Basic Americana

MICHAEL J. WALSH

The issue editor thinks that because of nearly fifty years experience in buying and selling Americana in a Yankee bookshop, I might have some thoughts of value to librarians and library students. It is assumed from the name of this periodical that it circulates mainly among library people. My few remarks, therefore, will be directed to such an audience rather than to my bookseller associates, although there is a close kinship between the two groups.

Historically, the relationship between librarian and bookseller has in general been more than one of mutual trust and understanding. Over and above the buying and selling, each has been helpful to the other with advice and information. This idea is interestingly expressed by L. C. Wroth in his paper "Lathrop Colgate Harper, a Happy Memory" in the Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, Third Quarter, 1958. While Wroth writes only of the friendly help given him on many occasions by Harper, I am sure that passage of information was not always one way. Many times I have sought help from Wroth and other librarian friends, and it has never been refused.

I have been asked to tell from my experience, what, if any, are the new trends in the Americana field. There are of course new and changing trends, but in my experience the demand for basic Americana has increased tremendously. This increase in recent years has been steady, from year to year, without diminution, even through the two recessions of the fifties.

With the greatly increased American population and wealth, new libraries and great enlargement of the older libraries, the demand for Americana is greater than ever. One of the problems of the book trade today is the avoidance of empty shelves. Today there are not many so-called "dead" subjects. Almanacs, textbooks, and New England theology, except for items of importance, are not much in demand. Outside of these and a few other subjects, the Americana field is highly active.

The author is Director, Goodspeed's Book Shop, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts.
In my experience, the great libraries have not, in the past fifty years, generally changed their principles in buying in the field of Americana. Most of them have persisted in seeking only the significant materials that record the history, life, and ambitions of the American people. On the whole they have avoided trivia.

The library student will find plenty of informative reading on the building and development of great libraries in the periodical reports of the librarians. The annual reports of the John Carter Brown Library are scholarly and informative. This series began in 1911 when the late G. P. Winship was librarian. Wroth’s reports included the years 1923 to 1957, inclusive. The reports since then have been written by T. R. Adams, the present librarian. A library student could not use time to better advantage than to read the entire series. These attractive pamphlets are essentially scholarly articles about important books in the field of Americana before 1800.

Also to be read with profit are W. A. Jackson’s reports, Houghton Library; the *Yale Library Journal*; the *Harvard Library Bulletin*; the *New York Public Library Bulletin*; Boston Public Library’s periodical, *More Books*; the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*; the *Library of Congress Quarterly Journal*; Princeton University Library Chronicle; the *Library Chronicle* of the University of Pennsylvania, and the *Huntington Library Quarterly*.

C. S. Brigham’s recently published *Fifty Years of Collecting Americana* tells the story of the most important period in the building of the American Antiquarian Society. These publications present a good picture of what libraries have bought and are currently buying in Americana.

The libraries at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, University of Indiana, Columbia, Michigan, University of Virginia, and other universities have been tremendously enriched by gifts of outstanding and valuable collections of Americana, supplemented by what, on the whole, has been wise purchasing.

The great Americana collections at the John Carter Brown Library, the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, and the various historical societies and state libraries have been enlarged by the steady acquisition of significant and desirable items. In addition to the growth of these libraries, our time has seen the establishment and progressive development of the great collections at the Henry E. Huntington Library and the W. L. Clements Library.

It seems to me that these institutions have changed very little in
their buying trends. They have in the main followed the tried and true method of "adding to strength." This means that if a library is noted for having outstanding collections in special subjects, the librarian will always be trying to make those collections as complete as possible.

The real change in library buying trends has been in fields of new interest. In 1921, with the publication of H. R. Wagner's *Bibliography of the Plains and Rockies*, a new, fascinating, and wide field was thrown open to both private collectors and libraries as W. R. Howell points out in the following chapter. Prices for some Western rarities advanced from under $100 to over $1,000 in the space of a few years. Not only the personal narratives with which Wagner dealt, but early imprints, maps, prints, the early constitutions and laws of the Western states, and items relating to the surveying, financing, and building of the Pacific railroads, the Mormons, bank and train robbers, and the cattle trade came in for terrific competition.

Recently we have seen the Civil War change from a dead subject on dealer's shelves to one of extreme activity. It has been the recent experience of most dealers to see their Civil War shelves depleted as much as 90 per cent, with little opportunity for replenishment. The average Civil War regimental history now brings $5 to $15. Twenty years ago dealers would refuse these at twenty-five cents a volume. They were not in demand then.

Another subject in which there has been greatly increased activity in recent years is that of the personal narrative, especially in the form of diaries and journals. Students, scholars, and writers justifiably regard personal narratives as basic historical sources. William Matthews' *Bibliography of American Diaries* has greatly helped to increase the interest in this field.

In the past few years, it has been difficult for dealers to keep up with the demand for books on American medicine, cookery, crime, rogues and badmen, the sea, whaling and pirates, aviation, science, American sport, juveniles, and some other subjects. Buyers now rarely see substantial offerings in these fields.

In the early part of the century the demand was primarily for books on the discovery and exploration period, the French and Indian Wars, the American Revolution, the adoption of the Federal Constitution, early American imprints, Indian captivities, and the early state histories. While present interest in these fields may not compare with that in the West and Civil War, dealers' stocks on these subjects are
not what they used to be. Many books once very common are now uncommon. An example that could be cited is B. J. Lossing's *Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution*, a two-volume work. This was so common that it was not unusual for a dealer to have four or five sets in stock. Copies are no longer plentiful and it has become uncommon enough so as to be absent from most stocks.

