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Notes from Mosier -- Drummers on the Porch

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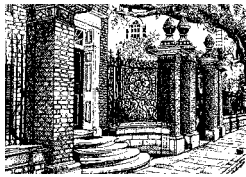
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Notes from Mosier — Drummers on the Porch

Column Editor: **Scott A. Smith** (International Sales, Alibris; Phone: 503-951-8343) <scott.alan.smith@comcast.net>

First, some good news — in my last column I reported that the little Columbia Gorge town of Mosier had lost its lease on the building and closed its library. Well, we're back, and due to a curious set of circumstances. The developer who had planned more condos (the locals refer to them as "chicken coops") decided this might not be the best time to build, and the city got the building back. (We might qualify as the smallest library in the country; the building is only about ten by fifteen feet.) So, here's at least one example of hard economic times working to a library's benefit.

The title for this article doesn't refer to musicians. Rather, it's a somewhat archaic term for travelling salesmen. (My good friend and former colleague **John Laraway** is one of the few people I've ever met who knew this; well, **John** and anyone who's ever read **Faulkner's Snopes** trilogy and encountered the character **V. K. Ratliff**.)

In the nineteenth century book salesmen would set out by train on long circuits, laden with steamer trunks packed with books. They'd stay

in boarding houses — places that included dinner in the price of the room — and after dinner these men (and in those days they were all men) would retire to a long front porch or gallery and smoke and swap stories until bedtime.

Another friend and former colleague, alas long gone, was **Jim "Cash" Quick**. **Jim** worked at **J. K. Gill's** in the 1930s; Portland's premier source for books in the days before **Powell's**. One famous Oregon author was returning after a major and very successful book tour, and was to sign that evening. However, when **Jim** picked him up at Union Station he was very much the worse for wear, and clearly in no condition to sign much of anything.

Those were the days before jacket photos, though, so for a few hours **Jim** assumed the identity of the well-known writer and sent a flood of, well, interestingly signed first editions into the world.

By now you may be asking, what's the point here? Just this: a combination of new technologies (obvious example, the Web), a steadily worsening economy, and questionable management decisions and practices is radically altering

the ways sales reps (and by extension, their lifeline, genuine customer service departments) go about their business, if they're allowed to go about it at all. Companies are downsizing, often eliminating some of their oldest and most knowledgeable employees. Too often these days this process is executed in a most brutal and uncompassionate way. Sometimes these staff are replaced by much younger and less experienced people; often these positions are simply not filled. A skeleton staff is left to deal with an ever-growing workload.

Case in point: telephone switchboards. Sure, it's a lot cheaper to have your customers interact with an automated switchboard, but you're not serving them more effectively — you're wasting their time. Think how many hours of our lives we all spend on hold or listening to seemingly ever-changing "menus" (and usually ghastly music) before we find out what we want to know, if indeed we ever do. A company that truly believes in serving its customers will provide adequate resources to address their needs. I understand the need to be and remain profitable — but if the road to achieving that goal is mediocrity, I have to question the rationale for being in business in the first place. What price grace and dignity?

I know that many libraries now augment traditional reference desks by offering auto-

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Library Perspective, Vendor Response

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Column Editors' Note: *This column is devoted to discussing issues affecting library acquisitions, library vendors, and the publishing marketplace as a whole. It is an ongoing conversation between Robin Champieux, EBL's Vice President of Business Development, and Steven Carrico, Acquisitions Librarian, University of Florida. — RC and SC*

Steve: Robin, I'd like to discuss a few library conferences held in 2009 that covered many interesting themes and topics affecting libraries and vendors. In addition to the annual **Charleston Conference**, we both attended the **Collection Development and Resource Sharing Conference** hosted by **Florida Library Consortia** in Tallahassee; another was the **Exploring Acquisitions Conference** held in Oxford, England; a third conference was **ALA Annual** in Chicago.¹ The Tallahassee conference brought together librarians and vendors to discuss developing new models for library consortia to purchase and share resources. The **Exploring Acquisitions Conference** dealt with the current and future status of the book in libraries. At **ALA** of course, there were a variety of **ALCTS** programs devoted to a similar topic affecting libraries. And the **Charleston Conference** seemed to focus on the various patron-driven acquisitions models



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mated service through their Websites — in many cases distance learning makes it impossible to interact with every patron. But to my point of view a reference interview is far more likely to be successful and truly satisfy the patron's needs if it's conducted face-to-face. In the same fashion, having the opportunity to meet with a knowledgeable field rep or speak directly with a competent customer service staffer is a far better way for librarians to get the most from their vendors.

