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Millenium Minutes-Special Millenium section featuring the memories and reminiscings of various individuals

Editor

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arrived in Libraryland in the fall of 1965. Several days prior to my joining the Circulation Department at Rhode Island College in Providence, the library had acquired its first Xerox machine. As the newest circulation assistant, my official job was to make photocopies. My first real library skill—and, therefore, the one that has been in longest constant use—was to clean paper jams. I quickly learned to pull that very expensive and fragile drum out of the behemoth machine and remove the baking hot paper. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

— by Joan Bartram
(Collection Development Library, Salve Regina Univ., Newport, R.I.)
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In 1961, I took my first job in publishing as an editorial assistant for the American Rocket Society. And yes, I am still with the same organization thirty-nine years later, except that now we are the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics. Somehow the old name still seems more adventurous and romantic, though.

Several months after I began working for ARS, we sponsored a meeting called “Space Flight Report to the Nation,” and I had the privilege of engaging in a (brief) conversation with Werner von Braun. What a rush for a 22-year-old, entry-level nobody! I immediately fell in love with my new organization and its members, who to this day remain kind, cooperative, and accessible, regardless of their standing in the profession.

In 1982, the organization that by then was called AIAA celebrated its fiftieth anniversary at a large conference. At our formal banquet, I danced with Bob Crippen, who had just returned from his mission as the first Space Shuttle astronaut. (Remember Crippen and Young and their historic flight?) Another rush, only this time for a 42-year-old managing editor!

At that rate, in another year or so I should be due for my third rush—and I can hardly wait to see what form that one will take. It was a wonderful century. May we all find at least as many wonderful moments in the next!

— by Norma Brennan
(American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics)

You asked for our adventures during the past century (I assume you mean library-oriented adventures!), so here they are!

I began my library-related activities in the early 1950s, when as a Senior (Girl) Scout I had to do some community activities; among them were plane-spotting and work in the local public library, both of which I did. (I do not remember what I did in the library, but I do remember seeing hand-written catalog cards.) In junior college, I had a small scholarship that also required some college-related activities, so I tended the Dean’s flower beds and worked in the college library. After graduating and transferring to UConn in 1957, I got a job at the front desk of the library, because having the job meant that I had unrestricted access to the stacks (closed to undergrads then). After marriage, graduation from UConn in ’59, and a stint at the U of Maine, we returned to UConn. Because I needed a job and there were only student jobs available, I became a grad student (chemistry) and worked in several areas, one of them the Serials Department (as a kind of librarian, based in the Serials Department; I also checked in journals.) After number two daughter was born, I lost my library job and began teaching career (chemistry and physical science); I returned to the library world in 1970, at Central CT State Univ, in the Serials Department where I became Serials Librarian. In 1972 I left CCSU to go to Yale where “Information Science Abstracts” was being edited and published, to become managing editor. From there I went to Olin Corporation (Metals Information Center), then TRC (Hartford area) as Technical Librarian, to self-employment (editor and later editor & publisher of “HazChem Alert”), to indexing jobs here and there, and finally to CHICE as Science & Technical/Art & Architecture editor.

One of the most influential persons in my library/information life was and is Dr. Ben-Ami Lipetz, now at SUNY-Albany, and Dr. Bernie Schlessinger, somewhere in the West now, who’s an old and dear friend whom I haven’t seen for some years. Actually there were lots of other folks who I have looked up to in all these years—professors, colleagues, friends, and peers—all beloved and remembered when I not having a senior moment!

— by Judith A. Douville
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Our mention of electric erasers brings back memories of my first library job as an undergraduate student worker back in the early 70s in the LSU cataloging department. I had no aspirations toward a career as a librarian, but just needed a paycheck. Nothing about the position in any way led to my decision, twenty years later, to pursue an MLIS. In short, everything about the position served only to reinforce the most negative of stereotypes about library work.

My primary responsibility was to alphabetize the thousands of catalog cards that were being retyped as part of LSU’s conversion from Dewey to LC. I sat at a desk for hours on end with one of those long, sectioned alphabetizers, first alphabetizing by first letter, then by the second, and on and on. I didn’t study German in college, but I learned to translate Friedrich der Gros und sein haus (Frederick the Great and his house) from filing hundreds of cards with that heading.

Student workers were only allowed to file cards in the cataloging department; the solemn duty of actually returning the cards to the outside card catalog was reserved for professional librarians. This slight left me feeling somewhat unfulfilled, but I trudged on.

