ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL GIBBS

Information CENTRAL

The SU Library balances books and new technologies as it gears up to meet the challenges of the Information Age

BY DAVID MARC

Not long ago, some people thought libraries were headed the way of drive-in movie theaters—a few might survive as historical curiosities. With all due reverence for what had been the citadel of knowledge since ancient Alexandria, what role was there for the dusty warehouse of books in the emerging multimedia environment? Hadn't the Internet and personal computing created a customized window to the world of information on every would-be library patron's desktop—or lap?

Denise Stephens, Syracuse University Library (SUL) associate librarian for public services, recalls the sense of crisis that pervaded her profession as American society passed through a technological cusp during the '80s and '90s on its way to the Information Age. "As the web began to take off, we feared there would be fewer libraries and librarians," she says. "I remember a conference where a commercial vendor of statistical databases told us our days were numbered; a chill went across the audience. But those concerns have been wiped away. The library has done more than survive. It's at the center of the action in the wired world—for education, commerce, and just about every other aspect of culture."

According to Stephens, the need for librarians has grown as well, though the job has changed. With the Internet beckoning, hardly anyone strolls up to the reference desk these days to ask, "Which way to the encyclopedias?" With differing systems for storage, protection, and delivery of data developing among the various academic disciplines, there is a greater need for librarians to specialize in particular fields and to collaborate with faculty in those areas. "There is such a glut of information now available electronically that users are calling on our abilities to identify and access the most reliable sources," Stephens says. "Once they've found information, they want us to help them interpret and evaluate it. A good librarian today helps a researcher separate the grain from the chaff." Library users understand this. Graduate student Tristan Sipley, who is working on an M.A. degree in English, has a keen interest in American nature writing and spends a good deal of time at E.S. Bird Library studying late 19th- and early 20th-century literature and culture. "While the Internet has done great things in increasing access to archives and sources, the bottom line is that a lot of what you find isn't credible," he says. "You can't be sure that it came from a reputable source."

William Garrison, associate university librarian for information management services, sees today's library straddling two locations, one on campus, the other in cyberspace, with librarians guiding users between them. "Many people start their research in the library," he says. "Then, when they click into a good source, such as the right electronic journal, they may leave the library and access it from somewhere else." At that point, the physical library seems to lose importance. But would the student have found that journal without the help of the librarian? "The library is a portal today as much as it is a place," Garrison says. "Once you've moved through its open door to find what you're looking for, it's easy to forget the crucial role the library played in getting you there."

At SU, the advantages the library offers for conducting research are complemented by its value as a teaching resource. Jane Weiner, a television-radio-film professor at the Newhouse School, finds SUL's media library "indispensable" to her teaching. "I don't believe I'd be able to offer Writing and Designing a Documentary or either of my international film courses without the library's wonderful video and DVD collections," she says. "I don't know how students would work on their papers without the reserve viewing facilities." Apparently, Weiner is not alone in her enthusiasm. According to George Abbott, head of the library's media services department, "In a survey, we found that in a two-year period beginning in 2000, more than 30 percent of Syracuse faculty borrowed at least one audiovisual item from the library."

Radical Makeover

On the SU Hill, as elsewhere, the contemporary research library is reinventing itself as a new kind of all-purpose information center. This transformation, which began with the conversion of card catalogs into computer databases in the '80s, remains an ongoing process. New—and often very expensive—research software products and online services come to market

daily. A few will emerge as standard features, while some won't be worth the CDs they're burned on by the end of the school year. Others may prove essential for some institutions and a waste of money for others.

No one was more aware of the variety and complexity of current library issues than the late University Librarian Peter S. Graham, who died August 11 (see related story, page 39). After arriving at SU in 1998, Graham oversaw the metamorphosis of the SU Library system. With limited resources, he was determined to put the best tools for research and learning at the fingertips of faculty, students, and staff. His colleagues remain committed to getting Syracuse University the greatest bang for its buck in a worldwide information marketplace where access costs are accelerating along with the value of knowledge. "Research libraries such as ours have been undergoing a sea change that shows no sign of diminishing," Graham said. "Increasingly, scholarship is created and communicated electronically, even as we continue to purchase paper journals and books. This situation is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, and we are carefully striving to balance the print and digital needs of our users."

