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Personal Reflections

“In 1937, there were four municipal colleges in New York City: City College, Hunter, Brooklyn, and Queens. The libraries were manned for the most part by a group of persons with the inspiring title of ‘Library Assistant,’ some of whom had library degrees and some of whom did not.... The gap between the Library Assistants and the elite ‘upper ranks’ was a wide one that persisted a long time. It was a ‘hoi-polloi’ – ‘hoi aristoi’ relationship or, as one might later say, labor vs. management.”

Eiberson, H. (1990). LACUNY then and now—mostly then. *Urban Academic Librarian*, 7(2), 4.

**Memoirs of a Not-So-
Young Ex-CUNY
Librarian**

Edwin Terry

When I retired from CUNY in 1988, I believe I was the senior member of the professional library staff. A couple of people at Hunter, who had served longer than I, retired shortly before I did. My service dates from 1948 when, as a young librarian recently graduated from Columbia University's School of Library Service, I joined the Queens College library department as Acquisitions Assistant.

As I recall, I was hired on the budget supporting a Master's Degree program in education, just approved at Queens. It provided the library with about \$10,000 for collections and \$3,300 for my salary. My payroll title was Library Assistant in those days prior to faculty rank for librarians.

Sidney Mattis was hired along with me. He started in the more senior title of Assistant Librarian in charge of reader services. Sidney had served for some years as a high school librarian and proved to be an outstanding staff member, outgoing and well-liked. For many years after his sudden, fatal heart attack in 1951, a room in the Klapper library bore his name.

Queens College in the forties was a young institution. Its library occupied the top floor of Jefferson Hall, the administration building fronting Kissena Boulevard. It was fairly small in both collection and staff. The collection was stored in the attic of the building. Just to point out how primitive the operation was, books were retrieved by means of a cardboard box with a length of rope attached. The circulation desk assistant would place a call slip in the box, and the box would be hauled up to the attic by a bookstack aide. The aide would retrieve the book, place it in the box, and lower it to the circulation desk. It wasn't until we occupied the new building that we had anything as up-to-date as a pneumatic tube and a mechanical book lift.

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My supervisor at the Queens College library was Joseph Brewer. Brewer was educated at Oxford and spoke and acted in a manner befitting the English gentry. He had entered the publishing business in the twenties under the firm name of Brewer, Warren, and Putnam. In the thirties he had been president of Olivet College in Michigan. Then he completed his work toward the master's degree at Columbia. He was in a very real sense a bookman, and he knew the antiquarian book trade well. I learned so much from Joe Brewer. He was highly regarded by the library staff and by the college faculty. He would take tea in the late afternoon, a ritual we all partook of. Now Joe is 90 years old and resides in a nursing home in North Carolina.

Morris Gelfand was Chief Librarian at Queens. He had joined the library staff when Queens College was founded and had served with the first Chief Librarian, Charles Gosnell. When Gosnell resigned, Gelfand succeeded him. After a stint in the army during World War II, he returned to Queens and, together with Joe Brewer, effectively led the library for the next twenty years. Gelfand and Brewer complemented each other very well. The latter was the bookman and collection builder; the former was the administrator who busied himself with various organizational problems, staff matters, reports and evaluations, work on the new library building, and sundry other activities. Gelfand was one of the founders of LACUNY, exactly 50 years ago. Today he operates a printing press in his home in Roslyn, Long Island.

I recall many of my staff colleagues at Queens. Some are deceased. But every so often I run into, or hear of others, who are very much with us: Lois Afflerbach, former serials librarian; Bob Colby, head of the language and literature division before joining the Queens library school faculty; Ken Freyer, information librarian; Margit Kraft, science librarian; Stanley Lewis, art librarian before joining the library school faculty; Morton Rosenstock, Sam Pinzur, reader services librarian; Doris Vorwald, education librarian; Margaret Webb, cataloger; and Ray Wile, reference librarian. All but Rosenstock are retired.

In the mid-50's the library moved from its quarters in Jefferson Hall to a spanking new building in the center of the campus. Designed largely by Charles Gosnell (in which he provided for a shower adjacent to the chief librarian's office), the Paul Klapper Library was named after Queens College's first president. In 1954 it was a handsome state-of-the-art structure of 120,000 sq. feet, with many modern appointments and ample space for the college population of the fifties. The technical services department where I worked had a spacious room on an upper floor.

