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Papa Abel Remembers -- The Tale of a Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 9: Growing Pains

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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 9: Growing Pains

by **Richard Abel** (Aged Independent Learner) <rael@easystreet.net>

In mid-1964, the Approval Plan was in relative good order and a number of academic and research libraries had accepted it. Now it was time to expand our territory to libraries along the front range of the Rocky Mountains and the adjacent Midwest tier of states. Word-of-mouth about our firm had spread from librarians west of the Rockies to librarians east of the Rockies, leading some of the latter to contact us in Portland, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. One of us would then travel to that library and any nearby ones to tell the firm's story and express our interest in working with them. Armed with the Approval Plan, a more elaborate standing order system, and a capacity to deal with library-initiated orders, we were able to present a more compelling story than in the early days. As some old-timers reading this tale will recall, the rapid growth of libraries, institutions of higher education, and research establishments, the latter as an adjunct to the growth of new manufacturers, led to a high demand for experienced librarians. Consequently, a number of librarians moved across the country. As some of the librarians we had worked with on the West Coast moved east, they contacted us for a visit. These librarians were acquainted with the services we offered, so our initial trips were usually devoted to meeting with the established acquisitions/bibliographic

staff, enabling them to size us up in response to the newcomer's recommendation.

We also began to mount a more public stance. Our first assay in this direction was to attend the **ALA Conference** in San Francisco, headquartered at the St. Francis Hotel. With **Fred Gullette**, **Tom Martin**, and I in attendance, all three of us could "work the halls" in order to learn how we might organize attendance at future meetings of librarians. We ran into many old friends with whom we had worked, and we invited them to **Fred's** rather large room for a drink and a place to rest their heels between meetings. Word soon got around that we had opened a "hospitality room." Before the conference ended, we had entertained a number of old friends and all manner of others with whom we had never worked nor were ever likely to work with. (Calls to room service for more bottles of liquor and mixers became increasingly frequent.) The three of us had used the day before the conference to plan our next steps, but we stayed a day after to formalize plans for our attendance at future meetings: the principal conclusion was to open a hospitality suite so the person whose room was used for guests had a place to retire.

These events led us to open an office in Denver. As good fortune would have it, **Jim**

Cameron called shortly thereafter to seek a position. **Jim** had been a "detail man" for several medical/dental/nursing publishers. He knew the book trade and a heavy travel commitment did not deter him. His preferred way of travel was his Packard, which he endorsed as the gold standard of automobiles. He was an extremely pleasant fellow and a wry, cynical humorist. Because of his experience, **Jim** required minimal training, which was held in Portland and consisted of some hands-on exposure to selecting books for Approval Plans. **Jim** joined the firm just before the fall round of ordering from the publishers' advance catalogs of forthcoming titles. We added copies for the Denver office inventory and completed our Denver Approval Plans.

After a few months spent in the Portland office, **Jim** was off to Denver to locate and furnish an office. As the firm was working with very few libraries in the Denver territory, the opening of the Denver office represented a

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much greater gamble and risk than the two earlier branch offices. **Jim** would have to develop enough library customers to offset the costs of establishing and operating the office. He did this quickly, proving himself an exceedingly valuable member of the firm.

The opening of the Denver office required the firm to add more **Flexowriters** and a person to supervise the increased production of Approval Plan forms. We were also running out of space in the portion of the old garage we had rented in Portland. Some time earlier, we had rented the bulk of the remaining space to ease crowding, but as that soon proved inadequate, we double-decked the bookshelves. I devised another **Rube Goldberg** solution that employed ladders as well as a manual dumbwaiter to lift or bring down books. (We also hired **Dick Rome**, who was typical of a number of employees we luckily stumbled onto. He had received little education, and we initially hired him as a receiving/shipping clerk. However, he possessed a good mind, was a hustler, and soon became a valuable member of the staff, charged with a growing number of responsibilities.) To accommodate the additional **Flexowriters**, we added a second level and a small room above the restrooms. Accessing this workroom, with its twin banks of **Flexowriters**, was an exercise in ducking a large beam and low doorway. Hardly elegant, the crew routinely produced increasing numbers of Approval Plan forms for a growing number of libraries, all in a timely manner. These makeshift arrangements grew out of a mindset of frugality. We needed to preserve resources for inventories to meet constantly increasing demands and to finance a growing accounts receivable file on very skimpy margins.

As 1965 approached, a major improvement in the operation of the Approval Plan was undertaken. I was experiencing increasing difficulty in tracking the necessary quantities of new titles required for each office's Approval Plans. Furthermore, knowledge of the unique collecting requirements of each library's Approval Plan was lodged in the minds of the managers or the individual responsible for dealing with the Approval Plan selection. This became an obvious problem in the Los Angeles office when **Tom Martin** became ill for several months. While we fortunately had **Eunice Andrews** (now **Eunice Martin**) to take operational responsibility in the office, I had to spend about three months in the Los Angeles area to assist **Eunice** and to travel to the libraries to both assure them that things were under control and to deal with any problems that arose. When a library had a problem with Approval Plan selection, I had no place to readily turn. **Tom** was not always available to call for help. All this information and knowledge about individual library collecting needs was lodged in four or five geographically dispersed mortal heads. In short, we were suffering the want of sound, up-to-date, and readily accessible internal information and knowledge. An anomalous situation indeed!

