

# Reflections of a Wandering Bookman

The 2007 Coulter Lecture  
Delivered by Gary E. Strong  
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*Conference Abstract: What brought him to librarianship, his passion about the profession, observations about differing library worlds and pointers about where we are headed—a world replete with books.*

Thank you for the nice introduction, but I am not sure that I am worthy to stand before you in the line of distinguished speakers who have graced this lecture. During my Sacramento years, I had the pleasure of publishing two of the Coulter lectures—one by Ward Ritchie and another delivered by Kevin Starr. So I have some understanding of the meaning behind the lecture and the heritage it hopes to sustain.

Several years ago, I acquired a CLA keepsake containing the Coulter lecture given by Lawrence Clark Powell talking about his relationship with Ms. Coulter. At the time I read it with great amusement and, having re-read it recently, recalled my many conversations with Larry and his take on the history of California librarianship. Now sitting in his seat at UCLA - well, not in the exact same chair or even the same building - I have charge of that southern campus of the university and the responsibility, and inspiration, of following in his footsteps more than metaphorically. Powell took the reins with fewer than a million volumes in the collection. He spent his time acquiring, building, and starting a great research library collection to rival Cal's. I had the pleasure this last year of celebrating the addition of the eight millionth volume to that collection. While we have not overtaken Cal, we have secured our place among the top ten research libraries in North America.

My task today, however, looms in front of me as one that I relish, because I don't get the chance often enough to talk about passion and values. So Michael, thank you for the invitation. I can also see Ursula Meyer in the audience and know that she will tell me exactly what I got wrong when we finish this afternoon.

So let's see; where to begin. I was born ... in Idaho, grew up in the country, and rode the bus to school for twelve years to Potlatch. Potlatch was a company town owned by Potlatch Forest, Inc. It was home to the largest white pine mill in North America.

It was there that Georgia Mae Bennett inspired me to become a librarian. She was my high school Latin teacher for four years, my senior English teacher, my drama coach, and the school librarian. By my junior year she gained enough trust to leave me in charge of the school library before classes began and during what would have been my study hall period. But most of all, she inspired me to read and to think and dream beyond that small rural place. To my knowledge, she also inspired four others of my contemporaries to work in libraries.

Years later, she called my father and asked him to get in touch with me to see if I would like to have her eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. She had remembered that I had admired it and borrowed volumes to read during high school. I accepted that gift, and it holds a place of honor in my personal library today. She also gave me a book by a guy named Powell entitled *A Passion for Books*, which I immediately devoured. Those words and her actions would guide my entry into the profession.

Idaho is a small state, and I had the opportunity to work in the library at the University of Idaho, where Lee Zimmerman and Richard Beck took me under their wing and gave me the opportunity to work in every menial job imaginable, until I finally was made a reference assistant in the humanities. I also got the chance to take three library science courses during a summer session between my junior and senior years. My last year at Idaho, I worked to establish the library support group, the Associates, and drove the bookmobile across two counties in Northern Idaho under an LSCA demonstration grant.

When it came time to go to graduate school, I assumed that I would go to the University of Washington, but Irving Lieberman, the dean at Washington whom I had met in the Pacific Northwest Library Association, told me to go somewhere else. "You know all about the Pacific Northwest," he said, "and you need other experiences." So I applied at Columbia, Rutgers, and Michigan. The choice was easy: they didn't require the GRE at Michigan; they gave me a job running residence halls libraries, which paid my room and board; and they let me take the final exams for all the introductory library courses. Eloise Ebert, the Oregon state librarian, made the decision to give me an LSCA scholarship to attend school.

I was off in the middle of Kent State and the Vietnam War. Michigan was a whole new world. So while others were protesting, marching, or "sitting in"

various offices across the campus, I would go to the graduate library and just sit and look around, pulling great reference books off the shelves and just sitting and looking at them. If one could be arrested for fondling books, I would have spent most of my time in book jail. I loved library school. Wally Bonk was my dean, and he would meet on Friday afternoons with students at the Library Bar on the north campus. Other faculty would join us, and we talked and schemed about what we would do when we got control of the profession.