The years spent at Queens were, on the whole, happy ones. As Acquisitions Assistant I had frequent contact with publishers, book dealers, and antiquarian bookstores. I soaked up much practical knowledge of the book trade from my mentor Joe Brewer, knowledge that I was able to capitalize upon when I moved to my next job.

But alas, I had been at Queens a long time, and promotions were few and far between. I was still on the entry level, a Library Assistant, in 1959. In the meantime, my family responsibilities had grown and I needed more wherewithal. So I began to look abroad.

I spotted a squib in a local paper that the new Nassau Community College would open in January, 1960 in Mineola, Long Island. Knowing they would need a librarian, I forwarded my resume, was interviewed, and got the job. I stayed there six and a half years. I would have remained, had it not been for the retirement of the first president and his replacement by a person who was less kindly disposed toward the library. The new president retained a consultant who surveyed the college and came up with a series of recommendations, including one that would place librarians in the civil service. Under this plan the librarians would lose the full faculty status they had enjoyed since the college's funding, would receive less vacation time, and would be placed on a different (though not necessarily reduced) salary scale from classroom faculty. When I learned that the president was prepared to implement these recommendations, I remonstrated without success. I myself had tenure as a full professor and did not have to accept the new status. However, I felt that the changed status of staff librarians

would be detrimental and would weaken the library. As a result I resigned in protest.

My friend Mort Rosenstock resigned as Chief Librarian of the Bronx Community College to become Associate Dean of Faculty in February 1967. Knowing that I was anxious to leave Nassau, he urged me to apply for his former position. I prepared a resume, was interviewed by President James Colston, and was offered the position. Not the least of the reasons for my wishing to return to CUNY was the faculty status enjoyed by CUNY librarians. I began my new position in September 1967.

Bronx Community College was dubbed the "little Harvard" in its early years by its faculty. The school then applied highly selective admissions standards that brought in a largely Caucasian, working-class student body and it had a higher preponderance of faculty with Ph.Ds than other community colleges. Much academic stress in the early years was placed on the faculties of the liberal arts and sciences, and a majority of the student body at graduation expected to transfer to one of the CUNY senior colleges.

The library contained 13,000 volumes in 1967, and the book budget was \$20,000. Spacewise the main library occupied 3,500 sq. feet in a corner of the first floor of the building at 184th Street and Creston Avenue, former home to Evander Childs High School and the Bronx High School of Science. A satellite library was at the nursing center in the northeast Bronx. There were five librarians in 1967 and an equivalent number of clerical staff. Given these conditions library development in the early years was hardly possible. The Chief Librarian also taught history, dividing his attentions between class and library.

My most eventful years at the college were from 1969 to 1971, those preceding open admissions. In 1969 student protests began over such issues as inadequate minority representation on the faculty. I well remember the day that several students chained the front doors of the library, confining the library staff for three hours, with the Dean of Students eyeing us dismally from outside the glass front doors, powerless to do anything on our behalf.

In that same year the library department Promotions and Budget Committee did not recommend my tenure appointment for internal political reasons. President Colston worked out an arrangement whereby he would authorize a new faculty line for the library in the title of Chief Librarian and the Promotions and Budget Committee would reconsider their vote for my tenureship in the department but not as Chief. The President felt completely justified in doing this because the college was on the verge of Open Admissions, which would demand an increased budget and additional staff positions.

In September 1970 open admissions began. It resulted in masses of underprepared students entering the university. Almost all were assigned to the community colleges which then had to inaugurate compensatory education programs in basic academic skills. Anticipating the substantial increase in students and consequent necessity for more space, the library, as early as Fall 1968, took over additional temporary space on Jerome Avenue.

Open admissions had a pronounced impact on our library. We had to acquire more books and audiovisual materials in remedial and developmental areas and because of the different ethnicity of our students, we began to acquire extensive materials in Black and Hispanic studies. Furthermore, the book collection had to reflect a stronger emphasis in career areas such as nursing, medical lab technology, business technology, and mechanical and electrical technologies.

Because of open admissions, our materials collection tripled in size between 1970 and 1973 and our professional staff size doubled. In 1974, recognizing that the "new student" required alternative formats to print, we opened a nonprint learning component in the library with a new staff member in charge.

