

Saving the Irreplaceable in Small Libraries

SARAH SUTHERLAND explores the retirement options for superannuated books in libraries with specialized collections, with particular reference to the life sciences and the law.

I STILL REMEMBER the winter day I packed into boxes the pile of books that had been gathering dust on my desk for six months, walked them over to the university library through the wind-swept Prairie snow, and donated them to the library's special collections. A climate-controlled room became the home for these treasures entering their afterlife, judged too valuable to be touched by bare hands.

These books—illustrated mycological treatises from the late 19th to early 20th centuries, too large for standard shelving, with ornate leather bindings and detailed etchings of fungi—were quite valuable as beautiful objects, as resources for the university's developing history-of-science program, and to any mycologists who might want to consult them. But to the research institute where I worked as the librarian, they supported research that was no longer relevant to its "strategic priorities," the fungi program having been cancelled years before.

The fate of these beautiful treatises is not uncommon. Small specialized libraries in research institutes, newspapers, government departments and professional firms are downsizing or closing all over the world, and, unlike the private collections of modern firsts that Paul Whitney discussed in a recent issue of *Amphora* (see "Bought for a dollar, sold for a dime," *Amphora* 160 [Spring 2012]), many of them contain rare and valuable materials in unusual and highly focused subject areas.

These collections are often unique in the world. Yet, even in institutions that retain their libraries, the collections are intended to fulfill current applied needs, not to be repositories for historical material or collections maintained in the event someone needs access 20 years hence, when the past two decades have seen little or no demand.

The foci of parent organizations also change

over time: research programs are cancelled, legal practice in some areas dwindles, and government departments are given new mandates. The subject priorities of the libraries change too, which means that while some of these rare and valuable titles continue to be integral to the intent of the library, some are not.

If books are not meeting current or immediately foreseeable needs in this type of library, they should be taken out of the library to make way for current material. However, the parent institutions are often ill-equipped to dispose of the small portion of valuable and rare library materials that continues to be of interest in a way that will respect their value and ensure that they are not simply thrown away.

TWO DIFFERENT LIBRARIES WITH SIMILAR PROBLEMS

The two libraries where I experienced these issues most profoundly were in a government research lab dedicated to plant sciences and a private law library serving a large general practice. These libraries have different issues and priorities, but both have current needs for information that is only found in rare, out-of-print material.

These institutions, and the libraries they house, have long timelines, being approximately 70 and 100 years old, respectively. Both are anticipated to continue far into the future, and each boasts legacy collections as old as the institutions themselves. Some of the material is no longer relevant to current needs, but some rare, valuable items are not easily discarded in a way that respects their scholarly or financial value.

ISSUES SPECIFIC TO THE LIFE SCIENCES

Within the life sciences many techniques and foundational discoveries are unchanged for years, and the materials describing them continue to be relevant. Some may even become harder

to find, increasing their value and that of the collection of which they're a part. Examples of such materials include texts on the preparation of samples for testing, taxonomical works, and botanical references on plant anatomy. Many of the latter are particularly problematic for access over time as they often include lovely plates, attractive targets for dismembering by those seeking vintage prints that can be framed and hung in someone's hallway or washroom.

Historical methodological information is also important when researchers attempt to recreate the results of historical experiments; replicability is an important element of the scientific method, and ongoing concerns regarding the confirmation of scientific findings¹ lend value to detailed information about how past researchers discovered what they did. High-profile discoveries of new species are also regularly made among existing specimens and historical research materials.²

Most of the books described here have not been reprinted and the contents are not readily available elsewhere, as they were mainly published in the early to mid 20th century, which means reproduction is limited due to existing copyright restrictions.³ Furthermore, the market for these texts is so vanishingly small that reprinting them is unlikely, yet for those who need them, they are invaluable.

The evaluation of scientific historical materials is complicated by the fact that it was the norm until quite recently for particular areas of study to have dominant languages of discourse which were not always English. In the plant sciences, for instance, substantial historical holdings are in German, with a lesser complement in Latin dating back to the 19th century.

It is very difficult to know how to evaluate these materials, especially as familiarity with these languages is no longer a standard element of the education of scientists who would be using them: yet they may be valuable, and it is a difficult decision to send them to be pulped without that evaluation.

LEGAL MATERIALS BRING THEIR OWN CHALLENGES

The legal profession, like science, relies on past stores of learning for its work, and both

lawyers and scientists tend to be highly educated people with a great deal of respect for the print inheritance of their respective fields. However, the dynamics of the legal environment are different from those of scientific investigation.

The law is governed by the principle of *stare decisis*, or precedent, and unless a government changes the legislation or a higher court judge decides that for some reason a historical decision is no longer relevant to a particular issue, historical laws continue in force. Particular areas of practice (e.g., real estate, transportation, and contract law) often depend on laws that are several hundred years old.

Another principle states that the intent that motivated the creation of a particular law when it came into force is persuasive in the interpretation of that law going forward, so commentary contemporaneous with the creation of different laws is regularly consulted.

These two principles combine to create a discipline in which old material continues to be highly relevant to current business needs, and in which decisions relating to large amounts of money are dependent on access to and successful navigation of historical material.

However, not all historical material continues to have value beyond being a curiosity to lawyers and legal scholars or serving as props for interior decorators looking to create a perception of richness with leather-bound books that will never be read.

