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## Papa Abel Remembers -- The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 7: Life After Reed College

Richard Abel  
rabel@easystreet.com

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# Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fascicle 7: Life After Reed College

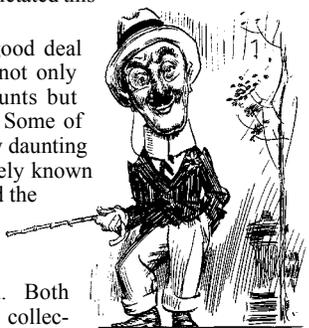
by **Richard Abel** (Aged Independent Learner) <label@easystreet.net>

After severing ties with **Reed College**, July 1960 found our small band as a now fully independent enterprise located in our new, off-campus home and business setting — exhilarating, but simultaneously, a daunting prospect!

Under **Tom Martin's** management, the Los Angeles office of **Richard Abel, Bookseller**, was rolled into the parent company shortly after our departure from **Reed**. Although still independently managed by **Tom**, no effort was made to establish it as an independent profit center because this would continue to involve complicated and costly accounting and recordkeeping procedures. In this new environment, we focused all efforts on keeping costs down and service standards high, standards that were intrinsically higher than the more limited services offered by competing wholesalers.

In the early days of every branch office opening, we tracked the level of imputed profitability to ensure that we never ran a money-losing office to the detriment of the overall firm. This new and more stringent operating environment also forced us to cast aside our notions of remaining a small, regional scholarly bookseller to a geographically restricted set of academic and research libraries. We now had to look further afield to a larger group of libraries. Our earliest vision calls to mind that famous cartoon of a United States map showing only the outline of New York State or Washington, D.C., with the immediately adjoining states vaguely outlined on their western periphery, fading off into a far and featureless Midwest and West Coast. That amusing depiction was not dissimilar to the vision held by us. But our view showed the mirror image, with the Eastern states fading off into a hazy vision somewhere just beyond the Rocky Mountain states. The need to generate larger sales and to support new costs encountered by the firm dictated this expanded service area.

Consequently, I spent a good deal of time on the road visiting not only our established library accounts but also soliciting new libraries. Some of the latter were psychologically daunting prospects for a tiny and scarcely known firm. **Stanford University** and the **University of California, Berkeley**, were two examples of libraries that I approached with considerable trepidation. Both were noted for their extensive collec-



tions, particularly knowledgeable staffs, and an elevated institutional stature. What was a small crew of young booksellers represented by this hardly-dry-behind-the-ears whippersnapper doing in such elevated precincts?

We received a warm reception at **Stanford** from **Elmer Grieder**, the acquisitions librarian, and **Edith Falconer**, the order librarian. **Elmer** was one of those very widely read, book-loving librarians who were such an ornament to the world of books. **Edith**, too, was very knowledgeable and an extraordinarily pleasant woman. Trial orders soon appeared. In due time, **Stanford University Library** and staff became good and enjoyable friends.

**Dorothy Keller**, the acquisitions librarian for the **UC-Berkeley Library**, was a very tough-minded bookwoman, who had manifestly learned in the school of hard knocks. She was more deliberate about testing us. Rather than send any trial orders for books needed by the library, she introduced us to a very engaged and bright young understudy, **Anne Lipow**, who was responsible for book acquisitions of the departmental libraries. We were not put off by this tactic but rather welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate what we could do. The departmental orders carried a significant number of “grey literature” and association publications, as might be expected. This was clearly planned as a trial by fire. We apparently performed adequately, and trial orders for the library began to appear in due course.

In the meantime, it became clear that the growth in accounts receivables and library accounts, as well as the growing accounting complexities associated therewith, exceeded the capacities of the bookkeeper hired the previous year. So, after a somewhat less than amicable parting of the ways, our outside accountant put us in touch with **Paul Sibley**. The change in the firm's accounting practices and reports soon made it evident that **Paul** was going to be a stalwart member of the team. Not only was he clearly the master of the accounts and their growing complexities but a font of good common-sense thinking, which proved over the years a substantial contribution to the planning required for the future.

Late in 1962, about a year after **Paul's** arrival, we had the good fortune of welcoming **Don Stave** aboard. **Don** was the acquisitions librarian in the research library of the **Hanford Atomic Works** outside Richland, Washington. He had become a good friend after we started working with that library and had volunteered much useful advice thereafter. We knew that we were going to need additional book and library strength in light of my frequent absences to visit libraries, the increased technical support requested by libraries, and **Fred Gullette's** imminent departure. Fortunately, **Don** decided to leave **Hanford** for a variety of personal reasons and selected our firm as his next and (as time would tell) lifelong place.

