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## Of Collectors, Collections, and Libraries

Frank P. Piskor

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# THE COURIER

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# Of Collectors, Collections, and Libraries

By Frank P. Piskor

*At Library Associates' Annual Members' Luncheon, April 28, 1978, Dr. Frank P. Piskor received the Syracuse Post-Standard Award for Distinguished Service to the Syracuse University Libraries. (See The Courier, XV, 2 and 3, Summer 1978). The text of his talk on that occasion was published in A.B. Bookman's Weekly (June 26, 1978, p. 4515). The following is his talk as delivered, taken from a tape-recording graciously given to this editor by Mrs. Ramona Bowden of the Post-Standard staff.*

*The additional comments enrich the text and reveal the quality of the man so happily remembered at Syracuse University. The ad lib portions of Dr. Piskor's talk constitute more than two-thirds of the talk as here presented. For ease of reading, these extemporaneous remarks and the written text are not set off with special type or brackets.*

*Dr. Piskor has been a book collector for many years. During his tenure at Syracuse University he took a great interest in the library and Library Associates. He is now president of St. Lawrence University.*

I wish I could believe all that is written about me in that [Post-Standard Award] citation.<sup>1</sup> I'm really quite an ordinary college president. We all try to be extraordinary and end up being quite ordinary; but I'm satisfied to be typical and run-of-the-mill. A friend of mine has a very fine definition of what an ordinary college president is; and I fit it, because when I think I have no choice but to be in charge, I ponder; and when I know I'm in trouble, I delegate; and when I'm really in doubt, which is much of the time, I mumble. Now if I could overcome these characteristics I might move toward the "extraordinary" phase and be able to be referred to differently.

I remind Chancellor Tolley that when we first had these affairs and invited distinguished performers like Norman Strouse or Sol Feinstone, what we really hoped for was that they'd show up with a rarity worthy of the occasion; and remembering that, I intended to do so. And I had a rarity relating to Picasso that I was prepared to part with for this occasion! But knowing that this library has grown and really grown significantly and that its resources have grown and grown significantly; in no small measure because of what people in this room have done for it, I said to our librarian, or maybe one of my favorite librarians, in the library at St. Lawrence, "Please

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<sup>1</sup>See *The Courier*, XV, 2, Summer 1978, p. 38.

check for me to make sure that this item does not already exist at Syracuse.” She did—we have an OCLC terminal—there it was: you have it. I report it because I’ll find another thing.

You know, a real bibliophile really has to have a heart-to-heart struggle over what he’s going to part with. Although it’s not easy for me even to part with something related to Picasso, one of my late interests, I was prepared to part with this. I’ll find at least one other thing. If I don’t, my wife will. We have a new rule in the house: we may continue our interest in rare books and continue our interest in being a bibliophile; but for every book that comes in, one must go out. Many individuals and many libraries benefit as a result; but that’s the rule. She’ll tell you privately that I keep cheating on that, that I’m not holding up my part of the bargain; but we try. So, Mrs. Mozley, I’ll give you a public promise that either I replace what I was prepared to deliver here with something that isn’t going to be a duplication, or you’ll have to tell me privately what it is you most wish to have now; and maybe I’ll have to settle for that.

I want to thank you all for being here. I thank many of my colleagues who have done so much to help me make something of my life; and I thank some students who somehow survived. Bill Tolley and I were reminiscing about some of those in the room here. I’ve already made my peace with every librarian with whom I’ve had an argument. I kissed every librarian with whom I remembered I had an argument. So many of you have contributed so much to whatever career I have had. Among the enduring things which continue to enrich my life is what I like to refer to as the Syracuse Book Connection: a connection the Associates have unquestionably played the primary role in keeping vital and alive. So I salute you and your program. I still think of it as a program of which I am a part and will continue to be a part, thankful for your contribution and grateful for this honor. As one of the promoting salesmen (because I remember discussions about this award very well, Mr. Gorman) as one of the promoting salesmen for the establishment of the *Post-Standard* Award, I should probably have disqualified myself as a recipient; but I do not intend to raise the question except in this very half-hearted, fleeting way, to salve my conscience, because it’s my own conscience and not yours.

