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**From the Selected Works of Sidney F. Huttner**

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## Special Collections (1988-1989)

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## **Special Collections**

The 1989 Yearbook (covering the year 1988) did not contain an article on Special Collections (though many activities in this area were referred to other articles). This article, therefore, includes references to 1988 as well as 1989 and, in light of space considerations, discusses apparent trends while reporting only briefly key events and activities. Acquisitions, grants, and people are broadly reported in *American Libraries* and *College & Research Libraries News*, activities of interest to the field are consistently reported in *AB Bookman's Weekly* and *RBMS Newsletter* (RBMS is the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)). With these periodicals stably funded and well edited, and with *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* appearing twice a year to provide thorough coverage of relevant academic and theoretical issues, communication in the world of special collections has reached a new level of maturity. Fewer and fewer matters of significance escape this total record.

From that record the long list of lectures, conferences, exhibitions, and publications noted in 1988 *Yearbook* could be replicated, even extended. There is now, for example, the Francis W. Bartlett Lecture Series at the Linda Hall Library (Kansas City, Missouri) and the University of Pennsylvania A. S. W. Rosenbach Lectures will henceforth be repeated each year at the University of California at Los Angeles. The Pierpont Morgan Library will expand into a neighboring 45-mansion, and Cornell University announced construction of a new wing to house its several special collections units.

This period is characterized not merely by expansion, however, but also by the perception of changes that promise to transform the role of special collections in the library and scholarly communities. These trends are most apparent in inter-institutional cooperation, in the book trade, and in ethical standards.

**Inter-Institutional Cooperation.** The way in which our world is shrinking as a result of electronic media and inexpensive, rapid international transportation have been frequently observed. The theme, indeed, of the 30<sup>th</sup> annual RBMS preconference (Dallas, 1989) was "Local History, Global Village: Regional Collecting, Regional Collections." Just over 100 people registered to explore problems and paradoxes: it is increasingly difficult to define "locality"; it is essential to collect not only a vastly greater volume and variety of materials, but also to be increasingly selective; and it is essential to find new ways to identify and access "regional" materials not only at collecting institutions, but also for a scholarly community now gone global.

One response to this last problem is the extremely rapid growth of the Special Program for Archives, Manuscripts, and Special Collections (AMSC) created within the Research Libraries Group. From a handful of original participants in 1986, this program involved over 80 members by the end of 1989. The members include not only academic and research libraries, but state and other archives, museum libraries, and historical societies. The newest member is Old Sturbridge Village (Massachusetts). The principal attraction to these varied institutions is the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) AMC file, a database that by the end of 1989 held nearly a quarter of a million records representing

manuscript and archive collections. Over half those records were created by member institutions in 1989. The AMSC group has also been highly successful in securing grant funding for retrospective record conversion and preservation microfilm projects.

Records for early and other special books are also going into the RLIN and OCLC databases at a rapid rate by way of projects like the Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalog (ESTC). As a result, librarians and scholars daily discover old books and want to borrow them. This growing pressure for inter-institutional traffic in rare and unique materials was explored in a series of articles in the fall 1989 issue of *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship*.

Another example of automation driving cooperation is the expanding ACRL series of thesauri for use in rare book and special collections cataloging. Two new thesauri were added in 1989: *Binding Terms* and *Provenance Evidence* are under development as MARC formats are extended to new categories of materials – graphic images and ephemeral forms of printed materials, for example. Regional consortia are also cooperatively developing local name authority files for use in cataloging manuscript and archive materials.

Exhibitions – and publications and programs related to them – have also become increasingly elaborate and expensive, a trend explored at the 29<sup>th</sup> RBMS preconference (New Orleans, 1988): “Libraries and Museums: Leave from Each Other’s Books.” While the majority of exhibitions are certainly still funded within the institution, many with the support of Friends groups, applications for outside support are increasingly common, and one result is often far more than simple presentation of a group of books and manuscripts to an essentially scholarly audience. The Walters Art Gallery (Baltimore), for example, mounted a widely hailed exhibit of its splendid collection of manuscript books of hours, “Time Sanctified,” with major assistance from the National Endowment for the Humanities. This exhibit placed the books in a context of medieval art and life by creating an elaborate multimedia experience through which the viewer was guided.

