

Editor's Note

SIDNEY E. BERGER

The opening essay of this issue, Daniel J. Bradbury's "Barbarians within the Gate: Pillage of a Rare Book Collection?," emanates from the June 1993 Rare Books and Manuscripts Preconference in New Orleans. The subject of that meeting was "Mainstream or Margin: How Others View Special Collections," and this essay views special collections from the perspective of an administrator who faced the unenviable task of selling off most of his rare book holdings.

Many collections need to be weeded occasionally. But some may see the "weeding out" of an entire rare book collection from a library to be a radical and undesirable act and an appalling precedent to set. Is the jettisoning of such a collection defensible? What were the particular circumstances that the Kansas City Public Library faced which occasioned this dire decision? What public and private reasons were given for it? Did the ends—raising money and deaccessioning a rarely used and essentially inaccessible collection—justify the means? What arguments did the opponents raise? Who was right? This article not only recounts the story, it points up the importance for all of us to consider the relevance of any item or group of items to our collections, our readers, and our libraries' missions.

The ALA publication, *Becoming a Fundraiser: The Principles and Practices of Library Development* by Victoria Steele and Stephen Elder (Chicago: ALA, 1992), reminds us of the seemingly constant shrinkage of funds that academic institutions have been facing on and off since the 1970s, coupled with the rising costs of books and periodicals. We must all think about outside sources of funding. The Steele and Elder volume is exceptionally useful; as Robert Martin and Elaine Smyth show in their article on working with friends' groups, they designed a fundraising program that was successful for their context. Every institution has its own particular users and each must design a campaign suited to those users.

Another issue in the rare book world is how one evaluates books and manuscripts. The controversy raised recently about the ethical guidelines for rare books and special collections librarians contains arguments concerning the propriety of librarians' doing

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appraisals. But there are different kinds of appraisals, both the private in-house ones for insurance and other purposes, and the “public” one of putting prices onto items for their public sale. Also, librarians, especially rare book and special collections librarians, should know what items are worth (or should know how to find this out), so that they will not find themselves paying \$500 for a \$50 book. Allen and Patricia Ahearn, in their article on pricing, explain the various kinds of evaluations, the tools one might use to do them, the pitfalls one might encounter in appraising, and the ways we might think about the books we see offered in stores, catalogs, dealers’ quotations, and at auction. While most *RBML* readers may know a good deal about what the Ahearns have to say, the Ahearns’ many years of experience in this endeavor will show us that there are nuances to pricing that even the most schooled and experienced of us might be unaware of.

Finally, Nicholson Baker’s recent *New Yorker* article “Discards” (April 4, 1994, pp. 64–86) on throwing away card catalogs after a library catalog has been put online, carries many truths and warnings, but should not be taken as the last word on the subject. As, indeed, it is not. There has been a tremendous outpouring of reaction to this piece on the electronic bulletin boards, and Nancy Douglas offers a reasoned reply here. The issue of discarding our card catalogs should be of particular concern to special collections, manuscripts, and rare book librarians, for as Baker has said, many times the cards carry much more information than online catalogs do.

The essays in this issue raise many questions about our roles, qualifications, and responsibilities as librarians. *RBML* readers are urged to express their views on these subjects in the form of “Letters to the Editor.” The nature of our profession encourages dialogue, and I trust that *RBML* can be a forum for that discussion.

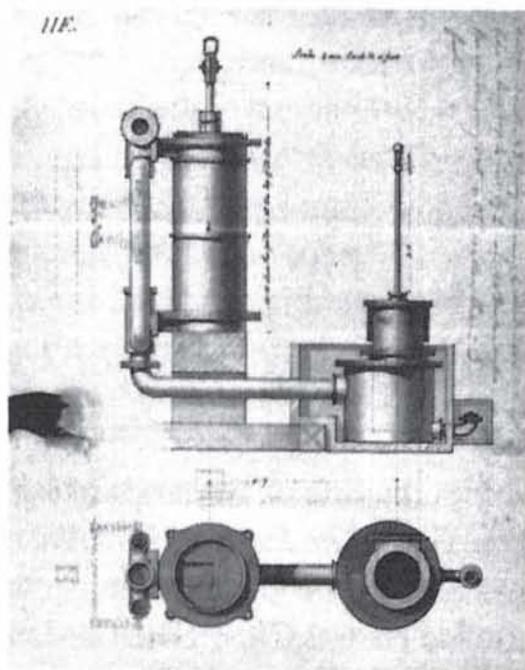


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