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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 17: The Theater of Bibliographic Control

by **Richard Abel** (Aged Independent Learner) <reabel@q.com>

Shortly after **Ralph Schoffner** joined the band of Argonauts in 1972, we received a Request for Proposal from the University system of the **University of California** (not from any of the individual campuses but for all the then nine campuses). The Request was to provide a plan for the conversion of all the nine system catalogs to machine (computer) readable form as well as estimates of length of time to complete such a project and costs. We soon learned that this request had come at the urging of a committee of the California State Legislature, which in turn had been urged by the many high-tech industries located in the state. The latter sought research help from the universities in the form of a union catalog — and one particularly oriented to the provision of information on the latest books published. This catalog was to contain but a single uniform entry (author, title, subject headings, etc.) together with a holdings indicator so an industrial borrower might turn to the closest university library. This Request was received only about a week before the mid-winter **American Library Association** meeting in Chicago, and the Proposal was due about a week after the close of the meeting.

It was decided that **Ralph** was to be the point man player in preparing and writing the Proposal and that much of the intra-company consultation would be conducted at the **ALA** meeting. I took a suite so we had a sitting room in which the consulting, exchange of ideas, and preliminary writing could be done in shifts as the various managers were free of obligations to meet with their librarians. **Ralph** presided at all these variegated and ever-changing meetings.

The main outlines of the way in which we would proceed was already fairly firmly embedded in our cataloging and book processing procedures developed to provide shelf-ready undergraduate collections and shelf-ready opening day collections for new institutions. However, we knew much other work would be necessary to fulfill the objectives of this particular Request. First, we knew that much author and subject control work had to be done to provide complete congruence between the collections. Fortunately, before **Don Chvatal** moved on to the marketing position from the head of cataloging and book-processing, he had been insistent that the firm had to update and maintain the traditional authority files. We had undertaken this project and found market interest from several of the new **University of Texas** campuses in 1971. They sought a uniform catalog, which contained updated and uniform authority entries and headings.

We were also painfully aware of the severe cataloging back-

logs accumulated in not simply the libraries involved in this Proposal but libraries around the world, which we were now serving. These cumulating backlogs resulted from the speed with which we were getting books into libraries on our Approval Plans. The backlogs were particularly acute for titles published overseas, as we had developed systems of acquisition and distribution much more efficient and timely than the nineteenth-century procedures still being used by many of the major libraries around the world. As a consequence, much current knowledge that we had shipped to fulfill Approval Plan requirements was sitting around for months on back-office shelves and so not available to users possessed of urgent research needs. (We had been furnishing a poor substitute for this shortcoming in the form of a notification slip to be sent to users, a temporary author catalog card, and a temporary title catalog card in our Approval Plan form set. But this was at best a band-aid approach to a massive and growing cataloging problem.) To meet the objectives of this Request we had to undertake the perpetual elimination of this backlog in the participating libraries employing our cataloging department. This part of our operation was now managed by **Kent Hendrickson**, who had recently joined the band, so we had no qualms about the integrity and quality of our cataloging work. (As I write I have just learned of **Kent's** deeply regretted demise in an auto accident.)

We were undaunted by the magnitude of the databases which would result from our efforts for we had developed substantial databases for the Approval Plan, the New Collections, and the cataloging operations and had learned how to deal with large databases. So, we were confident, as was the head **Gary Olson**, that the computer staff could readily handle this not overwhelming scale-up.

In short, we were not only not overwhelmed by the magnitude and complexity of the project we were proposing but rather saw it as a possible avenue out of the unfavorable strategic position into which the coming of **OCLC** had placed us. Further, we saw it as the means to recoup the substantial diminution in the value of our investments in software and staff occasioned by the same development. And lastly and most importantly we, of course, saw it as the solution to the increasingly vexing difficulties of libraries in dealing with getting current knowledge to users.

Upon our return to Portland following the close of the **ALA** meeting, **Ralph** cast the Proposal into final form and sent it off by the stipulated deadline. It had been a real grind involving several short nights for those involved in threshing

it out. In the course of our formulation of the Proposal, it had become clear to us that we should make a substantial effort to advise each of the libraries involved of the contents of the Proposal. This for the reason that we were entirely uncertain of the extent of their knowledge of this central University office initiative. We did not want to have any of the libraries, all of which were large and valued patrons, to be taken by surprise. So, it was agreed that I would meet the manager of the San Francisco office in Sacramento Sunday of the following week to start a five-day itinerary beginning at the **Davis** campus to call on all nine libraries and explain our Proposal. In mid-week the San Francisco manager returned and I met the Los Angeles office manager in Santa Barbara to complete our visits. The second week following this whirlwind tour of exposition I called the managers of both offices to learn of any feedback they may have had. Both reported that they indeed had: the cataloging staffs at virtually every library believed that the firm was undertaking to put them out of work. A piece of bad news indeed, for we needed no enemies among the technical services staffs of our patrons.