This convinced me that we had to develop a permanent written and readily accessible record of each library's instructions as to what books they wished to receive on approval. By this time, the Approval Plan had evolved to provide not only subject needs but also what we came to call "non-subject parameters," including such title characteristics as country of origin; cloth or paper binding; level of difficulty; series designation; publisher exclusions; reprints, etc. These characteristics had to be included in an information/knowledge system to meet the firm's internal needs.

During my after hours, I began to devise such a system, as daily routine work and travel occupied roughly 65-70 hours a week. Fortunately, as a student at **Reed** and an autodidact, I discovered that I not only did my best mental work from about 10:00 in the evening until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning but that I could make out on four to five hours of sleep a night. After my family had gone to bed, I set to work on the system. This job took about three months to complete, much of that time spent in research on knowledge organization. This research had its foundation in the work of **Bliss**, now, unfortunately, a forgotten name. I then turned to **Dewey's** system, the **British Library** modifications of **Dewey**, and, finally, a close study of the **Library of Congress** subject authority compilation. These systems provided the professional contexts within which librarians thought about such matters. Lastly, I turned to the course catalogs of the institutions we served, for they were the contexts in which faculty conceived of their fields and their relations to one another.

With this research in hand, I organized a subject listing that the managers would use in soliciting information from the libraries. First, we would give a copy of this listing to the head of acquisitions with the understanding that our manager would return in a couple of weeks to go through the final version with the acquisitions staff. During this interval, the acquisitions staff would consult with faculty, catalog librarians, circulation librarians, bibliographers, and the acquisitions group to make certain that the Approval Plan would serve the library as effectively as possible.

Then I turned to compiling a list of non-subject parameters. I consulted with all the managers and any others, such as **Don Stave**, who had a close relation to the libraries' collecting behavior. At this time, I was telephoning the managers a couple of times a week to keep them abreast of the rapid developments in Portland and the other offices and to stay current with developments in their offices. With these two parts of the "library profiling worksheets" compiled and pulled together, I turned this work over to **Don Stave** and the managers for their critical evaluation. When these critiques were back, I modified the subject and non-subject parameters as appropriate. We then sent out this revised profiling questionnaire in bulk to the managers responsible for the first operational step, putting into a permanent record all the Approval Plan requirements of the participating libraries. The regional office retained a copy and sent a copy to Portland for forthcoming ordering purposes. At last

there was a shared written record of the Approval Plan information/knowledge in the firm. How very reminiscent of the product we were trading in!

Now I well understood, as did the managers, that we had just handed our competition the guts of our Approval Plan system from which they could easily and quickly organize their own versions. They could solicit a friendly librarian to pass a copy to them, but that was the price of recording and publishing information/knowledge — and we knew we must — and we paid the price. Despite the hazard we had erected for ourselves, we saw no genuine alternative if we were to guarantee the libraries continued top-level customer service for their Approval Plans, regardless of personnel changes and unforeseen contingencies.

About this time, the management travel load in the Los Angeles office led **Tom** to hire **Oliver Sitea** to assist with the operation of the Approval Plans and the management of the office inventory. **Oliver** had a strong retail book background, having worked in some of the leading bookstores in the Los Angeles area. In time, he would join the Portland operation to take over the forthcoming book purchasing.

In the fall of 1964, we began to discuss the place of computers and information technology in our operation. While our manual systems were working well, it became increasingly evident that as sales volumes increased, this would overwhelm them. We were quite unsure as to how to proceed. **Tom Martin** started looking around the Los Angeles area for some help with our considerations. He learned of **Ralph Shoffner**, who worked for **Informatics** and was doing some interesting things with computers. **Tom** recommended that we retain **Ralph** as a consultant. **Ralph** came to Portland in early 1965 for a continuing series of consulting sessions that eventuated in the firm moving into the arena of information technology a year later.

As a step to improve the efficiency of our operations, **Paul Sibley** urged us to move to more spacious quarters. One late afternoon in the spring of 1965 when I called into Portland, **Paul** said he had just leased a building about three times as large as our present one, and that we could move in June. This was the beginning of a period of a continual need for additional space. **Paul's** initiative was typical of the entire management group. A great team was shaping up, motivated by a profound commitment to the world of serious books and to the advancement of hypotheses. Additionally, all were dedicated to the transmission of that knowledge to the next generation. In short, all were great bookmen, a team that would be difficult to recreate. None was fearful of facing and dealing with risk. The quest they joined was fraught with risk from day one, which would be their constant companion to its conclusion. In moments of reflection, the group brought to mind the journey of the Argonauts. This same spirit and commitment to learning and the accumulation of knowledge informed not only the new additions to the management group but also much of the clerical staff responsible for ongoing daily operations. 🌳