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ATG Interviews Sam Gowan

Associate Director for Collection Management — U. of Florida Libraries

by **Bob Nardini** (Regional Vice President, Collection Management & Development Group, YBP) <nardini@YBP.com>

Millions watched Oscar Night on television in March. The University of Florida Libraries' **Sam Gowan**, though, had a better seat than any of us at home. He was present in the Hollywood audience, hoping that the name inside the "Best Actor" envelope will be that of **Peter Fonda**, star of "**Ulee's Gold**," a film Gowan co-produced. Fonda, already the winner of a Golden Globe for his role in the film, was one of five nominees for Best Actor, and among the favorites.

For over twenty years Gowan has been an independent filmmaker and full-time librarian. Recently he announced to Florida colleagues that he would soon be retiring from librarianship in order to devote all of his time to films. Last year **Yankee Book Peddler** published an interview with Gowan on the YBP Website. Here is the text of that interview, along with a new one conducted this March by *Against the Grain*.

ATG: *You've been involved with some large projects well beyond the daily routine in your library career. Which have been the most satisfying or interesting to you?*

SG: Impending retirement certainly forces introspection. There are thousands of flashing

memories, not at all organized, and each one whispering, "pick me, pick me." It is chaos, a great deal like receiving six months worth of approval books in one shipment — joy, challenge, and horror.

I am very lucky because my most vivid memories of the University of Florida Libraries are happy and, in some cases, thrilling. They mostly divide into two parts: new collections and new ways to develop collections.

Back in the 1970s, a man introduced himself and told me he had some family letters written during the Civil War in Florida; they were in a dress box under his bed at his home in Rivera Beach. He wondered if the library would be interested in adding them to the collection. My antennae went up immediately, because I knew that Florida Civil War letters are very rare.

The letters under the bed described the migration of a Massachusetts family to a little town on the St. John's river in the late 1840's, and how the family began to cultivate oranges. This was a very special gift in itself, but the man, **Winston Stephens, Jr.**, contacted other family members, some of whom he had not been in touch with for years, to see if there were other extant letters. It turned out that most of the family had preserved letters from the same period. Over several years we worked to bring the collection together, from Clearwater, from Westhampton, and from a New York City apartment. What finally emerged was extraordinary. It is a nearly complete record of a Florida family from 1848 to 1908.

The collection includes diaries with entries on the day when **Octavia Bryant Stephens** gave birth to a daughter and was told the same day that her husband had been killed in one of the few Florida Civil War battles. There are letters describing the day Octavia's father, who

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was loyal to the Union side, visited his family, including his wife who was a Confederate, by sailing down the St. John's river on a Union gunboat under a truce flag.

These gifts fundamentally changed the scope of our holdings about Florida during the Civil War. In just a few months the **University of Florida Press** expects to publish a large selection of them and, after nearly 25 years, it is wonderful to be able to remember the first hoard of letters in that dress box and to be nearly ready to celebrate their publication. To me, this is a perfect illustration of the constant serendipity and value that flow through a research library.

And, then, there was the day I went to a local bank with an attorney to collect a bequest from a safety deposit box and discovered that we had been given a holograph manuscript by **Sir Walter Scott**. I certainly enjoyed working with **John D. MacDonald** over the years, especially when he sent his **Travis McGee** typescripts to me before they appeared in print, and the day **Ruth Baldwin** arrived followed by two moving vans full of the 35,000 volumes of historical children's books that she was donating. **Robert Singerman**, our Judaica bibliographer, left an indelible impression when he called to say that he was buying the entire stock of a Lower East Side New York bookstore that became our core Yiddish collection. The acquisition of the **Wilhelm Haussenstein** library was thrilling, because it contained an almost complete collection of important books and catalogues documenting the German Expressionist movement. All gifts or acquisitions are transitions, but some mark an essential change in the libraries' capacity to provide access to research resources and these are the changes most memorable to me.

In the long run, however, my most sustained pleasure was developing the libraries' collection management program. In 1987, there was no in-library collection management program, which was unusual for a research library our size. Since then, the library established a core of bibliographers and selectors that, I believe, vastly improved our service. During the past two years, we have worked to create cooperative collection development programs among the heretofore completely separated Florida university libraries. Along with the cooperative collection programs, the libraries have instituted a cooperative electronic license program for databases.

After the acquisition joy, of course, there comes the unrelenting and usually unacknowledged hard work of making the material accessible. One of my responsibilities has been to locate grants opportunities for the libraries. Most grant awards are exciting, at least before the work actually begins, but the most memo-

orable are those that actually do change the way library work gets done.