In any event, our Proposal was not acted upon by the University office. We understand that this was because ours was the only proposal received. This fact could be taken as implying that ours was the only organization capable of undertaking such a major project. In this view, it could be said that the creative and forward-looking vision of the staff based upon a close understanding of the present and future needs of libraries was confirmed. Alternatively, it could be said that the firm was getting too far out in front of its market and was moving faster to cut new avenues in the matter of computer-bibliographic control than our patrons were comfortable with. Or it might simply have been that the University office felt uncomfortable with awarding a contract to a sole bidder.

Whatever, now what may well have been another significant strategic error was committed by us — largely attributable to me. I should have “connected the dots” differently, as the saying presently goes. The way in which the dots were then connected was first the strange behavior of the **ARL** librarians vociferously attacking the **L.C.** contingent standing in the doorway and the resulting decision to terminate the luncheon for **ARL** librarians at an earlier Washington mid-winter. The second dot to be connected was the response of several librarians to shifting their catalog card purchasing from our firm to **OCLC** for reasons of professional motherhood and apple pie. And the last dot to be connected was the angry and conspiracy-inspired response of the affected library cataloging staffs to our **University of**

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California Proposal. It may be argued that we were walking on eggs and had to give up or redirect the forward-looking drive of trying to marry the powers of the computer to the needs of bibliographic control. Perhaps we should have slowed down the rate of innovation we had established as a company norm and so toned down the image of a hard-driving, hell-for-leather band of booksellers. But that that is not how we conceived the way forward.

Our strategic situation as we saw it at that time may be summed up in the following terms:

I. A radical new direction in University policies had developed rather rapidly. The changes of greatest import for libraries were:

A. The amounts of money devoted to sci/tech research had increased rapidly in the years of the mid-1950s stimulated by the example of the development of radar, the atomic bomb, atomic-energy generation plants, jet aircraft propulsion, medical practices, etc., all resulting from infusions of research/development investment in the 1940s and 1950s. This impulse was quickened by the successful launch of the Russian spacecraft, Sputnik. The new mantra was that universities should develop faculties and facilities of sufficient achievement to capture much of the public and private money available for research.

B. Inevitably, the results of this avalanche of money and research effort translated first, into an increase in journal pages and hence prices. And secondly with about a 10-year lag into an increase in book authorship. (Both streams of publication greatly stimulated by the widespread adoption of publication as a surrogate measure of achievement employed for purposes of hiring, promotion, tenure awards, faculty ranks, salary, scholarly society esteem, etc.)

C. The sense of the growing administrative staffs devoted to building research prestige that libraries were simply a monetary sinkhole. (At a conference called by the librarian of a major research university seeking to reverse declining library budgets relative to other university departments, I recounted these factors and documented them with UNESCO-derived statistics. Following my presentation the Provost turned to me, saying, "So, you are urging equivalent increases in the library materials budget." Upon my affirmative response he replied, "We haven't the money to do so." Needless to say I was struck nearly dumb by this response, well aware of the enormous sums this university had spent and was spending to develop and maintain its sci/tech research capabilities.)

D. In the meantime university computer department staffs were urging the "paperless office/university" concept – as well as the "total university system." Neither of which, ironically, has yet appeared some 35 years later. Administrators were mesmerized by this vision of a cheaper set of control mechanisms, which offered them the ready handles for micro-managing universities and all aspects thereof. (The **University of California** RFP was obviously founded upon these premises, as were the several other failed or to fail university-wide library-cataloging initiatives.)

E. The vision of "open access" was promoted by the same *aficionados* of total systems. The information requirements of research faculty could now be served by monies incorporated in grant proposals to pay for the papers specifically downloaded by research staff. (Few grants incorporated funds to support the acquisition of additional materials by libraries — the latter were at best an element in "overhead costs.")

II. This concatenation of events and ideas imposed, we believed, a clear line of development and response for our firm.

A. With the growing perceived importance of journals, constrained budgets led to reduced book purchases. It was, therefore, necessary for the firm to continue the thrust of reducing technical processes costs for book acquisitions and cataloging.

These savings to be employed to partially maintain the book buying power of reduced library material budgets.

B. In the meantime, competition in the supply of books had sprung up all about us — both domestically and overseas. All manner of entrants had been attracted to the field. Interestingly, we had furnished the service and control templates used by virtually all of them. Most of these competitors started by fulfilling "one-shot" orders originated by libraries. This for the reason that libraries were rightfully prepared to try out new suppliers seeking both service and price advantages.

C. However, these competitors soon perceived what the oldest firm in the game had long since discovered: that to remain profitable they had to cherry-pick such orders and return as OP, "unavailable through the trade," "indefinitely out of stock," and similar dodges those not comporting with their profit expectations. We were still offering to acquire everything, including "gray literature." We believed we could hold our profit margins with innovation. So, instead, we saw this emphasis upon a total service as having proved one of the key-stones of our place in the trade.

