

April 2012

ATG Interviews Leslie Straus

Tom Gilson

Against the Grain, gilsont@cofc.edu

Katina Strauch

Against the Grain, kstrauch@comcast.net

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gilson, Tom and Strauch, Katina (2012) "ATG Interviews Leslie Straus," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 24: Iss. 2, Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6134>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

President, SkyRiver Technology Solutions

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *Leslie, can you talk about SkyRiver for our readers who may have heard the name but are a little vague about what you all do?*

LS: **SkyRiver** is a full-service bibliographic utility for cataloging. By “full-service” we mean that, over and above a robust database of MARC records for downloading into a local library system, we provide associated services. To mention a few, the database has a powerful discovery layer which gets catalogers to the records they need quickly; there’s a service that matches vendor manifests against the database to provide corresponding MARC records; and there’s a unique record requesting service if the record you’re looking for happens not to be in the **SkyRiver** database. Another way to describe what we do is simply to say that we are in direct competition with **OCLC**’s online cataloging service, the fundamental differences being our open data use policy and significantly lower prices.

ATG: *Tell us about your background and what first got you excited about SkyRiver.*

LS: Since the **ATG** profile provides ample background, I’ll just recount how during the spring of 2009 (three years into my retirement from **Innovative Interfaces**) **Jerry Kline**,

Innovative founder and chairman, called me, told me that he wanted to create a bibliographic utility, described how it would fill an expressed need in the library community, and asked me to help him start it up. It was all very compelling despite some real ambivalence about coming out of a happy retirement. I think that what excited me most was the prospect of building a brand new company that could matter a lot to libraries — the mission. In addition, I’d be able to put all of my past experience to good use, even going back to my years as a cataloger in the ‘60s.

ATG: *Given your former association with Innovative Interfaces, some may think of SkyRiver as a spinoff or subsidiary. What is your current affiliation with Innovative Interfaces?*

LS: From the start, **SkyRiver** has been a separate company from **Innovative**, with a formal licensing agreement for some of **Innovative**’s technology and a maintenance agreement for that technology. Having said that, our presence in the same building (we rent the space) fosters informal relationships that help in many ways. From the other direction, **Innovative** is licensed as one of **SkyRiver**’s market-

ing and sales partners, as are **MCLS (Midwest Collaborative for Library Services)** and **LYRASIS**. As for me, I’m employed solely by **SkyRiver**. **SkyRiver**’s separateness continues under agreement with our new investors, which is further described below. We actually have the best of both worlds — independence, yet strong external support as needed.

ATG: *Along with Innovative Interfaces, SkyRiver just received a strategic investment from Huntsman Gay Global Capital. What will this mean for the company? Will it translate into new services for your customers? Does it give Huntsman Gay an ownership stake?*

LS: There are no structural or operational changes — if there’s any change it’s that we can say with even more certainty that **SkyRiver** is here for the long run. Our new investors see the potential for a lot of growth and have strongly expressed their willingness to invest in this growth. I think that will translate into continued aggressive product development as well as a much higher profile for **SkyRiver** in the marketplace. **Huntsman Gay** and **JMI** join **Jerry Kline** as co-owners.

ATG: *As the first president of the company, what was your role in the start-up phase? What were the biggest obstacles that you had to overcome? What did you find most rewarding?*

LS: My role involved soup to nuts, as with typical start-ups — from choosing a logo, Web domain, and Website design, to hiring staff, helping to train customers, writing press releases, and presenting **SkyRiver** at conferences. There were some early frustrations such as learning that the Web domain we wanted was not available and not for sale (though *theskyriver.com* has worked out well), the discovery that our newly-printed envelopes weren’t acceptable to the U.S. Post Office because of where we placed our return address, the fact that the bank would not issue a general corporate credit card to us because of our size — growing pains like that. The biggest reward has been participating in the birth of something that now is a going concern.

ATG: *According to your Website “SkyRiver holds as a guiding principle that bibliographic metadata exist within the public domain.” What does that mean exactly? And why is it important?*

LS: This is important in the context of **OCLC**’s historical stance regarding **WorldCat** records. While **OCLC** backed away from its highly restrictive 2008 draft data use policy, **OCLC**’s revised policy of 2010 still infers ownership of bibliographic records. **OCLC**’s highly publicized incursions into

continued on page 39

against the grain publisher profile

SkyRiver Technology Solutions



5850 Shellmound Way, Suite 302

Emeryville, CA 94608

Phone: 1-877-331-2769

Fax: 510-450-6352

Website: www.theskyriver.com

AFFILIATED COMPANIES: Sales/marketing partners are **Innovative Interfaces**, **LYRASIS**, **Midwest Collaborative for Library Services (MCLS)**

OFFICERS: Chairman, **Jerry Kline**; President, **Leslie Straus**; VP Operations, **Georgia Fujikawa**.

ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS, ETC.: Library of Congress Program for Cooperative Cataloging and **NACO** Exchange Partner.

VITAL INFORMATION: Key products and services: full-service bibliographic utility for cataloging, including vendor data integration (**SkyMatch**), record requesting (**SkySearch**), and record notification (**SkyWatch**)

CORE MARKETS/CLIENTELE: academic libraries, public libraries, library consortia

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 5 FTE; 3 part-time staff

HISTORY AND BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF YOUR COMPANY: Established in late 2009 with a handful of development partner installations and a database of 20 million records; now about 70 installations serving several hundred libraries and a database of 40 million records. 🌱



The science of service.

At Eastern Book Company, we've spent more than half a century shaping our unique brand of service. The first step is fulfilling our customers' orders with unmatched speed and accuracy. Then we custom-fit our operations to our customers' needs, allowing libraries to streamline processes and maximize budgets. And finally, we cultivate next-generation technologies to help our customers build the libraries their users need.



Eastern Book Company

1-800-937-0331
www.ebc.com

Trust. Expertise. Service.

Interview — Leslie Straus from page 38

the commercial market space, not to mention OCLC's acquisition and absorption of for-profit companies, make this stance on data use very self-serving. It also flies in the face of a substantial body of legal opinion.

SkyRiver's unrestricted data use policy is tied to the principle that bibliographic metadata exist within the public domain. This concept is upheld in many constituencies around the world. Late last year, for instance, the **National Library of Sweden** broke off negotiations with OCLC over this very issue.

ATG: SkyRiver filed suit in federal court against OCLC alleging that they "were unlawfully monopolizing the markets for cataloging services, interlibrary lending, and bibliographic data..." In turn, OCLC has filed a Motion to Dismiss your antitrust complaint. Can you tell us where things stand now? Do you have a timeframe as to when you expect these legal issues to be resolved? Have these legal complications affected your business?

LS: As things stand now, the complaint remains in the courts, but we haven't been given a time frame for when it might proceed and be resolved. Whatever happens, we know that it has had a salutary effect within the marketplace since it has raised a lot of consciousness about the need for competition. As for affecting the

business, it has, but there are no regrets. We simply needed to draw a line in the sand. In any case, the business is now growing just on the basis of being a quality service with affordable prices.

ATG: In January SkyRiver announced "a significantly stronger market position in terms of customer and database growth." What are we talking about in terms of number of new customers, sales and income figures, and the percentage of overall year-to-year growth? Where does your market share stand now?

LS: We're talking about doubling all of the above. As more libraries adopt SkyRiver the word is spreading that SkyRiver is a great solution for library cataloging. Word-of-mouth marketing is powerful. I think also that the air is gradually clearing about the real effect of OCLC's punitive pricing for loading our customers' holdings — the effect is minimal — and, as happens in nature, when there's an impediment life works around it. Librarians are smart about coming up with alternative solutions for their patrons. As for SkyRiver's market share, it's still a small fraction but a significant small fraction.

ATG: Last year you announced sharing arrangements with companies like the Donohue Group and Cassidy Cataloguing. Are there similar partnerships set for the near future that you can talk about? Are there any new scoops that ATG can report?

LS: There are several irons in the fire which aren't quite ready to announce right now.

ATG: Has the open source movement had any impact on SkyRiver and its services?

LS: If you're referring to open source ILS, we welcome libraries with open source systems — the great thing about SkyRiver and MARC data is that any system that can import MARC data can use our services. Moreover, SkyRiver's open data use policy fits very well with the open source movement.

ATG: What is your strategy for growing the business at a time when the library market seems stagnant, if not actually shrinking? Do you have any new service enhancements in the pipeline?

LS: From SkyRiver's vantage point, we see huge potential. There are thousands of libraries that need a cataloging utility and, if even a few hundred of them move to SkyRiver, we have a bright future. We have the talent to use state-of-the-art technology to best advantage so we can maintain our high level of service as well as our cost-effectiveness for libraries. With regard to enhancements, we continue to roll out frequent new versions of the cataloging client, all based on customer feedback — one per month so far this year. There's also a longer-term vision that includes services for non-English language libraries, an API to the SkyRiver database, and support for resource sharing.

ATG: Before we let you go we wanted to ask, being a natural born Canadian, what got you so interested in U.S. History and biog-

continued on page 40

Interview — Leslie Straus
from page 39

raphy? Obviously, you haven't cut your ties with your native land. We also know that you have a cottage on a lake in Muskoka, Ontario. Can you tell us about that?

LS: Living in the DC area in 1970-72 when my husband was a postdoctoral student probably started it. The people he worked with and their spouses were so open, direct, and warm — much more “out there” than in Toronto (at least the Toronto of those days). At the same time it was troubling to be in DC when it was still badly scarred from the 1968 riots and walking downtown was dangerous. I guess all this grew into a fascination with U.S./Canada cultural differences which I believe originate from each country's roots. Hence, the interest in history, and there's so much good stuff out there to read!