It was at Michigan that I got the sense of public librarianship while heading the Markley Residence Library. The residence libraries were set up for the use of students and provided a full range of reference and public services for them. I learned to listen to their interests and needs and to plan programs that were responsive. I also had the chance to host the actress in residence that year—Miss Helen Hayes. She was wonderful and would gather students around her at lunch and dinner and in the evenings to talk and visit. I realized how important this personal connection was in promoting library services. It reminded me of Robert Frost, who had been writer in residence at Michigan in 1914.

To complete my last courses in the summer session, I found that I was short in making my tuition payment, and I knew there was no money coming from home. My scholarship funds had been exhausted. Walking down a residential street in Ann Arbor, I came on a yard sale and began to look at the books. Among a stack was a book by Robert Frost. I realized I had in my hand an almost perfect inscribed copy of *North to Boston*. Someone was selling off the “junk” in the house they had just bought. I bought it for twenty-five cents and made my way down to the local book shop. The \$750 I got for the book made it possible for me to pay my summer session tuition and take my girl friend out for a dinner that was more than hot water and ketchup packets. I have always regretted that this volume was only in my possession such a short time.

I had realized that I needed to serve my two years of indentured servitude in a public library in Oregon on graduation or pay back the scholarship. Since I had no money, I put my academic library aspirations on hold and took a job as director of the Lake Oswego Public Library. And I never looked back. During those years, I was encouraged to run for office in the Oregon Library Association and was elected president. What did I know?

Well, I knew enough to gather a kitchen cabinet around me that included Carl Hintz from the University of Oregon, Bill Carlson from OSU, and Mary Phillips from the Library Association of Portland. Together, we took on the Oregon State Library and opened up library community participation in the state. These were also the days of Senator Wayne Morris and his stand on

national issues in Congress and his opposition to the war in Vietnam. I brought him as my speaker to OLA that year, and Lillian Bradshaw was there as president of the American Library Association.

With that, my association work had begun, and since then it has always played an important role in my professional life. As president of the Pacific Northwest Library Association, I brought Daniel Schorr as conference keynote speaker in Boise. He had just been fired for his views from CBS News, and his principled stand in support of freedom of speech was an inspiration to us all. It was during that time we brought Alberta and Saskatchewan into PNLA, so I started learning about international librarianship as well.

At about that same time, Eli Obler, who was librarian at ISU in Pocatello, decided it was time to indoctrinate me on censorship and intellectual freedom. PNLA was meeting in Vancouver that year, and he decided several of us youngsters needed to go see an adult movie. So off we went after the conference evening session and reception. It was the most boring experience I had ever had until the movie ended and the lights came up, and we all stood and sang "God Save the Queen." Now that was the capper for an interesting evening out with the guys.

I went into Everett, Washington, just as Boeing crashed, so I hired a community service officer and began to develop programs for displaced workers. Then the gas crisis hit us. I had an executive on my board from General Telephone, so I talked him into giving us a half dozen answering machines, and we set up the first telephone reference system that listed open gas station by sector in town every day. We got thousands of phone calls each day and the Chamber of Commerce award for the year.

When I was at Lake Oswego, I began to bring writers and illustrators into the library to do programs. We would get huge crowds. My children's librarian, Hilda Lapidus, was a great storyteller, and the place hopped with activity. We could not keep books on the shelves. I also met Teresa Truchot, who asked if she could tutor those who could not read in the library. She was a retired schoolteacher in her eighties, who inspired me to think about illiteracy and the role of libraries.

At Everett we brought writers and performers into the library regularly. One of my favorite programs was a weekend celebration of "Bobby Burns birthday." The highlight was the county clerk dressed in his kilt, playing his bagpipes, and leading the whole crowd into the library. The readings went on all day. That was quite a change from the first public program we did on bicycling around Puget Sound, which drew my wife and me along with the local homeless guy, who came for the refreshments. The speakers were great sports

and spent the evening talking to us. I didn't have the heart to tell them I didn't even own a bike.

