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# Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fascicle 18: Costs and Revenues

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

With the decision that we had to turn to the scene in which an increasing proportion of the decisions relating to achieving the firm's objective of offering academic and research libraries an integrated book acquisition and bibliographic control package at the lowest possible overall expenditure of library funds, we necessarily turned to our agent-negotiator in Washington to help us frame an approach and strategy for moving ahead. **Don Chvatal** and/or I made repeated trips to Washington over the months devoted to trying to solve the problem with which we had been presented. After some months our Washington contact learned that the House Special Sub-committee on Education of the Committee on Education and Labor had scheduled a hearing to try to deal with the same general problem we were seeking to solve (in particular NPAC), but ours was oriented to the somewhat different matter of how the flow of knowledge to faculty, research staff, and students in universities around the country might be improved. Members or Committee Staff had learned through quite different channels of the problem our firm was endeavoring to solve and saw it as closely related to that of renewing NPAC.

When we learned of this development we spent several days with our Washington agent to assess the suitability of this hearing to make our case and, if so, decide how that case should be made. The Chairwoman of that Committee, **Edith Green**, was from Oregon, so our agent had a relatively ready means of access to her. He met with her to sound her out and to learn if our thinking was consistent with the interests of the Committee and if the Members had a reasonable interest in our testimony. The reply was in the affirmative. We had several months to prepare the evidence and line of reasoning we planned to employ in presenting that evidence and our proposed assertion. So, most of my time and much of **Don's** was focused on framing our testimony in such a way as to demonstrate that the evidence we would employ was consistent with what the Committee had in hand. Further, we had to endeavor to structure our proposed solution in terms the Committee members found reasonable and that aligned with the thinking of their Staff.

With our presentation in hand, **Don** and I went to Washington recognizing that there we were involved in a significant gamble — the evening before the hearing was devoted to seeking to assess the risks we might be dealing with. Again we concluded, as we had following numerous preceding assessments, that presenting our extensive but private knowledge and understanding of the existing difficulties presented in trying to get the most current knowledge to academic

and research users in a public forum might prove a major step in resolving the structures and practices that created the problem.

The principal thrust of our testimony was to improve the funding of the **Library of Congress** and to urge changes to speed up the acquisition of books and their cataloging and to markedly improve the coverage of scholarly books and related cataloging. Our presentation was framed by first pointing to the evidence we had gathered with the help of the various office managers documenting the extensive delays in getting books on the shelves of the libraries of the country's academic and research institutions. Our argument then presented the evidence relating to the speed of our world-wide acquisition and distribution system. We then proceeded to describe the systems we had put into place to achieve these results. We next described the speed with which we were furnishing cataloging for books not yet cataloged when delivered. We closed this line of presentation by pointing out that we were furnishing in-house cataloging to a number of libraries, including a substantial number of government-agency libraries. Lastly we documented from an **L.C.** in-house study the delays in ordering and receiving overseas books and, hence, cataloging. So much for the evidentiary base of our testimony, which was presented with some haste so as not to bury the interest of the Members in a mass of statistics and examples.

We closed by comparing the speed and coverage of our overseas acquisition program and of our cataloging for those libraries for which we were creating cataloging if none were received from **L.C.** in some stipulated time. We then demonstrated that we could get scholarly material from the principal overseas knowledge-producing countries both more rapidly and at substantially less cost than that of the then **L.C.** procurement system. We then repeated this set of comparisons for the cataloging of both domestic and overseas scholarly titles. These comparisons were made to endeavor to demonstrate that there was a system of acquisitions and cataloging that would be of greater utility to library users in existence — and one which would do the job at lesser cost.

All of this seemed eminently reasonable to us as a rational way to solve one of the problems for which the **ARL** librarians had assailed the **L.C.** contingent at the luncheon meeting to which we had invited **ARL** members to attend several years previously — again in an effort to solve the growing library problem of the delays of **L.C.** cataloging for overseas books and, in some cases, scholarly books of U.S. origin. The proposal offered at the hearing differed from that presented

to the **ARL** librarians several years earlier in that it more firmly coupled the supply of the most recent knowledge content in the form of books to the prompt supply of the cataloging requisite for the timely use of faculty and research staff. This for the reason that in the intervening years we learned in greater detail more about the systems of acquisition and dispatch employed by **L.C.** with respect to overseas scholarly publications and the internal priorities for cataloging.