As for the cottage, for me it's where many beautiful things come together — water, trees, magnificent rock faces, fresh air, lots of wildlife, the seasons. This is where I'm happiest. 🌿

Rumors
from page 30

School of Library and Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Mike Shatzkin, Founder & CEO of The Idea Logical Company, a panel on “Changes in Selling and Acquisition of University Press Content” with Leila W. Salisbury, Director, University Press of Mississippi, Doug Armato, Director, University of Minnesota Press, Alison Muddit, Director, University of California Press. And that's just a few of our speakers.

<http://www.katina.info/conference/>

Was excited to learn that the fantastic Doug Armato has recently been named President of the American Association of American University Presses. Doug obviously knows where the action is which is why he is coming to Charleston!

Facebook is a fascinating place to visit “had I but world enough and time”! We have a Charleston Conference FB page. Have you visited? In fact, I saw news of several colleagues the other day when I happened to stumble into FB. Rebecca Cybulsky Walden was one of them. Rebecca used to work at EBSCO (left in 2008) and does a lot of freelance work for the American Library Association (www.atyourlibrary.org) and also some consulting for Dan Tonkery's company, Content Strategies and some STM publishers.

continued on page 42

against the grain
people profile

President, SkyRiver Technology Solutions
5850 Shellmound Way, Ste. 302, Emeryville, CA 94608
Phone: (510) 520-8084 • Fax: (510) 450-6352
<leslie@theskyriver.com> • www.theskyriver.com

Leslie Straus

BORN/LIVED/EARLY LIFE: Born in Kaslo, British Columbia near the end of WWII (then a relocation center for Japanese Canadians). At war's end the family moved to Waterloo, Ontario. Remained in Waterloo through graduation with a BA (English major) from the University of Waterloo, where I was fortunate to work two summers as a library assistant. Then came marriage, a move to Toronto, and a University of Toronto library degree.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Started out as a Junior Cataloger at York University Libraries in Toronto, progressing to Serials Cataloger, then Senior Cataloger before becoming Head of (technical) Processing. (I have vivid memories from those pre-MARC days of cataloging in a manual setting — endless searching and endless filing — fantasizing how wonderful it would be if only the NUC quarterly and monthly printed catalogs were somehow computerized). After that, there was a hiatus of two years as a stay-at-home mom in the Washington, DC area where husband Neil was a post-doctoral student. Then it was back to Toronto, where I began to work part-time for Coutts Library Services, helping to set up the company's continuations service. Involvement with Coutts led to involvement with UTLAS in an electronic ordering pilot project, which led to a job offer from UTLAS to be Manager of Product Marketing. Among the products we brought on-board at UTLAS to market in Canada was INNOVACQ, a nascent acquisitions system developed by Innovative Interfaces when Innovative consisted of half-a-dozen people working in three rented rooms in Berkeley. That involvement led to a job offer from Innovative to be a trainer, which rather quickly evolved into a combination training/sales/contracts role. (Being the Eastern Time Zone person for a California start-up meant that it was easy to get to wear multiple hats.) Twenty-one years later, in 2006, I retired from Innovative as VP of worldwide sales and marketing. Although happy with that being the sum total of my career, I found myself accepting an invitation three years later to head up SkyRiver, a new bibliographic utility for cataloging. This was a good decision. It has been a great adventure, not to mention learning experience, to be able to help launch SkyRiver with technology that eclipses anything I could have imagined as a cataloger in the 1960s. So I've come full circle in a very serendipitous way.

FAMILY: Married to Neil Straus (University of Toronto Professor Emeritus); two sons.

IN MY SPARE TIME: Not much of this right now, but whenever possible it's spent in Muskoka, Ontario at our cottage on a lake, canoeing, hiking, foraging for berries and mushrooms, or just enjoying the view of rocks, trees, and water (or ice and pristine snow).

FAVORITE BOOKS: Biographies and history, particularly U.S. history. Having become a naturalized U.S. citizen, it's interesting to learn more about the “other guys” after being schooled from a British-centric perspective.

PHILOSOPHY: Be curious; be as useful as possible; laugh whenever possible; be open to ideas and people.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: My role in bringing SkyRiver to the library community and introducing a cost-effective, full-service alternative for libraries when there wasn't one.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Having the good health, energy, and time to engage in whatever adventure presents itself then.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Technology will continue to transform how information is managed and presented, but there will be no change in the need for bibliographic integrity and understanding the needs of information consumers. In fact, this will be even more vital because there will be so much more to deal with in so many different forms. It will be important for librarians to assert themselves in an industry that stands to learn a lot from their expertise and service commitment to patrons. Librarians who adapt to new technologies yet remain grounded in the fundamentals of librarianship will be important in keeping the world afloat in a sea of information, whether they're in libraries or in the industry. 🌿