The now suspended Title IIC grants underwrote conversion of serial records into machine-readable form among the southeastern **ARL** libraries, a massive job that extended over almost seven years. The **NEH** gave us a series of grants in the late 1970s and 1980s to organize the several million microfilm frames of Florida Colonial documents. These grants followed years of difficult organization and microfilming in Spanish and Mexican archives, and allowed us to open the collection and link to other vast Borderlands Collections in North America. Without the grants, the library would have owned only a hoard of microfilm, but now we can provide access to a growing number of scholars whose work engenders a better understanding of Spanish influence on North America over several centuries. I can't imagine an alternative to the **NEH**. I hope that the federal government recognizes how important its grants have been to research libraries and to the preservation of this country's heritage.

More recently, grants underwriting digital research and development projects have helped us grapple with the new formats. The **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** award that allowed us to equip a digital laboratory and convert important Caribbean newspapers makes it possible for the library to publish unusual resources electronically which, I believe, fundamentally changes the concept of a library, by joining the possibility of publication with repository. The future of library programs in this area is almost unlimited.

ATG: *You've developed a certain expertise in tracking and even predicting state funding levels for academic libraries in Florida. How would you describe the ebb and flow of state support in your state?*

SG: Oh, it really isn't that mysterious. Florida has no income tax and is extraordinarily dependent on sales taxes and other user fees for its revenue. The state is required to balance its budget and, therefore, when the revenue goes down, the state has to revise its budget downward. The north-to-south money "pipeline" is

cellations.

Budget revisions are brutal in Florida because the universities are not protected. In the last round of the "boom-bust" cycle in the early 1990s, the acquisitions budget dropped 39 percent in a single year and required library budget revisions every two months. While the budget may go down 39 percent, it may go up by a similar amount when the state coffers are full—those are the fun years. In effect, the library does not have an acquisition base budget. The cycle seems to run in nine year cycles and,

If The New York Times describes problems in The New York State budget, I begin to think about serial cancellations.

frankly, I am delighted to be retiring in a "boom" year.

ATG: *Is there anything you learned making films that you've found useful as a librarian?*

SG: Yes, movies are totally conceived universes. The producer and director have to envision the project, and then separate the vision into pieces, some of which are exceedingly small—the actors, locations, the set, the camera, pre-production, production, and post-production budget, right down to the number of feet of negative film that is needed. If investors are necessary, then a prospectus and detailed budgets are to be written. Developing a movie project requires the same kind of analysis that an extensive library grant application requires; of course, any major project requires this kind of analysis. The difference is that in libraries there is an added consideration for institutional traditions and environment. In independent movies almost all of this work is done from scratch by one or two people. I find the processes are similar. In fact, I used to think of the backers of our films sort of like a mini-**NEH**. Library grant writing and film producing reinforce similar skills.

ATG: *Once you're a full-time filmmaker, do you think you'll be able to stay involved with the university and with the library?*

SG: There are so many interesting people that I have met during the years, I certainly don't want to lose track of them. Yes, I hope at least to continue work with potential library donors during the university's capital campaign. I've also tried to extract promises that I may been given a few hours of paid work on the desk or somewhere else in case the "great experiment" in film production flops.

ATG: *You've already described what a good marketing campaign from a major studio can do when a film like "Ulee's Gold" is released. What has the studio been doing this award season?*

SG: Several weeks ago, I was sent a fax that listed twenty-five or thirty various print,

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I hope that the federal government recognizes how important its grants have been to research libraries and to the preservation of this country's heritage.

very significant in Florida. If the northern states start into an economic downturn, the downturn is felt in Florida the following year because second homes sales and migration into the state slows down. Florida could have a good tourist year, but unless people are buying real estate the state's income shrinks. If *The New York Times* describes problems in the New York State budget, I begin to think about serial can-

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television, or other events arranged for **Peter Fonda**. The amount of coordination and work a list like this involves is astounding, and the requirements associated with "going for" an Oscar nomination are very expensive. The distributor has to be willing to spend at least \$100,000 to make the commitment. Peter Fonda's appearance on the cover of *Parade Magazine* is a good example of what a major studio distributor can accomplish that would be very difficult for a small distributor. The major difference between big studio distribution and the smaller distributors that handled our previous movies is resources -- people, money, and experience.

ATG: What can you tell us about your plans as a filmmaker, either for the short or long term?

