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Oregon Trails -- Book People I Have Known

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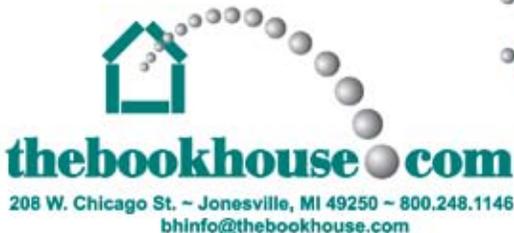
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Oregon Trails — Book People I Have Known

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Retirement has given me time to leisurely assay the boxes of correspondence and memorabilia that I have collected over a lifetime. As I sift through these nearly forgotten documents, my mind returns to the times as a child when the Army reassigned my father. Our belongings would be crated and shipped to the new quarters and were out of our sight and possession for weeks or months at a time. Once re-united with my belongings, especially my toys, there was a freshness about them, but there was warmth about them, too, generated by fond memories and forgotten pleasures.

Among my souvenirs are letters, cards, and notes from booksellers and printers, scholars and collectors. These artifacts awakened dormant memories and fond relationships, bound with a common thread — a love of the book as sources of knowledge and wisdom and as a physical object of beauty and desirability or what **Daniel Berkeley Updike** called “the well-made book.”

My first job in a library began in December of 1969. **Leslie C. Clarke** hired me as a page for the Rare Books and Special Collections Department (RBSC) of the **Doe Library**, later part of the **Bancroft Library**. I stayed there until June 1973 with increasing responsibilities and a burgeoning appreciation for and interest in

special collections and the history of the book. In 1972, I switched my graduate program from German Studies to Library Science, moving from Dwinelle Hall to South Hall.

During my three-and-a-half years in special collections, I became aware of antiquarian booksellers, their catalogues, and their scholarly inclination. **Bernard M. Rosenthal**, the renowned San Francisco antiquarian, would frequent the reading room of the RBSC and would comb through the card catalogue to ascertain what we had and what we did not have. He would then confer with **Leslie Clarke** and, if the price was right, make a sale. His visits explained, in part, **Mrs. Clarke’s** lunchtime study of books about epigraphy and paleography. He was a scholar helping build a research collection and she was a dedicated librarian and scholar in her own right ready to make informed decisions. **Barnie Rosenthal** turned 90 last year and was feted by the who’s who of Bay area antiquarians, librarians, and fine printers. Follow the link below to read more about it. (http://www.ilab.org/eng/book-sellers_main_page/meet_the_ilab_booksellers/Bernard_M._Rosenthal.html),

One of my fellow workers in RBSC (I am regressing for a couple of reasons), when we were both enrolled in the Library

School, was **Michael Hackenberg** (<http://www.hackenbooks.com/shop/hackenbooks/index.html?id=kxNLgTt9>). **Michael** also had a scholarly bent and once complained that he would not be able to work on a collection of French Revolution pamphlets because the office would be closed for a holiday.

Michael went on to get his Ph.D. at **Berkeley** and was teaching at the **University of Chicago** when its library science program was discontinued. He may always have been a collector while teaching history of books and printing, because when he wrote “The Armed Services Editions in Publishing History” in *Books in Action: The Armed Services Editions*, (The Center for the Book, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1984), edited by **John Y. Cole**, he already owned 800 volumes. As of last year, he had about a thousand volumes for sale *en bloc* should you be interested.

When Chicago’s library science program closed its doors, **Michael** made a career change, deciding to become an antiquarian bookseller in the Bay Area. He continues the honored tradition of the bookseller as scholar.

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The late **Peter Howard**, *Serendipity Books*, also sold books to RBSC, modern first editions. I remember him visiting with **Mrs. Clarke**, looking at a collection of gray archival boxes. Later, in the stacks, I discovered that those boxes contained the manuscripts of **Wright Morris**. Shelved just below the manuscripts were the published works, first editions. And that was the beginning of my appreciation for the writing and photography of **Wright Morris**, the first author that I began to collect. In 1995 I had the privilege and honor of meeting **Mr. Morris** and persuading him to speak at my annual Library Associates dinner. What I failed to do was have him autograph my copies of his books, but I wasn't sure at the time if that would have been gauche. It is too late now, but I do have a few letters and notes from him, and that is enough.

Peter Howard and I met in 1975 when I was the Gift and Exchange Librarian at **Stanford**. I was running out of space for unwanted gifts — that is, titles that we already had or that didn't fit our collection policies. I asked **Peter** to come and make an offer on several ranges of books with the understanding that he would take them all. I was delighted to find the postcard that he sent me, written in pencil, explaining why he didn't show up on our first agreed-to date.

"Dear Thomas Leonhardt, I hope my secretary got through to inform you I had to go to Portland Monday & now it's the Toronto Book Fair this week. Hope to call promptly upon my return after the 19th (May 1975). Good luck with children and others/Plt"

Later that month he showed up ready to schlepp countless boxes of books out to his vehicle (he made more than one trip to get them all). I enjoyed seeing first-hand a real bookseller at work and was just as glad to see all of those empty shelves.

