

Three Reasons I'm a Librarian

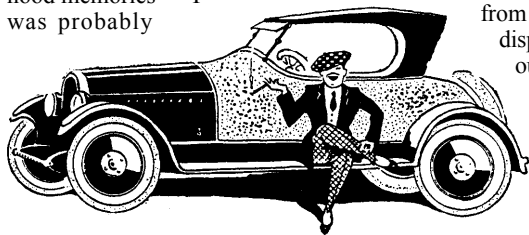
by **Rick Anderson** (Associate Director for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-721-1687) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

This morning I dragged myself out of bed very early and went running — something I do more frequently than I would prefer, but less frequently than I should. One of the side benefits of going running in the early morning is that it frees up my mind for reflection, and this morning I found myself thinking about my choice of profession. Anyone who reads this column knows that I find the library world a frustrating place in many ways, and that I sometimes worry about whether our profession will be able to save itself from irrelevance before it's too late — whether we have the collective will to face and answer the hard questions that will have to be dealt with if we're going to stay useful to our stakeholders in the future, and to make the changes (some of which may be wrenching and radical) that the future will require of us. I also struggle constantly with my own inability to see what's coming and to anticipate accurately what our patrons are going to need and want in two, five or ten years.

As I pounded the asphalt and entertained these rather gloomy thoughts, a voice came into my head. (I'm not positive, but it might have been **Walt Crawford's**.) The voice asked: "So if this profession is such a frustrating place for you to be, **Rick**, why are you here? Why are you a librarian?"

Why am I a librarian? I'm sure all of us have asked ourselves that question at one time or another, and I imagine that for some of us the answer is simple and for others it's complex or even ineffable. For me, I think it boils down to three memories from my childhood and young adulthood, all of which I believe, in hindsight, to have shaped my thinking about people and information and libraries and gradually pointed me in my current professional direction. All of them are memories of experiences I've had while trying to use library resources.

Memory #1: I couldn't get access. From the time I was a toddler, I've been obsessed with music. My mom knew that if she wanted to free herself up to get something done, all she had to do was stack some records on the spindle of our console stereo and give me a pile of picture books, and she'd have a couple of hours of peace. One of my earliest childhood memories — I was probably



three or four years old — is of being in the **Belmont Public Library** with my mother, who was flipping through the LP collection that was housed in a series of bins at waist level. Her waist level, that is. I came up to about her knee, and I couldn't see the records she was browsing through. I remember being intensely frustrated by that. Then as now, I wanted disintermediated access.

Memory #2: There wasn't enough. By the time I was twelve or so I had pretty much worked my way through the branch library near my house, and read all the books I was interested in (which might sound like a boast, but it's not — up until then I'd been mostly interested in *Peanuts*, *Paddington Bear*, *Encyclopedia Brown* and books about warplanes). My music obsession was reasserting itself as well, and there was no music collection in my branch library, so I started taking the bus down to **Arlington Center** where the main library was. I still remember the rhythm of the clacking sounds in the rickety elevator that took me up to the fourth floor where the records were. Before too long I had worked my way through all the LPs that interested me, and was hungry for more. So I started going in the other direction — walking two miles (yes, often through the snow) to the next town over, Lexington, where the **Cary Memorial Library** held a rich collection of the folk, bluegrass and early country albums I craved, as well as lots of books on musical topics. But it still wasn't enough. I had three pretty good libraries within reach, but I remember feeling frustrated by how little of the information I wanted seemed to be available to me, and how much effort it took to get at what there was.

Memory #3: I couldn't find what I knew was there. In college, I lived in a constant state of low-grade bibliographic torment: I knew that the books I wanted to read, and the articles I needed for my papers, were almost certainly somewhere in the collection of the good-sized university where I was a student. And I knew how to use the card catalog, and the **Notis** system, and the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, and (later) the **Silver Platter CD-ROMs**. But while I was a good and resourceful searcher, I could never shake the feeling that the content I needed was hiding from me close by and that the tools I had at my disposal were not up to the task of ferreting it out. Even in that large, comprehensive and well-equipped library, doing research felt like trying to perform surgery with oven mitts on. It was hard work, which made me feel like a good and virtuous student, but I would have gladly traded the satisfaction of work-

ing hard for better tools that required less work and yielded better results.

Now, I don't claim that these experiences have led me to the One True Vision of what librarianship should be, nor that they drove me, filled with missionary zeal, into librarianship so that I could spare others the frustrations that I experienced throughout my life as an information user. But I do think that what I enjoy about being a librarian tends to flow from the feelings of frustration I experienced as a toddler and as a tween and as an undergraduate. Library work gives me a chance, in some way, to give the frustrated three-year-old a stool so he can flip through the records himself, and to make sure that there's plenty of relevant content available to the kid who wants to wallow in books on his favorite topic, and to make it as unlikely as humanly possible that the student who needs access to a particular resource will fail to get it because we made the resource too hard to find.

I think these experiences may also explain why I get so impatient when I encounter what seem to me like attitudes that put the needs of libraries and librarians over the needs of patrons. I once got into an extended argument with a colleague who honestly believed that his job in Technical Services was not to serve the patron, but rather to serve the collection. I was (and remain) dumbfounded by that stance — I don't even really know what it means. (The collection, it seems to me, couldn't care less whether or not it's being served.) Sometimes I hear a librarian equate simplifying access with "spoonfeeding" patrons. Sometimes I encounter a colleague who honestly believes that online journal access isn't better than print access, or that it's a good thing when patrons have to ask how to find a call number, or that a printed index is actually as good as (or even better than) full-text searchability. I think these attitudes are on the decline, but when I encounter them they still fill me not only with frustration on behalf of our current patrons, but also a weird sort of retrospective frustration on behalf of my younger self.

Among other things, those memories are what keep me in this profession. No matter how frustrating it gets, no matter how worried I become about whether we're willing to do what it will take to stay relevant and useful in the future, and no matter how discouraged I become at my own inadequacy as a librarian, at some level I think I always have the sense that there's a three-year-old kid standing next to me, tugging on my pantleg and asking why he can't see the records. As long as it will have me, I plan to stick it out in this profession and keep trying to help that kid. 🐻