My banner year was 1971. In that year I got my old job back. The new Chief had problems with his staff, and as his star fell mine began to rise. In 1971 I was promoted to full professor and received my doctorate in history from St. John's University. It was also the year that our library gave up its

184th Street location to occupy expanded quarters on Jerome Avenue, and it was the year that I contracted Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever.

In 1973 the college took over the University Heights campus of New York University. President Colston offered us a choice of locations for the library: the handsome Gould Memorial Library, a landmark structure designed by Stanford White or the more modern engineering library located in the basement of the Tech II building, a Marcel Breuer-designed structure built in the sixties. The Gould building did not seem to be as functional and adaptable as the engineering library. We decided on the latter.

The new library provided space for 100,000 volumes, 500 reader stations and ample offices for the staff. In 1974, we allocated about 2,000 feet to our new nonprint component, and we placed about 40 study carrels, equipped with projection and listening equipment, around the perimeter of the lower level. AV production had a separate area of some 4,000 feet. By 1976 the nonprint component had to move to a larger space in an adjacent building.

Budgetary retrenchment began in 1975. The library had to cut \$100,000 of its total budget and had to eliminate two professional positions in the AV area and four nonprofessional clerical positions. The book budget took a 50 percent cut. It was a terrible time for staff with intense friction and loss of morale.

These retrenchment events were further aggravated by the discovery of water leaks in the reference area of the library. The leaks eventually spread through the bookstack area and into some staff offices including my own. The problem persisted for several years despite efforts by the administration to solve it. Fortunately, we lost only a few books and the problem was ultimately solved.

President Colston resigned in 1976 and was succeeded in 1977 by Roscoe Brown of NYU. Brown was not the friend to the library that Colston had been; contending that the library was overstaffed, despite my counter

contention, he did not approve reappointment of two librarians in 1978. As the result of this action I began to see the handwriting on the wall.

We had now lost two important staff positions and Mort Rosenstock had returned to the college from a one-year stint at 80th Street with no real job to do. I saw the time as opportune to step down and I wrote out my resignation in October 1978 in which I recommended the names of two possible successors: Mort Rosenstock and Jean Kolliner. I heard nothing for two months. Then, around mid-December, a memo was forthcoming from President Brown to the faculty relieving me of responsibility as Chief Librarian and designating Rosenstock as the new Chief effective February 1, 1979.

When Rosenstock took over, he honored my request to divide my workload about equally between the library and the nonprint learning center supervised by Annette Peretz, whom I greatly admired. My principal responsibility was service at the reference desk, but while in the learning center I performed various other duties: reference, instruction, and acquisitions. When Jean Kolliner retired in 1984, I opted to work full-time in the learning center and did so until my retirement.

Though I had long been a member of LACUNY as a Chief Librarian, I did not become active in the Association until I began to serve as a staff librarian. In 1981, I became Chair of the LACUNY Professional Status Committee. The Committee concerned itself primarily with attaining parity in annual leave for librarians and classroom faculty. To this end, a number of strategies were attempted. I took what was considered a radical and controversial step sending a letter to the members of the Delegate Assembly of the Professional Staff Congress. Neither that nor any other ploy succeeded as we wished. Contract negotiations took place resulting in 2 to 3 week reassignment leaves for librarians. There was, however, no change in the annual leave allowance. In 1982, I joined the Publications Committee and worked on the Urban Academic Librarian (UAL), successor to the LACUNY Journal. Publication of UAL had languished since its first two issues in 1981, and the committee was concerned with its revival. With the

journal's reorganization I became co-editor and served with Sylvia Wright of City College and Arnold Genus of Hostos until my retirement. We did succeed in publishing the journal on a regular basis from 1983 on, although the quality of manuscripts received was not always high.

In my retirement I have been serving as an adjunct in the BCC's Learning Center and have maintained my membership on LACUNY's Publications Committee and the Advisory Committee to the minority fellowship program at the Queens College library school. I have also been involved in research projects. Annette Peretz of BCC, Aurelia Stephan of Nassau Community College and I produced a mediagraphy of print and nonprint materials in the health sciences, recently published by Oryx Press.

From the viewpoint of a seasoned academic librarian and politically conscious associate member, I would like to advise LACUNY to advocate the election of library department chairs, full parity of qualifications, rights and privileges for librarians and teaching faculty and in-service staff development including that which takes place during working hours. There is no more viable alternative position for an organization representing our profession.

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