The great sources of supply that were available to dealers in the early part of the century are in general no longer present. The private libraries in the east seem for the most part to have been dispersed. Even the American auction houses now rarely have a sale that could be called important. One of the main reasons for this has been the practice of the giving rather than the selling of many notable private collections of Americana. Our tax laws are so written that wealthy collectors find, in some situations, that it is more advantageous to give than to sell. The dealer of today must depend mainly for stock replenishment on the purchase of small lots and single items. Quick and careful reading of catalogs and the use of the telephone are now "musts" in the dealer's daily activities.

He also travels more than his predecessor. Today's fine roads and air travel make this convenient and pleasant. It is no longer unusual for a Boston dealer to fly to New York or some other eastern city in the morning, transact his business, and be home the evening of the same day. West Coast dealers are now able to visit Chicago, New York, or Boston or all three and not be absent from their desks for more than two or three days.

The voluminous body of bibliography published in our time has added tremendous stimulus to the demand for Americana. It has helped both librarian and dealer. Not many desirable books turn up these days on which no bibliographical information can be found. The great libraries and the best dealers have extensive bibliographical collections. Here are the tools of the trade, with which every library student and beginning bookseller must become acquainted. For the librarian, good bibliography saves many pitfalls by giving collations, census of copies, and other vital information. Frequently the informative notes will be the guidepost when a purchase is under contemplation.

Dealers know from experience that the most expensive bibliography nearly always more than pays for itself. No matter what the cost, good bibliography is a prime investment for both librarian and bookseller.

Another stimulus to the increased demand in our time, not only for
Basic Americana

Americana but for rare books in general, has been the books written about book collecting. In my opinion, the best of these are Henry Stevens’ *Recollections of James Lenox*; C. E. Goodspeed’s *Yankee Bookseller*; A. S. W. Rosenbach’s *Books and Bidders*; and A. E. Newton’s *Amenities of Book-Collecting*. These books have undoubtedly guided the footsteps of many an embryo book collector to the door of his nearest bookseller.

A natural question here is what effect the increased competition for Americana, coupled with the increasing scarcity, has done to prices. It is my opinion that Americana that is still available can be had at reasonable though, of course, much higher prices. It has not increased in cost in the same proportion as new houses and automobiles. In this particular field there has been a steady, natural advance in prices, totally unlike that in modern art, where prices have zoomed beyond all expectations.

Librarians have always been conscious of the value of public exhibitions of their treasures, and many are skillful in writing notes concerning the books to be exhibited and in describing their significance in American history. Even though I have spent a lifetime in the company of rare books, I can still come away from a well-presented exhibition with increased knowledge.

Two exhibitions of recent years, neither of which was in a public institution, have had great influence on the collecting of rare Americana. These are T. W. Streeter’s “America—Beginnings shown in honor of a visit of the Hroswitha Club on May 3, 1951” at his home in Morristown, N.J., and the “One Hundred Influential American Books Printed Before 1900 Exhibition at The Grolier Club, April Eighteenth—June Sixteenth, MCMXLVI” in New York City. The catalogs of these really notable exhibitions, with informative notes, are now collector’s items of no mean value.

Some years ago an exhibition took place at the Houghton Library in Cambridge that is not going to be equalled for quality and importance in a hurry. The show consisted of the first books printed on the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and North and South America! There is doubt about the earliest North American imprint, but in the light of present knowledge, the book in this exhibition could be regarded as a candidate for that honor.

Exhibitions such as these are the sparks that light the fires of collecting. More than that, they show the non-collector and the person who is not rare-book-minded the best reasons for collecting and pre-
serving the historical and literary treasures of the nation. A person showing lack of interest when viewing the first edition of the Columbus Letter or the first appearance in print of the immortal Declaration would be, it seems to me, totally devoid of sentiment.

If the reader has not left me, he will by now have the impression that Americana is not plentiful. It is not only not plentiful, but in the high-priced bracket, is very scarce. A generation ago dealers' catalogs were loaded with rare and expensive items. Today's bookseller is thankful if he can save for listing a few such items.

What of the future? It would seem that the collectors and libraries who have specialized in Americana before 1800 will find the pickings in this field slim and more expensive. A high percentage of the known material in this category is already on the shelves of institutions, never to come out. I know, because I have been one of those who helped put it there. The supply, once thought inexhaustible, is no longer available. The movement of large lots of books from private libraries, attics, and barns to bookstores is no longer taking place. Such lots invariably had one or two nice pieces of Americana.

The outlook is not hopeless, however, in at least one respect. History is being made every day. Americana since 1875 is not in general being collected. Since then our country has been in four wars, through the great depression, has seen the spread of world communism, the beginnings of the Atomic Age, and the earliest attempts at exploration of outer space. Who will say that books on these subjects will not be sought in the future?

Recent technical accomplishments have suggested the possible conquest by man of poverty and disease and the much more glamorous achievement of his transportation to the planets. There will be rare books, pamphlets, and broadsides on these subjects to be searched for, to be bought and sold, and to be given proper bibliographical treatment by future scholars.

It is not difficult to imagine Americana collectors not yet born competing for the first printing of the narrative account of the first human to make the first round trip from the earth to the moon. And, while I'll not be here to buy and sell it, some future bookseller will some day make some collector happy by offering for sale the first book printed in outer space.