

Plus ça change...Sixty Years of the Association of Research Libraries

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What follows is an engaging overview of the Association's first 60 years, originally a speech by David H. Stam, at the Association's 121st Membership Meeting, October 22, 1992.

In honor of our British colleagues here tonight, I would like to begin with a morality tale well-known in historical circles. The facts aren't quite right, but the story as told to me many years ago by Prof. Max Savelle, an eminent American historian from the University of Washington, concerned the first meeting of the American Historical Association to be held in the midwest, far from the eastern establishment that had dominated that association for fifty years. At a cocktail party at the University of Wisconsin meeting in the mid-1930s, shortly after ARL was organized, Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison chatted with Wisconsin historian Merle Curti about their work. Morison, who was tall and imposing, looked down on Curti, who though an intellectual giant was short of stature, and asked, "How far east do you have to go to get to a good library?" Curti took no time to reply, "The British Museum"!

That story may or may not tell us anything about the state of research libraries in this country when our Association was founded in 1932, but it does evoke an image of a changing bibliothecal map that has been filled in and redrawn constantly in the intervening period. It also provides a current lesson in humility, and not the last, for however much we may forget that we stand on the shoulders of giants, it was lives of struggle which brought us to where we are today. My theme tonight is that continuity between the early history of the Association and what we struggle with now, laced I hope with some of the humor that helped our early predecessors to cope.

As part of a committee charged with planning for this Diamond Jubilee, I agreed to do some historical sleuthing through the ARL Archives of the early years of the Association, now at the Library of Congress, in preparation for this talk. This too was a lesson in humility, for my time in Washington was limited and the archives are extensive: forty-four manuscript containers through 1962 comprising over 11,000 items, with additions of ca. 5000 and ca. 50,000 items in 1968 and 1979. Please note the precise statistics. Since it took me about a day to browse through a single manuscript box, cope with LC's new and admirably stringent rules of use, renew my photocopy vendacard in the Law Library, balance the ease of photocopying against the time waiting for a free machine, etc., I hope you'll be tolerant of the fragmentary nature of what follows. Helping to synthesize what I did find, however, were the succinct minutes of the early meetings, and a fine dissertation by Frank McGowan on the early history of the Association, which I am pleased to acknowledge as a work which belongs in each of our libraries.

What strikes one most in going through some of this material is the similarity of past and present agendas. Apart from changing social issues such as gender and race, the same issues recur constantly. The forms of technology have changed, but the search for technologies to aid research libraries was certainly present. So were the topics of cooperation, serials, statistics, relationships to other organizations, membership criteria, resource sharing, serials, bibliographical control, preservation, copyright, access to public information, serial price increases, and *mirabile dictu*, even dues. This afternoon we discussed a modest dues increase of 15%, so you can imagine the outcry in 1938 when they were raised by 100% from \$5 to \$10, or again in 1944 when they increased to \$25 to help defray the editorial costs of Doctoral Dissertations. That increase was duly protested by Dartmouth College and McGill, Princeton, and Kansas Universities. By 1962 dues had reached \$200. The percentage increase in dues since 1932 as of today has now reached just under 240,000%, or an average annual increase of 4000%. On the brighter side, we should note that members in earlier days had to pay separately for

their annual dinners. The December 28, 1934, dinner at the Cosmos Club here in Washington was \$1.25 exclusive of drinks. The 1951 meeting at the University of Chicago cost \$10.50 for two nights in the dormitory and two days' meals, topped in value, I suspect, the following year at the University of Iowa: “The University is reserving 50 beds in Hillcrest Dormitory at \$2.00 per individual per night.... Two beds to a room, pair off when you come in.... The Hotel Jefferson can be endured if you do not wish to stay with the group in the dormitory.”

By now you will have guessed that it was only men who were, in the memorable title by Julian Moynihan, “Pairing Off” in Iowa City and at the Cosmos Club. The early correspondence in the archives is filled with the discourse of men about men. With the exception of two acting librarians from the midwest, all of the member representatives were men. The two acting librarians were Effie A. Keefe, Acting Librarian of Northwestern University from 1941 to 1944, and Grace von Warner, Acting Librarian of the State University of Iowa who, if McGowan's biographical note is to be trusted, served as acting librarian from 1922 to 1924, 1927 to 1930, and from 1932 to 1943, surely some kind of record in long-suffering devotion.

