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At the Turn of the Millennium, A Library Development Time-Line

by Elisabeth Knight (Extended Campus Services Librarian, Western Kentucky University Libraries)

Today the library hums with computers, copiers and all the modern conveniences to make research and scholarship quick, easy, and as painless as possible. As recently as two decades ago, library users had to go through indexes for the information they needed in book form, which had to be gone through by hand, entry by entry, year by year. Nowadays, copy machines save a lot of time for students since they can make a copy of the material they want and go away to write their paper. But at one time, students had to stay in the library with the materials that didn’t circulate, taking notes by hand. Modern electronic databases and the copier are just two of the enormous advances which have changed the way the library has been used. Consider some of the other kinds of changes that had to occur to make the library as it is today:

Circa 284 B.C. Alexandrian Library was founded by Ptolemy I Solter, prototype of libraries throughout the world.

If Rumors Were Horses

Okay. There is so much going on that it makes my head spin. How to keep up with it all?

Well, the minute that the Charleston Conference was over—always a low time for me—I got a cheery phone call from Fred Philipp (Blackwell’s)! He always makes me smile. Anyway, Fred said that he wasn’t at the Charleston Conference because he broke his ankle of all things. Fred is back at work but using a cane. Break a leg, Fred!

And speaking of Fred. We have a new company—Swets Blackwell. On Tuesday, 30 November, the formal agreement of the merger between Blackwell Information Services and Swets Subscription Services was signed in Lisse, The Netherlands. If you’ll remember, this follows the June 1999 announcement of the intention to create a joint venture combining the two companies. Due diligence, tax and regulatory processes have taken place through the summer and autumn and completion is anticipated to take place in the New Year. The new company, formed through the merger, is called Swets Blackwell. Swets is the majority shareholder and the Head Office of the new company—Swets Blackwell. Blackwell Information Services

Late 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries
First time chains were used to secure books as an alternative to securing them in cupboard or rooms to prevent theft of the scarce and valuable materials. Typically, chains were attached to a brass clip on one of the wooden covers.

Bodleian Library unchaired the last of its books in 1448.

First known abstracts in the modern sense were the summaries of 36 books (chapters) of Pliny’s Naturalis Historia, written by the author to save the time of Emperor Titus.

First introduction of wall shelving on a large scale at the Library of Escorial in Spain.

Edinburgh established first known circulating library.

Since 1830
There has been Indexing and Abstracting for every major subject discipline.

Microforms were invented. Not used widely in libraries until the 1930s when quality film and equipment first became widely available.

First Periodical Index, William Frederick Poole’s Index to Periodical Literature.

Congress established the Government Printing Office.

Melvil Dewey published the first edition of Dewey Classification in Amherst, Mass.

Congress passed “New Printing Act of 1895” creating the GPO’s Superintendent of Documents division.

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Reference service as we know began, based on a paper delivered by Samuel Swett Green of the Worcester (Mass.) Library on assisting the public.

September 1876 — the first issue of Library Journal was published.

Interlibrary Loan — the basics of ILL as we know it was put forth in a letter to the editor in Library Journal concerning standardizing the practice of Interlibrary cooperation, until this point a non-formalized arrangement of lending parts of a collection.

Development of steel bookends.

Appearance of modern book stacks.

Bernard Richardson Green designed and patented the book stack (with adjustable shelves), built in a framework of vertical and horizontal steel supports for the Library of Congress.

Herman Hollerith created a punch card tabulating machine for the U.S. Census and founds the company that will become IBM. Technically, his creation is a version of the first computer.

First use of a single catalog tray.

Browne System for a circulating collection was used for the first time at the Newark Public Library. The Browne System became the model for public library circulating systems, involving use of book pocket, book card (with title, call number, and author), date due slip, and a borrower's card.

First appearance of a card catalog cabinet.

James C.M. Hanson and Charles Martel began developing Library of Congress Classification system.

Late 1880s

Accessioning began, now better known to librarians as a shelflist.

Early 1900s

A forerunner of the modern bookmobile developed by Mary Leomist Thicomb of the Washington County Library, Hagerstown, Maryland, when she designed the first book wagon (pulled by horses) to be used in the U.S. to deliver library services to people.

First version of cataloging rules concerning author and title entries. Used by both British and American Library Associations.

Formal adoption of GPS's Librarian, Adelaide Hesse's invention, the SooDuc Classification system. Also first year of the Monthly Checklist of State Documents.

Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) first appeared with the title, Subject Headings Used in the Dictionary Catalogues of the Library of Congress.

Microform materials were suddenly possible due to the development of Recordak filming equipment (originally designed to film bank checks). The planetary camera was put into use to film newspapers and journals.


First electronic digital computer built. It was the size of a room.

Thermofax (diffuse transfer reversal) appeared for the first time.

Electrostatic equipment, better known as copy machines, were made commercially available by Xerox.

Microchip invented.

The first commercial mainframe computer appears, the IBM System/360.

AACR The Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules published. The AACR was a culmination of more than 80 years of efforts to arrive at a body of rules governing bibliographical control of library materials.

MARC Format - distribution of machine readable form by Library of Congress.

DIALOG was developed by Lockheed Missiles and Space Co., an online search system.

A network of university computers, known as ARPA Net, formed. ARPA stands for Advanced Research Project Agency, an agency formed in 1957 to coordinate research.

UNIX, an operating system, created by Bell Labs, allowing computers to work across platforms.

CLSI (Computer Library Systems, Inc.) pioneered the first online circulation system.

Current age began when Index Medicus offered coverage under the name MEDLINE.

OCLC began a computer-based shared cataloging system.

The first personal computer kit, the Altair 8800, appeared.

Apple II computer created by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak.

The MODEM (modulator-demodulator) created by programmer Ward Christensen, which allows PCs to talk over phone lines.

Philips and Sony arrived at standards for new invention they have developed, the CD.

IBM launched its PC.

Audio CDs first introduced to the United States by Philips and Sony after appearing the previous year in Japan and Europe.

Introduction of Macintosh computers.

The first appearance of CD-ROM products in libraries. Three bibliographic databases, Library Corporation's BiblioFile, SilverPlatter's ERIC and PsycLit, and Information Access Corporation's InfoTrac heralded the age of electronic data retrieval in libraries.

ARPA Net renamed the Internet.

Tim Berners-Lee created an Internet protocol called the World Wide Web.

Early 1990s

The first point and click Web browsers appeared.

LCSH and LC cataloging data were accessible online through the Internet.

CNET was launched.

Internet became available on cable through WebTV.

Libraries, as with all living entities, undergo a constant process of change, and the new millennium is sure to usher in many more. The library's role of making materials available has been one of the most important contributions ever made to human culture and technology and will continue to do so. Although libraries are having to adapt and evolve as institutions, and although information may now be available in many other media besides that of books, the focus of libraries will continue to be serving the public's information needs. Despite much speculation to the contrary, books, librarians and libraries, will be around for millennia to come.

NB: Elisabeth Knight is an Assistant Professor and extended Campus Librarian at Western Kentucky University Libraries. She has a M.A. in Literature and an MLS from the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee.

Works Consulted


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