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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 13: Financial Considerations and Growth of the Band of Argonauts

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Disconcertingly rapidly the late 1960s turned into a blur of varied initiatives. As with the Classical voyage, the most vital element of our progression was the increasing number of recruits joining our band of Argonauts as we progressed along the course of our journey. These new venturers brought with them fresh and innovative backgrounds, talents, and insights. In this period **John Larraway**, **Dan Mosier**, **Ron Wadlington**, **Mike Markwith**, and **Bob Durant** joined the voyage. A couple of these fellow-travelers, **John**, **Dan**, and **Ron**, learned the ropes of the book-trade as salesmen for **Prentice-Hall**. The man who trained them was a first-rate bookman and trade sales manager for **Prentice-Hall**, **Dwight Meyers**. **Dwight** was rumored to have told his West Coast staff to never meet me when they called on the book-buyers for our firm. His motive derived from his view that I would try to hire his best representatives away from him.

John Larraway started in the Zion office representing the firm in the middle Midwest. He did a fine job, as he continues to do, so, when we had to move a subsidiary corporation, **ISBS**, to Zion **John** was the obvious choice to take over the management of it. About this more later.

Dan Mosier opened an Ohio office set up to serve the upper Old Northwest. **Ron Wadlington** opened the Atlanta office to serve the Deep South. These two offices were oriented to the regional office in New Jersey managed by **Tom Martin**.

Mark Markwith had started as a part-timer in the Sausalito office with **Aaron Saady**. He joined the firm full-time upon his decision to leave theological seminary. He proved such a promising young man that he was transferred to Portland to enter our management-training program. In 1970 **Mike** agreed to replace **Ron Wadlington** in the Atlanta office after **Ron** had indicated that he wished to open the new office in Sydney, Australia, about which more shortly.

Bob Durant came aboard to assist **Joe Schectman** in new title and approval title buying. **Joe** had joined the firm several years earlier — another **Lyman Newlin** recruit. **Joe** possessed an absolutely encyclopedic mind for book titles and their contents despite a severe vision problem. He became the principal buyer for the firm after **Lyman** turned his hand to relieving me of nurturing relations with the domestic publishers. This change in position led **Lyman** to move to northern New Jersey for its proximity to New York City but yet to raise their boys in a small town setting.

In this same time frame **Don Chvatal** came to Portland to take over the management of the cataloging (both original and L.C.) and processing (affixing spine labels, affixing property stamps, circulation pockets/cards, or supplying electronic records) section. The firm's cataloging load had increased very rapidly both in terms of providing cataloging and processing and in terms of the magnitude of the database employed. **Dan Halloran** replaced **Don** in the Texas office, which despite the Texas annual bidding process had grown very large.

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By way of preparation for the Sydney, Australia office, I traveled to New Zealand and Australia to appraise the firm's chance of success in entering what yet remained a largely UK bastion. I had timed my visit to coincide with the annual meeting of the **Australian Library Association**. Upon early registration I was asked to speak about our efforts to computerize the Approval Plan, the standing order software, and the cataloging/processing program. The talk was to be delivered at an evening banquet dinner. When my wife and I arrived we were escorted to our table at which, to my great surprise, were already seated **Richard Blackwell** and his wife. Some wag had manifestly decided to see if some competitive fireworks might be staged at dinner for the entertainment of the assembled group. However, to the probable chagrin of the wag both of us put a good face on things — all the while I was recasting my talk in my mind as I knew that **Blackwell** were having substantial trouble bringing up comparable software.

I had planned to present a précis of the various programs and systems the firm had developed to serve libraries — this by way of preparing the librarians with whom I was scheduled to meet later to describe in greater detail the range of services the firm was able to offer them and their libraries. Given the immediate situation I recast the talk from this perspective to one describing the hazards implicit in the computer automation of bibliographic data. By so doing I gave **Richard** no clues to the systems we had in place or in development. So ended in a fizzle the perpetrator's designs and the first of such confrontations staged to create a fireworks display.