Enter the electric erasers. Sometimes when the filing was caught up (and amazingly, it occasionally was), a secondary duty was to prepare books to be removed from the collection and sent to a nearby prison, where inmates were no doubt anxiously awaiting the next shipment of 50-year-old agricultural texts. There was a simple routine involved: I ripped out the card pocket, then went to pages 60 and 125, where with a black marker I obliterated the name of the library, then used the electric eraser to remove the call number from the spine (lest those wily prisoners attempt to place the books in call number order on the shelf). This was before the days of any sort of concern for workplace environment, so I went home every day sneezing from the eraser dust.

My supervisor was a Miss Tharpe (long since deceased), who refused to retire, but preferred instead to nap in her office most of the day. Miss Tharpe’s limited interaction with her staff included walking around the office once every afternoon to insure that the student workers had signed their time sheets. I was the student worker with the longest tenure, so she called me “Carrol,” everyone else

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Sometimes the cards never came. And cards for older books often seemed to be out of print. I'm not real sure, because phonng LC would not have occurred to us - an occasional letter was the extent of communication.

When cards didn't come, we relied on the National Union Catalog and its supplements. The NUC section was regarded by the whole library as a sort of holy sanctum - the very essence of librarianship resided there. (Perhaps it still does, but I don't remember where we've put them.) We would search out the citation and then the cataloger would haul the volume down to her (always her, then) desk and type away.

And then we got this camera. It was huge - maybe three feet long by two feet wide and metal and black and replete with mysterious doors, knobs, and levers. We put a table for it in the midst of the NUC. You took your entry and I think maybe masked out the others on the pages and inserted the whole deal into a slot in the side of the camera. There was a covered metal tray, about the size of a stack of legal pads. It opened and you put in a handful of very fine black powder - which tended to escape and get all over hands and clothes. You inserted the tray in a sort of stand which allowed you to rotate it briskly 360 degrees a couple of times to distribute the powder properly, inserted it into yet another slot in the camera, and pushed the button. There you were - an instant master catalog card - though not a very elegant one.

The technology is not all I remember. Other things have changed. As I interviewed for jobs, no one asked about my career plans. They asked about my husband's career and when we planned children. It was explicitly assumed that within a few years, I would move away following him or stay home with children. Though the child of a professional mother, I sort of supposed that too.

I had in my section an assistant, a published writer, with a master's degree who had cerebral palsy. Her movements were awkward and her speech a bit hard to follow. It was thought progressive of the library to have hired her to do menial tasks. She wanted to do NUC searching -- she was certainly qualified. This created worries. The NUC was in a "public" area. Patrons might be "offended" to see her there. And she got easily flustered - what if she got upset or angry in a "public" area? To its credit, the library allowed us to move ahead. And she loved it for many years. Today, however, I like to think, would have been a better time for her.

by Margaret Landesman
(Head, Collection Development, Marriott Library, University of Utah)
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In 1974 I began work as a cataloger at Tulane University with the wonderful Jane Stevens as my department head. Tulane had just come online with OCLC/SOLINET and I was learning all about why it took so long to do a good job of cataloging a book. But why, I asked myself, did we have to be so careful to fill in the fixed field and to get all the delimiters and MARC codes right? What good was that ever going to do anyone? Sure, we wanted to code the author and title correctly, but who cared about those esoteric things like festschriften? Now, in the year 2000, as I do a three-hour library instruction session for graduate students majoring in English, I always give them a brief introduction to the incredible OCLC system and tell them how long ago librarians started planning for the access to bibliographic information they take for granted.

by Cheryl Mahan
(University of Central Florida)
supposed to use! We all used the unforgettably pale green NUC books to find cataloging copy. I was there when Duke first began to create a computerized serials list. At the Massachusetts Horticultural Society Library I worked with a unique classification system devised just for its collection. It has since gone the way of homogenization, subsumed by LC and OCLC in the interest of sharing and communication, but to the detriment of specific classification.

I was here at SUNY Albany when the first PC arrived, a gift from a vendor. It lived for some time in a closet because no one knew what to do with it. Now we have more than 450 PCs and servers and every staff member has a PC that is essential for his or her work. We are on our second automated system and are rapidly moving toward the fourth. Filing in the card catalog has disappeared, but no one noticed any gain in time because of it.

In the early days I was sure my salary would never top $10,000.00. I never thought I would become an assistant director. Although I had considered attending Harkar College (which became SUNY Binghamton), I never imagined working for SUNY until I landed on its doorstep. In high school I refused to take a typing course because I was not going to be anybody's secretary. Nobody has a typewriter anymore, but everyone types more than they ever expected to and that includes me. Some things have stayed the same such as the Baker & Taylor staff book accounts, one of the great perks of this business. And the basic tenets of librarianship remain with us, but the profession is immersed in a very different environment now.