Staff folklore at headquarters tells the story of Virginia Whitney, our first female president, introducing a resolution at a membership meeting in the late 1960s calling for the use of name badges, “because, frankly gentlemen, you all look alike to me.” For all the continuity we see in the development of this Association, gender is fortunately an area in which the language of discourse has changed.

What could possibly substitute for this female absence but booze. Bill Dix once recalled the abundance of Heaven Hill bourbon at his early meetings of the Association. A bit later, in 1951, the prospect of a meeting at the University of Minnesota's Center for Continuation Study, where liquor sales were banned within a mile of the campus, caused a quiet panic for Executive Secretary Charles David of the University of Pennsylvania: “What are the rules about any liquor? Is there a place near by where it is available, or is there any rule about a moderate amount of it being brought into the Center? I imagine we have some members who would find it a little difficult to go through with such a party for two days without any alcoholic facilities whatever.”

Reading the files fills one with sympathy for the Association staff in the amount of detail its daily mail had to cope with: menus for annual dinners, representation at ceremonial events, various protocols, inappropriate inquiries about membership (“Would the Rosicrucian Research Library be eligible for membership in the Association of Research Libraries?”), complaints about dues, the cyclical navel-gazing about the organization, the periodical lists of periodical price increases, such things as the April 1951 request for member's names and addresses from the “Miss a Meal Movement” in New Delhi, as endorsed by Mahatma Gandhi. Executive Secretary Charles David graciously responded on June 6: “I have read your letter of April 7th with interest and deep sympathy, but since the Association for Research Libraries is an exclusively scientific organization and does not in any way exist for charitable purposes, I feel it would not be proper for me to give you a list of our membership.” Scientific perhaps, but I should note that the catalog entry at LC for the ARL Archives describes the association as “literary-cultural.” Donald Gilchrist, Librarian of the University of Rochester, was our first Executive Secretary, elected in absentia as so many were, in January of 1933. He too had some problems about describing just what we are, especially in responding to probing questions from a Columbia University Press official and from a library student at George Washington University. In some of the more entertaining correspondence in the files, Gilchrist tried to respond to two different requests for the definition of a research library. To the first he replied on May 13, 1937, “I am very much at a loss to define the word ‘research’, particularly when applied in descriptive terms to libraries. I disclaim all responsibility for interpreting it as a part of the title of the association which I happen to be serving at present as secretary.”

Donald Porter Geddes of the Columbia Press was scarcely satisfied and replied to Gilchrist the next day: "I must admit that I had a premonition of the sort of answer I would get.... Scholars and scholarly publishers seem to talk very glibly of research libraries. I have even been guilty myself of saying that there were fifty in the country. Where I got the idea, I can't say. But when I saw that there was an Association of Research Libraries, I was quick to make inquiry.... I should add that Mr. Howson [the Librarian at Columbia] has always discouraged us from thinking that there was such a thing as a research library. At least, he has said that he is unable to tell us what it is. Nevertheless, our curiosity still consumes us, and we think that the information which you have might enable us to whittle down our definition a little better."

Gilchrist made a more leisurely response on the 19th: "My private opinion is there's no such thing as a research library;... If you will compare the definitions of the word 'research' in Murray's 'Oxford Dictionary' and Webster's 'New International', you can even make out a case for your own office reference shelf as a research collection. It's a pretty threadbare word in American education. As far as our Association is concerned, it includes the membership of the Association of American Universities, possibly a half dozen other large university and public libraries offering wide and rich facilities to scholars. This couldn't be said of all members of the Association of American Universities.... I'm happy to enclose a list of the membership; and wish you luck in your pursuit of the research library."

That was not the end of the issue for Gilchrist; after the end of his tenure as Executive Secretary in 1938, he received the following letter, dated March 29, 1939, from Wallace A. Jones of Washington, D.C.: "Dear Mr. Gilchrist: In connection with my work at George Washington University, one of the professors has asked me to obtain a definition of a 'Research Library.' It will be appreciated if some member of your staff can furnish me with the desired definition."

March 31, 1939, Gilchrist to Jones: "Probably nothing which the Association of Research Libraries has ever done in its six years of existence has aroused so many queries as the name which it selected. I don't know what a research library is; I don't even know how to define the word 'research'. It seems to be one of those words in the process of modification through practice. I hear it used by my son who does research (so he says) in a number of different fields for his first year in junior high school. Certainly, everybody in college does research, and the faculty do Research [with a capital R].

