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From the Collector's Library: Tales From a Village Bookshop

Roderick Benton

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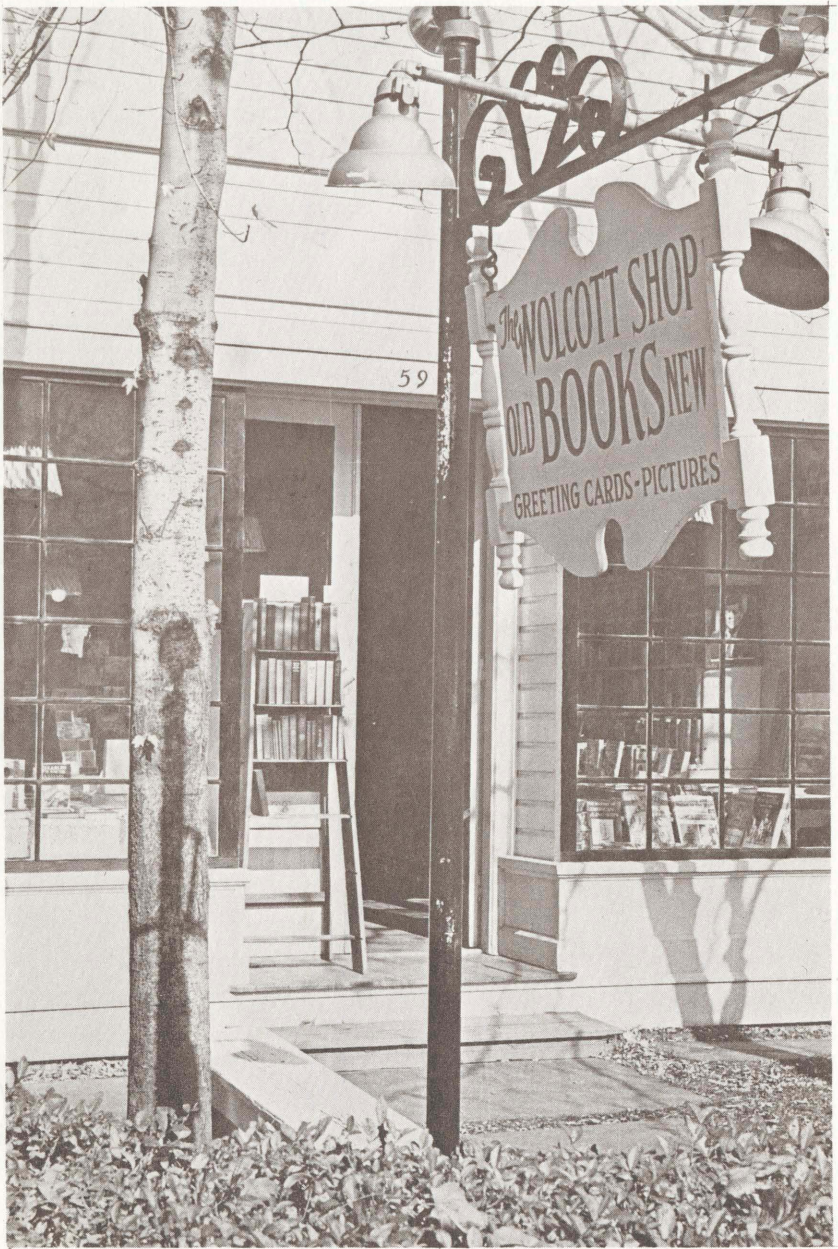


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The Old Bookshop, Skaneateles, New York

THE COURIER

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FROM THE COLLECTOR'S LIBRARY

Tales From a Village Bookshop

by Roderick Benton

Skaneateles is an upstate New York village situated at the tip of one of the Finger Lakes from which it gets its name. It is far enough away from the city of Syracuse to keep its identity, rather than being mistaken for a suburb. There are always plenty of summer residents who need to buy books to read on rainy days, to say nothing of the regular residents who have to pass the time during snowy upstate winters on the lake.

The Wolcott Shop in Skaneateles which we owned for many years was just the place to buy leisure reading, stocked as it was with books for all ages and interests. But it was more than that. It was a book-collector's bookstore.

The visitor would probably find our cat sunning herself decoratively in the window, perhaps minding the store while I was away on a brief errand to the post office. Most of the customers spoke to the cat in flattering endearments, but the regular customer could count on having a conversation with someone there, especially if he were a book collector.