On the morning of the hearing, and well before the hour agreed that our Washington representative was to pick us up, he appeared at the hotel to advise that he had just learned from a Committee staff member that the Library of Congress had sent a memo to the Committee labeling our forthcoming testimony as that of a "hostile witness." As a long-time denizen of the Hill and earlier in his career the chief-of-staff for a leading Congressman, he delivered this information with a mixture of astonished disbelief and marked dismay. Our lunch conversation then turned to the wisdom of testifying with such a headwind from one of the most esteemed institutions on the Hill. By way of countervailing consideration was the manifestly sincere desire of the Committee to relieve their academic and research library constituents of the accusations of inexcusable delays in making books containing new knowledge generally accessible to scholars and students. The Committee was genuinely endeavoring to resolve a problem of which the members had been made well aware for some time. So, our failure to appear would in some measure defeat their wish to do something of benefit for their academic and corporate constituents. At the conclusion of this long and anguished discussion we decided to proceed as planned.

When we arrived at the Congressional hearing-room we noted two persons, unknown to us, sitting in the back of an otherwise empty gallery. Shortly, the hearing was opened. One of these unknown figures immediately requested to be heard. Whereupon, to our renewed dismay, she announced that she represented the **American Library Association** and that she wished it to be known to the Committee that the **ALA** viewed our forthcoming testimony as that of a "hostile witness."

**Don** and I were then called to the witness table. I delivered our prepared testimony after which the Committee Members asked several questions. Finally one of the Members concluded with compliments respecting the job he had learned we were doing and for our positive proposal to solve a genuine problem.

Shortly thereafter the hearing was adjourned, and as we left the Chairman commended us for the job we were doing for higher education and for our willingness to help solve a problem which the Committee well knew

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existed. We left to begin the appraisal of the unknown wounds we had received and the meanings thereof. Clearly this was the very profession with which we had sought to assist and for which we had pioneered and invested in a variety of systems to not simply speed the movement of books to them and their users but to simultaneously reduce the internal costs of so doing.

Well before the hearing, our testimony had obviously been construed by the **Library of Congress** and the **ALA** as something approaching heresy. It was viewed as an attack on the Queen Mother rather than as a well-intentioned effort to assist in resolving a long-standing problem — a festering boil on the flank of academic and research libraries. Not only was the firm and its efforts judged as unspeakable before the hearings, the chorus of criticism from elements of the library fraternity/sorority that sounded immediately following our presentation inflated that *a priori* judgment. It seemed a well-orchestrated attack. We were baffled by how our proposal to improve **L.C.** funding and by how the track record we had established with multiple libraries to assist in solving a long-standing problem of providing timely availability of the latest scholarship from the principal knowledge-producing countries of the world could be so turned on its head — a repeated and complete misunderstanding of everything we had said and done over a period of years.

The *a priori* judgment of our testimony and our intentions together with the strange perversion thereof forced considerable rethinking of our strategic posture. This rethinking had to be coupled to the evidence of the Washington lunch for the **ARL** at which we had sought to get support for the resolution of the same problems, which had turned into a sustained assault on the **L.C.** contingent that had refused to be seated and stood at the door. The evidence of the *sotto voce* explanation of several Ohio librarians that they switched their purchase of cataloging to **OCLC** from our firm out of a sense of “motherhood and apple pie” surely had to be added into this reappraisal, as did the almost unanimous belief of the cataloging staff in the **University of California** system that our response to the RFP from the University central office reflected our firm’s willingness to put them out of work and seemed to point to degree of professional loyalty exceeding that of loyalty to professional standards of service to users. This was quite a different analysis than we had constructed several years earlier. And one which dictated quite a different strategy in going forward.

So a major reorientation of the firm’s strategic posture had to be formulated and put into place. Perhaps we should simply bid any concern for the welfare of library users goodbye. That seemed a craven retreat for a band of 180-proof brokers of knowledge more commonly known as bookmen. But perhaps the times had overtaken that kind. Whatever, this reformulation demanded substantial management attention.