So, despite hyperbolic marketing campaigns and images of gauzy, blissful services spun by many companies, we're forced to accept often diminished standards — and this author for one thinks we're poorer for it. But I'll promise you — come visit the **Mosier Valley Library** and you'll get face to face attention. You really can't help it. 🐾

that are being developed for libraries. So in your opinion, what new ideas and themes were evident and emerged at these events?

Robin: What struck me was the proliferation of fundamental questions about the mission of academic libraries, the role of patrons, and the importance of collection development. For example, all of the conferences included debate about how active patrons and librarians should be in the selection, purchase, and weeding of library materials. Such questions surfaced when presenters and attendees talked about criteria for format decisions and during debates about the legitimacy of patron driven purchasing. Of course, the **Google Books Settlement** was a hot topic. It was interesting to hear speakers and attendees draw connections between **Google Book Search**, issues of access and discovery, and their own institution's missions. Often, a discussion of "who knows best" was central to the conversation. But, regardless of where presenters, attendees, and even vendors sided on such topics, all seemed to be after the answer to one important question: how can we do better?

Steve: I agree, but with so many libraries facing budgetary and staffing cuts it's not just "how can we do better" but "how can we do better given our declining resources?" I know in my own library it's a constant battle to offer more content and faster access (which our users now expect), all with a flat materials budget and smaller staff. When you add inflation to the formula, a flat materials budget equates to a shrinking materials budget.

Robin: Yes, many of the sessions I attended, and my conversations with customers and friends emphasized this struggle. However, the strategies I heard described and the momentum for budget stretching innovation were impressive and encouraging. Moreover, there seemed to be a focus on taking action and, when called for, risks. For instance, in years past, there was a lot of conference programming dedicated to talking and thinking about electronic monographs, but the discussion seemed disconnected from actionable strategies and broad, diverse use cases. This was not the case this conference season! The Tallahassee conference is an excellent example. From my perspective, it was as much a conference as it was a strategy session.

Steve: Good point. Speaking of the Tallahassee conference, it was a great conference because it was so focused on practical outcomes. The conference brought together librarians and professionals from library consortia across the state of Florida to pinpoint methods to increase collection building and sharing, particularly online. The new push for library consortia seems to be finding ways to share eBooks. I remember a librarian at the beginning of the Tallahassee preconference (a.k.a. the "E-Books

Summit") stating that her library couldn't afford to participate in shared eBook purchases; our facilitating team's response was that library budgets are now so restrictive libraries can no longer afford to acquire resources individually — they have to share. But as you say, all this starts with the innovations that make sharing eBooks possible.

Robin: Yes, for me, that conference inspired several important questions that I think most of us "librarians, vendors, and publishers" are still trying to answer. What does sharing look like in an electronic environment? Collectively, I think we need to tease apart what models and best practices from the print world can be successfully applied to eBook collection development and buying, and what models and practices sort of obscure our imagination about eBooks and encourage inertia. Our expectations for eBooks are different than our expectations for print books. I think this is especially true in regards to resource sharing, patron discovery, and use. So, how do we change what we do to help realize these expectations?

Steve: Change must start with the publishers, in my opinion. They hold the key, which is content, and so control how it is accessed or distributed. Which brings me back to the E-Books Summit. An interesting part of that preconference was the afternoon discussion forum that took place between librarians and vendor representatives. The librarian audience made a collective request that new models to share purchases and access of eBooks must be developed. I thought the vendor panel — **Kenyatte Baylor** and **Lorane Crawford** from **Elsevier**, **Tim Turner** from **Coutts**, and **John Laraway**, **Christina Taylor** and you from **Blackwell**, were on the panel and stepped to the plate with some good ideas and new initiatives for libraries and consortial purchasing.

Robin: That was a really great session. And, I agree, smart requirements and ideas were put forth by the attendees and the panelists. Of late, we've seen some progress on the development of viable consortial eBook purchase models. For example, all of the leading eBook aggregators have launched models that will save consortia considerable money and allow a fairly seamless integration of shared and institutional-specific content from the patron's perspective. Nevertheless, these models are still not mature and must meet publisher requirements that are, in my opinion, largely predicated on print business models. The majority, for instance, rest on the premise of purchasing and delivering a number of "copies." I'm not convinced that thinking in terms of "copies" will lead us to build pricing or access structures that adequately address library and patron needs, nor does this line of thinking recognize the capabilities of the format. But,

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