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Lost in Austin — The Golden Age of Librarianship

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Every once in a while, and it seems to be happening with ever increasing frequency, I wonder what happened to the library world in which I began my career about forty years ago counting staff work. Oh, I know where I am and although I am not really uncomfortable with the thousand and one things that have changed since I began working in libraries as a page and library assistant before getting my M.L.S. in 1973 (**Berkeley** actually awarded a master of library science), I have been amazed at the rapidity and the profundity of changes in the past five years. I have been involved in information technology since 1973 (Project BALLOTS, later RLIN, now gone but not forgotten) and have been used to and part of the changes that began to replace labor-intensive, repetitive tasks. I was wont to say that although many of the changes were dramatic and even unsettling to some people, they were not really profound. Perhaps, in retrospect, they were more profound than I gave them credit for because they were paving the way to today's world, a world that is disappointing in a way that I will touch on later. Hint, it concerns printed books.

I began my library work in the Rare Books and Special Collections Department (RBSC) of the **Doe Library** at the **University of California** back in 1969 and stayed there, through the administrative and, finally, physical union with the **Bancroft Library** until June 1973. The wonderful **Leslie S. Clarke** was my first boss and the person most responsible for getting me excited about library work. As my knowledge and skills grew, so did my responsibilities.

When RBSC moved to the newly re-modeled **Bancroft Library**, led by **James D. Hart**, compiler of the *Oxford Companion to American Literature* and tenured professor in **Berkeley's** renowned English department, my new boss was the equally wonderful (but in a different way) **J.B. Tompkins** from whom I learned the importance of wearing a tie to work. Is he why I persist in tying a bow knot most work days? Or am I just a stubborn old man tied to a past that goes back to the 1940s when I sported a clip on bow tie, white shirt, and tweed suit with short pants?

We do dress more casually than we did when I first began as a librarian and that is a change that I have mostly avoided until recently. I now freely admit to wearing polo shirts and chinos to work when one one-hundred degree day leads to another *ad infinitum*, or so it seems. On the other hand, I rather look forward to days when I have meetings and can wear a Seersucker suit. **J.B.** would be proud of me.

The real changes in librarianship began subtly if not profoundly. Even when we had moved from typing purchase orders and catalog cards and began keying that data into a main frame

using dumb terminals, we still searched NUC and the LC Depository Catalog that I used at **Berkeley** and **Stanford**. Searching, *sans* authority control, was a careful exercise that was a form of sleuthing to determine if the author's first name for author Smith was Thomas, Thom, Tom, or simply T and if all four variations were found, were they the same person? If the author were famous or at least known, there could still be an entry somewhere that varied and caused an "unexpected duplicate", as we called them at **Stanford**.

Clerk typists were phased out and eliminated in the 1970s and 1980s all over the country to be replaced by searchers who also did the data entry. But for the most part, we didn't change so much of what we did as automate it. We were letting technology do our jobs faster and more accurately. Nevertheless, as head of acquisitions at **Boise State University**, I became proficient with a ten-key adding machine and using the totals compiled from 3"x5" multiple copy forms (four or five colors), to enter encumbrances and expenditures onto account sheets. I don't miss those days (maybe just a little) but I am glad that I got to experience them. At the same time, though, I got to use a **Texas Instruments** calculator with a tape printout that had 99 programmable steps that I used for budgetary purposes. It was more powerful, in many ways, than the mainframes and minis that we were using. Which reminds me that our serials control (periodicals and standing orders) at **Boise State** was stored on punch cards that we updated every six months or so. And it reminds me that in 1979, we joined WLN and moved copy cataloging into Acquisitions where it belonged. The Octopus has long since gobbled up WLN, alas and alack.

That's enough of memory lane. What really started this train of thought, that is, changes in the world that I began in, was a recent report on use of the print reference collection at the **Scarborough-Phillips Library, St. Edward's University**.

I have always been a strong advocate of hard evidence but only learned later in life something that I had long suspected, and that is that "the plural of anecdote is not data", that from my learned colleague and holder of the Ebsco Endowed Chair of Library Service, **Danny P. Wallace** (<http://webapp.slis.ua.edu/dwallace/>). One of my favorite books early in my career was *Scientific Management of Library Operations* (1966, 1982), now replaced by *Streamlining Library Services: What We Do, How Much Time It Takes, What It Costs, and How We Can Do It Better*. When I read the report on the number of uses of our print reference materials, I was stunned, dismayed, and convinced — convinced that we needed to get rid of my favorite part of the collection, next to American and English literature. It was a sad reckoning, never mind that

many of the titles were out of date and most were available online and we had paid for them.

We have begun the process. Alternately, I feel like a traitor and a visionary. How dare you remove those wonderful tomes of erudition! How dare you waste money on reference books that no one uses! I love them but they are not appreciated. Surely you know the feeling, don't you? Haven't you had a good friend, a best friend even, who was not appreciated by others?

When I think of print reference books, my thoughts go back to the **Doe Library (UC Berkeley)** and its great reading room. The long tables with the built in lamps were surrounded by reference works from all over the world, biographies, encyclopedias, atlases, and more. The tables were of some hard wood and the chairs, too, but somehow I, and countless other undergraduates, managed some of the most restful sleep you can imagine and some hard duty studying and writing, too. I haven't been back in years and am loathe to do so now. You really can't go home again.

So yes, print reference books, at least in non-research libraries, are a vanishing breed, an endangered species and so are bound periodicals and print journals. I still prefer to read the print journals but most of the time what I read has been printed on 11" x 8" printer paper with the original saved on my hard drive where it is easier to find than the photocopied articles that I relied on in graduate school.

For most of my seven years at **St. Edward's University**, nothing has stood still. We have erected new buildings, remodeled others, planted trees, added students, staff, and faculty, and have generally presented a new look on the frame that was first begun in 1885. Along with those changes went a slogan, often represented on signs placed strategically around campus that read, "Change is good."

Change is good because without it, we would probably not exist. The irony (that is the definition of life) is that change is probably what will do us in as a human race, either that or the failure to change quickly enough and in the right ways.

As someone at the end of my career (almost but not quite) and as someone who has been an advocate and instrument of change, I cannot condemn what is going on now. I have contributed to it, after all, but I have also been a skeptic of change for change's sake. I have often said that just because you can do something doesn't mean that you should do it. I still believe that but I have come to embrace the digitization of periodicals and the rebirth of reference tools in electronic form, a form that allows itself to timely revisions and updates. Many if not most print reference tools were out of date even before they were listed in *Books in Print* and now, *Books in Print* itself is electronic and includes book reviews. Change is good. 🐾

