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Tom Carroll, President and Owner, Carroll Publishing Company

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Interview — Tom Carroll

President and Owner, Carroll Publishing Company

by Katina Strauch (College of Charleston)

Tom Carroll told me that editors like to play at being publishers and vice versa, a church and state sort of thing. The thing I don't know is who is the church and who is the state. In the meantime, let's read about the mystery man who won't be photographed. — KS

ATG: Well. Congratulations. Your publishing company has been in business twenty years as of this September. Tell us about Carroll Publishing Company.

TC: Yes, Carroll Publishing Company started in September of 1974. We are very much a niche publisher and we are premised on being more timely and more accurate in our reporting. We focus on government and on government-oriented programs and people. We publish primarily serially on a subscription basis and have seventeen products, including **FEDERAL Executive Directory**, **STATE Executive Directory**, **FEDERAL Organization Service**, and **RUSSIAN Government Today**.

ATG: Where were you born? Were your parents publishers? Did you come from a publishing tradition?

TC: I was born in Columbus, Ohio. My father called himself a publisher. My grandfather published weekly Catholic newspapers in the Midwest. That ended when the bishops discovered he was making a profit and they decided to do it themselves. It was mostly a printing company. In 1908, Carroll was incorporated as a publishing company by my grandfather. The company ended when my father died, as it was solely owned. As a child, I remember going to the Columbus printing plant. The Sunday activity that my cousins and I hated most was melting lead to feed the linotype machines. If my father could see how we repaginate and change a graphic now by computerization, he would be bewildered. It is sort of neat, a fun family connection.

ATG: I know that the *New York Times* has said that you "Keep Up with the Bureaucrats." (Jan. 4, 1981). Can you tell us how you got started?

This building, at 1058 Thomas Jefferson Street NW, was erected by the Masonic Order in 1810 as its meeting lodge. It adjoins the Georgetown Lock, number 4, of the Chesapeake and Ohio Barge Canal and towpath. The Canal, constructed between 1828 and 1850, opened Atlantic port shipping through the Alleghenies to the Midwest. This is now the home of Carroll Publishing Company in the heart of historic Georgetown.

TC: I was working as an EPA administrator and I learned that there was a nearly bankrupt company in Columbus that published organizational charts about the government. Since I was government and management-oriented and since I was taking my children to the Ohio State Fair in any event, I decided to meet with the previous publisher. To be brutally honest, I knew of the tax benefits of deferred income accounting. I thought I could do this as a part time venture for a tax advantage. But it grew from half day a week to a business.

For a small royalty for a year or two and \$1000, I bought the publishing company. I thought I understood why they had had trouble. They were in Ohio, not in Washington, D.C., and the information was 8-10 months out of date because they relied on government Public Affairs Information Office data. Before we published our first organization service publication, we wanted to verify the entries so we started making phone calls. We didn't know about telemarketing back in 1973 and now it is everywhere. We found that the Service was 50% wrong, so we corrected everything before we sent it out.

ATG: How many people work at Carroll Publishing Company? Tell us a little about your operation. Do you plan to stay independent?

TC: We have 13 full time people and 20-25 part time people. I am quite pleased with the quality of our staff. I believe in giving workers every possible mechanical tool so that they can use their mind in their work and minimize the routine.

When we first got started, we used an altar society to make phone calls. We would give money for flowers for the church and we used retired people and shut ins who liked a little income to supplement their regular income. They are a loyal group and some of them still work here on a part time basis.

Yes, I plan to stay independent. I am a 100% stockholder. As a small publisher we have flexibility to do things quicker and to see immediate results. When we get an idea, we can try it out and wait a year to see if it works. We don't worry about quarterly earnings, reports and investor attitudes.

I have two sons but only one of them is involved in publishing. Oddly enough, he doesn't think of himself as publisher.

He has just done his second book on volunteerism for Peterson's (**Golden Opportunities: A Volunteer Guide for Americans Over 50**). He just promoted it on CNN. He thinks of himself as more of an author.

ATG: What is your background and training?

TC: I went to a lot of schools. I am Yale, class of '50, University of Michigan School of Law, JD (1952), I had one year at the Harvard Business School and then I went to work for Time, Inc., finishing my business degree at Columbia seven years later in night school.