On another front it was becoming increasingly clear that the firm needed more than eyes and ears in Washington, DC. A growing number of initiatives, regulations, and practices were increasingly victimizing the people in and long-term, costly investments made by the firm. We, like a rapidly burgeoning number of firms similarly impacted, discerned that it was necessary to establish a voice as well as eyes and ears to endeavor to stave off or modify to a less harmful hit these impacts. So I spent about a week with our lobbyist to bring him up to speed on what we were doing, what we had on the drawing boards, and where we had been or where we were likely to be hurt. What a far cry from the vocation of a bookman and from the objectives and destination the Argonauts had set out to deal with!

Keith Barker, the firm's financial man, had developed a set of projections demonstrating the difficult path of financial requirements we had to travel. As a soundly grounded financial type he was quite alarmed by what he had discovered. Although I was less disturbed by these prospects, having lived for years on a shoestring, I agreed that we needed to do something to shore up the financial side of the venture. **Keith** contacted a boutique, underwriting bank, which sent a representative out to learn more about the firm. I, in the meantime, spoke with several acquaintances, who had recently taken their companies public. To a man they were quite negative about the entire thing — the costs were, even at that time, dreadfully costly, especially for firms still very much in the operations building stage; the regulations imposed were already daunting and promising to grow; the yearly reporting and dealing with shareholders consumed vast amounts of money, time, and diversions from the real work of the firm; and the pressure on executives to constantly increase profits to maintain the price of their shares led to all manner of short-term fixes rather than long-term improvements and solutions. None of this looked very appetizing, particularly in light of the fact that my acquaintances had founded manufacturing firms, so had some pricing power and worked on substantially more generous margins than we, who were bound by publishers' prices/discounts and a wholesalers discount. Further, all of them went public to create a better market for early employees to sell some of their shares. Our firm was hardly in so enviable a position.

The investment banker thought we could raise about $3 million in an initial offering and additional sums in secondary offerings on down the road. This was all very tempting — but at the end of the day I thought the trade-offs between the firm's continuing need to innovate in order adequately fulfill the needs of the specialized economic niche within which the firm worked outweighed the shortcomings associated with this financial benefit.

I have pondered this decision repeatedly over the years: Was it wise to continue the same pace of innovation and development of library services and support, or would the additional financial strength gained have reduced to manageable proportions the devastating impact of the overwhelming financial crunch we were to experience? I still have no satisfactory answer to that conundrum.

Keith then succeeded in lining up an institutional investor, who invested in a substantial convertible debenture arrangement. This investor was not yet called a venture-capital investor but that was what it was, in fact. This investment provided substantial relief from the pressures being imposed by the local bank, which was lending against our receivables. But it did place a new premium upon maintaining growth and resource allocation

In the meantime, pressures were steadily building to do something about the awkward space problem we faced. The firm now occupied three buildings — two warehouse-type structures and the specialized computer facility. Co-ordinating the efficient flow of receiving and shipping; the movement of books and cataloging internally to fulfill library demands; the staff common understandings of what staff in other functions did and how the two groups related; and keeping the managers up-to-speed on the design and execution of new programs and changing procedures in other parts of the organization had become a daunting challenge. But while we had been successful in managing this challenge to date it was clear to everyone that we must bring all the parts into a single location — and quickly before we fell on our faces for want of close co-ordination and the proper execution of operations, new and established.

We undertook a widespread search for space, preferably outside Portland, which was already getting tax-hungry. After a number of unproductive months we concluded that we were going to have to build. **Keith** turned up a willing lender to enable us to purchase about 20 acres and put up a building of approximately 130,000 square feet — the space needed to accommodate both present operations and provide for some small margin of growth. Substantial growth was to be accommodated in a second building of similar size at some future time, if needed. So we started designing and building a structure which would solve our present problems.

