



## On electric erasers and other notable events

By Norman Stevens

---

### *What C&RL News has missed over the past 30 years*

---

**A**s invaluable as *C&RL News* has been in covering the day-to-day minutia of academic and research libraries over the past thirty years, it has sometimes missed the boat. It has, perhaps too often, failed to note the truly important events of the time. A thoughtful editorial process invariably involves the careful selection of material to be included. In the case of journals devoted largely to "news" events deemed by the editors to be of particular interest to their readership, the selection process is apt to be idiosyncratic. Some libraries and librarians are, after all, experts at self-promotion while others quietly go about their work not drawing attention to the equally important things that they are doing. Most librarians seem to be interested primarily in finding out what everyone else is doing and emulating that rather than following their own instincts down truly innovative paths.

For far longer than *C&RL News* has been in existence as a separate entity, the Molesworth Institute has been tracking certain unusual or unique library events relevant to its mission and, at times, generating its own version of the real news of the day. Except for a brief

period (March 1988 to November 1990) when the then editor was foolish enough to allow the director of the Molesworth Institute to write an irregular column called "Innovations: Humor and Creativity" for *C&RL News*, our version of the academic and research library news of the day has largely been ignored by the mainstream library press. In an effort to right that wrong, we are taking this opportunity to present a small but representative selection of items that have not been adequately covered in the first 30 years of this esteemed journal, as well as some brief guidelines for future editors in the hope that in the next 30 years they will offer a truer picture of the "real" events of the work of the academic side of Our Profession.

### Personnel

Nouleigh Rhee Furbished was appointed as NELINET's Preservation Officer in 1971. Her appointment was noted, much to the chagrin of the editor, by *Library Journal*. Until her recent retirement, Ms. Furbished spent much of her time visiting NELINET member libraries where she polished leather bindings with shoe polish.

Claude J. ("Booker") Bookstack retired as director of the Beesly University Library in Baxter, Massachusetts, in 1991 after 75 years in that position. He was the author of *Baby's First Book of Library and Information Science* (Slumberland Press, 1978). He was often nominated,



**Claude J. Bookstack was honored for his record of never having served on any local, state, regional, national, or international library association committee.**

---

*Norman Stevens is director of the Molesworth Institute; e-mail: bbladm3@uconnvm.uconn.edu*

but never designated, as ACRL's Academic/Research Librarian of the Year but did receive the Edmund Lester Pearson Award in 1990 for his record of never having served on any local, state, regional, national, or international library association committee.

## **Collections**

In 1977 the Southwest Northeast Southern Eastern State Teachers Normal College Library acquired the Robert Louis Stevenson collection of more than 15,000 books, articles, manuscripts, and ephemera relating to umbrellas and parasols. The acquisition of that collection led, in addition to the creation of *Umbrella Abstracts*, to the SNESTNC Library's admission to the Research Library Group (RLG) in 1980.

## **Technology**

The Library of Congress, in 1994, officially retired and turned over to the Smithsonian Institution the last known electric eraser in use in an academic or research library. That was added to the Smithsonian's collection of obsolete library technology that includes: a card platen for an electric typewriter; a container from the late, but not lamented, automated book retrieval system at the Health Sciences Library at Ohio State University; a Projected Books reader; and a half-size catalog card unit.

The ambitious plans for the full-scale automation of the library at Florida Atlantic University, which had been widely publicized at the time of its founding in 1961, came to a quiet end sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

## **Innovation**

The East Machias branch of the University of Maine system opened its library in a former Wal-Mart store in 1989. The large one-story building was left essentially as it had been leading to the use of the checkout counters as circulation points and the adaptation of the cash registers as circulation terminals. Users quickly found the greeters at the front door, as well as the drive-through reserve service, welcome innovations although it was no easier to find books than it had been to find goods.

Academic libraries, including the University of Michigan Library, began to change their dress codes in the early 1970s by allowing women staff members to wear pants to work provided, initially, that they were part of a matching pants suit outfit. That marked a major step forward in dealing with the broad issue of dress for women

in libraries. Some of us, for example, can remember a time as late as the mid-1950s when no woman in shorts or pants was allowed even to enter some major academic libraries (e.g., Rutgers University). Now, of course, almost anything is considered appropriate attire for women or men librarians, library staff, and library users.

