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# Building Library Collections in the 21st Century — There's Gold in Them There Shelves

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**B**uilding collections isn't all that we do these days. We pare collections; print ones, as much as we build. At least if you are somewhere where space issues are constant like they are where I am. Even when you have two off-site collection locations, one a research venue and the other easily retrievable storage, there is always the need to weed. If there was ever an old-fashioned library term, weeding, that's it, but it survives because the activity does. Most academic libraries have gone through the exercise of weeding to one copy of books, withdrawing duplicates. Also, certain areas of the collection grow faster than others, and the need to shift comes sooner than later. We do continue to build as well as pare. Our faculty and students want print books, as much as other newer resources and the collection continues to grow. This results in a necessary thorough and continuous weeding.

There are a thousand stories in the naked city, so to speak, and our library is a case in point. Bear with me. **Kelvin Smith Library**, the main university library, uses **LC** classification, but there are still **Dewey** books in the collection that haven't been reclassified. The **University** has strong and prestigious graduate and PhD programs in the humanities as well as sciences and engineering, but the sciences and engineering curriculum and enrollment are the larger. The humanities are not predominant as they were decades ago at **Western Reserve University**.

The university federated in 1967, combining **Case Institute of Technology**, strong in engineering, with **Western Reserve University**, a very humanities centric institution. The institute and university were themselves the product of the joining of smaller colleges, all with separate libraries. Since all of this, there were also two main libraries that were combined when a new library was built 14 years ago. The product was **Case Western Reserve University Kevin Smith Library** and a remaining separate **Kulas Music Library**. This merging resulted in a lot of duplications in the library of course, and a lot of **Dewey**, and a lot of it is very old. A very strong humanities collection was amalgamated with the sciences into the collection that now exists.

This past year we started a reshifting, reclassification, and withdrawal project in the library that has successfully redistributed the **LC** collection on the third floor where books reside. We also moved some books to our **RRCC**, a research facility, and to **Iron Mountain**, where lesser-used and fragile books, which can still be accessed through retrieval, reside. Because of the different classification schemes that existed, and the regular and large shelving that existed, **Kelvin Smith Li-**

**brary** could be a difficult collection in which to locate everything, except by the most persistent scholar or student until this shift.

In our project, each book was looked at, usually by the collection manager responsible for the area. Some books were being examined for the first time in many years. This resulted in the finding of rare books that had no business being on the open shelves and which by sheer good luck hadn't been harmed. Collection managers found these themselves — first editions, rare imprints, rare books in any edition, and books that were themselves works of art, even with library markings. We have an active Preservation Department in which these sorts of books are appropriately handled and repaired and for which a suitable new location for each is found, but Preservation can't be in the business of going through the shelves simply in search of such items. There are enough that show up on their doorstep, so to say.

The valuable books that were found in this project included a first edition of **Walker Evans**. *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*, first editions of travelers accounts, those of the 19th and early twentieth century. Many large-size folios are in the collection consisting of drawings of Classical subjects. Many of these things are rare or there is no other copy in **OCLC**.

I am a collection manager for the area of Art History and Art, and have been a graduate student here in this area. Being a persistent librarian, and it took that, I have found first editions of books which are cornerstones of art history, as well as rare exhibition catalogs. Scholarship in these books doesn't age and has often not been republished. Happily these things are being reclassified and the access is better.

We have an enormous number of early **Baedeker** and **Murray's** European guide books in the collection, on the open shelves. They are valuable in my area, art history, in part because rooms that housed artworks, which are described in detail, in museums and great houses, simply no longer exist. They were victims of two world wars. What are left are the descriptions, which can fill in gaps in an artist's oeuvre. They also contain fabulous maps year-to-year, of European places, all of which have changed names and boundaries since then. We are lucky that all the maps hadn't been removed because they are valuable in and of themselves.

A lot of the collection managers and our Head of Special Collections caught these things, but a couple of us who are book collectors caught many, as well. Thumbing through **Abebooks**, so to speak, was a great way of establishing the worth of these books. They are all safely stored away, mostly in **Iron Mountain**, which is perfectly climate-con-

trolled and where they shall stay safely for the person who wants them brought out and used for research in the library.

I have come across such things as this before. Most of librarians probably have them in the gift pile, if nowhere else. In a public library branch where I once worked, an early edition of the etchings of **Gustave Dore** found its way in the gifts before it landed in the library system-wide book sale.

Before that, I worked as a cataloger, pre **OCLC**, in an unusual public/research Library in **Evansville Indiana, Willard Library**. This library is famous because it is haunted and there is even a ghost cam running constantly. Check it out on the Web. **Willard** was a quirky old place. The library was built in 1876, but the collection went back to the 1850's. There was one director who loved poetry — in the twenties, when **Edna St. Vincent Millay** was writing and other greats of that era. Even with library markings many of these books were rare and valuable. Poetry has never been printed in large editions. First editions of **Mark Twain** were to be found on the shelves and there was a special fund for art books, and it had been in force for decades, so that was a rich collection. Of course being old, there was a lot of historical material of value, most on the open shelves.

When the library was built the founder was **Willard Carpenter**, who was a staunch abolitionist and believer in the equality of all men and women. Therefore, at a time when such access was rare, women, people of color (as termed at the time), and immigrants were all welcome. He wanted people to have an opportunity to improve themselves.

Unfortunately, there were some incredibly important historical documents in the **Willard Library** collection connected with his active role as an abolitionist that were not handled in the way a Special Collections Room would, and which were stolen. These were original letters and documents concerning the Underground Railroad. These documents came from the library's founder **Willard Carpenter** who had operated a station himself from his house situated on the Ohio River between Indiana and Kentucky. Many were by him and other important emancipation proponents of the era. An old-fashioned, dear, and too-trusting librarian who preceded me as cataloger, let them be used unobserved by a couple of brothers who knew their worth and stole them.

I am sure there are a lot of these kinds of materials on the open shelves or easily accessed areas all over the country, and since libraries, are all understaffed, they are open to theft or harm, or simply being discarded as space becomes slim and the value is not known. I guess this is why so many people, including collectors, haunt library book sales like the ghost haunts **Willard Library**. 🐼