Rod Swartz drafted me into service at the State Library as his deputy. It was here that I first met Carma Zimmerman, who was friends with former Washington State Librarian Mary Ann Reynolds and most of the library development staff at the Washington State Library. She had been Washington state librarian before taking the California state library job in 1952. These were Washington Library Network days, and we were faced with having to make it pay for itself. Maryann had set it up so WLN would be paid for with state funds, but that all changed with the economic downturns of the 1970s.

My great pleasure there was overseeing the annual Washington writer's awards given each spring. Dixie Lee Ray had just been elected governor as we announced the awards for 1977. She came and gave an inspired talk, glad-handed everyone, and left for the mansion. The next morning she eliminated the Women's Commission and cut the state library's budget by ten percent. Just goes to show you how politics really works.

We had a branch of the Washington State Library in the governor's mansion, and I was often invited up to fill in a seat at lunch. I got up one day and sat my chair back right on the tail of one of the dogs, and that ended my invitations to lunch.

In the fall of 1979, my wife, Carolyn, and I took the children to visit my brother in Sacramento. We had a great time, and I had a chance to visit the Sacramento Public Library and the State Library. I was struck by the majesty of the Library and Courts Building and joked with my sister-in-law about coming down and taking it over one day. The next spring she called me and said that she had heard that they were looking for a new state librarian. On a lark, I sent in my application.

When I arrived for the interview, I was ushered into the conference room in the Capital to be faced with an interview panel of more than twenty people. I thought, "Well this is going to be interesting." I felt like the kid in *The Omen* as my head spun from one side of the room to the other trying to make eye contact and to answer the questions thrown at random by those in the room. I left feeling that it was a most interesting experience indeed.

A few days later Carlotta Mellon, the governor's appointments secretary, called and told me I had been selected as the next state librarian of California. I couldn't believe it, so before anyone could change their minds I accepted and spent the next fourteen years in the state.

Within a month of taking office I was meeting with the Jesuit officials at the University of San Francisco, negotiating to keep the Sutro Library in the basement of the Gleason Library until we could find new quarters. Off to my first meeting of the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies in Madison, Wisconsin, I received a frantic call from my Sacramento office telling me that I had been exposed to hepatitis during the lunch in the USF faculty center during that meeting, and that I needed to immediately get vaccinated. So instead of my first reception with fellow chief officers, I was driven around Madison, trying to find a needle that would serve its purpose.

I recall my first meeting of the council of the California Library Association. Barbara Campbell was president, and I was invited to observe the meeting and be introduced to the council. Anxious to get out and meet people, I found myself in the back of the room between Ursula Meyer and Gina Minudri. Little did I know of the controversy about the speaker for the joint dinner with the Nevada Library Association. You certainly could not take a nap between Ursula and Gina arguing over whether to cancel the talk on Nevada brothels. I had truly arrived in California.

In 1983, I found that we had two and one half million dollars of out-of-cycle LSCA funds to spend. I asked the staff for options, and Carmela Ruby came to me and proposed that we start a program of teaching adults to read in public libraries. I had learned by this time that good staff have good ideas, so although I had no idea what would be involved, I told them to develop a program, and in 1984 the California Literacy Campaign was born. We funded programs in twenty-six libraries. Martin Gomez had come to work at the state library, and he wrote the first regulations. The campaign caught the attention of the legislature and the state Department of Education. We partnered with adult education and with the governor's office. I hosted Barbara Bush and California first lady Gloria Deukmejian at the State Library.

This took on a life of its own, and in the aftermath of Proposition Thirteen, we had an issue that drew interest from both sides of the aisle. My greatest achievement was getting David Roberti and Bill Baker to sponsor the Families for Literacy legislation and to get it funded. From opposite ends of the political spectrum, they led the charge, making this a nonpartisan issue. The program was off and running. I also worked with Assemblywoman Teresa Hughes to introduce legislation to support a students for literacy program. It was structured to be a work-study program that would fund college students to work in public library literacy programs. That would fail, and I learned about how powerful the higher education lobby is in California. Still, my greatest satisfaction is that California created a solid program of literacy services as a valid part of local public library services and set the tone for the nation.

