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Papa Abel Remembers -- The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 16: People, Computers, and Change

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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fascicle 16: People, Computers, and Change

by **Richard Abel** (Aged Independent Learner) <reabel@q.com>

Authorial Emendations and Redactions: *As noted earlier in this recount of the Argonauts' voyage, we had for long been treated by publishers not as wholesalers, as were virtually all our competitors, but rather as retailers. We were, as a consequence, at a distinct economic disadvantage vis-à-vis the competition. But in the late 1960s several court decisions and some legislative actions began to remove the structures of regulatory restrictions which had here-to-fore shaped the market. In this changed environment and after some telephone exchanges, Lyman went to several of the larger scholarly publishers with whom we dealt and with whom we regularly did a substantial volume of business. Following several months of conversations and presentation of supporting evidence, Lyman was able to work out with them a discounting and returns program that rewarded not presumed role in the market but rather the extent of the publishers' forthcoming list and backlist, being ordered and stocked as well as the vigor employed in promoting the publishers' list.*

Lyman then undertook a many-months-long concerted effort to seek adherence to some form

of this new program, which he had formulated with a few key publishers, by a substantial number of the publishers with whom we regularly dealt. He had considerable success, save with most of the university presses. — RA

So, at the end of the day **Lyman** rightfully must be credited with having engineered a marked change in the publisher-book-seller exchange. The basic form of this revised relationship was most commonly known as the Agency Plan, though some publishers chose to title it differently. This new relationship obtains to the present day — some thirty years after **Lyman's** work.

The early 1970s were a time of radical restructuring of the company. The firm had outgrown the management and workflow organizations that had been developed over the previous years. I spent considerable time looking into the various management arrangements being advanced at the time by management consultants, etc. as well as picking the brains of friends who had faced similar problems in their firms. The then Portland management group met weekly to explore the means for effecting

the changes needed to better organize and realize the next stage of development.

The badly needed financial arrangements earlier made coupled with the rapid and unexpected changes in the scholarly library world all dictated that the firm had to increase sales and serve larger numbers of libraries. This imperative in turn dictated working harder to serve smaller institutions with comparably smaller book budgets as well as more overseas libraries. Serving these market sectors more fully presented substantial challenges in the form of modifying/expanding systems and programs already in place but initially conceived and designed to serve larger domestic libraries. We had our hands well filled with these modifications.

Ralph Schoffner had agreed to come aboard in 1972. He was a great boon not simply in the arena of using computers in bibliographic applications but with an MBA also in thinking through the restructuring problems we faced. He also helped bring to our computer staff two experienced bibliographic systems analysts and programmers **John Knapp** and **Brian**

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Aveny, both of whom had worked on **University of California** bibliographic systems with **Ralph**. The two of them added a great deal of experience with bibliographic systems to what was already an innovative and well-grounded computer staff.

In a sense it can be said that **Max Gnehm**, now the manager of the overseas offices in London, Amsterdam, and Berne, as well as the soon to be opened offices in Sydney, and Sao Paulo, was the man on the hot seat. It was from among the libraries associated with tertiary education and research establishments served by these overseas offices that much of added sales we needed to support our financing initiative had to be cultivated.

We had converted the Approval Plan to an entirely computer-based program in 1971. This major revision had been undertaken in response to a growing number of complaints by librarians who had taken new posts that the Approval Plan produced a different outcome from the office with which they had first worked from that experienced in their new position. So we started in 1970 to try to bring about a uniform intake of books across the breadth of the libraries we served — librarians moving to new posts could count on the same intake of books in response to the same set of collecting profiles. To this end we reprofiled all the libraries, entering the revised profiles into the library data-base. The objective was to program the computer to match revised and tightened library collecting profiles to tightened book profiles and produce the necessary invoice or notification forms.