One regular visitor was Mr. Henry Bannister who stopped in on his visits to our village. He was and is an enthusiastic and knowledgeable bookman and has formed a superb collection of his own. Sometimes Mrs. Bannister came with him and she, too, knows books. She believed then, as now, that our central New York school libraries should promote books on local history and folklore. We were able to find for her many of these books, such as Walter Edmonds's *Rome Haul*, *The Big Barn*, *Erie Water*, *Mostly Canallers*, and *Drums Along the Mohawk*; also Carl Carmer's *Genesee Fever*; and Constance Robertsons's *Nine Mile Swamp* and *Muller Hill*. This list should include two great books by Dr. Clarke of Utica, *Emigrés in the Wilderness* and *The Bloody Mohawk*, and the early historical novels of Robert W. Chambers, and *The Man in the Grey Cloak* by Harold MacGrath of Syracuse.

Mr. John Mayfield was a mail-order customer of ours long before he came to Syracuse and presented his million dollar library to the University. How lucky we are to have a book collector of his calibre in our community! If a bibliographical problem arose, a call from the shop to Mr. Mayfield would

always supply the information needed. His visits to our home are still a delight. His favorite diversion must be searching the shelves of old book shops. He usually finds something that other collectors and dealers have overlooked.

Mr. John Kohn of Seven Gable Bookshop in New York and his wife were regular summer visitors. John's specialty seemed to be early American fiction and the shop usually had a shelf of it for his inspection. Another important dealer, who came once or twice a year and of whom we were very fond, was Ernie Wessen of Midland Rare Book Co., Mansfield, Ohio. Ernie's catalog, *Midland Notes*, is a collectors' item for the amazing and accurate bibliographical information it contains. He was a superb conversationalist and his great anecdotes of bookselling and book buying should be preserved, but I fear that Ernie never recorded them.

Another interesting and frequent visitor to our shop was Professor A. McKinley (Pete) Terhune of the Syracuse University English Department. He is an authority on *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and the poet translator Edward Fitzgerald and has written a definitive biography of Fitzgerald. One day when Pete Terhune was in the shop another customer stopped in – rather a rough-appearing man who was a truck driver, dressed in his work clothes. He greeted us by exclaiming, "That was a great book you sold me last week! My wife and kids are crazy about it. Just the kind of book we want for our little library. I'll be glad to buy more of the same kind. I hope I pronounce it right: *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*." Of course he was introduced to Professor Terhune, the great authority on Omar and Fitzgerald. Pete was perhaps a bit stunned by this incident because after the customer had left Pete asked, "Is that the type of customer who buys poetry and English literature?" Assured that many of our best book buyers were truck drivers or men in humble circumstances, Pete said, "Have I got something to tell my students when I get back to the university!"

Among the regular and frequent callers was the elderly rector of the stone church up the street. He was a great reader and lover of books and as a result of his reading his sermons were the best we ever heard, full of literary and historical references and little theology. The rector and the cat became great friends. He approved of the cat's name, Flurette, because it was so appropriate and reminded him of cute little French girls. How an Episcopalian rector would know about cute little French girls we couldn't quite understand. But he did speak French and after he retired and moved away he wrote a letter in French addressed to Mlle. Flurette, Window Apartment, Old Book Shop, Skaneateles, New York. We bought his fine library and noticed inside the back cover of each book the date it had been read. One book had been read sixteen times in a twenty-year period! It was not a scholarly book but a most amusing social satire by E. N. Benson, one of the three gifted sons of the Archbishop of Canterbury. It was *Miss Mapp*, (1923) and is now difficult to find. (Benson continued with a series using many of the same characters and the books are all hilariously funny.)

A woman came in the shop one day and asked if there were any books with lavender bindings for sale. I thought a minute and said that I had a few, but wondered what type of literature she wanted. "Oh!" she said, "I don't care what they are so long as they are lavender to go with my newly decorated bedroom. They would look so nice on the table." So we found four or five books by Myrtle Reed with such titles as *Lavender and Old Lace*, *Old Gold and Silver*, *The Master's Violin*, etc., "all bound in lavender cloth, lettered in gold and silver, gilt tops, other edges untrimmed, printed on excellent paper and in perfect condition. No pornography in these and no four-letter words and all could meet with the approval of the Christian Endeavor Society, the W.C.T.U., and the Holy Name Society." After this little sales talk the woman seemed much pleased with her purchase. (A few years later when her effects were sold we repurchased Myrtle Reed.)

People often wonder where we find our rare books, so without giving away many trade secrets I'll give a couple of examples of our book purchases.