In the course of all these rapid changes we were being besieged by a number of English-language scholarly publishers located in Australia, New Zealand, England, etc. as well as several U.S. university publishers to stock, market, and sell their lists. The overseas publishers were seeking to broaden their market for their titles in North America. The U.S. scholarly publishers were seeking to relieve themselves of much of the burden of marketing their lists and unburden themselves entirely of the problems of storage, billing, and shipping their books. All knew of our firm and its now wide-scale locations for we had become large-scale purchasers of their books. So, **Keith**, **Paul Sibley**, and I set about forming an wholly owned subsidiary to serve such functions. The subsidiary was named **International Scholarly Book Services, Inc.** (**ISBS**). We had brought a bright, young Scandinavian immigrant into our management-training program some months previously, **John Christofferson**. We asked **John** if he was willing to assume the responsibility for bringing this new operation up, a proposition to which he agreed. **Ron Wadlington**, now established in a Sydney office, canvassed the Australian publishers, while **Tom Slatner**, now in charge of the London office solicited UK publishers. **Lyman**, of course, contacted the U.S. publishers. The new subsidiary grew faster than anticipated, leading to a further space crunch in the buildings we rented in Portland. **John** left for New York at about the same time so we moved the operation to a separate building in Zion, where **John Larraway** took over its management.

In the course of the conversations and planning for **ISBS** a new theme, a new way of conceiving of what the firm was about, began to emerge. That revised sense of the firm's place in the world of books which came into being in the planning for **ISBS** was that of getting any scholarly book from the person who knew to the person who needed to know — whether the latter person understood his/her need to know or not. So, a separate and growing operation was forging another major link in this emerging system — books here-to-fore widely unheard of and unknown in many cases in the wider world of books would be more broadly brought

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to the attention of users/readers. Quite a metamorphosis of vision from a firm conceived of as a regional supplier of scholarly books to a limited number of buyers.

We were well aware that we still had to walk many a mile to reach such a lofty goal. But we were well on the way. The Amsterdam office was now acquiring all the scholarly books in Western Europe. The London office was doing the same for all UK scholarly books, as well as profiling the books from both Western Europe and the UK for input to the now fully automated Approval Plan. The Sydney office covered the then growing Antipode output. The firm, of course, was able to fulfill all library-generated orders, standing orders, and approval-plan titles for libraries throughout much of the developed world with the scholarly book output from much of the developed world.

We were able to supply cataloging either in the form of card sets of various contents or in machine readable form. (The **Danish National Library** required 50 assorted cards at one time.) We had brought up under **Don Chvatal's** direction (**Don** had come to Portland from Texas to take on the complex matters associated with providing cataloging to a variety of libraries in a variety of formats) the direction of the multi-year development and implementation of a subject authority file for the **University of Texas** system. This file, when the work was completed, allowed us to provide authoritative subject headings for our original cataloging, as well. The extensive cataloging data-base underlying this capacity also permitted us to provide "instant" libraries, the titles selected from our extensive bibliographic database, fully-cataloged from our massive cataloging database, and processed for both undergraduate libraries and opening day collections.

We had augmented our capacities for selecting the books and assembling undergraduate library systems of 50K-75K books together with their catalogs to selecting the books, assembling them, and cataloging and processing them for opening-day collections of 125K-250K books for newly established colleges and/or universities. In some cases these collections were packaged in shelf-list order, the cartons serially numbered. This procedure was followed so that the newly completed and furnished library building and newly hired staff had only to open the cartons in the indicated sequence to expeditiously shelve the collection. Several such opening-day collections of books were augmented by a collection of back volumes of the basic journals in the subject areas to which instruction/research were to be oriented. In a few cases we also provided a basic rare book collection in the subject areas the nascent library planned to build toward.

