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It Was the Best of Times!

by **Karen Hunter** (Senior Vice President, Elsevier Science) <k.hunter@elsevier.com>

Libraries have been a part of my life for nearly fifty years. Here are random, quite personal recollections as a student, technical services librarian, book wholesaler, publisher and current user.

Student

My Detroit grade school librarian in the 1950s had a closet — never opened — in which hung her imaginary red-checkered apron. Misbehaving students were told to stop “or I will have to put on my red-checkered apron and put you over my knee.” But for those of us who basked in the warm rays of her love of books, she was as supportive and special as they come.

Riding my bicycle to the local public library after school was the only exercise I’ve ever adopted voluntarily. I also took the bus downtown to the main Detroit Public Library starting when I was 10 (this was a l-o-n-g time ago) to use their collection. I don’t recall why now, but I know I spent hours with their microfilm readers.

As an undergraduate I thought it was cheating to ask a librarian for help.

When I was in business school at Columbia, I was also working full time and Columbia had packaged their executive program to avoid library use. In two years, there was only one assignment that required us to enter the library. Was this really a favor (it seemed so at the time) or did it mean we never learned the resources that were available in support of business information needs?

Cornell University Libraries (1967-72)

First salary: about \$80 a week. Those of us at Ivy League schools thought we were financially penalized for working at prestigious universities. Probably just the law of supply and demand.

Was “Sex see Librarian” really in our old (pre-recataloging) card catalog or is it just an urban legend?

Early technology: at Cornell in the 1960s: we had a modified Polaroid camera to place over a page in a printed Library of Congress catalog in order to photograph a cataloging record — photo then went to Catalog Dept. with the book.

I recall two acquisition rules of thumb: (1) If you make an error on a book costing \$10 or under, you eat the error — it cost more to return it. (2) If you think Harrasowitz made an error, check and check and check again — it will almost always turn out to be our error.

Best caution given by a boss (1969): “Karen, your mouth is going to get you

in trouble.” Too bad I didn’t listen to him.

Fun cataloging errors: two Eastern European books (specific language lost in the mists of time) that Harvard had cataloged under the main entry equivalent of “By, Written”.

During the time I was running Cornell’s exchange program, relations with China opened after a long period of silence. I recall the excitement of the first letters we sent to re-establish communications. During that period we also “exchanged” current periodical subscriptions for rare Russian books. Who knows — that may still be the normal practice.

Contrast working at Cornell for a year and a half in a windowless basement (and the huge enclosed warehouses of Baker & Taylor) with the Dutch law that all workers must have a window in their work area. Given the weather in Amsterdam, that means watching the rain much of the time.

And then there was the 1960’s implementation of the PL480 program — American food aid going to selected underdeveloped countries was paid for in local currency. The U.S. government then used that currency to buy local books, with one copy

going by air to the Library of Congress and other copies going by sea to selected U.S. research libraries. At Cornell, we received titles from India, Thailand, a few from Israel and other countries now forgotten. The first step was to fumigate the books and then wait — and, in some cases, wait and wait months or years — for LC cataloging to arrive.

Best part of my job: running the semi-annual book sales on campus for books deaccessioned or unwanted gifts. Everyone got a bargain, including those of us insiders who took the first pick.

Remember the golden days of acquisitions in the 1960s, when virtually every journal or book that was within scope and from a reputable source was purchased?

By 1970-71, we started selling off of second or third copies of campus journal subscriptions. Perhaps this was a foreshadowing of the later “cancel-to-add” process.

Mentor: Henk Edelman, then AUL for Collection Development, later library director and library school faculty at Rutgers. Henk’s path crossed with mine at Cornell, Baker & Taylor and Elsevier and he has consistently been an intelligent, good-humored friend. One remembered comment: “Don’t ever ask someone for advice unless you will give it very serious consideration.

To do otherwise is to insult your advisor.”

Baker & Taylor (1972-76)

I went to B & T with the assignment of changing their standing order program from a public library program with 500 titles into an academic service, growing to over 16,000 series and serials in the first two years. Just as we were moving from pilot to launch, Richard Abel’s excellent program for academic libraries collapsed. Many of his customers reluctantly fled to us and orders came in by the box-full, almost faster than we could handle them. Talk about being in the right place at the right time.

The best example of smoke and mirrors: The Baker and Taylor Automated Buying program (BATAP). Customers sent their orders on tape, to speed processing. But, when the BATAP tape was received, it was printed out and the orders all entered by hand in the normal fashion.

Baker and Taylor in the mid-1970s had the rule that you couldn’t travel on company time — all business travel was to be done in the evening, early morning or weekends. While we all do a lot of traveling on “our own time,” I’ve not heard of another company that made it mandatory.

Strange memories: In 1973 I made my first trip to visit B & T customers and invited them to “the best restaurant in town.” Turned out to be the Holiday Inn — it was a small town.

Another trip memory: Around 1975, when I was invited by the marketing director of Cambridge University Press to attend the annual AAUP (American Association of University Presses) meeting. It was in what I recall as a pretty remote part of Indiana, not easy to get to. When I finally arrived, I was thrown out by the AAUP staff as an unwanted vendor. (Early preparation for representing Elsevier.)

By 1976, B & T was in chaos. It had gambled on a large number of new businesses — increased academic sales, special library sales, purchase of a school supply company and new sales forces for audio-visual and international — and had forgotten what its basic business was. The central office grew from 35 to over 125 in one year — and then collapsed almost as quickly. People queued outside of the HR cubicles to turn in keys and credit cards. The silver lining for me: I could use it as a case study for my final strategy paper at Columbia.