"Personally and confidentially, I think the selection of that term for the association which comprises some forty-odd large university and public libraries was a little unfortunate and certainly not crisply definitive. The title has been a source of embarrassment ever since it was chosen. Perhaps someday someone will think of a better word for the association's official title.

"...Have I answered your question?"

March 31, 1939, Gilchrist to Keyes Metcalf, recently elected Executive Secretary, with enclosures of the preceding exchange: "Metcalf: For your information and amusement. D.B. Gilchrist."

April 15, 1939, Wallace Jones to Gilchrist: "Your letter of March 29, 1939...has been received. I regret to admit that I am still confused as to just what a Research Library is. Will you please give me a concise definition of just what one is, and also tell how to distinguish between a Research Library and any other library. I regret to bother you again with this matter, but as I explained, it is in connection with one of my studies in Library Science at George Washington University, and I have been requested to secure the information."

April 19, 1939, Gilchrist to Jones: "Dear Mr. Jones: You have me back against the ropes and gasping for breath. I am forwarding your letter of the fifteenth to Mr. Metcalf, the present secretary of the Association of Research Libraries, and the director of the

Harvard University Libraries, in the hope that perhaps he will have the courage to give you a crisp definition."

April 19, 1939, Gilchrist to Metcalf, with enclosures: "Metcalf: I've told him all I know on the subject, suppose you try. Don."

April 26, 1939, Metcalf to Jones: "My dear Mr Jones: Donald B. Gilchrist, Librarian of the University of Rochester, has turned over to me copies of his correspondence with you dealing with the definition of a research library. I referred the matter to Dr Andrew D. Osborn, a member of our library staff at Harvard, who is interested in library terminology. Here is a copy of his report, which I am glad to pass on to you for such use as you see fit. It cannot be considered an official definition prepared by the Harvard College Library." Attached were five pages of manuscript notes, starting with a referral to the editor of the dictionary of library terminology (Miss L.R. Reed, University of North Carolina Library), continuing with an admission that American library terminology is vague, and ending with a comparison to the German concept of the "wissenschaftliche Bibliothek." By now Jones too was presumably on the ropes, for the correspondence stops at this point, though the issue is hardly dead and there are still some today who believe the Association is misnamed. "Perhaps someday someone will think of a better word for the association's title."

The author of those last words was also tired. In January of 1938, Gilchrist had transferred the files to Metcalf at Harvard, saying that his job as Executive Secretary had been "much fun and satisfaction.... The Advisory Committee and the membership have been most cooperative, and apparently loyal." Gilchrist died suddenly later in 1939 to the great sorrow of his fellow members.

In January 1962, the Association revised its By-Laws in preparation for its major expansion from 49 to 72 member institutions, an interesting period in our development which splits the history of the Association into two neat thirty-year periods. There isn't time to explore that NSF supported development which incidentally brought Syracuse University into the fold and gives me eligibility for this talk. The revised By-Laws offered a new description if not a definition: "Major university libraries are considered to be those whose parent institutions emphasize research and graduate instruction at the doctoral level, and which support large, comprehensive collections of library materials on a permanent basis." (see McGowan, Appendix B, p. 197). Given the now clearly recognized impermanence of our collections and the nearly ubiquitous current emphasis on undergraduate instruction and the student as ultimate consumer, there may be a question here of how many of us still would qualify by that definition. I want to return to that question later, but here I would just note that for all the deficiencies of the 1962 definition, it was a step up from the more coy description of 1932: "Membership shall consist of the libraries which have united in founding this association."

There is an overabundance of materials in the files concerning serial price increases. It was an issue suggested for the first meeting on December 29, 1932, and has been sporadically all-consuming, often depending on unfavorable currency exchange rates. Although there were no apparent complaints about currency exchange windfalls, the reverse was often true.

In March of 1933, Secretary Gilchrist complained that the situation was so serious that Rochester had already had to cancel four Springer titles in the previous two years. Later that year an ARL memo noted the resolution passed by the Medical Library Association in June: "That no library subscribe to any periodicals which do not have a fixed annual subscription price for the entire annual output of volumes or parts. That such price be stated in advance, and also the number and parts to be issued per year.... Unless definite word comes to that effect MLA recommends cancellation except for one library in each of 6 to 10 zones throughout America." Does any of this sound familiar? Did Donald Koepp plagiarize his remarks at our Charleston meeting? By 1934 the price issue was further compounded by the dismissal of many German professors which

members felt would lead to a decline in the quality of German scientific scholarship and the need to review subscription lists for further cancellations.

