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American Museum of Natural History Library

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AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY LIBRARY

By Nina J. Root

How many directors of libraries can walk out of their offices and in less than one minute be standing beside the skeleton of a 50 foot high dinosaur, or go down a different hall and be gazing at the twenty-foot wide cross section of a giant sequoia tree that had been growing since 500 A.D. at the time it was cut down?

These examples give some idea of the environment in which I as Director of the American Museum of Natural History Library do my work. After more than twenty years on the job, I'm still awed by the public exhibits, but my attention is principally centered on the mountain of printed library materials, photographs, motion picture films, archives, and countless other formats that are added daily to our burgeoning collections, as well as working with Museum departments for providing good service to the scientific staff. We go far beyond a book and journal collection, just as the scientists representing the Museum were often pioneers in using what were new formats at the time.

MUSEUM PROJECTS

This year we are celebrating the 125th anniversary of the founding of the Museum and its library. At its opening in 1869 the purpose was, briefly stated, that "...of encouraging and developing

the study of Natural Science; of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and to that end of furnishing popular instruction." In keeping with these goals the Museum and the Library have worked together in amassing what has been said to be the largest natural history library in the western hemisphere.

The educational goal of the Museum has been foremost in its plans and budgets since the earliest days, with two and a half million visitors per year, of which classes of school children represent at least half a million visitors annually. To meet the needs of school children, there is the Natural Science Center for third to sixth graders, or the Junior High School Natural Science Project, designed to encourage inner city children in their study of natural science. Those visitors who have visual or auditory impairments, or mentally retarded children and adults, can all take part in special learning projects on the weekends.

Another program consists of evening lectures and field trips for adults. Nearly 100,000 visitors have taken part each year in special weekend festivals designed to be educational, using films and live performers.

At the college level, hundreds of undergraduates and graduates from

colleges and universities take part in special research projects, some of which are designed to train teachers for science courses.

LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

In view of the wide breadth of interests of the Museum, encompassing every discipline related to natural history (except botany), the collection was planned to cover all aspects of this broad range of disciplines, seemingly including all the "ologies" known to man—from anthropology to zoology, including some fields not in the main stream of lay people's vocabularies, such as ichthyology or conchology. Now the collection contains over one million items, whose value has been estimated at more than one billion dollars.

Books represent about one half the total items, estimated at 400,000 volumes, of which 270,000 are periodical volumes. Currently over 6,000 journals are received, many coming as exchanges from scientific institutions all over the world.

A study made of the holdings of serials showed that 18% of its titles are held only by the Museum or a few other institutions in the United States.

The rare book and manuscript collection includes one incunabulum (a book published in Venice in 1495—Albertus Magnus's *De animalibus*). A few other examples include the four elephant folio volumes of Audubon's *The Birds of America* (1827-1838) or Darwin's accounts of the 1831-1836 voyage of the ship *Beagle*, along with the first edition of his work *On the origin of species* (1859). One of the strengths of this collection includes the original

journals kept by explorers and scientists, such as those of Roy Chapman Andrews while on the Central Asiatic Expeditions in the 1920s.

The great strength of the library in non-book and esoteric materials is evident from considering its holdings:

- Photographs: 1,000,000 still images
- Films: 3,000 reels and more than 700 video cassettes
- Rare books and manuscripts: over 13,000 items
- Art works and memorabilia: 1,750 items representing fine arts, artifacts, and memorabilia of explorers.
- Museum archives: a detailed record of the history and development of the institution.

Thus the library is the source of a very wide range of materials, going from current Middle Eastern periodicals on zoology to motion picture cameras used seventy years ago in Museum-sponsored expeditions to central Asia (one of which shows the discovery of the first dinosaur eggs found by scientists), or photographs taken in the 1880s and 1890s on expeditions to Siberia.

LIBRARY STAFF

The staff is small when one considers the enormous size of the collection and the constant rate of increase throughout the years. There are twenty-seven staff members assisting me, whether in reference work, acquisitions, conservation of materials, or technical services.

The care and processing of materials is done under the supervision of the Manager of Special Collections, who is involved in all the many types of

materials we collect. His expertise ranges from archives to fine arts.

One feature not found on many library staffs is a conservation laboratory, employing two conservators and other employees. They are able to restore damaged or soiled materials, rebind volumes literally falling apart, or construct containers for protecting rare items. To give some idea of the amount of time needed to restore a particular rare book, one conservator had to wash each page up to 20 times before it was completely free of the dirt and grime that had accumulated over the years.

The Technical Services section of the staff has versatility in handling the cataloging of all the various formats we collect. The Library is completing the reclassifying of all books into the Library of Congress system. Surveys are being made to prepare proposals for the conversion of all records into a computerized online catalog, which will greatly facilitate our service.

LIBRARY FACILITIES

For many years the Library existed in crowded quarters which were lacking in proper environmental conditions and were difficult for patrons and staff to use. Finally funds were made available for the construction of new space, and an attractive, spacious, modern library was completed in December 1992. The architect worked closely with me, making use of the notes and recommendations I had accumulated over the years. I feel the results were splendid.

There are eight stories of stacks plus excellent space for the staff, all of the space being air-conditioned,

humidity-controlled, air-filtered, and properly lighted. The space for library users is comfortable and spacious, while specialized equipment needed for the conservator and those using audio-visual materials has been provided.

Actually there are four different air conditioning zones, ranging from staff and reader areas to different temperature and humidity conditions for rare books or still different conditions for the film stack areas.

The cost of the project was approximately eleven million dollars. The resulting library is not only attractive but also is extremely functional, thus facilitating the work that can be accomplished by a relatively small staff.

The support given the Library in making this new home possible is indicative of the regard with which it is held by the Museum administration and by the public. Clearly New Yorkers and visitors from all over the world are aware of the value of this unique Museum and its Library.

Nina Root has been Director of the American Museum of Natural History Library for more than 20 years. She is located at American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79th Street, New York, NY 10024-5192. She is a graduate of Hunter College and the Pratt Institute of Library Science. She served as head of reference at the Library of Congress Science and Technology Division, where she received a Meritorious Service Award. She has been active in many library organizations and has been the author of numerous articles and books.

Captions for photos:

1. Nina Root, (Director of Library) and Joel Sweimler (Manager of Special Collections)
2. Light box facilitates viewing of slides
3. Paula Schrynemakers, book conservator, repairs a rare book in laboratory
4. Movie film processing equipment in use