When your letter of invitation arrived, I really did not register that this meeting would mark the twenty-fifth year of service of the Library Associates of Syracuse University. I find as I grow older that there is one sense in which we try to slow things down a little, and these great anniversaries somehow tend to generate double-edged meanings. What a sweet milestone for so many of us in this room! Twenty-five years of any kind of volunteer service deserves celebration

in these times, but so many years of volunteer affection and attention to a university library is a remarkable achievement in any institution's history. To Syracuse University, your devotion, your determination and your abiding optimism has, in my view, made a critical educational difference in the stature and the life of this institution. You have much that you can reminisce about with deep satisfaction: the magnificent physical facilities housing the Bird Library, and the George Arents Research Library, and a Library Associates journal of the highest quality. I read several of these, and this is really one of the journals of quality now in the library world.

And the Library development program! Now Don Anthony told me earlier that there are still a lot of problems. All I want to say to him is that trying to fit four hundred thousand volumes in a two hundred thousand capacity building and deciding where you're going to put a million plus, I think is a little more complex than all of the technological problems I know he's facing. The Library Resource Development Program, in retrospect, is one to boggle the imagination of certainly one of the many hearts here; and also, as Library Associates, there are your own very special enrichment efforts.

As I greeted people and shook hands, each one of you had a special association and a special thing that I could spend the afternoon reminiscing about and will not. And if I may be permitted just one commercial, you possess the kind of appreciation for learning in this room that I pray for at St. Lawrence where a much younger organization called the Friends of the Owen D. Young Library is involved in similar efforts on the undergraduate college level, including a four-million-dollar building addition for which we've just broken ground.

As previously announced, I propose to share some thoughts with you today "Of Collectors, Special Collections, and Libraries." My interest, quite frankly, is to register my deep concern for the dwindling number of young collectors and to encourage in every way possible the creation, nurture, and feeding of a new generation in its commitment to the meaningful accumulation of books.

I spent one hour of my business day in New York City yesterday at the fourteenth International Antiquarian Book Fair. And it is a fine fair. It's worth seeing. The interesting thing about it is that in that massive hall probably the average age of the collectors there was substantially over sixty. I saw no young people, although there are a lot of young people in New York. I didn't think the entrance fee was the thing discouraging them. It may be that Monet was competing more successfully at the Metropolitan, but I doubt it.

Those of us who think that there's more than personal delight and satisfaction in being a bibliophile need to rethink the whole business of the young collector and the manner in which to engage and interest him in this activity. Let me hasten to add that I do not come armed

with a briefcase full of recent statistical surveys; but rather just a “gut feeling” that, on a national basis, fewer individuals are devoting time to forming quality collections of books and manuscripts for their own use and enjoyment and of future significance for libraries and the learning community.

Many contemporary developments conspire, of course, to create the shrinkage. Inflation’s impact on the cost of books is well known, and is a definite factor in discouraging collectors.

I think that of the rarest items in a poetry collection that I still enjoy, *American Poetry Since 1900*, the average item was acquired at a time when poetry was in such disrepute that you could get great volumes for twenty-five cents, fifty cents, one dollar. I realize that young collectors do not have that kind of privilege. One senses what the inflationary impact has been. The radical changes in the nature of the publishing and the marketing of the product, the book, are also broad. Finely printed books, for example, are harder to come by; and when they are available, their market life, the time they’re offered on the market, is frequently so short that one hardly has the time necessary to save the money needed to purchase them. The publishing practice of “remaindering” books helps some collectors some of the time. I’m not against remainder houses, but they also hinder those still in the process of learning the subtleties of the remainder trade. Sometimes a book is officially out-of-print and still available in the remainder shops, but that fact is not readily available or established.

Now Mr. Fred Pierce, one of our old bookstore managers years ago, sat in my office at Syracuse University and said to me, “The real rare books are being created right now by publishing practice.” This was in the 1950s, and he said, “I can already demonstrate to you that the books of 1950 are in fact rarer than many books of 1590.”

If you reflect on that, I think you’ll find that the nature of the publishing business in fact is creating the built-in book obsolescence practiced by an increasing sector of the book-publishing world. That is to say, the deliberately cheaply made book, designed to be a throw-away, discourages collection.

The increasing cost of producing booksellers’ catalogues has resulted in significantly fewer regular issues; so much so that many of those still produced almost immediately become important collectible reference tools. I have some book catalogues which I simply keep for reference in my own bibliophile activities, now worth one hundred, one hundred and fifty dollars apiece, just because they come out so infrequently.