H.W. Wilson's service-base pricing policy and the phenomenon of differential pricing for institutions and individuals were related issues. Particularly galling was the 1951 increase of Chemical Abstracts from \$20 to \$60 for institutional subscriptions, while the individual subscription price remained at \$15. Early that year Executive Secretary David wrote to Ralph Shaw of what is now called the National Agricultural Library: "The longer I consider the problem of the new price of Chemical Abstracts, the more I am tempted to turn rebel and order it on an individual subscription. It seems to me that when I was with you last you made out a pretty good case for this, but I just can't remember what it was. Please repeat." Shaw's response was one of unequivocal equivocation: "...each one of us has a free choice in the method we will use.... My judgment, therefore, would be that you should let your conscience be your guide, and, if I were in your position, my conscience wouldn't be strained unduly by having a member subscribe to the publication for the library."

But I must desist from this periodical obsession and move on to two other concluding topics. Probably the most difficult issue facing our founders was the question of affiliation with or independence from existing library organizations, particularly the American Library Association. While there seems to have been general agreement that the new organization could only help toward the demise of the American Library Institute (a kind of library club about which I've learned little apart from its reputation for ponderous pomposity). On the other hand, opinion about the American Library Association was sharply divided between those who wanted nothing to do with ALA, wishing to follow the unaffiliated stance of the Special Libraries Association, and those who were positive about ALA or at the very least wanted to do nothing to offend that organization.

In late 1931, prospective members had been canvassed through a circular memo seeking ideas and agenda topics for the first meeting, and addressing the issue of affiliation. The results were neatly summarized in a five-page memorandum in February 1932 from University of Illinois Librarian Phineas L. Windsor to Harold L. Leupp, Librarian of the University of California at Berkeley. Again, I can't resist giving you a few examples of the substance and tone of the debate:

Windsor to Leupp, Feb. 11, 1932: "Two or three referred to the A.L.I., and hope that it can be revamped in some way to fill our needs. Eight or ten more people will have to die before that can possibly be done.... The A.L.I. is about the biggest disappointment that professional libraries have to put up with." Windsor did prefer affiliation with ALA, as did librarians from Yale, Michigan, Duke, Washington, New York Public Library, and the Newberry Library, all of whom were against independence from ALA. John French of Johns Hopkins favored an entirely independent organization or one affiliated with ALA, but suggested it be called the "Association of Learned Libraries" (ALL), a name that at least would have created a truly comprehensive acronym. Stanford wanted an Association of University Libraries, but that suggestion got nowhere since it excluded a number of major reference libraries, as they were then called. Otto Kinkeldey of Cornell University, speaking for independence, wrote that "My own impression of the College and Reference Section meetings of the A.L.A. is not so favorable as to lead me to hope that a good research libraries organization can be developed from this stock." Alfred Potter of Harvard University suggested that "we avail ourselves of the American Library Institute, perhaps changing its scope a little," definitely a minority opinion. Most trenchant on the subject was the December 23, 1931, letter of Harold Leupp of Berkeley to James Thayer Gerould at Princeton: "I am wholly out of sympathy with present tendencies in the A.L.A., where the Headquarters tail has come to wag the Association dog, partly through its control of a large--too large--share of Andrew Carnegie's money. I think that a professional association...should stand for

something more than ballyhoo of the Chamber of Commerce type. If its name is to be associated in the public mind wholly with the loud speaker and the dollar sign, to the exclusion of everything of a scholarly kind, some other organization will have to make good the deficiency. At present I can see little hope that the Association will do anything for scholarship, since the element in control seems to have no idea what the word means. This conviction is not altered by the Association's allowing its name to be used on the title-page of the Union List of Serials, to which it contributed nothing else, or by its sending out a few million mimeographed letters soliciting subscriptions to the new edition of the British Museum catalogue. In these cases as in every other case I know of in which a genuine service to scholarship might have been rendered by the Association, its contribution has been practically nothing, but it has managed afterwards to claim credit for the product. This sort of thing makes me pretty qualified tired, and I should think that you and Lydenberg and the others who have done the work would feel infinitely more so.” The letter goes on, but I won't.