Garrison agrees that the hybrid library will be with us for some time. "While some want the library moving solely in an electronic direction and others see it as a last bastion of books, everyone will have to live in both worlds because neither, by itself, is capable of fulfilling all the library's functions," he says. "When it comes to ready reference, for example, we will continue to see more online services, because that's the most convenient way to look something up. At the same time, people still want to curl up in a chair with a good book."

Data MAPPING

With much talk of bibliotechnical razzle-dazzle in the air, the future has already arrived at Syracuse University Library's Digital Services Program in the form of the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Laboratory, which offers faculty and students easy and accurate ways to illuminate abstract data by mapping it. "Ninety percent of all numeric data can be geo-located on the Earth," says librarian John Olson, who heads the lab. "GIS can turn that data into a visual representation that can speak volumes about a location, a community, a nation, or the entire planet."

Faculty and student scholars use GIS to illustrate subjects ranging from the spread of the printing press in 15th-century Europe to the paths of neural activity in a chimpanzee's brain. In a business case study, GIS was used to make a site selection decision concerning the building of a new ski resort. Diverse factors, such as suitable terrain, access to major transportation options, proximity of competitors, and proximity of non-skiing attractions, were mapped so they could be viewed singly or simultaneously. "The GIS lab is a first venture into the next level of information interaction with users," says Denise Stephens, associate librarian for public services. "It is an example of how we help users define their outcomes."

Graduate student Sipley, who loves books and also appreciates the efficiency of electronic databases, believes that one of the library's most traditional functions is also among its most current. "It's a quiet place to read," he says. "Students are so inundated with distractions these days—TV, cell phones, video games, instant messengers, people stopping by to visit—it's really a struggle to find a space to concentrate. The library is a last refuge."

Open Access?

While many people are aware of the MP3 downloading controversy that has sent the recorded music industry into turmoil, much less attention has been given to a similar problem facing the information industry—and its hub, the research library. Most librarians agree that decisions made today on the nature of electronic intellectual property rights are likely to determine the cost and perhaps the very character of engaging in academic research for decades to come. While information is cheaper than ever to store and deliver, its rising value as a commodity is creating circumstances that could diminish access. "The idea of 'open access' is at the heart of the new ferment in the library world," Graham said. "In the academic networked world, open access refers to scholarly work made available for education and research at no cost to the library reader. However, open access is in direct conflict with the present publishing mode, which requires libraries to buy expensive subscriptions to journals. As a result, we must pay the publisher for access to what scholars, who are supported by this and other research institutions, have given to those journals for free."

Advocates of open access are developing alternatives. In 1996, for example, the Los Alamos National Laboratory established a "pre-print server" so physicists could get their work out to the scientific community before its appearance in copyrighted journals. The American Physical Association is now a partner in the enterprise, offering both pre-prints and e-prints on the web. Another model calls on university libraries to serve as repositories for the scholarly work and teaching materials generated by their entire faculties. "An institutional repository has the virtue of showcasing the scholarly accomplishments of a university for the world to see," Graham said. "Conceivably, it could connect to a global system of repositories, helping the cause of open access in scholarly communications."

Promising options notwithstanding, Peter McDonald, associate university librarian for collection development, finds that the costs of access are best moderated through memberships in library consortia. "A consortium uses the strength of numbers to negotiate stable prices for journals and databases," McDonald says. "The predictability of cost it provides is essential to rational budget planning." SU belongs to the NorthEast Research Libraries consortium (NERL), a provider of hundreds of e-journals and databases, whose 21 members include all eight Ivy League schools as well as Johns Hopkins, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Stanford. Membership is also maintained in the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI), a service of the Association of Research Libraries. CNI provides SUL with access to innovative projects and digital collaboration programs with more than 120 member libraries.

Very Special Collections

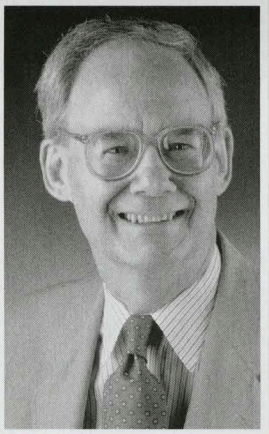
Enjoying the shared benefits of group buying power need not rob a library of its distinct identity, according to Christian Dupont, director of SUL's Special Collections Research Center or SCRC (*libwww.syr.edu/information/spcollections*). "We must face the fact that most of what libraries do, they no longer do uniquely," he says. "Now, more than ever, it is a library's singular assets that give it character. At Syracuse, our extraordinary special collections—including more than 100,000 rare books, as well as personal papers, corporate archives, and other artifacts—offer our library a powerful identity. I believe that the reputation of a research library is increasingly defined by its special collections."