Of course no recitation such as this could be complete without mourning the demise of so many great used-book stores and with them their proprietor-counselors. I’m glad Mr. Sylvester is here today. I’m honored and flattered that he is here today, because he was a book-counselor of mine when he ran a little hole in the wall on Washington

Street with rarities that I still water over and wish that I'd acquired at the time. As he got to know my interests, he was a tremendous counselor, in feeding that interest.

I think of the antiquarian book shop in Park Place, Newark, New Jersey; and I still hold from there a rare Ezra Pound item, given to me by a bookseller whose name I never knew. The shop was bulldozed in urban renewal. I hope the books weren't bulldozed with it. They probably were. I'll always remember that bookman because he was so wise in his advice: so wise to direct you where to look in a shop where the first thing you have to do is get over twelve cats to get to the books. Now isn't it tough to know that those things are going out of existence?

And there are people, many people in this room, who remember Fourth Avenue, New York City, when it was just an avenue of books. You go down there now and there's no one on Fourth Avenue that you really know. I still go to get advice from an old bookseller that Dr. Tolley introduced me to at Dauber Pines.—To proper Bostonians who remember the Bridle Book Shop, it was worth the price of admission and the price of the book just to step over all the books you had to step over to get to the ones you wanted.

Urban blight, urban renewal, the inevitable impacts of time and age have taken their relentless toll with the result that fewer friendly advisers to book collectors exist in the trade. How can one build a collection without advisers?

The new fact in the book-collection universe today, of course, is the institution, just as it has been in recent years in the stock market. Institutions, particularly general and specialized research libraries, are the primary markets for booksellers because they buy in bulk, if you please, and seek out total collections of all kinds. They are therefore sought out as accounts and cultivated by booksellers in preference to the individual collector.

As a result, institutional presence affects what the individual can do, what he must pay, what he has available to consider for purchase, and last but not least, whether he will enter the competition at all. And it affects the psychological as well as the economic climate which prevails. To illustrate (and I still get a little palpitation when I think about this): the outright purchase of Lowdermilk's bookstore in Washington by an institution can be viewed, as I see it, as a mixed blessing—positively in terms of the enrichment it made possible in the numerous collections of a great university, but negatively in terms of closing forever still another used book "wetland" (the ecological reference is mine) where budding individual collectors could try their collecting wings at modest outlays. Anyone who had an experience even for a day in Lowdermilk's knows what I'm talking about and what the future generation is going to miss. And the Lowdermilk



sale, as we all know, is simply one of a growing number of such acquisitions. Institutions buy total collections in many other ways: as bidders at auctions, as worldwide searchers with sophisticated intelligence and scouts at their command.

My view should not be interpreted as a condemnation of what happened to Lowdermilk's and bookshops of that type. Much more disastrous consequences could have followed, and you can imagine them as well as I can, for there are ignominious as well as sad ways to close a book business. My concern is that we try more fully to understand the impact on the individual collector struggling to exist, struggling to be born, if you please.

We must remind ourselves again that institutional collectors need, and will continue to need, individual collectors to help provide and diversify the unique dimensions to their collections—an academic way of saying that libraries better remember how much of their uniqueness comes out of individual bibliophile interest

It goes without saying that institutions have no choice but to continue to do whatever legitimately meets their responsibilities for building of their resources. But do they not also have new obligations to create, rekindle, nurture, and promote the development of the next generation of collectors, just as they historically assume obligations for developing readers, browsers, and researchers? I feel they do, and that the time is long past due when the effort should be made in earnest.

What is called for is a new look at what needs to be done to enhance the care and feeding of bibliophiles. The type of effort begun by George Arents, right here in Syracuse, and enlarged here in Syracuse by David Fraser and John and Edith Mayfield, needs to be extended.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the book collections of young collectors through prizes is very good. More promotion efforts at all school levels need to be undertaken.

We have school library coverage now. We could start right there, at the school library level. I've seen it done because I finally sold one of my librarian daughters on doing it. Now I think she's created more teenage bibliophiles in East Lyme than we can probably count right now in Syracuse, New York. So it can be done. After all, most of us caught the disease from another collector rather than being taught how to become involved. There is a new frontier here for teaching.

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<sup>2</sup>See *The Courier*, XV, 1, Spring 1978, p. 16.

