



# Conservation of Old and Rare Books

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A GLANCE AT THE CALENDARS of recent American Library Association conferences will give substance to the impression that, throughout the United States, there is a deepening awareness on the part of librarians not only of the need for acquiring increased resources in old and rare materials for use by the present generation of students and scholars, but also of the growing responsibility of providing proper care for such materials after they are acquired, in the interests of future generations of investigators.<sup>1</sup> One symptom of this is the burgeoning movement to create "rare-book rooms" and "departments of special collections" in college and university libraries. Some of these, one suspects, are being formed without full appreciation of the budgetary implications that are involved. It is becoming a common annual experience with established rare-book librarians to receive communications from other libraries where rare-book rooms are being set up, requesting the names of suitable candidates for posts in them. All too often the salaries offered indicate the good administrator's inherent desire to send up trial balloons at the lowest possible cost. This is despite the fact that he usually specifies that a rare-book librarian must have qualities and qualifications not normally developed by library-school curricula. It must be assumed, in such cases, that one of two possibilities holds: either the administrator in question feels he must do something about preserving the old and rare books in his collections, with or without proper budgetary support, and the best way to do it is to make a start; or, on the other hand, he may be basically unconvinced of the soundness of the rare-book department concept as applied to his own institution, while being aware of the necessity, for policy reasons, of saving face among the Johns and the Elis in rare-book matters. In the latter instance, the desire to keep the financial commitment within bounds is thoroughly understandable.

Nevertheless, as seen from an admittedly biased point of view, there are elements in the second, negative attitude which breed doubts;

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and the sudden splurge in "special collections" departments could quite conceivably result in a strong counter movement—which may, in fact, have begun already. Librarians at Columbia University, for example, which has one of the largest special collections departments in the country, are seriously concerned over the necessity of finding a means of overcoming some of the difficulties of administration brought on by the inevitable and rapid growth of files of "research materials." The result of this concern may be a wide departure from most current rare-book concepts.

Rare-book divisions are by nature expensive to operate, whether they are administered by a special staff or are saddled on some existing department of the library; and this expense must sooner or later be justified to those whose business it is to scrutinize budgets. At best such divisions constitute an interference between the scholar and his resources. As a result many a scholar, who will put up with almost any inconvenience (because he must) when he visits an off-campus research library, becomes a natural enemy of the rare-book room in his own institution. Finally, rare-book rooms too often tend to dramatize the trivial, off-beat holdings of a library. Where these receive a lion's share of attention, there is likely to be a very natural and just resentment within the library itself. All of these factors constitute dangers, if the decision to establish the rare-book room has not been reached as the result of careful consideration and in answer to a thoroughly defensible need. The establishment of an expensive rare-book department in a small college library may, for example, result merely in an elaborate set-up to discourage use of the materials placed there. If this is the desideratum (and it might well be justified) it could be achieved as well by the time-honored custom of locking the books up in the librarian's safe, or in some out-of-the-way closet, or in a display case in the library vestibule.

The answer that has been most commonly reached in recent times, however, is that of setting up a little island of reserve within the library system, where "rare-books" and "special materials" can be sequestered, away from the casual—too often predatory—fingers of dilettantes. The fact that these materials usually include, by plain necessity, the library's holdings in thumb books, dubious fore-edge paintings of modern vintage, the founder's wife's album of pressed flowers, books bound in human tegument (preferably from the mammary areas), books on sex hygiene, and the like, has contributed to cause the down-the-nose looks that are so often directed at "rare-book rooms." At the other end of the spectrum is the application of

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rare-book selection codes which prescribe, for example, the segregation of every book printed prior to 1820 in the area of the United States, or all the works of Henry Miller, or every book having a current value of more than fifty dollars, or of an edition limited to 300 copies or less. Such attempts at rare-book selection by blunderbuss have several results that jeopardize a basically sound concept: inordinate growth of the rare-book collection for its own statistical sake; relaxation or over-complication of reader regulations to take into account various degrees of "rarity"; and of course the inevitable non-staff reaction, "For heaven's sake, why is this a rare book? I saw a copy in Blank's catalog just the other day for two and six!"

