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Papa Lyman Remembers — October Salad Days

by Lyman Newlin (Book Trade Counsellor) <broadwater.books@usa.net>

Here's something I remember from early years: the first version of October's *Bright Blue Weather* by **Helen Hunt Jackson**:

*"O suns and skies and clouds
of June
and flowers of June together
ye cannot rival for one hour
October's bright blue weather."*

October's bright blue weather, and I'm trying to get this column going when I should be out walking among the goldenrods and the fringed gentians. For me, October has been the beginning of the year. And this, the last for Century Number Twenty, is more beautiful than any I remember.

Having been associated with schools as a participant or as a provider of books to schools since 1916, I long ago discounted those opening days prior to October 1. By then, school fellows are known to each other, booksellers have run out of the most-wanted text and are breathlessly awaiting arrival of the ordered stock. I'm not referring only to college texts.

From the first day of school for me in North Chicago (c.1916) all textbooks for all schools had to be purchased, usually from the local drug store. By the time I got to grade school in Chicago's **Robert Emmet Elementary School**, the Board of Education had begun furnishing free books to elementary students, but several years passed before public high school students were beneficiaries of this hand-out. Most parochial schools had no free school book programs. After the one year of Chicago schooling, my family moved to Iowa and then Kansas. Neither of these states provided free books. And, of course, most colleges have never been so beneficent as to give away much of anything. Especially books.

Back to early October and a few memories outside of education: for sports, shinny with a tin can for puck, football on fields oftener with sandburrs than bluegrass. On Saturdays, picking apples—the first bite of a Jonathan shined on the seat of your pants. Who can forget that crunchy experience?

Colleges really never got going until October. By then, you could find your way around campus, and if you were

lucky, you had a member of the opposite sex going along, just guide you, of course.

Oct., 1934 - My first days at **Wilcox & Follett** (now "**Follets**") down in the retail store on the second floor facing Wabash Avenue in Chicago. The Great Depression was at its worst, but great for a dealer in used textbooks of which **Wilcox & Follett**, far and away the largest with floods of shoppers from opening at 7:00 AM and a 7:00 PM closing. As mentioned above, parochial schools and many suburban schools had no free texts. It was not uncommon to wait on a well-turned-out suburban mother who might ask for help to get her purchases (no shopping bags--you formulated your own "book bell" or you juggled) down to her waiting car with chauffeur at the wheel.

The **Wilcox and Follett College Department** was headed by the second of founder **Charles W. Follett's** four sons **Robert**. In the thirties, list price for college texts averaged \$3.00 or less. The largest selling texts were in business, and **Prentice-Hall** had the market sewn up with their series on accounting by **Northwestern University Professors Finney and Miller**. **W&F** marked down used books by 30%. A saving of 90¢ sounds small now, but a college student could eat well for a day on that amount. Four dollars was just about top for a text. A used copy would save \$1.20 and that meant meals for a day, possibly two, or enough for a date and a movie.

When list prices went up, for example, from \$3 to \$3.25, **Ben Follett** would have us beginner clerks stay overtime to mark up used ones from \$2.10 to \$2.25. Multiply that by the hundreds of copies we might have to mark up by 15¢ and you can see that Bob would pay us overtime (65¢ per hour up from 40) and still have some for the company.

Going back to the **Prentice-Hall** textbooks, **P-H**, like most text publishers, hated the innards of secondhand book jobbers such as **W&F**, **Barnes & Noble** (**B&N** then was only a textbook wholesaler-retailer) **Long's College Book Co.** of Columbus, Ohio, **Missouri Book Co.** of Columbia, and **Nebraska Book Co.** of Lincoln. **Prentice-Hall** had bright people from its chairman **E.P. Elting** to the lowliest salesman. The **P-H** marketers came up with what seemed to be a sure way to slow down used book dealings. At the end

of each chapter of many college texts, a perforated "Progress Sheet" was inserted. The student was to complete the answer blanks, tear out the sheet, and present same to the instructor as part of every class meeting.