The bloc purchase was not appreciated by our head of special collections, who claimed that I had as good as given away scores of sleepers, books with higher than average resale value. When my boss spoke to me about the matter I defended the transaction by reminding him that every gift that I brought in was reviewed by our head of collection development, the head of special collections, branch librarians, and curators or collection specialists. I had also reviewed each gift at the side of **Franklin Gilliam**, a bookman of the highest order who was generous with his time when talking books and values with me. If that array of experts missed a few sleepers, **Peter Howard** was welcome to them, and it was his business to match books with buyers; ours was to match books with readers. There was and is a need for both. Lately I feel as if second-hand and antiquarian booksellers are doing more for the survival of the book as artifact than modern day librarians.

Another bookseller that I met while at **Stanford** and who became a friend was **William (Bill) Bledsoe**, an **ABAA** bookseller in San

Carlos, California who was a "Specialist in the Literature of Economics and Political Science." **Bill's** niche was in out-of-print books so that when a library received one of his catalogues and found desirable titles, they had to order quickly. It was not unusual for his catalogues to sell out. It was not until towards the end of his career that business slowed down as library budgets were constrained.

We stayed in touch after I left **Stanford** in 1976 for **Boise State University**. I find no letters from my three years there, but I still have the last two letters that I received from **Bill**.

The first is dated February 14, 1980 and reads in part:

"I sent out my catalogue in January this year (1980) instead of the traditional September mailing. And, at the suggestion of several acquisitions librarians, I reduced its size considerably. Only 96 pages instead of the usual 114, and 1,448 entries rather than 4,000. But sales are very slow. This catalogue is doing quite poorly. I think the quality of the items are up to par, so I suppose it is the budget situations in all the libraries."

Another dated December 27, 1980 reads:

"Dear Tom, It was so thoughtful of you to remember me with a Christmas greeting. Thanks much. Yes, I imagine by now you are well settled in Durham, but I can understand your missing the west. I'm sure I would. But I think I would like Durham better than Boise, all things considered. But having lived in San Carlos for 31 years now I think I'm pretty well bedded down for the rest of my days."

I did not get out a catalogue in 1980. That is, I did not mail one in that year. My last is dated 1980, but it was prepared and mailed in 1979. My market seems to have disappeared. Sales are way off. I have managed to stay in the black, but I don't know how far I should push my luck. I'm not buying anymore inventory until I can sell more of what I have on hand."

What is your explanation? Is it purely financial — cut library budgets: or are there other factors that are causing such a depression in library buying of o.p. titles in economics, business, political science, etc.?"

I don't remember what I wrote in reply. **Bill** had earned a good living selling books while providing a valuable service to academic libraries and individuals for several decades. It still saddens me that his market dried up. I wonder if it would have picked up later in the decade. I had a letter from his wife **Lela** in September of 1981 telling me that **Bill** had passed away of a heart attack on July 30. She wrote that:

"Bill had decided not to issue a catalog this year so #135 is our last. I will continue to keep the books on hand, which there are many, and do limited searching. The ads in AB have not been too successful of late, however."

As **Lela** predicted, the news saddened me. **Bill** was another of those knowledge-

able, scholarly booksellers and a wonderful person to know. I knew that **Lela** helped him out over the years, so it was not surprising, either, that she would have carried on as long as she could.

Two of my children were born in the Kaiser hospital in Redwood City in the 1970s. It was a pleasant surprise, when my wife, our baby, and I were preparing to leave the hospital. A wheelchair was mandatory and who should wheel it around to us but a Candy Striper named **Bill Bledsoe**. He had persuaded the Kaiser people that it was unfair to restrict Candy Stripers to young women.

To round out the story, I once saw an ad for a Cambridge, Massachusetts bookseller named **Robin Bledsoe**. I wrote to her and asked if she were related to **Bill**. Here is part of her reply dated June 21, 1994:

"Dear Tom, Thanks very much for your note of last month about Bill Bledsoe. Yes, I'm his daughter, and every so often old friends or colleagues of his write to ask, "Are you related to..."? I'm always pleased and proud to say yes!

So you knew Dad at Kaiser, too — I think he loved candy-stripping as much as bookselling. And how he loved those trips to Stanford... I went with him a few times and may have met you. I remember chatting there with Maria Gulyas (whom I used to babysit for, as they lived across the street from us).

Dad wound down his bookselling in the late 70s and died of a heart attack in 1981, and Mom in 1984..."

After many years of book editing, I opened the shop here in 1983. I share it with a bookseller who sells architecture books, and I sell art and horse books. We get lots of funny comments about the subject mix — there's very little customer cross-over. We both issue catalogues — but as you know, times for libraries (and booksellers) aren't what they were in the 1970s!"

Robin's shop is near **Harvard Square** at 1640 Massachusetts Avenue (<http://www.bledsoebooks.com/shop/bledsoe/index.html>). Give her a call or stop in and see her and ask to be put on her mailing list, should you buy art and horse books. A **Bledsoe** as bookseller lives on.

I miss those days when I rubbed elbows with so many booksellers, collectors, printers, scholars, and authors. Those are warm memories tinged with sadness, as so many of those booklovers are no longer with us. But looking at the names of some of those who turned out for **Barney Rosenthal's** 90th birthday bash, many more are continuing to celebrate the well-made book.

In a future column, I will write more about booksellers and the world that they inhabit. And in the meantime, try talking about books and authors and the one that got away with your **Nook** or **Kindle** or even an employee, while on the job, at **Amazon** or **Barnes and Noble**. In the meantime, good book buying, good reading, and goodbye for now. 🐾