As noted, the overture to **Don** was based partly on the decision to open a San Francisco branch office to better serve the libraries in northern California, Nevada, and Colorado. One of the reasons for this gradual expansion eastward was because some of the librarians we had become acquainted with on the West Coast moved on to positions beyond our initial stomping grounds. In addition, we had to augment the numbers of libraries served to satisfy the exigencies of our new business setting. **Fred** agreed to open and manage that office, a venture undertaken in early 1963.

When not on the road, my job included marketing and selling; managing the firm; advance purchases of all suitable forthcoming titles from the publishers' seasonal advance catalogs; and inventory management, including picking books from our inventory and replacing that inventory as needed, managing the twice-weekly purchasing cycle to obtain ordered titles not in our inventory, and replenishing the in-house inventory in Portland. **Tom Martin** had the responsibility for picking books from the Los Angeles office inventory and managing that inventory. All orders to replenish his inventory came to Portland, with fulfillment either from the Portland inventory or through the mechanism of the Portland ordering procedure. **Lorene Dortch** assisted me in Portland, and dispatched the publishers' orders and organized the multi-part, 3"x5" publisher forms. The receiving staff matched these forms to the daily shipment receipts. This pattern of branch-central office ordering/inventory control was replicated as the company expanded geographically. I ordered all forthcoming titles for the Los Angeles office. These titles were delivered to the Portland office and reshipped to the Los Angeles office, coupled with the multi-part, 3"x5" publisher forms. All accounting, including accounts receivable management, was performed in the Portland office under **Paul Sibley's** control. When I was on the road, **Fred** assumed the inventory-control/ordering functions. With his departure, a trained bookperson had to be aboard to perform these functions, one of the reasons for bringing someone of **Don Stave's** stature aboard.

So, in early 1963 **Fred** was off to establish the second branch office for the firm in San Francisco. We sent no in-house backup person, as **Fred** believed he could find someone to handle those functions as well as the inventory management whenever he was on the road. The operating relationships remained the same as those we had established in connection with the conversion of the Los Angeles office to a branch office.

The complexities incident to the operation of three widely separated offices were increasing. Much of the firm's management and business was done over the phone. Such personal exchanges, marked by very useful input from the branch offices and the branch managers, helped maintain the sense of the common integrity and cohesiveness of the firm. Additionally, the two branch managers, both of whom also constituted the board, traveled to Portland on a regular schedule

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## Something to Think About from page 83

know who will be sitting next to you! Enjoy everyone and everything and try to ease yourself through the crowds of over 1000 people and umpteen presentations. It's like being plugged into a wall socket! Thanks to **Katina** and all the rest of the crew who give so many hours to ensure our access of knowledge and entertainment! 🌿

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for board meetings as well as the thrashing out of the never-ending problems that inevitably arise in the conduct of any complex operation. I traveled to each of the branches to meet with the managers and staff; to visit libraries with the branch managers; to introduce new programs to the branch managers; and to accompany the branch managers on visits to receptive libraries as a form of instruction in a real setting. I also put out the worst of the fires of librarian complaints that, again, inevitably arise in buying-selling relationships.

With the opening of the San Francisco branch, 1963 proved a very busy year that included the quite-by-chance opportunity to experiment with the contemplated, nascent "approval plan" in a genuine library-bookseller setting. For the past year, I had mulled over the fact that I had been buying forthcoming titles from publishers' catalogs, first for one, then two, and now three offices. I based the quantities ordered upon my sense of which titles each of the libraries we served might purchase as guided by their college/university catalogs or the mission objectives of the research libraries, coupled with my growing experience of their purchasing behavior. Now these projected quantities had to be modified to reflect a time lag of 12-18 months for most library-originated orders. This lag flowed from the typical delays in scholarly book reviews, delays caused by journals in forwarding scholarly books to reviewers and delays caused by the reviewers who needed time to read the books and write credible reviews. Scholarly books were not supported by the advance promotion of mass-popular titles but rather

on the sending of review copies. I wondered if there was a mechanism by which we could order suitable titles for the libraries upon publication. If a title requested by some faculty member resulted in a library order based on a delayed review, wouldn't such library users be better served a year or two sooner? I was well acquainted with the then **Farmington Plan** operated by a consortium of large libraries and the **Library of Congress**, but what I had in mind was a program that had none of the rigidities inherent to the former. The titles to be sent required a finer selection sieve, and a simple, clean option to return any title found unsuitable for a specific collection. Well, so much for idle fantasies!