Such spectacular exhibitions provide another incentive for inter-institutional cooperation: there is at least the perception that funding agencies find cooperatively developed proposals particularly attractive. The most notable success to date is certainly the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, established in 1985 by 16 libraries. In 1988 with funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Consortium presented “Legacies of Genius,” a cooperative exhibition accompanied by a fully illustrated catalog, a series of lectures, workshops and programs for children, and massive regional publicity. The St. Louis Rare Book Librarians Group, again involving 16 institutions, is similarly cooperating on matters related to local history and preservation programming.

Within institutions, automation is encouraging decentralization in ways previously difficult. Cataloging staff members, for example, have traditionally tied to shelflists, authority files, and reference collections, tools too expensive to duplicate within most special collections departments. As many of these tools come online, catalogers can be located amidst the materials with which they are working, as has happened at Brown University and elsewhere, and can be brought into closer association with staff

responsible for reference and collection development. The same concept may provide a response to pockets of valuable but specialized materials long held cataloged in many libraries for long periods of time. Princeton University has long held an unprocessed collection of Ge'ez manuscripts, for example, and other institutions doubtless have held manuscripts in this language. It should now be possible to assemble a team to catalog all examples by, perhaps, travelling between repositories with substantial holdings, while smaller holdings are sent to a central project location, with all records contributed to national databases.

**Acquisitions.** Libraries acquire rare books, manuscripts, and other special collections materials through the book trade in one of two ways: directly from booksellers or indirectly from collectors who themselves rely on the trade to assemble their collections. The status and direction of the marketplace is therefore of continuing concern to special collections librarians, and several disturbing trends appear to be emerging.

The explosive growth of value observed in the art auction market, driven in part by auction houses' recent willingness to arrange financing for purchasers, is overflowing into the book and manuscript auction market as well. The pattern has been blurred by the sale of a series of extra-ordinary collections – the Estelle Doheny library and the John Fleming, H, Bradley Martin, and Garden Ltd. collections most prominent among them -- that included a large number of individually spectacular items. There is nonetheless concern that a wide range of books and manuscripts will come to interest financial speculators as well as collectors and institutions and that the traditional market will be distorted. The New York Public Library's 1988 purchase at auction of a single, late Saul Bellow manuscript for a hammer price of \$60,000 set a record for the work of a still-living writer daunting to most institutions building research collections in modern literature, even, indeed, to many collectors of means.

The concern is not merely that few institutional budgets can support such individually expensive acquisitions, but that a general rise in prices will further press funds and thereby tend to make more materials unavailable to scholars. Whether this is a time of temporary turbulence or a period of change is not yet clear, but the situation does bear watching.

A second phenomenon of concern is the rise of the bookseller who acquires and catalogs materials at top-of-the-market prices, then disposes of items that do not sell quickly through the auction market. These booksellers are unencumbered by the high overhead cost of a book stock and premises to house it and can focus their energy on bottom-line, short-run profits. Booksellers traditionally have maintained stock for long periods, have priced to reflect their sense of and commitment to an item's continuing value, and have been satisfied with stable income. A change in prevailing attitude would have profound effects on the book trade.

The history and present state of the international trade in rare books and manuscripts were the subject of a major conference sponsored by RBMS in Cambridge, England in September 1989. The conference was the first organized by RBMS outside the United States, and it was enthusiastically received: approximately 175 American special collections librarians attended, joined by 50 British colleagues and

about as many booksellers from both sides of the Atlantic. Over four days conferees heard formal papers that focused on historical aspects of the book trade and panel discussions on more contemporary matters, while enjoying a variety of tours and social events and getting to know one another better.