Consideration of such fundamental points will surely lead us face to face with more practical problems. Granted that control of access (which is or should be at the bottom of every decision to set up a rare-book room) is a primary step in preservation, what further ones will be needed to ensure the integrity and completeness of the record for future generations of students and scholars? How shall we describe and classify rare materials? How shall we prevent deterioration? How shall we strengthen failing paper and parchment and leather to overcome deterioration that has already taken place? How far and how fast shall we go in adopting the technological discoveries in plastics and photography and transfer processes?

It is not in the prescribed scope of the present article to deal with the problems attendant on the preparation processes for rare materials—though, to the writer, this is a matter for some regret. Someone must do something soon to counteract the atmosphere of art and mystery that has come to surround "rare-book cataloging," and recent motions toward standardized procedures in the description of manuscript collections appear to be pointing toward the old familiar log-jam, where the cost of preparation will seriously inhibit the decisions to acquire useful collections. But this is a theme for separate treatment.

The monographic literature relating to developments in book preservation techniques since World War II is scant. This is scarcely a new situation; such literature has always been scant. Between Cockerell and Lydenberg-Archer<sup>2</sup> there was little, and between Lydenberg-Archer and today there is less. But the war, on one hand, created special problems for libraries involving budgetary considerations which have made economies mandatory; while on the other hand there were technological developments outgrowing from the war which have ushered in a period of busy experiment. Nowhere in library literature have all the results of these economies or the application of the tech-

nical experiments been brought together between covers, although M. F. Tauber and his associates have discussed many of them.<sup>3</sup>

This should not be interpreted as meaning that the literature of book and document preservation is lacking—quite the opposite is true. But it is to be found for the most part in notes and articles rather than in books; and this is perhaps just as well, because any definitive treatment of the subject at this stage would almost certainly run the risk of being out of date before it could be published, considering the rate at which new developments are taking place.

The overwhelming majority of these notes and articles are concerned with the librarian's perennial head-ache, rebinding. Rising costs of labor and material are primarily responsible for this situation, bringing forth ceaseless efforts to circumvent the realities. In most institutional budgets book funds and binding allotments constitute a single line; other things being equal, then, rising binding costs jeopardize the acquisitions program, and vice versa. "Budget binding" has therefore come in for a good deal of attention, and do-it-yourself mending techniques have burgeoned. The good which has resulted from increased understanding and awareness of their problems by librarians may well have been offset by the evils of misapplication. The matter came to a head in the late forties, and in 1951 appeared the *Library Binding Manual*, issued under the joint sponsorship of the A.L.A. and the Library Binding Institute.<sup>4</sup> As might be expected, not everyone was satisfied, and in 1953 Flora B. Ludington, then A.L.A. president, issued a statement outlining "areas for study" at the forthcoming Cincinnati conference.<sup>5</sup>

These matters, of course, are related for the most part to the regular rebinding problems of libraries. "Rare books" are always carefully excluded from mass-production techniques, and it has usually been tacitly or implicitly understood that when rebinding or repair of old and rare books is under consideration, nothing will take the place of knowledge and careful thought on the part of the decision-making librarian. This is all very well, but it implies two points which cause concern. On the one hand, assuming that mass techniques are entirely suitable for general library purposes, why should they be excluded completely from rare-book departments—unless one wants to reach the unguarded conclusion that its presence in the rarebook room guarantees a book's rarity? On the other hand, assuming this time that mass techniques are only suitable for expendable materials, how is tomorrow's rarity to be recognized before it is ruined? It seems unlikely that

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many copies of the first printing (in journal form) of Einstein's theory of relativity have escaped the binder's knife.