SG: My hope is that our company comes up with a good script, particularly one that enhances the independent film program in Florida, and that we can find financial backing to make it. That's our main aim -- to make another movie. Hundreds of scripts have been sent to Victor. I have about 15 myself, and Victor is working on another original script that may be the next movie. We are also trying to figure out how we could get into more development work, helping other independent producers and directors.

YBP Interviews Sam Gowan

by **Bob Nardini** (Regional Vice President, Collection Management & Development Group, YBP) <rnardini@YBP.com>

This section of Gowan's interview is available in its complete form on the YBP Website — <http://www.ybp.com/> and is partially reprinted here with permission.

Lost in the bottom-corner small type of the full-page *New York Times* movie-section ad for "Ulee's Gold," beneath a large photograph of its star, Peter Fonda, beneath a smaller photograph of Fonda surrounded by his co-star Patricia Richardson and other cast members, below the "two thumbs up, way up!" blurb from Siskel & Ebert, the "astonishing" notice of the *Times*' own Janet Maslin, the "mesmerizing" verdict of the *Los Angeles Times*, and the "triumph" proclaimed by *Rolling Stone*, is a line saying simply that the film is a "Nunez-Gowan" production.

"Nunez" is **Victor Nunez**, writer and director. "Gowan," co-producer of "Ulee's Gold," is **Sam Gowan**, Associate Director for Collection Management at the University of Florida Libraries, part-time filmmaker, full-time librarian.

Nunez, of Tallahassee, Florida, has quietly gained notice as one of the country's finest in-

dependent directors. All of his films, beginning in 1979 with "Gal Young 'Un," adapted from a **Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings** story, evoke the moods and colors of north and central Florida. "A Flash of Green," based upon a **John D. MacDonald** novel, was released in 1984. "Ruby in Paradise" was a 1993 film.

Gowan has produced or co-produced all four. He first encountered Nunez when, through a local preservation group, he helped to secure a shooting location in Gainesville for "Gal Young 'Un." "Ulee's Gold," in which Peter Fonda plays a Florida beekeeper who fights to hold his family together while laboring to bring in the tupelo honey harvest, is the first Nunez-Gowan film to enjoy backing from a large studio, Orion Pictures (since purchased by MGM). The result has been near-unanimous applause from the critics, career renewal for Fonda, one of the summer's biggest hits, and a librarian who "suddenly," twenty years after his first film, stands square in the bright lights of a remarkable movie success.

Gowan, who grew up in New York City and Long Island, moved to Gainesville in 1965 to study at the University of Florida, where he went from graduate work to a teaching post in

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Book Reviews

Column Editor: **Tom Leonhardt** (Oregon Institute of Technology) <leonhart@OIT.EDU>

Lott, Bret. *The Hunt Club: A Novel*. New York: Villard
c1998. 243p. ISBN 0-375-50014-6

Reviewed by **Mary Robinson Cross** (System Librarian,
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Noone of us ever wants to loose any of our senses, especially our sense of sight. However, when one sense goes, others often become even more heightened. Leland Dillard, owner of Hungry Neck Hunt Club, was blinded by flying glass and collapsing eaves at a fire in his home. He depends on his nephew, Huger, to be his eyes. As Huger says, "It's me to drive you to the Piggly Wiggly, and me to write your bills for you, and me to rewash the dishes in the sink because you're—"

Huger was his uncle's eyes, but Leland's increased sense of smell was what brought them face to face with the body — face mostly gone and hands skinned off. Huger was a fifteen-year-old boy living with his mother in North Charleston, a community separated from the Charleston of the members of the Club, more by lineage and dollars than miles.

Bret Lott captures the essence of the South Carolina Lowcountry as though he has been intimate with this area all his life. A professor of English at the **College of Charleston** and **Vermont College**, Lott describes the Lowcountry of South Carolina like the back of his hand. "Live oak and pine, dogwood and palmetto and poison ivy and wild grapes and all else. Marsh grass down to the Ashepoo." All the natural elements found in this geographic region become the backdrop of a grisly murder.

For this, his first venture into murder and mystery, Lott has woven family, Huguenot names, the Medical University, SLED, the State Senate and much more to form a spellbinding story. He has driven down country roads like Cemetery Ridge and County Road 112 and over

the Mark Clark Expressway many times. He knows the interaction of the peoples and the places one finds in the Lowcountry. He describes them so vividly that if one were blind, one could see them clearly.