We should recognize just how many book-collecting journals no longer exist and correct that extinction through alternative efforts. A journal as fine as your Library Associates journal could provide leadership by instituting a department or even a periodic column for the beginning collector, especially the youthful one. In collecting, even more so than in some other areas of endeavor, way leads on to way, as Robert Frost once observed in another context. Such a department in your magazine could focus on the human drama involved in the collections formed and donated to a university like Syracuse. What great stories there are in the collections that now grace the George Arents Research Library in the Bird Library that were formed right in the dreams of people in this room! How did David Fraser get interested in fine bindings? I've known him all my life, and I really don't know. That ought to be in the public domain. Or Sol Feinstone, his interest in Washington? Or W.P. Tolley in Kipling? I only know part of that story. Or Newell Rossman in Panama? (I hope you've extricated that Panama collection from him; I was thinking of it during the treaty debates.) Or yours truly in Robert Frost, Richard Hughes, and Robert Graves? Would not the answers make fascinating reading? It would be reading that would get into the public domain.

As I was thinking about this, having put it in manuscript form and flying back with it and criticizing it, I said to myself, maybe it ought to be more formal. Do you remember the *Paris Review* interviews with authors, which are now all collectibles and all very expensive as a result of the interviews with Robert Lowell, Robert Frost, Marianna Moore, and so forth? You could have interviews with collectors who contributed to this library. Those interviews would become important kinds of records of bibliophiles for bibliophiles for this new movement in the teaching library which I think is going to come, whether you get interested or not.

Ben Lake and I were sharing the fact that one of the great privileges in our bibliophile disease is that every so often you can find something that a friend of yours really wants and never has been able to find. That's one of the great satisfactions. I can remember, still, coming back from a trip (I used to always say to my students that instead of spending my time in New York in bars I'd spent it in bookstores), I can remember the special thrill in coming back and saying to Newell Rossman, "Have you got this book on Panama?" If he didn't there was a double thrill; there was a double satisfaction.

New collectors, particularly youthful ones, can be stimulated by starter collections. I recently gave a young scientist, fifteen years old, interested in recent moon explorations, such a collection of some twenty books on the moon, all written in the last fifteen years, and suggested to him the variety of ways of building such a starter set into

a collection of quality, over the next twenty, thirty, or fifty years. The last time I checked with him he was being tempted not only by collecting in the direction I'd suggested, but expanding it far beyond the moon. He thought he'd better get involved with all of the planets. The interest, the example, help, and testimony of all collectors for the breeding of new collectors just cannot be overestimated.

Another approach (and I'm nearly done, and you're very good so be patient), another approach is the unique exhibition catalogue. This is not a new idea; museums, art museums have done it for a long time. Anni Berman can tell you that now three and four museums get together, put together one traveling collection. All get credit for it, cover the whole country with it. Libraries do too little of that.

Years ago, Syracuse did an exhibition catalogue on the moon. Do you remember that, Dr. Tolley? It was tremendous. It was a first, I think, on the moon; and it represented rarities from many libraries. We responded to the demand, and we produced two editions. I can remember the thrill we received when we got an inquiry for that catalogue from the Leningrad Library, U.S.S.R. We produced two editions even though we couldn't afford to pay for one. I saw the second edition of that catalogue (in a book catalogue within the last two months) which you are privileged to buy for fifteen dollars. So hang on to your copy if you have it, because it'll only go one way: up.

That's the kind of thing I'm thinking of, on a more inter-institutional basis.

More recently, as many of you in this room know, Syracuse participated in that wonderful catalogue (put together by a great friend of Syracuse and mine, Edward Latham, retiring now as director of Libraries at Dartmouth), the *Frost One Hundred*, which is not only a unique bibliographical contribution, but a stimulating and suggestive example of collecting for all collectors, as well as collectors of Frost. Now that was one hundred special books relating Frost to his friends, institutional and personal friends, in a very special way.

I was flattered to have one item of mine in that collection, the English edition of *A Masque of Mercy*. And I might just digress and tell you the story. The introduction to that English edition was written by Frost, but not signed by him. So I wrote him one day, and I said, "I'm sending you this. I'd like you to sign this particular introduction so that they won't debate in the future whether you wrote it or not." Well, he took months as he always did, to respond; but he finally responded with a nice letter about the book. He not only signed the introduction, but annotated the book throughout. That's why it took so long. At the beginning of the essay entitled simply, "Introduction," he wrote this note: "Thanks for sending this. I forgot I wrote it." Then, just a little line that scholars from everywhere have wanted Xeroxed (if I've paid for one Xerox, I've paid for at least fifty) because

he went on to say, “I had forgotten I wrote this for Jonathan Cape. I like to hope you will find it interesting play. I weep in parts of it.”