As in the sciences, much of this material is not and will not be republished. Older titles that *are* needed create an interesting if small market for antiquarian booksellers. As a librarian, I have occasionally been in the market for such titles and would be willing to spend large sums to acquire a specific title on the rare book market because it was the best authority on a subject. This is where the focused nature of the collections in small libraries is important, as it is possible that at that particular time I was the only person in the world actively looking to acquire that title.

These specific needs for historical material are balanced by the large volume of legal books libraries accumulated over time that no longer create value for institutions. In particular, the runs of print case law reporters are almost

entirely duplicated online, and they have very little value anymore. For a time libraries were giving them away free for the cost of shipping, but now there are so few libraries with the need or the space for them that most are being pulped or acquired by the previously mentioned interior decorators as props.

This is difficult for legal practitioners, scholars and librarians to see, as these runs of books were so important for so many years and represent large investments in money and staff time. The content in these titles may also be very old; the first case law reporters included content back to the time of Edward II (r. 1307–1327),⁴ references potentially worth invoking today.

Yet even libraries with stable space and funding need to discard material on a regular basis to make way for new material that reflects current needs. This reality often upsets library stakeholders as they see this as a waste of existing resources, the result of past mistakes in selecting and purchasing material. This is not generally the case; rather, it's simply a reality in libraries that material that no longer adds value needs to make way for material that does. Unfortunately, material that no longer adds value in one library may be valuable elsewhere, and there is not always a good way for institutions to respect or realize that value.

In this regard private libraries, like those in law firms, are generally free to operate as they choose, and internal financial departments are happy to process payments or charitable donation receipts for relatively small amounts in the case of selling or donating books. For libraries within government departments, however, there is often no good way to dispose of books that will realize their value.

The Government of Canada usually disposes of materials using the government surplus system, where they would be sold next to customs seizures and used office equipment,⁵ the proceeds of which generally go into general revenue. As this is not a common occurrence, library staff might want to contact book dealers to notify them that certain items are being sold to make sure there is interest from other libraries or book dealers. Generally, it is better to find another publicly funded library that would use the materials.

PHANTOM LIBRARIES AND THE DEMISE OF PUBLIC ACCESS

The issues discussed above encountered by continuing libraries are envied by those library staff who find that the libraries where they work are being disassembled entirely. In this case, large amounts of material need to be disposed of within limited amounts of time and often with rapidly shrinking numbers of staff (often in the process of leaving for other opportunities).

The reality is that much of the material disposed of in this way, such as periodicals and reference books, is not missed. Even so, it is very difficult in the melee of disposing of several tons of print material at one time to be able to identify and save the truly unusual and valuable volumes that would make a continued contribution to research.

In this process, many useful titles disappear into the offices of staff and create a phantom library, without central control and known only through social networks. Sadly, this restricts its use by those on the margins of the organization. Perhaps the pendulum of library closure will one day swing the other way, and these books will migrate back into a centralized location for shared use, but there are no guarantees once a publicly accessible collection has migrated into private hands.

Personally, I have only felt the need to go dumpster diving once in my career in an attempt to retrieve books, and in that case it was a private collection that had been discarded. This was a collection of Aboriginal material collected over a lifetime by someone with an interest in the subject, but with no intention of collecting books as such. Unfortunately, we were unable to find it, and rather than being donated to an on-reserve academic institution the way it should have been, it was lost.

Because people like scientists and lawyers feel such emotional attachment to the written works that support their work, many people are working to ensure that important materials are preserved, but for a librarian working in these fields, it is a constant balance to ensure that the materials of any age are acquired, maintained and discarded in an appropriate way.

It is four years since a government directive closed the research institute library where I worked. Management at the institute are still trying to work out what to do with the former library space; in the meantime, its books sit in darkness awaiting their fate, since all the library staff are gone. My hope is that some of the valuable material will be saved and sent where it can be of use.

The law firm library, meanwhile, continues to be valued and maintained, because the lawyers both use and fund the library and see its ongoing contribution to their work. Not all libraries are so valued by decision-makers, and small libraries are often targets for downsizing. It is important for staff to know what in their collections is still of current research or monetary value, so it can be retained or discarded in a way that best preserves that value for the larger institutions and wider community.

NOTES

1. John P. A. Ioannidis, "Why Most Published Research Findings Are False," *PLOS Medicine*, August 2005, <http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pmed.0020124#pmed-0020124-b9>.
2. Mike Taylor, "Dinosaur Discovery: 'Thunder-Thighs' Dinosaur Found in Museum

Basement," *The Telegraph*, February 28, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/science-news/8352694/Dinosaur-discovery-thunder-thighs-dinosaur-found-in-museum-basement.html>; Seth Borenstein, "New Mammal Species Discovered: Cute Critter Was 'Kind of Hiding in Plain Sight,'" *The Globe and Mail*, August 15, 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/science/new-mammal-species-discovered-cute-critter-was-kind-of-hiding-in-plain-sight/article13783364/>.

3. Rebecca J. Rosen, "The Hole in Our Collective Memory: How Copyright Made Mid-Century Books Vanish," *The Atlantic*, July 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/07/the-hole-in-our-collective-memory-how-copyright-made-mid-century-books-vanish/278209/>.
4. "Law Report," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_report (accessed September 8, 2013).
5. Government of Canada, "GC Surplus" [Website], <http://www.gcsurplus.ca> (accessed September 8, 2013).

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