Elsevier Science (1976-)

In 1976 we were a small company in the U.S. (still are) and Americans frequently asked “Elsie who?” At my interview for a planning position, a weary Dutchman asked

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Tales from the Bulb Fields: My Salad Days with Swets

by **Arlene Moore Sievers** (Case Western Reserve University)

In January of 1981, coincidentally or perhaps not, when **Ronald Reagan** assumed the presidency, I also took up a new position with **Swets & Zeitlinger BV** in Lisse, the Netherlands. I came directly from a reference/serials position at the Nora Branch Library of the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, so it was a bit of a change. Swets & Zeitlinger, now Swets Blackwells, was then a major international subscription agency with some long held business in the United States that was growing, and not enough help who could write a decent business letter in English and could understand what these American librarians wanted. I was

hired to fill this need. I lived for four years in the village of Lisse where Swets is located. Living in Holland was a delight, and working in a Dutch office was an experience I recall fondly because of my

colorful colleagues and the *gezellig* atmosphere only the Dutch can create. (*Gezellig* is an untranslatable Dutch term meaning, vaguely, warm, cozy, comfortable and friendly.)

The bulbfields were literally outside the windows, a huge field of daffodils with a reconstructed medieval tower, right in the center, called Huis Dever. What a view in the Spring! But in the late summer, after the bulbs are harvested the next step is fertilization. Holland has a coastal temperate climate, rainy and windy, most of the year. You get about two weeks of hot summer. This generally coincided with the application of manure on the fields, windows wide open of course, no air conditioning in Dutch buildings...Ahh, the earthy aroma of the fields wafted through our offices. Also during this "torrid" season, sometimes the hot weather would be met by a company decreed *tropenrooster* tropical schedule - allowed for employees. This meant you could come in at about 7 and leave at 1 or 2. One time one of the distinguished elderly gentlemen who worked in the antiquarian division entered our office clad in his tropical attire, khaki Bermuda shorts and shirt - all he needed was a pith helmet!

The Dutch are extremely fond of their pets. It had occurred that another elderly gentlemen in the antiquarian department became a widower and subsequently he was accompanied each day to the office by his equally elderly bulldog, who of course could not stay home alone. This was in the days before email, and the telex was the mode of quick written communication. The dog ensconced himself underneath the telex machine and would apply his slobbery kisses to the legs of those using the machine.

Dutch office culture would make a fascinating anthropological study. The extremely capable and efficient office workers live on a steady diet of rich office gossip and equally rich coffee. I tried to estimate how much of the coffee I had drunk in my four years there and I believe it would fill an oil drum. The Dutch are a peaceable sort, but I do believe mayhem and insurrection would occur if they were denied their coffee. By the way the coffee itself, sugar, creamer, stirrers, pots, and other accoutrements were supplied by the company. The preparation of one's *kopje koffie* is a ritual in itself; the pouring, application of cream and sugar and the stirring

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me: "I don't suppose you've ever heard of Elsevier?" Response: "I know you publish under the imprint of Elsevier, North Holland and Excerpta Medica." After all, I had been buying and selling his books for nine years.

In 1976, journal publishing was still an industry sleeper. Almost all publishers focused first (or only) on books.

The debate on the new copyright act that year drew me into copyright matters. Little did I suspect that debates would still be going on 24 years later, with no end in sight.

The reaction of the Elsevier finance director to my first ordering of a PC for the office (an Apple IIE in 1983): "It's a toy. You have no reason to have one." (Got it anyway.) At this same time, our London office was buying "automated typewriters" to circumvent the same anti-computer bias.

On making my first trip to Amsterdam (1976), my Dutch boss fabricated a reason for me to go to Paris as well, as he just thought I had to experience the city.

On that same trip, I went from office to office in Amsterdam and saw a book with the word "Engels" on the spine on most bookshelves. I thought: "What kind of Communist company have I joined?" Took about five offices to realize it was an English-Dutch dictionary.

In that context, one of my favorite stories relates to the early 1980s when we were hiring a new publisher for the company we then had in Mexico City. The person hired, a Colombian native but American educated McGraw-Hill publisher, told later how he was asked by one of the Dutch interviewing him if he would learn to speak Dutch. His reply: "It's rather like learning to wiggle your ears. Highly entertaining, but totally useless." I have been fortunate to manage for 24 years with Elsevier on English only, courtesy of my colleagues' facility in English and tolerance for those who have few language skills.

We started the first work on the **Adonis** project (electronic full text of biomedical journals) in late 1978, looking for ways to make technology improve efficiency. The first business plan, around 1980, ran aground because workstations for the large optical disks cost \$40,000. **The British Library**, the largest potential customer, could certainly beat that cost with its "rubber heels and rubber wheels" system of people pulling issues from the stacks.

The most poignant comment I think I've heard in my career was said by a friend (an **ARL** director) sometime in the late 1990's: "I didn't expect to spend my whole career downsizing collections."

Greatest challenges: the educational process in the late 1980's when librarians had to have a crash course on foreign cur-

rency realities, and today's constant battle to get the message out about the "new Elsevier" among those who can only obsess on the "old Elsevier." We've been called the Evil Empire so many times that we need a theme song.

Greatest satisfactions: First, the **TULIP** experiment (1991-1995), that brought me in contact with librarians that I still count as friends. We all learned a lot about networked delivery of full text, which is what experiments are all about. Second, writing a booklet on some of the history of the part of Manhattan to which Elsevier moved more than a decade ago. (Guess what I want to do when I eventually retire? Write more about urban history.)

Current library use

A vacation activity: mining library special collections around the country for original 1920s and 1930s band arrangements for my husband's band. Great fun and I appreciate and salute those libraries that preserve this part of American history.

My thanks to the **New York Public Library** just for being there. What a resource. Makes you a believer.

Finally, my dream: to get my own copy of many American newspapers and magazines from 1890-1930. I'm holding out for the day I can get them affordably on the Web. In my dreams? 🐷

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