I worked for Time, Inc. from 1953-1967. I started out as an internal auditor, then I was in "budget," then domestic broadcasting, International broadcasting and finally Director of Planning for the book publishing division. I landed in Washington in 1965, when Time, Inc. went into a joint venture with General Electric called General Learning. They were going to merge educational products and services.

ATG: Humor us. Tell us what it was like to work at Time, Inc. back then?

TC: Time in the 1950s was the most important media company in the world. Television was just coming in as a competitor. *Life* was a huge color magazine. We knew all the major players because there weren't that many, and the media were not as prolific and all-encompassing as now.

I was out of work and broke in New York and answered an ad in the newspaper. Back then, Time was a magazine only, but later it would become a multimedia enterprise. I was fortunate that I got a job in a growing company. The philosophy was that people were more important than an idea and that outstanding people made the average idea or concept grow, not the reverse.

ATG: I notice that there is a new biography out about Henry Luce (Henry R. Luce: A Political Portrait of the Man Who Created the American Century, by Robert E. Herzstein, Macmillan, 1994). What was he like?

TC: I was a great fan of Henry Luce and was privileged to work for him. His mind was so brilliant that he could juxtapose thoughts in unforeseen ways, and he always had a purpose. It was a challenge to be around him. Time was vicariously exciting, and an intellectually stimulating place to work. One needed to get up early in the morning and read

many daily newspapers simply to stay abreast. We had weekly luncheons with experts of all fields, for example, Carl Sagan, Charles Eames, etc.

Harry Luce believed in ideas so much that Time, Inc. was a company of the mind and of communication. It helped a lot that Time didn't have its own printing company. Luce believed that *Look* folded because the magazine was spending time keeping its own printing presses busy and was not concentrating on the publication. Time, Inc., was for the separation of church (editors) and state (business people).

ATG: Who are your customers?

TC: About a fourth of our clients are people in government and we have the Office of the President, CIA, GSA, etc. Another category is Washington representatives and lawyers. We have many library clients and school clients looking for grants and job opportunities in government. Of course, our customer base for our directory business is different from our customer base for our organization chart business that is essentially military oriented.

ATG: What makes you successful as a publishing company?

TC: Quality is the number one thing we seek to achieve. We seek to be more current and more accurate than our competition, and we are able to keep costs down by using our data in more than one product or service.

Everything we do, the government could do, but they aren't focused on the general public. The Plumbbook is put out by Congress every 4 years. These are the jobs the President has the power to appoint. These range from those in the Cabinet which are highly publicized, to those in lesser positions, such as chauffeurs. With any new administration, the bulk of the change comes in agencies at the end of the first year when they start to reorganize.

We do an alphabetical index of our publications and we find that almost 20% of the people listed are not there year to year. This flies in the face of the saying that the federal government bureaucracy is stable. The rule of thumb has always been that in industry and commercial enterprises, there is 15% turnover and 5% in the federal government. On the contrary, we find year to year that out of a group of 30,000 people in the Executive Branch, 20% are new people, or 20% of the people are not there any-

more. We publish the **Federal Executive Directory** six times a year because, even then, nearly 30% of the entries change in some fashion in each two-month period.

We keep producing new products and try to launch them well to our existing client base. We don't worry about the competition. We just need a decent profit and good salaries and we don't worry about what the competition does.

Marketing is the key. The question is what gets your attention, a company, a line on an envelope, or a subject that you are preconditioned to be interested in. Generally there is no profit in the early stages of a subscription. For example, it was the 80th week or so, before *Time* magazine made money in the 50s. You need to be patient and let your product grow by word of mouth.

ATG: Can you talk more about marketing? Will it become more and more important as we have more and more products?

TC: We have made mistakes and published unsuccessful books. We have sales people and we talk to them regularly. We do a survey on every product every two years and ask what is good or bad about it. We take a booth at ALA every 2-3 years and we go to the Special Libraries Association meetings and to military shows. When we are testing a new product, we may put a panel of 15-20 existing clients together and ask them to "beta test" it.

I think the theme of the 1994 Charleston Conference, The Savage Marketplace, is right on target. I tell my staff that these days anyone with a PC can put a product out there, but the name of the game is marketing, the experience and the reputation — that is what will make your product successful and what will distinguish it from other similar directory products.

ATG: What about your crystal ball? What are future issues for your company?

TC: Pricing, CDs and CD pricing. Some specialized publishers are charging too much.