D. By virtue of the above tactic, new dealers were able to beat us on discount. We had long become hardened to this tactic. Our Texas office had for years subsisted upon the orders that the bidder traditionally winning the state-wide university system of annual bidding based upon amount of discount offered, rejected, or failed to fulfill. However, odious comparisons of our discounts relative to that of the competitors could still be made using selective data from dealers playing the discount game. This pricing environment perpetually hamstrung our efforts to get shelf-ready books into libraries.

E. However, the massive and unforgiving issue of bibliographic control remained one of the gorillas in the room. We had tackled this issue at the interface of production and the market in a variety of ways, from Approval Plans for new/forthcoming books; standing order control; bibliographies of collections of back-list titles for undergraduate libraries; and bibliographies of collections of backlist titles for opening day collections for new institutions; to bibliographies of all the recently published scholarly titles published in all the major scholarly languages. We were well on the way to solving all the problems existing at the publisher/library buyer interface.

F. We were routinely pursuing and occasionally investing in new ways of obtaining and exercising bibliographic control of forthcoming and new titles. Thus, by way of example, we retained the help of **Derek Austin**, the founder of the **PRECIS** system used for a time by the **British Library**, to investigate the utility of that system for Approval Plan purposes. This with the aim of improving the book descriptions to assist librarians in selecting books to be retained from the Approval Plan.

III. In supporting and expediting the pedagogic and research efforts of university faculty and the research undertakings of those in the private sector, we actively pursued new ways of speeding access to the most recent literature.

A. As an aid in this search for means to advance the spread and use of book knowledge, **Lyman Newlin** had convinced most of the U.S. and Canadian publishers to supply us with a set of page-proofs for forthcoming titles. This so we could profile the books before their appearance and have Approval Plan forms on hand when the books were received.

B. To build upon this increase in speed and efficiency, we modified our distribution procedure so that most Approval Plan matches were made in New Jersey as soon as our truck picked up the new titles from the publishers' warehouses in and around New York. The books were then distributed by our own over-the-road trucks (**K & C Freight Lines**) to the various North American offices.

C. In the meantime we had established a title profiling organization in the London office which profiled the new titles from the UK and the Amsterdam and Berne offices. This profiling information was transmitted to Portland by

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overnight airfreight, computer Approval Plan matches then made, and the Approval Plan forms for both North American and overseas libraries air-freighted back for matching and consolidation into the airfreight shipment or to UK and Continental libraries.

IV. The final scene in the theater of bibliographic control was located in the bibliographic control system employed by libraries — the catalog. In an effort to not only assist libraries in speeding the use of books but also to help reduce the total internal library cost of bibliographic control the firm had developed an integrated body of systems.

A. The base element of the catalog bibliographic control problem was the flexible cataloging system we had developed using both L.C. generated cataloging, plus our own if the former was not available in a timely way. Clearly this effort was undertaken to minimize library costs in promptly providing cataloging because the books being acquired simultaneously triggered the supply of cataloging.

B. In every case we had developed computer systems that would do these jobs at the lowest possible costs consistent with a dependable product of known quality. Indeed, so effective and dependable were these databases and software systems that they were still in use by our successor firm into the twenty-first century.

C. In the meantime, the strange new competitor of OCLC had sprung into being. This well-financed, foundation-supported creature had shed its proposed purpose of creating a national computer-based catalog. Rather it had, in fact, become the *de facto* producer/distributor of L.C. catalog card sets to aca-

ademic and research libraries. The appearance of this source in turn effectively dismantled the single trigger mechanism for acquiring both books and their bibliographic control apparatus we had worked to put into place. So the objective of cutting costs and speeding user availability was compromised. But it also signaled the second failure of a foundation-supported computer-based catalog (Neline) was the first.)

D. But perhaps the most aggravated cataloging problem was to be found in the growing backlogs of uncataloged books to be found on the technical processes holding shelves. Library users were not being well-served by these sometimes months-long delays. But surprisingly the firm was barred from solving this problem for all save a few libraries. Turning to our cataloging it appeared seemed to most librarians to be a practice approaching the treasonable.

So, the strategic conclusion was reached that we had to push ahead as firmly as circumstance would permit to integrate the final facet of bibliographic control into the total system we had developed. This conclusion led to involving our Washington lobbyist in attempting to devise a strategy to deal with this final integration, for the answer seemed to lay in the reaches thereof. 🌿

Authorial comment: *In a sense I wish that I did not have to involve the reader in such a long, involved, and probably tedious, recital of the evolution of our corporate thinking and the ways in which we sought to frame the objective of the firm while remaining true to the original objective of effectively disseminating knowledge at minimal cost to the library community which we served. It seemed to me, however, that only by giving readers a summary of the months of internal corporate debate, thinking, and planning could they understand the history of the voyage I am endeavoring to meaningfully relate. I hope readers will understand and appreciate this motive. — RA*