— by Heather Miller
(SUNY Albany)

Remember the huge LC/NUC bound volumes with the small, fuzzy print? I was a young library assistant and mini-skirts were popular when it was my job to pull these monster books off the shelves to search for catalog copy. This involved hours of carefully bending over the low table so that my skirts did not reveal that tell-tale line near the top of my nylons; back-breaking work in more ways than one. I wonder how other library workers rejoiced when panty hose came out. This was about the same time our library started photocopying the catalog cards instead of re-typing them on a manual typewriter with a card platen. Revolutionary days!

— by Elaine Moore
(Valparaiso University)

The first time I paid attention to library technology was during 12th grade advanced English in spring 1971. The class took a trip to the main branch of the Detroit Public Library to do research. I was amazed that my classmate Mark Z. already knew how to operate the Xerox machine. (The copies were covered with a black messy stuff that came off on your hands. It also acted like carbon paper if you forgot and wrote something on the page on top of it.)

A summer or two later I volunteered at the Detroit Institute of Art's library and typed headings on the tops of catalog cards. As a very poor typist, I spent lots of time using the electric eraser (and hoped that I would not erase a hole through the card).

I don't remember filing those cards, but I certainly filed cards for several years at the East Carolina University Health Sciences Library (HSL). After we switched to an integrated library system (LS/2000) in the mid-1980s, we had a New Orleans style funeral for the card catalog (researching the topic by viewing the funeral scene in the James Bond movie).

I did my first literature search in late 1982 at the IISL on a computer with an acoustic coupler (two soft rubber circles in which you placed the ends of the phone receiver). I'm not certain now, but it might have been 300 baud.

The person who most influenced me in collection development was Daniel Richards (who died in 1995), one of the founders of the Medical Library Association's (MLA) Collection Development Section. (The 1998 cookbook celebrating the MLA's centennial was titled Selectively Acquired and honored Dan.)

The strangest thing about the vendors is probably the mergers and acquisitions game played by the acquisitions companies. I'm most familiar with a medical library example (ReadMore to Blackwell to Swets Blackwell), but other people can probably give examples that seem to resemble nominees for ALA's Worst Serial Title Change of the Year Awards.

— by Melissa Nasea
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Back in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, when I was working at the old Charleston County Library on Marion Square, we had all of the traditional library accoutrements: a card catalog half a block long, indestructible wooden furniture that had been purchased during the Hoover administration, a shelf list housed in a Remington Rand rotating file that had been modeled after the elevator system of an aircraft carrier.

Then in 1981 or 1982, two new purchases gave us a sneak view at the future. The first was an InfoTrac reader from Information Access Company. This contraption was a cartridge microfilm reader that looked something like a chiminea (those stone fireplaces people put on their patios today). It was an ungainly piece of furniture, and it seemed to scare some people, especially when I haughtily announced that this was "Computer Output Microfilm." But all the information was in one file, and it was updated every month! There was no moving around between a dozen or more paper and hardback volumes to track down the magazine articles the patrons were looking for. I watched the high school students line up for the reader while the hallowed and hoary Readers Guide to Periodical Literature gathered dust.

Not long afterward, we had our first Data General hard drives installed for our Dataphase automation system. The drive housings were the size and shape of washing machines, with disk packs that were comparable to a stack of fifty LP records (remember those?) and weighed a ton. To this day, I believe that the only reason I was put in charge of the automation process was that no one else in the building could live those damn disk packs. And now this little laptop computer I am typing this letter on which I am happened this letter has more computing power than the whole room full of equipment we had then. Ain't progress grand?

— by George Needham
(OCLC Online Computer Library Center)

It seems like a long time ago, but it has only been two years since the Antiquarian Bookman ceased publication. Jake Chernofsky tried selling the magazine, but there were no takers. I miss the weekly edition of the "AB" with its professional commitment to the o.p. market. It had great articles every week and lots of ads for books wanted and for sale and announcements for book fairs and sales and products related to the o.p. market.

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Remember the days of submitting o.p. searches by mail and waiting for a month for your first reply and then tabulating all of the postcard quotes from all over the country? Certainly the mystery of o.p. searching has gone out of the business with the rise of o.p. Websites. But the trade off for speed and selection has certainly been worth it.

The fun of searching through dusty old bookstores looking for a long lost book is gone as well. Now that every little bookstore is on the Web we have arrived at national market pricing for just about every o.p. book. There are no more surprise bargains at the bottom of a stack of books piled on the floor in the back of some out of the way bookshop.