That’s all a scholar needs, that one line to speculate about.

Syracuse, in that *Frost One Hundred*, had (and this is the only other anecdote and we’re almost through, see how I keep promising?), Syracuse, in that *Frost One Hundred*, had one of the great copies of *North of Boston* in the nation, I dare say in the world.<sup>3</sup> And the reason I want you to know the story is because one of the things that I always appreciated about W.P. Tolley was his utter disregard at the proper time for the pragmatic and realistic. Now let me explain that.

I’ve never submitted a bid for anything in an open auction, let alone an open bid at Sotheby’s in England. Margaret Cohen, of The House of Books, Ltd., brought to my attention that the book was to be auctioned and thought that Syracuse should have it. She wanted an open bid, meaning, of course, that she could bid as high as she had to. This meant the final cost of the book could be between one thousand and two thousand dollars. Dr. Tolley and I agreed to go for broke! As a result this is one of the most distinguished items in the Syracuse collection. It traveled throughout the country with those famous one hundred Frost items.

Finally, what would happen if the Library Associates offered to provide counsel on collection design and development? What would happen if librarians provided a book-collecting advisory service?

We have reader advisory services. We didn’t when I was a youngster. I don’t know about you, but we have them now. We consider it indispensable in public libraries. What’s the difference between reader advisory services and bibliophile advisory services? They’re simply different sides of the same coin. So you see the challenges are there, and they cry for trying. Now I know that everyone in this room really understands and believes that book collecting is an art and the collector truly an individual artist. If we’d remember that and believe it more often, I think we’d not only enhance our enterprise, but encourage others to become involved. If book collecting is an art and the collector an individual artist, it follows, I think, that like all meaningful artistic endeavor, book collecting should generate delight: delight in the plan for collecting, in its development and growth, the uses to which it is put, and its eventual home. Ben Lake and I were talking about the eventual homes for our collections. He didn’t ask me about anything for Syracuse, but I understood, I understood. George Arents would have endorsed this view, I think.

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<sup>3</sup>This refers to a first edition, first issue (London, David Nutt, 1914) of *North of Boston* by Robert Frost, a unique Association Copy. It was given by Edward Thomas to W.H. Hudson. Later Frost inscribed the book himself.

At a meeting of the Syracuse Library Associates which I'll never forget, I had the privilege of sitting on one side of George Arents. He actually gave me more good advice about how to form my budding college history collection than any historian ever did. So at that meeting, Mr. Arents advised his audience to buy books because, and I'm quoting him because I wrote the quote down after I got home, "because you love them and because they mean something for your intellectual life and hold promise for it."

Curiously, he was silent concerning one of his greatest personal delights, the delight of choosing individuals and institutions with whom to share his treasures. And he certainly knew how to do it. I never spend a week in New York without at least trying to get to the Arents Room in the New York Public Library, simply because one comes out a more inspired and better man for having dropped in.

As fulfilling as personal enrichment is, the book collector's opportunity to give of his treasure is the truly special privilege, for it is at this point that the results of the collecting imagination meet the cutting edge of so many facets of this human business we call education. (Speaking of giving, there is Marian Forrest, whom I'm honored to have here this morning, because as my secretary, she had to be a collector. In my collection I have a Marianne Moore letter that my secretary gave me.)

Alfred North Whitehead observed many years ago that:

The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory; it is energizing as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes.... Fools act on imagination without knowledge; pedants act on knowledge without imagination. The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience.<sup>4</sup>

That last sentence says so much, doesn't it? "*The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience,*" and it is in this process of *welding* that special treasures, like the ones we've been referring to and talking about and that you're dedicated to, it is in this process of welding that special treasures contribute to Whitehead's

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<sup>4</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aim of Education*, New York, Macmillan, 1929, p. 139.

view of imaginative consideration and the atmosphere of excitement. This is the collector's challenge, this is the collector's privilege. Ours is the challenge of finding new ways of encouraging him to multiply and commit himself to the quest.

Goethe once observed, "We are shaped and fashioned by what we love." You and I love books; we love collections; we love libraries; and we love collectors. Aren't we fortunate?