Among the shiniest jewels in the crown is the Belfer Audio Laboratory and Archive, which contains more than 300,000 historical sound recordings in all formats, including 22,000 cylinder recordings made between 1895 and 1929. The archive, whose curator is Susan T. Stinson, was comprehensively indexed and cataloged in 1998 with a grant from the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation. Its range of aural treasures includes Robert Frost reading his poems, Arturo Toscanini rehearsing the NBC Symphony Orchestra, and conversations with photographer Margaret Bourke-White and Dr. Albert Schweitzer.

According to Professor John Coggiola, chair of the music education program, the Belfer collection constitutes a unique and valuable research tool for both students and faculty. "The extraordinary assortment of primary source materials is rich in opportunities for investigating connections between historical and contemporary music," Coggiola says. As an example, he cites the works of two recent graduate students who used Belfer holdings to study early performances of selected compositions. Justin Mertz G'02 chose "The Stars and Stripes Forever," a John Philip Sousa march; and Colin McNally G'04 examined the African American spirituals "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Every Time I Feel de Spirit," and "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." "The experience helped each of these promising conductors develop a keen sense of performance interpretation," Coggiola says. "They also gained historical insights that will help them teach their students to perform these selections with aesthetic refinement and historical accountability."

The library's special collections draw scholars to the Hill from far and near. Swedish literary critic Stig Bjorkman discovered more than 20 audiocassettes of radio interviews among the papers of novelist Joyce Carol Oates '60, which he transcribed for his book, *Joyce Carol Oates*. Historian William J. Gabler made use of several SUL collections in writing *Frank Higgins: New York's Forgotten Governor*, which featured a photographic reproduction from Higgins's papers for the cover. When Taylor Morrison set out to write *The Buffalo Nickel*, he came to Syracuse to have a look at the archive dedicated to the coin's designer. The James Earle Fraser collection consists of some 57 linear feet of boxes, filled with original artwork, correspondence, and other "stuff."

Special collections are typically associated with advanced research projects, but a special effort is made at Syracuse to exploit their full value as teaching tools. Each year, SUL awards a teaching assistantship, funded by the Charles A. Dana Foundation, to a graduate student who works with SCRC's staff to create classroom presentations that familiarize students and other library users with the joys of primary resources. Michelle Orihel, a doctoral student in early American history at the Maxwell School, is the current Dana Scholar. "One of the highlights of the experience was working on a presentation concerning the library's fantastic collection of the engravings of William Blake," she says. "For a historian, there is no substitute for having firsthand contact with these living objects."



Peter Graham
(1939-2004)

As this article was in production, University Librarian Peter S. Graham passed away, following a lengthy illness. Graham will be remembered on the Hill for leading the Syracuse University Library into the digital era and for appointing nationally known leaders to head its major departments. Prior to his arrival in 1998, Graham was associate university librarian for technical and networked information services at Rutgers University, a position he held for 12 years.

As is often the case with people who have a comprehensive view of things, Graham was as concerned with continuity as he was with change. Few people knew that he had once worked in a print shop or that he maintained presses in the basement of his home. "For Peter, setting type and printing by hand was not some weekend hobby," says Christian Dupont, director of the library's Special Collections Research Center. "Rather, it was a way for him to connect physically with the long tradition of scholarly communication in the West, which for centuries depended and thrived upon the hand press. The University and the academic disciplines it supports are in his debt for the help he gave in preserving scholarly traditions and advancing them into the future."

FOR MILLENNIA, libraries were built for conditions of information scarcity. Existing information needed to be physically housed and protected from the elements, not to mention the barbarians. Libraries are now being rebuilt for an age of information overload, characterized by connectivity, accessibility, and ease of retrieval. If the librarian's traditional job was to lead people to information, librarians today are more often needed to lead people away from misinformation and disinformation. "If you're a student using the web for research, what do you do when you come up with 20,000 hits on your search?" Stephens asks. "Do you check them all out? Or would you like to learn how to perform a search that will produce two dozens hits, some of which are usable in ways you had not imagined? If the latter appeals, my advice is to ask a librarian."