I found it interesting that at the ALA convention in Miami, there was not a single manufacturer or seller of CD players. Is this just not a big enough market? I foresee the day when CDs will be rented out like music and books out of libraries. Something like Blockbuster CD. The consumer user who comes into that li-

Issues in Vendor-Library Relations

It's the Same New Song

Column Editors: Judy Webster (University of Tennessee) and
Barry Fast (Academic Book Center)

Acquiring Electronic Information and Electronic Access: Impacts on an Acquisitions Librarian

by Judy Webster

First they started coming on disks in book pockets, and then they were arriving as independent titles on disks in boxes or on magnetic tape. Next they were CD-ROMS and now, they are everywhere. They are datafiles, and they have become a part of my everyday work life. Each electronic format provides a slightly different challenge. I have learned to deal with questions of location, treatment, storage, archiving, and licensing. The first

question to be answered was what to do with datafiles on floppy disks as accompanying material to standard paper texts. After we answered the question that we wanted to keep the materials together, we learned to be creative in re-packaging many texts into containers suitable for shelving in the regular stack area.

One of the most difficult of the electronic formats is the data we acquire on magnetic tape from ICPSR. I began acquiring datafiles from the Inter-university Consortium of Political Research (ICPSR) in 1990 with the premise that I would treat them as normal orders. Each title we order has a record in ACQ in addition to our membership record where we pay our an-

nual dues. I found it challenging to organize and keep track of titles that I cannot see. I can hold the magnetic tapes in my hand but I cannot determine their contents. The University Computing Center stores the data for us and our users. I found that having the order records available online in our acquisitions system is a good decision for tracking purposes because all I have to pass along to the Cata-

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brary may want to take a CD home. Libraries will have to have multiple playback units to reference information electronically. Electronic media will have more and more of an impact.

There will still be room for books. In the last 10 years, as our "paperless" society has grown, paper usage has increased 51%. My products will always have a print version that you can carry and pass around.

ATG: *What specific plans do you have for new products and technologies?*

TC: We are still feeling around for what to do. During ALA, 15 small independent publishers got together to talk about what to do about the Internet and the outernet (Compuserve, etc). Will we as publishers be able to go on the Internet commercially and will people be able to find what's on it? Right now, it's a very scattered shot type of enterprise.

We are doing 3 CD products but the only one I want to talk about is a product for a highly specialized audience — aerospace, electronics and computer manufacturers. It is not a broad-based product. We are trying to carve out our niche. We are hoping to do one for government and hoping to sell it for less than \$100.

We will do more CDs by year end.

CDs used to be marketed by the manufacturer who wanted to sell the player and the content was secondary. Now a new wave of publisher is getting into CDs. Right now, I think that some publishers are charging more for the medium than the content. Buyers aren't looking at content, and they can't evaluate it because in many cases it's too big and too complex. The question is what value has been added by the publisher. Buyers have to find a way to distinguish quality of comparative products on CD. You can have wonderful pricing, but if the data is not accurate, what good is it?

ATG: *Do we need a Ralph Nader of library media products?*

TC: Yes. I would say we need a consumer reports arm. The subject of library reviews came up in Miami and every publisher who was there had horrendous examples of bad reviews in journals. It would be wonderful to get Ralph Nader on it, but he is interested in GATT right now. I think that product reviews will be much more critical in the future. We need to know not just when good reviews are published, but when reviews are inaccurate.

ATG: *Has the Feist ruling had an impact on you and your business? Are you nervous about losing your data because you can't really claim copyright to it?*

TC: No, not at all. By the time people copy our data, it's out of date. The information we deal with is not static. The only impact is that a competitor doesn't have to do all the preparatory work to collecting the data. It takes us time to develop a new product and competitors don't have to go through the developmental process.

ATG: *I'm kind of proud that we have gotten through this whole interview without talking about O.J. Simpson. Are you a sportsman? How about hobbies and reading?*

TC: I play a lot of tennis and love to watch Wimbledon. Everybody in Washington loves the Redskins. My main hobbies other than children are charitable activities. I read business journals and my share of newspapers. I am in the middle of reading the **Haldeman Diaries** which I thought would be boring but they are quite fascinating. I like Irish history and just read Flanagan's **End of the Affair**. ☞

Tom Carroll says that he is getting married sometime in the fall and that he knows that Charleston is a great place to bring his new wife. He says he was last here 40 years ago, on a rocking chair at the Yacht Club which is still there now. Let's look for him at the 1994 Charleston Conference. — KS