Simultaneously **Don Stave** revised the thesaurus and then trained an augmented staff of profilers in the tightened structure that he had devised. In many cases one or another of the branch managers had to return to a library to further modify their institutional profile to provide them with the range of books they sought. Some of those revisions were quite substantial. I recall one at a major research facility with which the manager asked me to assist as he seemed unable to get the profile right after several visits to the library. It turned out that the acquisitions people had focused upon the technology side of their subject interests and the missions of the facility when they also wished to receive books on the research side. The oft-times differences in individual perceptions of the meanings of words and their applied applications were quite startling. Whatever the revised procedures removed the sometimes-idiosyncratic understandings of a particular library's collecting wishes by the various managers' differing sense of linguistic meanings.

This computer-based Approval Plan imposed a considerable burden upon **Joe Schectman**, who had come aboard upon **Lyman's** recommendation as the chief book-buyer. Joe had to acquire in little time an entirely new procedure for ordering the stock

of forthcoming titles to be treated on the Approval Plan.

Accompanying all these changes and modifications in systems the firm moved in the direction of a more centralized management structure. Up to this point the firm had been organized on a few very loose lines of authority. Such a relaxed structure had provided substantial room for individual initiative and indeed in-house entrepreneurial undertakings in the various offices. This was a very congenial working environment for the kind of adventurer the firm had sought and who was attracted to the open-ended venture on which the firm was embarked. I moved to such a more hierarchical structure with great reluctance and with substantial reservations and a great deal of remorse for I feared that the firm would lose much of the *élan* which had driven it. Furthermore, I never had any appetite for working in such a setting and felt quite uncomfortable in moving in that direction. Whatever, the Argonauts and staff took these changes in good spirit and truly endeavored to advance the objectives thereof.

All of these changes and new imperatives necessarily entailed the recruiting and hiring of new staff, from among which it was hoped a new cadre of management trainees and bookpeople might emerge. As these new faces appeared on the staff, I was struck by the great numbers of newly minted college graduates incorporated in their midst. We saw a surprising large number of **Stanford** grads, as well as grads of other notable colleges/universities, taking ordinary, routine jobs. Now we had always endeavored to maintain a standard of wages and benefits in the upper 25% of comparable jobs in the Portland employment area. But however good our wage/benefits structure it seemed strange that we could attract so large a number of new college grads. In arriving at this conclusion I failed to take into account the effects and impacts of the counter-culture movement. It will be recalled by readers that the counter-culture movement was particularly fervent on some West Coast campuses. (I had seen the first of the Savio marches to Sather Gate on the **UC Berkeley** campus one afternoon when I was departing the Library.)

Despite my shortcomings in considering the total picture, we had spotted several of these staff members who we thought had the makings of good bookmen and management trainees. Then suddenly this entire promising picture was turned on its head.

We found ourselves in the middle of an organizing campaign undertaken by these promising people under the auspices of the **International Longshoring and Warehousing Union**. At the end of the day the union was massively turned down but the entire episode had burned out five months of crucial management time diverting the firm from the major restructuring tasks the firm was involved in as well as wasting substantial financial sums needed to advance the well-being of the firm. All of

the hoped-for trainees left, and so were lost to the firm, upon the final outcome.

Upon the conclusion of that episode we were able to return to the restructuring of the management structure of the firm and of its way of providing a multiplicity of services to libraries. As a major element in this restructuring a number of the branch managers took on new management responsibilities in the central offices. This in turn led to the not only shifting managers between branches but placing newly minted bookmen/trainees in the vacated branch offices. Among the most notable of this repeat of the game Musical Chairs were moving **Don Chvatal** from manager of cataloging/processing to the newly created post of marketing director. **Aaron Saady** agreed to leave the Los Angeles office to become sales manager. **Dan Halloran** took over the Chicago (Zion) central office. **Jim Cameron** came to Portland to become the manager of book operations. **Ron Wadlington** agreed to open the Sydney, Australia office.

All these changes were made in good cheer. Save for substantial staff upset with the coterie who had come in with another agenda and created a five-month upset and hiatus the voyage looked to be progressing in a sound and secure way. The managers and staff had truly bent their backs to a radical restructuring, understanding full well that that all this change was well and truly aimed at transforming a vigorous company into another as vigorous company but one operating along different lines in the interest of coming out a firm better financial positioned than here-to-fore but still firmly responsive to library needs. My concerns, shared I believe by some of the older hands, had proved unfounded. We were going to emerge a stronger firm better positioned to meet the equally rapidly changing needs of the species of library with which we worked.