The year 1989 also marked the beginning of a second decade for the Antiquarian Book Market Workshop Seminars, sponsored by *AB Bookman's Weekly* in association with the University of Denver. These annual, week-long programs continue to expand and to attract new and established members of the book trade from across the United States and Canada. The cumulative effect of the growing number of alumni on trade practices is considerable. *AB Bookman's Weekly* also inaugurated the Margaret Lewis Rau Essay Contest, won by Nancy J. Veglahn, a bookseller in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

On the other side of the desk are the more than 1,000 alumni of the Columbia University School of Library Service Rare Book School. The school, begun in 1983, offered 19 one-week courses during the summer of 1989 and produced its first yearbook with detailed course descriptions and evaluations.

**Ethical Standards.** Thefts and forgeries refocused the attention of many special collections librarians on questions of ethical standards: RBMS appointed a committee to review a statement of standards drawn up by an earlier RBMS committee and adopted by ACRL in 1986. Particularly troubling were pending cases of apparent thefts by curators at the Rosenbach Library and Museum (Philadelphia), Boston College, and the University of Texas Medical Branch Rare Book Collection (Galveston). Robert Willingham, convicted of stealing books from the collection he supervised at the University of Georgia, was sentenced to a jail term of 15 years followed by 15 years probation and \$45,000 in fines payable during that probation. While the circumstances surrounding each case were, of course, unique, in all cases unmet institutional management problems appeared to play a role by creating the environment in which the thefts took place. It is this issue upon which the RBMS review committee intends to concentrate attention, its work supported by a grant from the Council on Library Resources.

There were also instances of theft by non-librarians. The floor manager of the 1988 Boston International Antiquarian Book Fair, Richard Lunin, was arrested for stealing books worth \$210,000 as he tried to sell a few of them to a Massachusetts dealer. Information on the stolen items had been widely advertised. Lunin entered a guilty plea and agreed to return the books still in his possession. About 90 percent by value were recovered. Three books printed by Benjamin Franklin, one the only known copy, were stolen from the Van Pelt Library of the University of Pennsylvania by a man who found volumes that resembled them elsewhere in the library, then substituted these for the Franklin items among a group of books he used in the rare book department.

Theft is deeply disturbing; forging documents or knowingly circulating forged documents potentially threatens scholarship even more. Forgery is a crime of intent: creating a facsimile indistinguishable from the original may be merely an exercise of skill. Using it to defraud is the crime. It is thus a crime notoriously difficult to police, and indeed, as became clear at a conference sponsored by the University of Houston in November 1989, it is a crime in which it is difficult to interest police authorities. No federal

laws apply, and in most states the crime is a misdemeanor carrying with conviction only a modest jail term or fine. With the recent discovery of several counterfeit Texas imprints as an impetus, 200 librarians, booksellers, lawyers, and collectors assembled to discuss not only the Texas counterfeits, the Mark Hoffman Mormon Church fabrications, and a larger list of questioned imprints recently developed by the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America, but also to explore the wider implications of forged documents for private and institutional collections and for the scholarly community. The Texas forgeries became the subject of widespread public interest with articles in *Texas Monthly*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*, on the death in April 1989, by suicide or murder, of John H. Jenkins III, the Austin bookseller through whose hands many of the counterfeit documents had passed.

**Miscellany.** A number of other people of importance to special collections died: H. P. Kraus, preeminent book dealer, at the age of 81; Robert Rosenthal, special collections curator at the University of Chicago for 40 years, at the age of 63; Rollo G. Silver, historian of American printing and publishing, at the age of 80; Frances Steloff, founder of the Gotham Book Mart in New York City, at the age of 101; Colton Storm, librarian and bookbinder, at the age of 80; and Barbara Tuchman, historian and friend of the book, at the age of 77. William P. Wreden's 50 years of creative antiquarian bookselling was the reason for several celebrations in the San Francisco area. The San Francisco earthquake of October 1989 left librarians, libraries, and booksellers largely unscathed. It now appears that only the west wing of Green Library at Stanford University, which houses the special collections departments, was badly damaged. Even there, recently completed seismic bracing prevented both collapse of the book stack and probable loss of life.

Quote of the year: A year after accepting appointment as director of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, Thomas F. Staley said, "Coming here was what King Midas would have felt if he could have spent a night in Fort Knox."

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