Then, quite by chance, a perfect opportunity arose. In the late winter of 1963, I went to the **Washington University Library at Pullman**, which was recently granted full university status. Thus, the library was deep in the throes of building a collection beyond the typical land-grant collection, and they were collecting widely. In the course of the morning **Don Smith**, the head librarian, came in to **Ann Connette's** office, largely to say hello. In the ensuing conversation, **Don** asked me how it was that we were able to furnish so large a percentage of their orders by return shipment. I explained our new title ordering procedure, as outlined above. I then went on to briefly explicate my fanciful idea and outline the benefits to libraries and their users of sending suitable titles on publication with full return privileges. He was immediately interested and asked me to join him for lunch at his house.

Now **Don** was a thoroughly pragmatic head librarian. He was interested in results. He was interested in broad principles with the view that

the details could be worked out once the main ideas were in place. Further, he was a roughhewn man, little interested in social or organizational niceties. He was always a straight talker, no subsequent reflection on subtleties required. You knew what he meant at the time he spoke. I thoroughly enjoyed working with him and the staff who shared his ways.

We sat down to a peanut butter sandwich in **Don's** kitchen. There I laid out my thinking on what would soon be called the "approval plan." **Don** had several useful suggestions or modifications. With his input in hand, we agreed. A handshake was sufficient for **Don**, as well as for me, and we embarked on a joint experiment. We both understood it was an experiment, and that I would stay in touch by phone and frequent visits as we hammered out the details and any problems. We returned to the campus and **Don** explained to **Ann** the experiment we had agreed to. **Ann** was central to the successful operation of the experiment and, fortunately, was as pragmatic as **Don**.

With this quite unexpected development, I took the flight back to Portland. On the flight home and for several days thereafter, my mind was occupied with how to organize this experiment in-house. Fortunately, **Don Stave** was aboard, and obviously, at our end, he was the man to ride herd on the experiment. I discussed the entire thing with **Don** in great detail. His knowledge of books and library thinking and practices was very helpful in formulating how we would proceed.

So, the firm was now off in a wholly new direction — an idea long contemplated and awash with risk, but now possessed of a setting for its possible realization. 🌿

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## Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Buying eBooks: Does Workflow Work? Part I



by **Carolyn Morris** (Director of New Business Development, Coutts Information Services) <cmorris@couttsinfo.com>

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

As the demand for eBooks grows, libraries are struggling to develop strategies to accommodate them within current ways of doing business. In an era when workflow consultants prosper and consolidated purchasing is the mantra, it is tempting to think of eBooks as just another binding type and to move forward purchasing them from the library's existing print vendor. Otherwise, eBooks pose a real threat to all of the efficiency gains realized over the past decade. Unfortunately for acquisitions librarians, an eBook represents more than a binding type; and the method of eBook acquisition can have a profound impact well beyond workflow, bearing even on the future success of the entire library.

Not so long ago, vending decisions rested solely in the realm of the library's acquisitions department. A bibliographer sitting in his or her office would identify desirable titles then scribble a note to the acquisitions librarian who would go to the ends of the earth to get the title in the most timely, cost-efficient manner possible. How he or she did this was of no concern to the bibliographer.

With the advent of approval plans, subject

bibliographers suddenly had a much higher stake in who would be supplying the library's books because they would be required to work with that vendor to develop approval plans. As a result, in most libraries today, collections and acquisitions departments work together to select the library's monograph vendor.

eBooks add yet another layer or two of complexity to the acquisition process because they behave differently depending on how they are hosted and because the relationship with the eBook provider extends beyond the "shipping" of content. With print books, the end product is the same regardless of the vendor. A **Wiley** book from **Coutts** is the same as a **Wiley** book from **YBP** or as a **Wiley** book from **Blackwells**. eBooks, on the other hand, behave differently and are discovered differently depending on where they are hosted. In this environment, reference and public service librarians, since they are on the frontlines assisting researchers, have a vested interest in how eBooks are acquired.

Cataloging librarians also have a stake in which eBook vendor is selected. Though it has

become standard practice for eBook publishers, vendors and aggregators to provide cataloging records "free of charge" to their customers, all records are not created equal. Depending on the source, they may be relatively spare, laden with errors, provided one-at-a-time rather than in batch, or non-existent. Since currently there are relatively few eBook records in **WorldCat** and many libraries are already short on catalogers, this consideration can be of primary importance to some libraries.

In addition, to protect the library from pitfalls, library administration may want to take an active role in the eBook vending decision. Someone at the library certainly needs to be taking the long view. Will this eBook provider be around five, ten, fifteen years from now? Will they keep up with changes in technology? Will they promote fair use? Will they have the content we need? Will they continually develop facilities to integrate with our other systems?

All of this does not mean acquisition and selection workflows should not be taken into con-

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