In the meantime, there were other matters that demanded strategic attention. The librarians with whom we worked had repeatedly complained of the time and effort expended upon acquiring out-of-print titles needed to fill old holes in the collection, as well as filling the new holes evident from the broadening of curricular and research endeavors. To respond to these complaints we undertook an experiment with a handful of libraries to try to move in the direction of resolving these problems. We agreed with our experimental contingent that whenever we received an OP notice from a publisher we would first establish that the title had not been reprinted. If not, we would search for it using the then common method of advertising for it among the OP dealers. At first we had **Sol Malkin’s** *The Antiquarian Bookman* available. But soon **Sol** stopped publishing. So we commenced publication of a monthly, *Richard’s Wants*, listing all the accumulated OPs not fulfilled plus any new ones received in the interval. This wants list went along to all the OP dealers we could locate. We enjoyed what, at the time, was a good rate of success — roughly a third of all titles sought — and the rate seemed to be increasing. So after some months we offered this search service to all the libraries with which we worked. Our catalog soon reached 32 pages of single-line biblio descriptions. Our libraries seemed to be pleased with this new, cheaper way of filling OP holes in their collections.

For some years, we had been selling books to library staff at the usual library discounts but separately billed to a staff account. The acquisitions people would then collect the money, and some one of them would send payment. Little by little this service was used by some libraries to acquire books for faculty members, who we assumed were especially close to the librarians. In a few years’ time this service had grown to the point that we thought we had best serve this faculty market in a different and more straightforward fashion. As noted earlier, we had launched a separate subsidiary, **Richard Abel**, Bookseller, with the intention of serving individuals seeking scholarly books — a job only a scattering of retail booksellers were interested in doing. So, we began using this subsidiary to circulate lists of scholarly books recently passing through the Approval Plan. The idea was that eventually we would develop a list of such book buyers of sufficient magnitude that we could transform our procedures to produce single-title solicitations akin to the Approval Plan solicitation forms suitably modified for such individual use. The route to this end — an Approval Plan for individual faculty — would require a good deal of work and time to put into place. But we launched the initiative with a catalog of listings organized by subject to develop the mailing list and individual histories of subjects of interest in each case.

One other initiative of what we judged to be of substantial and growing library concern also began to preoccupy management time. The librarians in virtually every library of any age complained to us about the growing shortages of building space with which they were compelled to cope for want of the financial

resources requisite to adding space or building an entirely new library. Some had begun to resort to housing the least-used publications in cheap, off-campus warehouses at a substantial cost to library users. Some had joined consortia of various kinds to jointly acquire such off-campus storage — or, even more deleterious for users, the retention by each library in the group of only older books in agreed subject areas so only a single copy need be stored and shared among the consortium libraries.

As a consequence, we started to explore the possibility of developing and marketing an integrated, computer-based, bibliographic control and circulation control system coupled with a highly-compact storage system that could be housed in a cheap building (walls and roof only to keep off vandals, moisture, and no heating/cooling/ventilating). When the IT staff concluded their investigation and design with a positive outcome, we contacted a local heavy equipment manufacturer with a reputation for ingenious engineering solutions to difficult problems. Following months of conferences and the putting together of heads of our staff and their staff, the conclusion was reached that we could mutually create such a facility. (If I say so myself, it was a quite ingenious mechanical system.) The manufacturer said the firm would only proceed if we could assure them of the sale of three such systems — a wholly new game for a bookdealer. After some months we had nailed down one in a new library for which we were going to provide a shelf-ready opening day collection. We had three more likely prospects. We seemed to be well on the way to solving yet another library problem at a cost well below that of conventional building.

The fact that the numerous library acquisition methods for books and cataloging which the firm had developed, coupled with another large number of options offered to libraries, had led to such complexity that it had become a matter of great difficulty to attempt to understand the specific costs and revenues associated with them individually, as well as in various combinations. Fortunately, about the time that we became aware of this hardly-comprehensible array of costs and revenues, a young graduate of **Harvard Business School**, **Charles Marshall**, appeared in Portland. **Keith Barker** quickly brought him aboard and set him to work to sort out this mish-mash. It was an undertaking right out of **Taylor’s** manual of manufacturing — and at least as difficult. He had to not simply learn the various services and their multitudinous correlations but to identify what costs should be applied to each element of the resultant wide array of processes necessary to the accomplishment thereof. The management group was eager to have some results, but the job proved far more difficult than even we had imagined. Even though **Keith** and **Paul Sibley** lent a hand he was at it for months before he was confident that the preliminary round of costs he had derived were relatively solid — numbers which he and the management group were relatively certain reflected the financial realities of the machine we had built over a period of about twenty years. 🌱