Charles Middleton Simons, M.D., the name on the sign found with the dead body, is, of course, one of those South of Broad doctors who come regularly to Hungry Neck in their Grand Cherokees, Range Rovers and Suburbans. To those readers not from South Carolina the name might not matter much, but to many who call South Carolina and south of Columbia home, there is a difference between a one "m" Simons and a two "m" Simmons!

Not just the Dupree, Ravenel and Simons "blue bloods" find their way into *The Hunt Club*. The rednecks are there too--Leland Dillard, Delbert Yandle, Tommy Thigpen, Pigboy, and Fatback. So are the blacks with aristocratic surnames — Miss Dinah Gaillard, who arrives at 4:00 AM every Saturday all deer season long with her deaf-and-dumb daughter, Dorcas, to cook up breakfast— grits, eggs, bacon, and biscuits. Miss Dinah's son, Benjamin, a hero of the Persian Gulf War, though deceased, is a presence throughout the novel as are the fables of the green-eyed ghosts of the Mothers and Fathers and the haints.

The Hunt Club is not just another murder mystery. It is the story of a teenage boy who comes face to face with the ugly side of life — a side many of us never experience except in stories like this one. Huger experiences life and death in ways he never dreamed possible. That Saturday after Thanksgiving brought so much into the open; not just the dead body, but the lies that had been told to him all his life. The deer that are killed in those Saturday morning hunts, the deer that are never missed by others of the herd, is that what Huger Dillard will become?

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the English Department. In 1978 he earned an M.L.S. at Florida State University, returned to the University of Florida as a librarian, and has worked there ever since.

BN: Most people we know today in libraries can hardly catch their breath keeping up with a single job. How did you manage a film career and a library career at once?

SG: Don't ask the people I work with that question! Seriously, the movie projects have been infrequent over the past twenty years. And the role of the producer is relatively limited. You're dealing with budgets, with contracts, with deals, much of which you can do on weekends. When you are working on a film though, from Friday night right through, your weekends are straight movie work. Also, librarians can accumulate a good deal of vacation time and low-budget films are produced over short periods. "Ulee" shot for only seven weeks. It's something in the tradition of the independents. There's not enough money to live on, so everybody has a day job.

BN: How often were you on the set for "Ulee's Gold"?

SG: Just four or five times, overnight trips to deal with particular problems -- intervening

with the state film commission, for example, on a shooting location, or a problem we had with generators the crew needed.

BN: We've seen the film referred to as a "hybrid/indy." What does that mean?

SG: "Ulee" was made for Orion Pictures, not by Orion Pictures. That's very significant. Artistic control was in the hands of the director and producer, and Orion was not the producer. Victor and I had an ideal situation. We could make the film we wanted to, but we had a giant studio distributing it. It was a perfect world. For "Ruby," distribution went all wrong. It came to Gainesville and lasted two days. Orion did the work right. Their marketing department went back twenty years and read all of the reviews in the big papers for all of Victor's films. Then they targeted the reviewers still writing who'd been favorable, and directed publicity to them. They prepared audiences for the kind of film "Ulee" is, so we got the kind of word of mouth that you need. When "Ulee" opened, if people had come out of theaters grumbling, because they'd expected an action film, we'd have been dead right away.

BN: When you met Victor Nunez in 1975, did you have any special interest in film?

SG: No. Probably I knew less than you know now. I went to the movies. That's about it. I was reacting like a classic reference librarian. "Oh, you need an old house? I'll find you

one. You need to talk to **John D. MacDonald**? I'll call him up."

BN: What do film people make of the fact that they're dealing with a librarian?

SG: There's a lot of dissonance between the librarian stereotype and the film producer stereotype. People can't believe a librarian can be a film producer. Film producers are supposed to wear flowered shirts, sit around in hot tubs all the time. I use humor, laugh a lot, to help get over the stereotype barrier. People ask me, "What's a movie producer doing in a library?" I tell them that I like to eat.

BN: What have you learned in films that's been useful back in the library?

SG: Not to get uptight.

BN: You grew up in New York, but through the films you're known as a Florida regionalist. How did that happen?

SG: Well I've been coming to Florida since the 1940s, as a kid. The landscape in this part of the state has none of the sublimity of California, but the subtleties gradually affect you as you become adjusted to it. In one way Florida is like California -- the north and south are two different states. Also I became interested in the area's history. My wife and I got involved in historic preservation in Gainesville, to help preserve a certain special quality the region has. I met Victor and he had the same interests. I knew exactly what he was trying to do.

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