2 components: a database fee and a Vista access fee. The database fee has not changed; however the Vista access fee is changing. The new Vista access fees are based on unlimited access or access per port, depending on how the library chooses to implement the program. For pricing information, please call (800) 97-VISTA.

The ALA Conference in June was THE time for new products to be unveiled! Among these were: **Endeavor Information System's Voyager 3.0**, a system built on all the recognized foundations of next-generation computer systems; **Data Trek's new Graphical Library Automation System (G.L.A.S.)**, a Microsoft Windows-based fully-integrated system available for the microcomputer platform; and **Ameritech Library Services' WebPAC**, server software which allows library patrons and staff to use any World Wide Web browser as a public client for searching all Z39.50-compliant databases, including the library's OPAC. Contact the appropriate vendor for more information about any of these products.

ing advertising with Chicago's media. **Rand House** was the publisher of the bestselling *Ideal Marriage* by T.H. Van De Velde. After having established this position, the book was due for additional promotional effort. Mort consulted with **Robert Bernstein**, then sales manager (later president) of RH and it was decided that the publisher would support a very large ad in the *Chicago Tribune* in exchange for a very large order for this guide to the improvement of Chicago's marital unions. But the *Tribune* balked and no ad was accepted. It should be noted that compared to 1995 literature on the subject of sex, *Ideal Marriage* could now be taught in most kindergartens!

Another of the **K & B** innovations with which Mort was directly associated was its "First Edition Circle" which provided members, generally regular store customers, with autographed first edition copies of books by prominent contemporary authors.

Mort was ably assisted during much of his tenure by a brilliant advertising expert, **Fred Erik Hahn**. After leaving **K & B**, Fred founded **Hahn, Crane and Associates** which was a leading advertising agency in Chicago, specializing in book publishing. He is the author of *Advertising Self Taught*, Wiley, 1992 . . . The other corner of the advertising triangle

was ably maintained by **Hermine Sass** who handled the day-to-day jobs necessary to make any enterprise work.

Closing an article about **Kroch's and Brentano's** is difficult because the name still pops up in book-related news. See *Publishers Weekly*, August 7 for a caveat to an up-starting bookstore chain. See *American Bookseller*, August, 1995, for credit to Papa Kroch's 1951 starting of a campaign for a logo acceptable for use by booksellers, publishers and distributors — finally coming to fruition in 1994. Our industry does move in ways mysterious, their wonders to behold! And I will predict that the industry will be a generation or two older before its people cease to use **K & B** as a benchmark in book retailing.

Finally I want to thank **Morton L. Levin** for his help in recalling many of these particular stories. He is now retired from vice presidencies at **Viking, McGraw Hill** and **Hearst**.

Post Scriptum — In the week following the writing of this article Mort and his wife Sue will meet my wife Evy and me in Ithaca where we intend to visit the **Carl Kroch Library at Cornell University**. I hope the shelves are made of steel. If they are wood there would be a terrible temptation to carve "MLL" and "LWN" somewhere!

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