One night when we were reading in bed, as usual, I said to my wife, "I'm reading the biography of Thomas Bailey Aldrich in which he states that when he was a young chap shortly after the Civil War, he used to visit a large home a few miles south of Auburn, New York. His hosts used to row him across Owasco Lake to another large old home called 'Willowbrook.' Here he was shown a large old library with the most amazing collection of rare books: old black-letter printing, sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century books, literature, history, philosophy, Americana, early explorations of America by Europeans, and first editions which included all of J. Fenimore Cooper except *The Spy*. There were no rebound books and all were in at least respectable condition for their age."

My wife said, "Maybe the books are still there. We could find out as I have a friend that lives right next door."

So the next day we drove over and met the caretaker of Willowbrook. He was very helpful and was pleased to show the library. The books were all there just as T. B. Aldrich described them. The caretaker thought the family might soon wish to dispose of the books and gave us the name and address of the lawyer in New York who took care of the business for the heirs.

We wrote at once and received a reply that the books would be sold and naming a price, which was somewhat unusual as most sellers want an offer. The price seemed high, but we decided we would never again have such an opportunity to handle such rare items, so we sent a certified check to the lawyer and received notice that the books were ours. Our check had beaten an historical society check by just one hour. We made at least ten trips to cart the books home and place them in our large shelved room in the basement of the house. It would require weeks of work examining the books and pricing them.

One of the most interesting items was a leather-bound diary written by the wife of an army officer who was sent to New Mexico to protect early

settlers from hostile Indian tribes. She traveled across the plains in a hospital wagon and took part in several battles and nursed the wounded. She became a friend of the noted scout Kit Carson and recorded many of their conversations. She entertained General Sherman on one of his inspection trips and listed the elaborate menu served in their tent. It seems the General lacked many of the social graces usually looked for in hosts. The diary is now owned by the library of one of our large western universities.

“It never rains but it pours” is an old saying. That same week we bought another library of fifteen thousand books through the trust officer of a bank. These we hired a truckman to transport and stored them in an old carriage house barn that we rented for the purpose. These books had belonged to a gentleman with several university degrees who had never had to work and so spent his life in study. The older books and standard classics were nicely bound in leather, the modern books were in mint condition in dust wrappers, and there was no fiction.

In Skaneateles today we know of but two fine libraries. One has been formed by Mr. Norwin Hoffman, a Syracuse University graduate, who has been our good friend and steady customer for many years. While covering many fields, his library is particularly strong in Orientalia. The other notable collection belongs to Mr. Weir Stewart and is a scholarly library of literature, classics, history, philosophy, theology, and the best of reference works.

Life in a bookshop is not all books and literature. I should mention the art exhibits by local artists held on the lawn in front of the shop and luncheons and picnics on our patio back of the house and shop. (Flurette, our cat, was in her element on such occasions and had a good chance to increase the number of her friends and acquaintances.)

Sometimes it would be necessary to close the shop for a few hours when we went book hunting. At such times we would put our little sign on the door stating, “Will return shortly.” Even when we were gone several weeks in Europe the sign would remain on the door.

Now enough time has been spent on reminiscences. We are ready again to close up shop after putting our sign on the front door.