At the end of decade of the 1960s I attended, with **Bernard Starkmann** who ran our Amsterdam office, a meeting of the Scandinavian libraries held in Copenhagen. **Bernhard** had invited all the university and research library librarians to an all-day session at which I presented the total array of the services to libraries that the firm had available. I outlined the programs and their inter-relations using a blackboard. The presentation took about six hours and traced out the firm's inter-related programs beginning with orders and standing orders initiated by a library through the flexible approval programs, through cataloging, to "instant" libraries. In the hotel that evening I reflected on the day and was astonished by what the Argonauts had accomplished in 20 years. I had never thought of what we had done in such a global and systematic way before. Our attention had been narrowly focused upon the planning and execution of one program and then the next and how they related and the connections to be made between each to create what in the global view was an integrated system for supplying all or part the prevailing knowledge of **Karl Popper's** Three Worlds and the continuing and difficult efforts to extend that understanding, as synthesized by thinkers and writers around the world. But we, or I at least, had never reflected upon the meaning of the totality of the system and its contribution to present-day conceptions. These satisfying reflections were quickly replaced, however, by the summoning up of all that remained to be accomplished, how much further this Argonauts' voyage had to go, and what labors still faced the band.

@Brunning: People & Technology

At the Only Edge that Means Anything / How We Understand What We Do

by **Dennis Brunning** (E Humanities Development Librarian, Arizona State University) <dennis.brunning@gmail.com>

Oh, Google

Age has settled in at the **Googleplex**. **Page** is CEO, and **Schmidt** is kicked up to Chair, a cool 100 million ease the exit.

If bloggers were vultures they'd be encircling in those turquoise skies above Silicon Valley, uplifted in the thermals, lazy in anticipation of what's up.

For most of us, quality in search engine land, whether **Google** or anyone else (is there anyone else?), is and should be an issue. Yet for a long time **Google** brought quality to Web search far superior to its competitors — **Inktomi**, **Yahoo**, **AltaVista**, **Infoseek** — to name just a few. In two simple genius strokes, **Google** co-founders, **Sergey Brin** and **Larry Page**, turned bad results to good.

First, **Google** combined keywords rather than united them. Then they took the "and" away. Called implicit Boolean, this simple move overcame automatic bad results usually seen as too many and too wrong.

But as any librarian knows, three keywords are often too many and two not enough to avoid "negative success." Librarians appreciate no results; it says so much about what is available. **Google** thinks differently, they want results no matter what.

Understandably the **Google** guys were uncomfortable with zero results which was almost as bad as irrelevant ones. To address the "something relevant" issue, they boldly and brilliantly borrowed yet another library science principle. As graduate students they were aware of **Eugene Garfield's** citation indexing, where an article's reference were defined as a measure of an article's worth. Citation indexing, they thought, could be used with Web pages through referring links. If a Web page referred to your Web page, this was a positive vote of value. At first called "backrub" but then trade-marked as "Page Rank," this unique relevance tool helped **Google** to bring forward results that were most popular.

Implicit Boolean and page rank brought **Google** to the front of Web search. It got users to the search engine

Experts estimate **Google** now has over 500 rules similar to Page Rank but now generated from analysis of billions of searches and user behavior. How they rules play out is anyone's guess. Since text ads contribute over 97% of **Google's** current revenue, the slurry of services put into effect since going public — most notably **YouTube**, **Gmail**, and **Google Apps** — are not **Google's** secret sauce.

What amazes is that **Google** still works well for just enough information, especially news and consumer content. And it does this fast without as much as a pixel of sand descending in that hour glass of our impatience.

So then, what's the complaint? There are three: search spam, search neutrality, and comprehensive search.

Like email spam, search spam are results that game **Google's** finely wrought algorithms. Major offenders are content farms — Websites that produce keyword-rich articles likely to show up in **Google's** organic search results. A major content farm are the various properties of Demand Media. This company, planning to go public soon, generates pages of informative material across many topics. The idea is simple — get people to find your site and then click on text or banner ads running on your site.

Google can work on mitigating search

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