As outgrowth of the Ethic Services Task Force and the Rand Study I commissioned in the early 1980s looking at demographic change in California, we created the Partnerships for Change Program. Yolanda Cuesta would lead this effort. This program was intended to help public libraries change how they related to these new communities. Having funded hundreds of outreach grants, I was convinced that service to new Americans had to be delivered within the context of broader library service programs. You can not sustain a level of service on soft money, but you could use soft money to experiment and try new services. A library needs collections that support the reading interests of the people who live there. I found myself speaking at hundreds of events and putting this out at a time when people thought libraries were dead.

I learned one important thing from Proposition Thirteen and its aftermath: Californians loved their libraries and were willing to support them. But library service was devastated in the first few years after its passage. And at the same time, we were talking about shifting resources from traditional users of libraries to whole new populations. It was a challenging time indeed.

A part of this time was trying to build the state library's own collection. Perhaps the most controversial collection we obtained was that of Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann. Many librarians felt we should not have given it a place in the archives of the state library. Gary Kurutz and I felt it was important to document this mass change in political thought and action in California. Not since the early 1900s had there been such a sea change in the way the state functioned.

In my latter years as state librarian, I sought to establish the State Library as a small independent agency. We successfully separated ourselves from the Department of Education before Bill Honig was ousted, which cast a shadow on the department. In the next year the electorate passed an initiative limiting the budget of the state legislature. Even though the State Library had always been authorized to provide legislative reference service, it was an opportunity to take on a broader role.

As luck would have it, I had invited Librarian of Congress Jim Billington to visit, and he helped me convince David Roberti to allow the state library to establish the California Research Bureau. It was intended to take over the functions of the Senate Office of Research and later the Assembly Office of Research. The SOR was home of some of the finest research thinkers within state government, but unfortunately, the AOR was mostly a patronage arm of Speaker Willie Brown. Our efforts were successful, and after numerous attempts by the Assembly to plant staff in the bureau, we were able to establish a solid staff to provide research support to the governor and the legislature.

At the same time, the state library's budget was cut significantly, and funds for acquisitions virtually eliminated. Since we could not pay for the subscriptions in the State Law Library, I closed it. I could not justify providing inaccurate legal information to the various attorneys in state government. This brought the wrath of Senator Bill Lockyer, who called for my resignation. Senator Nick Petris intervened and held him off. Assemblyman Phil Isenberg, meanwhile, worked closely with me to find a solution. He had just finished a term as president of the State Bar Association and sought their financial support to carry subscriptions for one year while we developed a legislative solution. These events brought me even closer to the Third District Court of Appeals justices, with whom we shared the Library and Courts Building. The passage of an increased fee on civil court filings would provide a secure, ongoing source for acquisitions to the law library collection.

In 1994 I decided it was time to take an opportunity to put my money where my mouth was. At Queens Library I was able to practice more directly what I had been promoting during my state library years. We lived the belief that people would use libraries if you provided them with what they wanted—a solid collection of materials relevant to them in their own language as well as in English, a rich educational program, and cultural programming that brought them together to celebrate the diverse cultures of New York City. We became the busiest public library in the country. We saw over one half million people each year attending programs and fifty thousand a day entering our doors.

We were visible in every community of the borough. The borough president liked calling me out at events as the head of the busiest library in the world. I never corrected her; you take the sound bites when you get them. We built partnerships with businesses, hospitals, and social service and immigration agencies. We pioneered programs of working with youth-at-risk. I recall a recognition ceremony ending the first special program where first-offense youth were sentenced to the library for a series of focused programs instead of going to prison. The young man who spoke stood in front of the assembled family and friends and announced that he had read his first book, and it wasn't half bad.

I initiated a Page Fellows program to attract the best of our student workers to consider librarianship as a career. That program now has had more than one hundred and seventy-five young people exposed to the profession, paired with mentors who talk to them about librarianship.