Yet it remains part of the canon that "rare books" deserve only the time-honored best—hand sewing, leather covers, expensive boxes and cases, laborious remargining, sheet-splitting reinforcement, facsimile reconstruction of missing portions of text.<sup>6</sup> In other words, only the most costly treatment—which in no way guarantees the ultimate suitability of the work. For some reason, no doubt a most adequate one, it is generally accepted that rare-book librarians are all born with permanent twists in their necks, which prevent them from looking in any direction but backward. Granted that one of the surest ways to create respect and even reverence in the breast of a reader is to hand him a volume dressed in rich morocco and ornate with hand tooling (he might use the same work in shabby contemporary sheepskin as a rest for his notebook), there is still the nagging notion that, for example, some of the plate books of the 1880's and 1890's would be better off, not with their leaves expensively stubbed or tightly oversewn in such a way as to prevent their being opened flat, but in "perfect" bindings, making use of the new vinyl adhesives which have been shown to be stronger than the paper itself and of indefinite lasting qualities.<sup>7, 8</sup>

In the matter of repair and reinforcement of mildewed rag paper and disintegrating wood-pulp sheets a great deal has been tried out, but the conservative rare-book librarian is still reluctant to submit his precious documents to such treatment. No doubt he is right to be reluctant; he has been burned too often. Silking, it now develops, gives only temporary strength, tissing reduces legibility, plastic sprays and laminations may seal in existing weaknesses and the acids which produce deterioration in papers. Most recently a process known as "print transfer" has passed the experimental stage;<sup>9, 10</sup> this process is discussed fully elsewhere in this issue. It promises much in certain applications, but one hesitates to speculate on what firepower it would have given T. J. Wise, had he known of it when he faced his accusers in 1934.

Many of the more recent counteractive measures against loss by deterioration show respect for the cost factor, and this is all to the good. It seems probable, however, that this consciousness of the need to keep costs under control stems from the research librarian's compulsion to do something about his perpetual problem-child, the ubiquitous newspaper. While these waste away on shelves the search goes on for an inexpensive method of preserving them. The method

*must* be inexpensive, because the task is so great. Surely so much thought will provide, eventually, the acceptable answer. If it comes in time many of our problems of preservation will be solved, not only those pertaining to newspapers, but also—and more importantly—those connected with the other “little-used” materials which now lie moldering on so many library shelves. As things now stand, not a few librarians have simply thrown in their cards; in the case of newspapers especially there is a growing tendency to discard those of the woodpulp era, and to rely on microfilm to meet the readers’ immediate needs and on George for the preservation of the record.

On the whole the literature reveals that librarians seem to be more directly concerned with remedial rather than with preventive measures to combat deterioration. (The setting up of rare-book rooms is of course an exception.) Despite the warnings of experts,<sup>11, 12</sup> the librarian’s high-pressured search for the formula for achieving an adequate number of footcandles at table height sometimes causes him to forget the harmful effects of light on books and documents. These effects reflect a simple equation; candle power times length of exposure. Identical evil results can be obtained from exposure either to the direct rays of the sun or to a single 40-watt bulb, providing the length of exposure is adjusted to the power of the light source. And yet we cannot read in the dark. It is only a question of time before useful documents are subjected to light in harmful degrees. The use of actinic glass and other measures designed to reduce the effects of light are at best stop-gaps; the dilemma of the rare-book librarian is that, in theory at least, he must think in terms of eternities as well as of days and years and generations. And the fact that exposure of a document to direct sunlight will kill organisms which produce mildew and foxing does not alter the fact that those same rays have a destructive effect on the fibres and pigments of the document.