For the first Earth Day celebration in 1970 at least one academic library's program featured a mobile constructed of condoms and other contraceptive devices that was hung in the main circulation hall. That, and similar activities, marked the first intrusion of the real world into the interiors of many academic and research libraries.

Virtually every academic library of any size underwent a major staff reorganization of one kind or another although, from observations to date, there is little evidence that such reorganizations have resulted in increased efficiency, productivity, or user satisfaction. The Molesworth Institute continues its search for any college library whose organization still consists of a director and four or five departments and any university library whose organization still consists of a director, two or three associate directors, and six or seven departments.

By 1995 most academic and research libraries had abandoned the traditional practice of turning each day to the next colored plate in the reference department copies of unabridged dictionaries in favor of glitzy homepages on the World Wide Web. Preliminary research indicates that in the typical academic library approximately 25% more users look at the homepage than had looked at the dictionary plate while it costs approximately 500% more to develop and maintain the homepage than to have the newest professional librarian turn to the next colored plate. At least one major academic library has, in apparent contravention of the copyright law, incorporated a weekly change of a colored plate from an unabridged dictionary into its homepage. A daily change was rejected as being too costly and time-consuming.

## **Statistics**

The first (January 1, 1989) and second (April 1, 1990) issues of the *Not the Association of Research Libraries Newsletter* reported on efforts to establish a formula, or index, that would correlate the standing of academic libraries in

the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) with the standing of the basketball and/or football teams in those same institutions as measured by published polls. As Kendon Stubbs, who undertook much of the research, noted, "better basketball teams make better libraries," which led him to conclude that "if you want a winning library, transfer funds from the library to the basketball team."

### Other events

The now famous Festschrift Retirement Home (FRH) for ARL directors was established in the mid-1970s. Funding for the FRH comes largely from the institutions from which the directors have been removed, retired, or otherwise encouraged to depart. The Lorena Garloch wing for women, which was opened in 1990, and anticipates a substantial influx of inhabitants in the next decade.

### Publications

In addition to the two issues of the *Not the Association of Research Libraries Newsletter*, other notable publications of the past thirty years included a new issue (Volume 5, Number 5) in March 1980 of the *Librarian's Record* that included the first publication of "The Umbrella Paper," which reported on the disappearance, exchange, and loss rate of umbrellas in academic libraries in 1976–77.

The University of Connecticut Library's Library Ephemera series included as Portfolio 1, Number 2 (1974) a reprinting of William Fitch Smyth's *Little Lyrics for Librarians*. Featured in that slim volume is the poem "A Librarian's Life:"

"A Librarian's life is the life for me/  
For there's nothing at all to do, you see/  
But to sit at a desk and read new books/  
And admire yourself, and think of your looks,  
/To questioning souls one can tartly say:  
/I can't be bothered with you to-day,  
/For I haven't finished this novel.  
See?/A librarian's life is the life for me."

The revised version might well begin: "A librarian's life is the life for me/For there's noth-



**Still found in many libraries, the library Desk remains a symbol of authority that serves to separate, and protect, librarians from patrons. Intentionally massive, the Desk is a mask for the inferiority complex of the librarian who controls it.**

ing at all to do, you see/But to sit at a computer and surf the Net/ . . ."

Numerous real or spurious editions of academic library newsletters were issued over the course of the past thirty years on or about April 1, and sometimes October 31, that shed a great deal more light on the inner workings of those libraries than did the more traditional newsletters issued during the remainder of the year.

Throughout much of the early years of OCLC a recipe for apple cake kept mysteriously appearing as a bibliographic record in its database despite continued efforts by OCLC to purge that record each time it was discovered. That record is probably still buried in the OCLC database somewhere but today it is quicker to locate such important information out on the Net.

tion out on the Net.