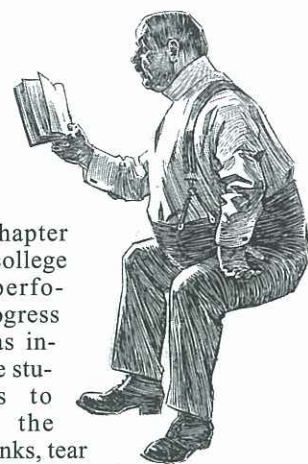
"Now we got 'em" shouted some text publishers. But not for long. Students and faculty balked at being left with a valueless used book. The accounting titles such as **Finney & Miller's** were not the only ones with "progress sheets". Even foreign language readers had them dubbed in at the end of each chapter. After a couple of large universities commanded faculty to adopt no **P-H** books, this great money-making scheme was abandoned.

Now a farewell to another October memory. On a recent visit to Minneapolis, I learned that the **University of Minnesota** is switching from quarters to semesters. But in spite of the change and the Governor, things won't really get moving until October!

As mentioned in **Rumors ATG**, September 1999, p.14, I would like to write a bit about **Chester Brooks Kerr**, "Scholars' Editor," as the *New York Times* August 26 obituary referred to him. Chester spent many years as a top editor at **Harcourt Brace and Atlantic Monthly** before joining **Yale** as secretary before becoming director in 1959 until his retirement in 1979.

I remember Chester as a master of the extra flair. This was not the route most would have conjured for the man who became famous for *A Report on American University Presses* which has been the benchmark for many similar studies, none of which came to have the use and cachet of the "Kerr Report." Here is an example of his theatrical genius. As a publisher he came forth with the *Vinland Map* on Columbus Day 1965. This book showed the outline of North America's coast which bore a legend attributing its discovery around 1000 A.D. by **Leif Eriksson**. As a master host, Chester scooped all the hosts before.

continued on page 87




Papa Lyman Remembers
from page 84

At an early 1970s and after annual meeting of the **Association of American University Presses**, I happened to be in attendance, but I can't remember what reason he gave for assembling all attendees and marching them off to luncheon across **Yale's** campus behind a fife and drum corps. Chester naturally was at the head of the whole shebang.

As a friend in need, I made an airplane trip from the East Coast to Tucson for the 1971 AUP meeting. My family was along on the trip and the airline generously transferred the four of us from coach to first class. A flight attendant spilled some scalding coffee on our youngest son, **Erik**, who let out a yelp. Who should come charging to our seats but good Saint Chester who took charge of the child, his mother, and the shaken attendant. In less than five minutes, all was calm and Chester returned to carry on his visits with the devotees of other university presses.

Another recent publisher death was that of **Evelyn Shrifte** at age 98. I doubt a single reader of *ATG* will recognize the name, but to me she was unforgettable as president of **Vanguard Press**. Vanguard was not large enough to be worth gobbling by a megapub (at that point in time I'm referring the megapubs were **RCA**, **Xerox**, **L.A. Times**). But this small family house published **Saul Bellow's** first two novels, *The Dangling Man*, 1944 (his first year as a teacher at **University of Minnesota**) and *The Victim*, 1947. Both of these titles by this unknown author were published during my tenure at the **Minnesota Book Store** where Saul was a regular customer.

But the Vanguard book nearest my heart was entitled *Fiddlefoot Jones of the North Woods* by **Philip D. Jordan**, an American history professor at Minnesota. *Fiddlefoot* was written as a sort of puerile Paul Bunyanesque collection of stories for young readers. Its setting was in and around Broadwater Lodge which was my stomping ground from 1948 to 1965. *Fiddlefoot* is now under reprint consideration by a couple of Minnesota publishers.

An omission to my railroad itinerary in *ATG* September (p.66,67), should be remedied. From Los Angeles, San Francisco and north to Seattle, **Amtrack's** number 14 & 15, "The Coast Star Light" is the best **Amtrack** I've ever ridden, and I certainly recommend a trip on it. Try it next time you travel our West Coast—the airplanes will miss having you to assault and abuse—but you deserve a change. Try it. You'll fall in love with train travel. 

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Ruskin's Venice

The Stones Revisited
Sarah Quill



Byzantine carved panel on the treasury wall of St. Marks, Venice, Sarah Quill

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