We created the Center for International Public Librarianship, which brought librarians from Asia, Europe, Russia, Africa, and the Caribbean to study and work in the Queens Library. I traveled to China, Thailand, Russia, Croatia, Slovenia, Latvia, Hungary, France, Argentina, Singapore, and Austria giving workshops and talking about service to diverse populations. We built

WorldLinQ bringing web resources to the Queens Library Web site in Chinese, Korean, Russian, French, and Spanish.

9/11 changed many things. For me, it made Carolyn and I realize that we wanted to be closer to our children, who had both resettled in California. Out of the blue, an overture to apply as university librarian at UCLA presented itself. Never believing that it could happen, I sent the application forward. And that is where I am today. So some thirty plus years after forsaking academic librarianship to fulfill my obligation to my scholarship, I had entered the academic library world.

Challenged by the chancellor and provost at UCLA to implement change in the university library, I found a great staff, a broad collection, and a terrible physical presence on the campus. We had lost several departmental libraries, and space was at a crisis stage. So we set out immediately to address these issues.

But the greatest challenge for me has come at a time when building a great research collection seems to be under threat. Yes, we should be acquiring access to the breadth of science, technical, and medical resources. But we should also be strengthening our role as laboratory for the humanities and social sciences. We have one of the few collections of record in the Western United States. What is our role in maintaining that in the face of Goggle gobbling up our content and stealing our cataloging? Will we be faced with buying it all back, as we have with journal literature?

What will be our role in supporting change in undergraduate education? A recent survey of undergraduates across UC reveals that seventy-five percent of the 38,000 who responded to the survey feel that having access to a world-class library collection is important, very important, or essential. Learning research methods drew sixty-five percent and learning about faculty research forty-six percent. I believe this gives us much reason to be encouraged and at the same time challenged about what the role of library instruction ought to be and how important the development of our collections must be.

Over my career, I have been interested in library programs that will change people's lives. It has certainly changed mine. During my years as state librarian, I was able to pursue the building of my own personal collection. (Mind you that I did not purchase books for the collections of the libraries I have directed.) I began building a collection of twentieth-century Californiana, including a pretty good selection of artist's books and limited editions. A couple of years ago I was able to obtain the last volume I did not have that was published by the Allen Press. The collection also includes almost the complete output of Joe D'Ambrosio, Vance Gerry at The Weatherbird Press, Peter and

Dona Thomas in Santa Cruz, Yolla Bolly Press, the Dawsons, and the Book Club of California, among others.

But I have also been a passionate collector of mystery writers from California or who set their stories in California. I have left it to others to collect the classic California mystery writers, and my collection begins in the late 1970s and includes more than 150 writers. Some are pretty standard pulp, but others are pretty good reads. It really began with Bill Pronzini, after we acquired his papers and collection for the California State Library. Then it was Marcia Muller. And it just kept going. The genre is interesting in California. Most writers build in great descriptions of California, and you get a sense of life across the state.

But I cannot stop thinking about how much I would like to have that copy of *North to Boston* sitting on my bookshelves along with the other Robert Frost volumes. I can't afford to acquire one these days.

In looking back at this journey, I think today of Edith Coulter and her work to prepare librarians for this profession. I do wish that our academy would still value the education of librarians to work in academic libraries. We need this new talent more than ever. As we integrate library and information resources into the teaching and research roles of our campuses, librarians have the tremendous opportunity to demonstrate how critical our role is in education.

A tradition at UCLA is to hold a reception for new deans to be welcomed to the campus. I closed my remarks that day in this way:

*The faculty and students at UCLA create significant amounts of new intellectual content. The Library must work with you to determine how best to capture and preserve this invaluable resource and ensure that it is appropriately made available for use and consultation. Support for robust systems of full text must be developed and maintained along side print collections.*

*Everything I have done to this day has been preparing me for the next years at UCLA. Serving three different governors in California through the early post-Proposition Thirteen era prepared me with several degrees in crisis management. Dealing with the aftermath of the terrorist attack on our country tested my resolve of the role of libraries in creating and keeping a civil society.*

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you today.