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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — On the Road in the 1970s, Looking for Authors

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I don't know how much traveling acquisitions editors in publishing houses do nowadays in looking for potential authors for monographs and upper-level texts, but I suspect it's less than I did when I had such a job at **Wiley** back in the latter half of the 1970s. I must have been on the road for at least four or five days six or eight times a year (maybe even more, but I can't remember). Trips to the West Coast always lasted over a weekend, and there was a Midwest trip that included a weekend in Chicago, when my wife joined me for a two-night stay in the grand old Palmer House. Sometimes I combined days of editorial scouting with staking out the **Wiley** booth at a convention, such as the annual **ASME** meeting. Sometimes I flew somewhere, rented a car, and drove from one campus to another for pretty much an entire work week.

I'd travelled somewhat before I took the **Wiley** job, but it did give me a wonderful opportunity to get to places I'd never been to but always wanted to visit or to places I'd already been to but wanted to revisit. Of course, every city and town I hit wasn't the most smashing place on earth. For every Seattle or San Francisco, there was a West Lafayette or a South Bend, Indiana, which might be, for all I know, vastly different now than they were then. I hope so, but I wouldn't count on it. My attention ought to have been focused on chatting up professors at **Purdue** or **Notre Dame**, but I did have to find places for dinner, and my desires for good meals could be hard to satisfy. In those days, as I recall, West Lafayette had but a single Chinese restaurant, which didn't much matter, because everyone from publishing seemed to end up at a famous and ugly steak place out on the highway called Sarge Biltz (gone now). Strangely, in the shadow of **Notre Dame** in South Bend, I found myself in a Jewish deli one night. In some college towns, you never knew where you might end up when hunger struck.

Big cities, with classy hotels and good restaurants, were a different story, of course. What's more, hotel and restaurant prices were far more moderate thirty-five years ago than they are today. For example, my boss suggested that when I would be in Chicago on an upcoming trip that involved something called the Triple Engineering Show at McCormick Place, I stay at the Drake. I remember a huge corner room. When I returned to it at night I could look up the shoreline of Lake Michigan and see the taillights of the cars as they made their way up Lake Shore Drive. If memory serves, the room cost just sixty dollars or so per night. (The Drake's rooms are now at least four times as much, but still aren't that expensive,

compared to those at many other major-city hotels). I ate sometimes at the Cape Cod Room on the ground floor. It's rated at \$\$\$\$ nowadays. It was much cheaper back then.

So my total Travel and Entertainment (T&E in the parlance I got used to fast) budget of \$10,000 went far in those days. I was able to stretch the money not only over air fares and car rentals, in addition to hotels and meals on the road, but also over business lunches in New York, where **Wiley** was located since its founding in 1807 — until the company decamped for Hoboken, NJ some years after I left as a vice-president in 1990. Back in the 1970s, managers could take subordinates out for a meal, and peers could do so, as well, as long as business was purportedly discussed. I don't recall that anyone asked about what was discussed at those expense account meals, at least not during most of my early publishing years. I lived through three-martini lunches (*vodka martinis*, of course), until they became a thing of the past — thankfully, because there

were always people whom you had to steer clear of after they staggered back from lunch.

If what I'm writing about sounds like it's out of *Mad Men*, I suppose it was.

There wasn't any lunch-time drinking on the road, of course. Sitting down in a small office to talk with a professor with booze on my

breath would have been a non-starter, to put it mildly. I had no idea whether a professor was a teetotaler or a reformed alcoholic or despised Demon Rum on religious grounds. There was no charm in getting any professor off topic, as it were. I was there to get leads on new projects that would help me fulfill my basic goals of twenty author signings, twenty manuscripts in production, and twenty books published during a fiscal year. (Acquisition editors I deal with nowadays as a packager, essentially, of engineering handbooks seem to have much more ambitious goals.)

When I visited an engineering school, I needed to canvass two departments — mechanical and industrial — which were the core of my editorial program. As a rule, I didn't make appointments in advance. One notable exception: I once visited **Michigan Tech** in the dead of a typical brutal winter, which earned me the gratitude of a delegation of professors, who met my plane on the runway when it landed. I was a celebrity on that campus for forty-eight hours. Even when I didn't call ahead, I managed to use my time efficiently. I'd reconnoiter a campus during early morning fitness runs, so I knew where the engineering buildings were. I'd hit a building at the earliest hour I figured professors might be in their offices, and I'd start walking the halls, looking for an open door with a fac-

ulty member sitting at a desk, or even a light in an office with the door closed.

When I walked into an office, **Wiley's** name, well known and respected among engineering and scientific faculty (this was when **Wiley's** journal program was much smaller than it is now and long before the current antagonism over journal prices, etc., although I did get an earful about textbook prices now and then), enabled me to sit down and have a conversation. I didn't ask whether there might be a manuscript already in preparation. That would have been much too crude, and quite possibly a conversation killer, to boot. Instead, I would draw professors out on what books they thought might be needed in their specialty or, more broadly, in their discipline, and whom I might contact about submitting a proposal. If someone I was talking to happened to have started on a manuscript or had been thinking of a book project, that would all the better. I kept at it for full working days. In brief, what I did worked.

My conversations with professors weren't relegated only to business. I talked about their worlds and mine, about spouses and kids, about their likes and dislikes, about the world in general and how they saw it. I had no illusions about what I was doing. I was a salesman, after all, selling the idea of a person taking a considerable amount of time to write a book which very likely wouldn't make him or her rich. That's nothing to be ashamed of. At one time or another during our lives, most of us, even those gifted with extraordinary talent or looks, are selling something. It may be an idea, or a product, or ourselves — to a boss, an investor, a gatekeeper of some sort, or someone we've fallen in love with or would just like to get close to for a time. I think that that's the way the world works.

Over the years, I met many people, some interesting, others deadly dull, although that didn't matter if a book idea, or even an actual book, came out of a conversation. There could be a pleasant surprise when a reserved professor came to **Wiley's** offices with an attractive, outgoing spouse in tow. Something a professor said could stick in the mind for years, such as the comment when I walked into an office in Manhattan, Kansas, and asked the occupant how he liked it in that part of the world. "I'm 500 miles from anything," he grumbled, "skiing, shopping, theater, good restaurants, you name it." One morning, I had to conduct an editorial conversation while jogging around the lake in Madison, Wisconsin. I don't remember whether or not I actually got a book out of that run, and I'd have to do a lot of research to call up the name of the professor who had no time to talk with me except during his morning jog, but I do have a memory of that beautiful early spring day, which was delightfully warm and dry. 🍷