In the end, diplomatic counsels prevailed, and we did start out with a formal affiliation with ALA, usually meeting in conjunction with ALA meetings. I have not discovered when that practice ceased. It was still going in 1947 when a scheduling conflict emerged. When ARL suggested the Sunday afternoon of June 29th for its San Francisco meeting that year, Carl Milam, with inadvertent anticipation of changing terminology, wrote from ALA that “It appears likely...that the California Library Association will give a gay cocktail party on that afternoon,” and the meeting was rescheduled. ALA dues for affiliate members in the 1940s was “.10c per capita for all members of your Association not members of ALA.” In 1942 the only members of ARL who were not also members of ALA were Johns Hopkins, Catholic, and North Carolina universities, and the Engineering Society Library. Executive Secretary Paul North Rice of the New York Public Library duly sent a check for .40c, saying he was tempted to send .80c to cover 1943 as well.

After all of this light-hearted frivolity, you must indulge me in at least one serious point, reflected in what I consider to be one of the sadder episodes in our history. At the Spring 1950 meeting a proposal was presented from the American Literature Group of the Modern Language Association, asking ARL to work with them, the Bibliographical Society of America, and the American Council of Learned Societies, to encourage living American authors to deposit their manuscripts in libraries. Harry Miller Lydenberg of NYPL strongly advocated the project, but librarians from some of the other larger libraries including Harvard, Yale, and UCLA resisted, arguing that such manuscript collecting was an “institutional, individual, even personal job not subject to cooperation.” On May 10, 1950, Charles David conveyed their rejection to the plan's proponent, Professor Harry Warfel, stating that the Association was disinclined to participate in such a cooperative effort: “So you can see the only result was to arouse latent jealousies that exist between one institution and another, and make it quite apparent that this kind of cooperation so far as the principal research institutions is concerned seems hardly a practicality. I feel ashamed, but I do not see that there is much that can be done about it.”

I do not present this story to excoriate the uncooperative but to suggest that our biggest failure has been in the area that most distinguishes research libraries. To a very large extent our statistics measure the products of research, not the raw materials of research, the primary resources which make research, particularly in the humanities and the social sciences, possible. As we move inexorably toward greater electronic access for more and more of the standard secondary literature, primarily in the English language, supporting “plain vanilla” research in more ways than one, and diverting more and more of our resources from what was previously our mission, the computer will represent the great leveller among libraries, making the materials accessible through it equally available among the great and the puny. But it will be the massive undigested

collections of primary resources, the types of materials which I've tried to exploit in preparing this talk, collections unlikely in my view to reach electronic formats, that will distinguish research libraries from all those other libraries with or without walls. We ignore those other resources at a peril to scholarship and to ourselves.

What you've heard tonight are some fragments of my research into such a resource. One related success that I've not mentioned is the Association's important role in the development of NUCMC, the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, which did much to make primary resources widely known. Couldn't we now mount an effort to put the contents of that remarkable but unwieldy catalog into machine readable form? What better way for ARL's centennial historian to find the ARL Archives?

But there is so much more, from the Farmington Plan to the conversion of the National Register of Microfilm Masters, from the Union List of Serials to the Commission on Preservation and Access, from the Library of Congress Printed Catalog and PL 480 to the Coalition for Networked Information, developments in which the Association has played important roles, that we are more than justified in some self-congratulation after sixty years. So I end with a toast, the fruit of some earlier research I once did in dozens of ARL and British libraries, attempting to reconstruct the personal library of Leigh Hunt, the prolific English author, whose father incidentally held degrees from two of our charter members, Penn and Columbia. During my quest I found a beautiful volume in the Beinecke Library at Yale, a translation of Ugo Foscolo's *Essays on Petrarch* (London, 1823), which had once been owned by Hunt. In one of the essays, Foscolo quotes Petrarch's description of a servant who waited on Petrarch in Vaucluse: "He knew not how to read, yet he was also the guardian of my library. With anxious eye he watched over my most rare and ancient copies, which, by long use, he could distinguish from those that were more modern, or of which I myself was the author. Whenever I consigned a volume to his custody, he was transported with joy; he pressed it to his bosom with signs; with great reverence he repeated the author's name; and seemed as if he had received an accession of learning and happiness from the sight and touch of a book." At the bottom of the page, in his inimitable hand, Hunt added this note: "The memory of this good man ought to be drunk at the anniversaries of the Bibliomaniacs."

In that spirit, I give you The Association of Research Libraries, and the lovers of books, libraries, and learning everywhere.

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Published with permission of the author. These remarks may also be found on the ARL Web site at <http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/pluscachange.pdf>.

Note: A more detailed history is Frank M. McGowan's doctoral dissertation, *The Association of Research Libraries 1932-62* (University of Pittsburgh, 1972).