Thanks for all the great years, Jake.
— by John Riley
(Eastern Book Company)

When I started grad school for my MLS, I asked my husband for a new state of the art electric typewriter— that was 1988. I told him nobody is going to mess around with a silly computer but the business world!
— by Linda Rousseau
(LeMoyne-Owen College)

Prior to OCLC, staff in Acquisitions and Cataloging at Colorado State remember how we used to spend hours filing “proof slips” from the Library of Congress. When we ordered books, we checked the proof slip drawers to see if we had received a proof slip that matched the book. Then Cataloging staff made the necessary copies of the proof slip for the public catalog. When there was not a proof slip for a book, staff had to wrestle with the huge, unwieldy NUC volumes and search for copy to photocopy. Now it is a quick online search in OCLC for copy cataloging.

The alphabetical sorters we used to alphabetize the proof slips before filing are the only thing that survived. We still use them today to alphabetize. Staff also remember the hours spent standing at the public catalog drawers filing. New staff had to “file above the rod” so their work could be reviewed. A card misfiled was lost forever. Dropping a drawer was a major catastrophe— it was an art to scoop up spilled cards in the right order.

— by Patricia Smith
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Started in Acquisitions in 1976. Almost my entire job was typing orders on forms with five carbon copies, and filing. With that number of copies, even if I had had a self-correcting typewriter, it would not have done any good. Of course, all the repetitive information, like the vendor and purchase order number, had to be keyed in for every title ordered. The big innovation was when we switched from carbon paper to NCR paper.

For pre order verification, we used Library of Congress proof slips, which gave the verifier sore feet. We then switched to the Blackwell title file, which gave the verifier motion sickness and a stiff neck. When we finally got OCLC, we had one terminal for all of Tech Services, and no automated acquisitions system, so we still had to write down all the information and then give it to the typist to type.

We used a ten-key calculator to total up the amount encumbered in each order. I remember that $8.95 was the most common price for a trade, hard-bound book; it seemed that I keyed it in constantly. We had an annual sort of ceremony: the tossing of the oldest year’s “orders received” file at the end of every fiscal year.

I shudder at the thought of having to function that way now: no OPAC and Internet at my desk, no automated system with its built-in report writing and fund accounting. But I sometimes wonder if, in our work life anyway, we have lost the ability to do it right the first time!

— by Jay Wann
(Oregon State Library)

Reminiscence at Retirement
January 15, 2000

There was a young woman of five and twenty
Who was offered a job at So Barre;
Twas at the end of a turbulent time,
Could the year have been 1969?
Mentored by Bird and Ebert both
Eager to put “med bib” to work;
At least for two years, for so we were taught,
Less than two is all for naught.

Directing “Tech Processing” was the focus then;
Cataloging, filing, and classification.
Union catalog print needing 5X magnification,
Card production and filing revision.
Over and over... ad infinitum.

In 1970 we made the move
To Library/Admn and never believed
We’d ever fill up such a huge place.
Not realizing we’d soon outgrow this place.

With the advent of MEDLINE in ‘72
We sampled the beginning of the equipment “zoo”
Access seemed limitless, there was no prediction.
’Twas the iceberg’s tip of electronic information.

The position became, in ’75.
Associate Director, I felt I’d arrived
At some sort of pinnacle (or was I impealed?)
With management, budget, and more personnel...

Two years later we added a floor
To support education with AV’s galore.
The hardware and software of ‘77
Lingers today in our electronic heaven.

In the mid ’80’s we went online
Removed that card catalog, celebrated big time.
We lost space, then gained it, reused and remodeled.
We shifted, we weeked, gave away and recycled.

More acronyms and abbreviations appeared
The linguistic nightmare we all had feared.
An alphabet soup that became quite perplexing.
Some were intelligible, others quite vexing.

NLC, NLM, MARC, and LC
CATLINE, SERLINE, MESH, OCLC,
SOLINET, SERMLP, OPAC, and MUSCLS.
LIS, BRS, CALCD and CONBLS.
AHEC, SCHIN, SACS, JCAHO,
LCME, IPEDS, AASHLD, and ARCO???
Pixels and protocols, PCs and MACS,
Email and Snailmail, HTML, HVAC???

Yes the building is bursting in ways old and new.
Collections have grown, equipment has, too.
Somewhere, somehow, during continuous change.
Two years became 30 — it now seems so strange.
How quick it all happened, what a ride its been.
A wonderful journey, perhaps a whirlwind?

This career was my second, and the longest by far.
But the millennium beckons, I must follow that star.
So now is the time to bid all adieu.
As Y2K arrives, new challenges do, too.
It’s the folks I’ll miss most, who shared all those miles.
For it’s the company that makes the journey worthwhile.

— by Anne Kahler Robichaux
Professor Emerita, Medical University of S.C.