Air conditioning, however, is one preventive measure that is given considerable (if usually somewhat wistful) lip service, though the number of libraries in the United States which have full air conditioning is still but a minor fraction of the total which apparently aspire to it. Nor do all of the libraries which claim air conditioning actually have it. Air conditioning as a means of book preservation<sup>13-16</sup> must not, as is so commonly the case, be confused with the same term used in connection with office buildings and Chrysler Imperials and reading rooms. Rendering the atmosphere comfortably cool and invigorating to human beings has nothing but incidental relationship to air conditioning for books and manuscripts. As an aid to preservation, air

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conditioning means year-in-year-out temperature control at from 65 to 72 degrees, a level inhibitive to the development of insect pests. It means control of the relative humidity within no greater range than 45 to 55 per cent, to prevent the expansion and contraction of glue, paper, cloth, and leather caused by normal daily variations, to lessen the chemical and physical reactions which extremes of dampness and dryness foster, and, taken in conjunction with temperature control, to arrest the development of molds and mildew and other harmful fungi. It means ridding the air of deleterious gases and of foreign matter such as soot and dust; the removal of the latter from books and manuscripts by means of dust cloths in careless hands can be one of the worst factors in binding deterioration. It means control of air motion and distribution, so that abnormal pockets are not allowed to develop. It means constancy and regularity. The system must not be turned off at night or during the pleasant days of spring and fall, because air conditioning has only indirect reference to the out-of-doors; nor should it be permitted to mirror the fluctuations which may take place in the institutional budget. An air conditioning system for book preservation which can be turned off because the maintenance budget is running low is in fact no air conditioning system at all, and if this seems to be a laboring of the point, it is suggested that the outraged reader check into the practices of his maintenance staff before writing his letter of remonstrance. One librarian recently reported to the writer that nine full cycles of bookworm infestation occurred in his library during a single year when the air conditioning plant was out of commission. Another reported that he must maintain constant vigilance over one area of a non-air-conditioned stack, because almost the minute when the relative humidity there reaches 60 per cent, he is faced with an active mildew problem.

All of this looks pretty expensive and pretty complicated, as indeed it is. One might properly question, in fact, whether the expenditure in money and man hours would be justified in any but our greatest repositories of rare books and manuscripts (some of the most notable of which, it must be reported, have been unable to install it). And it should be added that a watchful eye is needed to make certain that an air conditioning system, once installed, actually does the work it is supposed to do because external conditions change. H. C. Schulz, now curator of manuscripts at the Huntington Library in southern California, was able to report in 1935, relevant to the air conditioning system in use in his institution: "Owing to the great distance of this library from any large industrial center, and to the local use of oil

and gas in preference to coal, such destructive impurities as sulphur dioxide do not offer the serious problem which confronts libraries in the larger eastern cities." <sup>12</sup> But that was twenty years ago; since then the industrial section of Los Angeles has expanded enormously, and for much of the year a pall of smog envelopes the area which contains the Huntington Library. This change in external conditions has forced a thorough re-study of the air conditioning requirements at the Huntington Library, which is now under way.

It is matters such as these that indicate the extent to which librarians as a class are beginning to think along lines other than mere nameless yearning in connection with the preservation of our cultural heritage. There is an urge to do something direct and definite about the steady loss, mutilation, and ruination which too often attend the increasing rate at which materials for historical and literary research are being gathered into our libraries. Time was when "curator" meant "caretaker," and "librarian" was a term related somehow to "watch-dog." But for a generation or more—nay, Sibley (who seems to have met and recognized every problem in the librarian's book) was active in the Civil War period,<sup>17</sup> and Dewey's greater contributions had been made before our century was born—we have resented the implications behind our titles, and have sought to make librarianship synonymous with ease of reader access. This in turn has brought its own censure, and "librarians as enemies of books" is an appellation that has given us little quiet of mind. We have had it brought home to us that the very act of gathering into our libraries the literary products of our culture has, in all too many instances, furthered its destruction rather than its preservation. Now we are in the process of searching for some means of being all things to all men. The literature reflects the dilemma.

This article has had two primary objectives: first, to focus attention on at least a few of the areas which require deeper and more rational analysis; and second, to answer none of the questions raised. The latter objective, at least, has been achieved. As to the former, the present voice is by no means one lifted in the wilderness—the problems that are underscored here are being increasingly appreciated across the breadth of the land. And this is heartening, for no problem that is understood is ultimately unsolvable.

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