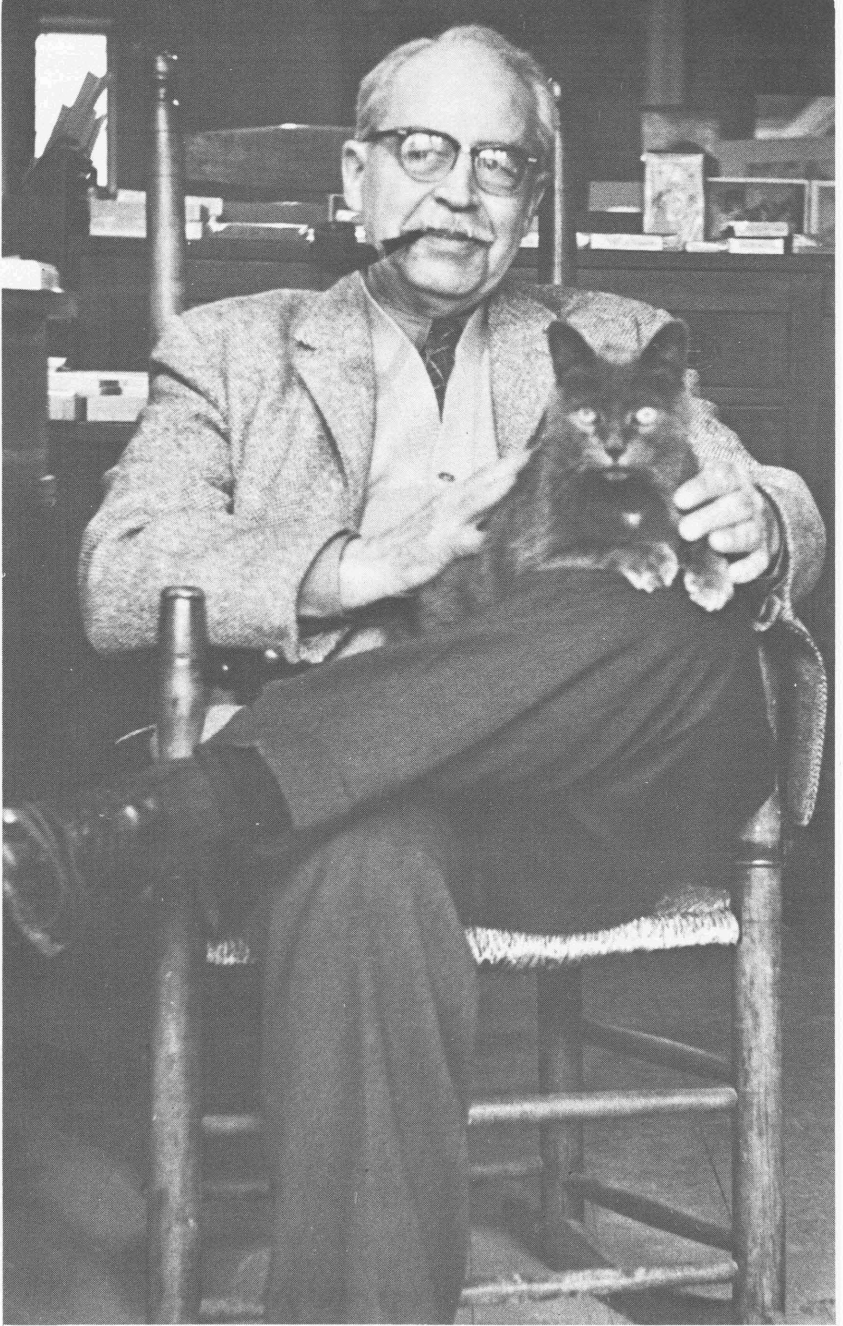
WILL RETURN SHORTLY

Post Script Shortly after Mr. Edward Lavery took over the old shop for his law office a woman rushed in and said, “Where are all the books?”

“Why, this is no longer a bookshop but a law office,” Mr. Lavery replied.

“That’s just the trouble with the country today,” said the woman. “There are too many law offices and not enough old book shops.”

* * * *



Mr. Roderick Benton and Flurette

The Wolcott Shop opened in its original location as one of the first two tenants in the White Memorial Building in Syracuse, New York, in 1881. The founder was Mr. Clarence E. Wolcott, whose original store was modeled after the studio of Sir Walter Scott and had an upper balcony of books above the main floor. It brought a little bit of Abbotsford and its "Laird" to Syracuse and a tradition for fine books that set this store apart and endured through all of its days. Mr. Wolcott was a great bookman in the old tradition. He was widely known among book lovers and in the trade. He was the first president of the American Booksellers' Association.

In 1921 Mr. Wolcott moved his store from Syracuse to Skaneateles where it was located in a small white frame building next door to the Skaneateles Library Association. The shop was a cozy place with a trimmed hedge in front. Two large mullioned windows looked out upon the street and gave a hint of the treasures to be found within. Books filled the shelves from floor to ceiling and spilled over onto tables everywhere in the shop. A nook in the rear held a desk, a chair in which a comfortable grey cat could usually be found, some shelves holding special books and a large pot-bellied stove that radiated its warmth throughout the place and lent a glow to the enjoyment of browsing along the shelves.

Mr. Wolcott was succeeded by his stepson, Mr. Roderick Benton, who conducted the shop's business until 1971 when it was finally closed. For those of us who were fortunate enough to know the Wolcott Shop during its Skaneateles days, it was a very special place. More than any other institution along Genesee Street, it bestowed a charm that somehow made Skaneateles different. The Wolcott Shop typified a graciousness and a way of life that is too quickly growing rare. It called to mind Christopher Morley's Haunted Bookshop and visiting there was an experience we shall not soon forget. Nostalgic memories remain with those of us who discovered its treasures. There will always be a warm feeling in our hearts for "Vi" and "Rod" Benton whose vision and taste remained true to the founder's traditions and made the Wolcott Shop what it was. Its closing has marked the passing of something unique. We are all richer for having known the Bentons and the Wolcott Shop, and we cannot help feeling a sadness that it is no more.

Henry S. Bannister