Because so much of our future depended upon increasing overseas sale to meet the financial underwriting we so desperately needed, **Max Gnehm** and I spent a good deal of time traveling abroad to work with the various overseas offices, meet with publishers to keep them apprised of our plans so to obtain their support, and visit libraries with the respective branch managers. **Bernhard Starkmann** of the Amsterdam office had done a superb job of not simply developing cordial relationships with a growing circle of Continental national, academic, and research libraries but in establishing a solid reputation among European publishers. **Bernhard** was selling not only English-language titles to Continental libraries but books published in Europe as well. In North America the firm had become a major source of books published in Europe, some acquired from the U.S. offices established by a few venturesome publishers but most acquired from the national house of the publishers.

All of this yielded another interesting pre-arranged encounter like those mounted in Australia aimed, I presume, to cause fireworks with **Richard Blackwell** or that in London with **Julian Blackwell** with the same outcome expected. This encounter was

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staged in the elegant ballroom of the **Hesserhof Hotel** in Frankfurt at the time of one of the Book Fairs, which someone from our firm routinely attended. It had been arranged by **Gunther Holtz**, who had opened the **Springer Verlag** office in New York and at the time of this incident had been elevated to the position of Marketing Director at the corporate headquarters. By way of background, I had picked up the rumor that our firm was viewed with extraordinary disfavor by **Mr. Dorn** (always addressed this way in the U.S.), who ran **Harrassowitz Buchhandlung** in Wiesbaden. He apparently resented the business we were doing with **Springer** and other German books. **Harrassowitz** was, and remains, a near legendary bookselling operation.

Gunther invited me to the **Springer** reception. When I arrived a substantial number of guests had already arrived but **Gunther** met me at the door to the ballroom. He introduced me to several persons in the **Springer** firm, which exercise had taken us to the middle of the floor. Then I noticed that all the guests had retired to the edges of the room leaving **Gunther** and I standing alone in the center. In moments the doors opened and who should walk in but **Mr. Dorn**. **Gunther** introduced us. I'm still uncertain as to what was expected next — fireworks I expect. Whatever we were height of mutual civility, soon the other guests returned to the floor, and as quickly as I could do so in a seemly way, I offered my thanks and departed. Another strange episode behind me.

At about the same time another strange development occurred. The president of a major New York book publisher called to learn if we might be interested in being acquired. After hurried in-house discussions I called back to set up a meeting. It seemed to us that such an arrangement would solve our financial problems and give publicly trade shares to the management group for the shares in the firm they had received by way of recognition of their contributions to the firm.

The first meeting in New York seemed very promising and a variety of major issues involved in the acquisition were resolved — including financial support, independence of operations, etc. A second meeting to be held in about a week was agreed, the date to be confirmed by the publisher. Nothing was heard for a couple of weeks, so I called. The CFO asked that I come out in a couple of days. I did so but only desultory meetings were held the first morning, none with the president. In considerable disgust I advised that I was returning to Portland yet that day. A few days later I learned that I had walked into the middle of a typical power struggle at the top of a long established publisher. The result was that the president who had initiated the talks was out and his assistant was in. Another strange episode behind the firm.

And life went on in the international book world which is not only compellingly interesting but often punctuated by strange turns. But despite these occasional episodes of the unusual, the way forward in the book trade remained much as it had for over the half-millennium of the existence of the codex. Writers continued to puzzle out along the edges of the vast realms of human ignorance

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about their world and its ultimate meanings, big and still unanswered questions that have preoccupied humankind for all the millennia of its being, and to offer their best, although invariably partial answers thereto. Publishers continued to invest in getting these partial answers into the near imperishable form of the printed codex. Booksellers continued to invest in the getting these codices as broadly distributed into the public square of ideas as possible — and so into the hands of readers. Librarians continued to invest in the acquisition, ordering, and storing of those codices for the use of contemporary readers, but more importantly for the use of future readers. And some of those readers would employ nearly every book as an ideational springboard to create additional hypotheses seeking to further puzzle out along the edges of the vast realms of human ignorance. 🌐

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