April 1996

Letter from Oklahoma

Tom Leonhardt
University of Oklahoma

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Recommended Citation

Leonhardt, Tom (1996) "Letter from Oklahoma," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 22.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2028>

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Letter from Oklahoma

Meetings I Have Known

by Tom Leonhardt (University of Oklahoma) <tom@libadm.lib.uoknor.edu>

All told, I must have attended around 100 conferences and professional meetings of one kind or another over the past twenty years. With very few exceptions, they are all a blur, especially the ALA Annual and Midwinter Conferences. Those that stand out do so, quite often, for reasons that have nothing to do with the meetings. I remember riding the bus from Boise to Chicago one year to make ends meet. The 48-hour bus ride was enough to make that 1978 meeting memorable, but that was also the year that a severe snowstorm kept many ALA members in Chicago longer than they had planned. As for me, my Trailways bus left right on schedule and never missed a stop on Interstate 80.

I also remember the 1982 Midwinter Meeting in Denver because I took another bus (this time it was a Greyhound). When I arrived in Denver, my luggage was still en route on another bus. I remember going straight from the bus terminal to the Woolworth's in downtown Denver where I bought a shirt, a tie, slacks, socks, and a change of underwear. A cross-country bus ride is romantic in theory but two days on a bus without benefit of a bath and without being able to take off one's shoes (after 24 hours your feet swell and once off, your shoes may not fit for a while) creates some sensations that are usually associated with those less fortunate than a gainfully employed librarian. Nevertheless, I was graciously allowed to check into my hotel and I recall that the desk clerk sent a bellhop ahead of me to start the shower. Such service is not soon forgotten.

This most recent Midwinter meeting of the American Library Association won't soon be forgotten, either. I didn't travel by bus although San Antonio is only an eight-hour drive from Norman. I will remember this meeting as the one where I got to bed early every night and lost at least five pounds in three days. I call my diet the "Remember the Alamo Retreat." You don't have to stay at the Crockett Hotel or even be in San Antonio for it to be successful. It will work at any conference, any city, any hotel, and for anyone.

On your first night at the conference, choose a restaurant where you can order some bad pork or some leftover dish made with mayonnaise. This should lead to food poisoning, preferably salmonella. You should then be able to go at least three days without eating anything (or keeping it down should you want to be heroic). Try to attend your meetings but afterwards you must go straight back to your hotel room. No night meetings if the diet is to be successful. Once in your room, consume Immodium AD tablets as if they were lifesavers (they will be) and drink plenty of ginger ale. A few saltine crackers are allowed and are

even helpful. You should be able to function normally on the fourth day and you should have lost at least one pound per day. Results may vary for individuals.

I did manage to attend all of my meetings and even spent a couple of hours in the exhibits, even though they closed on Monday instead of the usual Tuesday. This early closing was in response to requests from exhibitors. Given the traditional low attendance on Tuesdays, this was a good move by ALA, although beautiful weather turned Monday into Tuesday. This won't always be the case and we should do all we can to make sure that closing day is a big success. Many of us take the vendor booths for granted. Even when the meeting times don't coincide with a national holiday, exhibit space is very expensive. Librarians need to be more conscious of the expenses of renting exhibit space, shipping, assembling and disassembling a booth, and staffing it. Nowadays, most booths seem to have some kind of computer hook-up, thus adding to the overall expense and complexity.

When I served on the Vendor Relations Committee of the California Library Association I became acutely aware of exhibitor costs and concerns and saw how badly we librarians can treat them even when we take the time to visit the exhibits. There is nothing malicious about our behavior but at best it is benign neglect. For example, the weather was so nice in San Antonio that many of us, even feeling a bit under that very weather, chose to spend free time outdoors, strolling along the River Walk (Paseo del Rio), stopping only to buy a strawberry/banana freeze, or to observe a three-year-old terrify his parents while he terrorized the pigeons when he chased them to the water's edge. The vendors noticed our absence. They understood why we weren't there in larger numbers but that awareness does not feed the bulldog.

One way to show our appreciation for the exhibitors who make the conferences possible is to make sure that we librarians spend a minimal amount of our free time in the exhibit area. And while there, stop and talk to those working the booths. Even if you are not interested in the product, stop and thank the person for supporting ALA and then ask some questions. So what if it isn't your area of responsibility or interest! You will learn something new and you will make a lonely person feel better. If you have never worked the exhibits at a conference, I recommend that you volunteer for booth duty for your favorite ALA division. You will have new respect for exhibitors after only a couple of hours on your feet, begging with your eyes, your words, your gestures, for someone to stop and let you explain why you are there. Meanwhile, the world

passes you by.

Speaking of conferences, the **1995 Charleston Conference**

was memorable in several ways. In addition to the talks and panel discussions, there was ample opportunity to meet with colleagues in the hallways and restaurants and talk about the many things that librarians, publishers, subscription agents, and booksellers have in common. These opportunities make conferences mini-sabbaticals, chances to re-charge our batteries, learn about new ideas, have our own ideas challenged, discover questions that merit further exploration. I am someone who absolutely relies on email for conducting my professional work. Could I live without it? Of course! Would I choose to give it up? Not on your life! But email is not a total substitute for regular mail, the telephone, the telefacsimile machine. And it most certainly is not a substitute for meeting people face-to-face at conferences like Charleston, spending time with them. Attaching a face to a name can be gratifying, no matter how productive the long-distance relationship (See *84, Charing Cross Road* by *Helene Hanff* for a good example.). Several people who help Katina Strauch with the Charleston Conference are no longer just names and voices to me. And of course, many if not most of the writers who appear in *Against the Grain* make appearances at the Charleston Conference.

At least two things will place this **Charleston Conference** apart from others I have attended. The weather was perfect for seeing the city on foot and on Sunday morning I was able to enjoy a delicious breakfast of lox and eggs before taking a leisurely stroll among the wonderful buildings and homes in Charleston. The Queen Elizabeth II happened to be in port that day so I got to see her up close and was even closer to the crew practicing lifeboat techniques along the sea wall at the waterfront park. The second thing was that after **Jack Walsdorf** and I finished (that is, talked until we ran out of time) our presentation about writers, librarians, and printers, we discovered that we had sounded a sympathetic chord with many in the audience. Librarians do read books. This is not news and not even a surprise but the verification was gratifying. Books are important to us — librarians, publishers, vendors — not just because we buy and sell books, but because we read books and books nurture us and give us a commonality that transcends our business relationships. I will have more to say about book in my next letter but I must close for now. The Editor is knocking ...