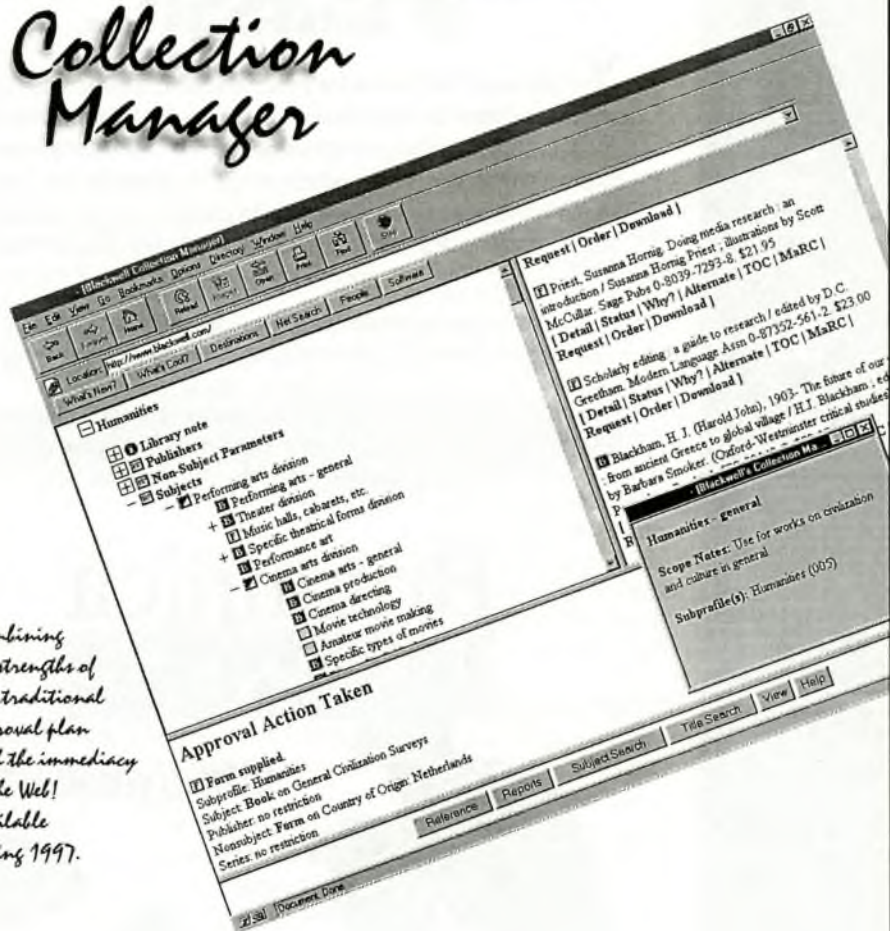
Finally, of course, the re-creation of The Bibliosmiles: A Rally of Librarians Who Are Nevertheless Human in the early 1990s offered a new opportunity for all librarians, but especially those in academic and research libraries, to help "formulate a permanent protest against undue solemnity in the profession." Although its total membership still numbers less than 100 hardy librarians, it offers our last best hope for the future.

### Guidelines for the future

How can future editors of, and contributors to, *C&RL News* manage to avoid the blunders of the past and provide more adequate coverage of the hidden aspect of academic and research librarianship? A few suggestions are in order. Look for electronic, photocopied, faxed, and printed materials that lie beyond the normal horizon of journal editors including, in particular, items with limited distribution, or that become known largely through word-of-mouth. Read every conceivable academic and research library newsletter—real and imaginary (with special attention to those issued on or around April 1)—with an eye for the odd and unusual happening. If all else fails, create your own news. ■

# BLACKWELL'S

## Collection Manager



*Combining  
the strengths of  
our traditional  
approval plan  
with the immediacy  
of the Web!  
Available  
Spring 1997.*

Another result of  
BLACKWELL'S commitment to  
Partnership Through Technology.

### BLACKWELL'S

• ELECTRONIC SERVICES •  
LAKE OSWEGO, OR OXFORD, ENGLAND

For more information contact:  
Matt Nauman  
1-800-547-6426  
mktg@bnauf.blackwell.com