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# Library Systems-No Longer an Oxymoron

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# Library Systems—No Longer an Oxymoron

*There was a time when computers were unthinkable as library tools*

*Editor's Note: Information Today introduces a new column and welcomes a new columnist to our Library Systems section this month. In the first of his bimonthly contributions to "The Systems Librarian," New York University's Terry Ballard retraces the events that led to the concurrent evolution of computer technology and of his library science career.*

It strikes me funny that I am being asked to do a column on library systems because when I started in the library field 30 years ago, there was no such thing as library systems. I had worked at the Phoenix Public Library for 10 years as a clerk and library assistant before the first computer made its way through the doors. It involved only a simple circulation system, but employees

could search by author or title. There must have been a few more intricacies than I recall because I was soon doing training workshops for my co-workers.

Eight years later, I was working in the cataloging section when one of our dedicated OCLC terminals was replaced with an M300 microcomputer. My boss asked me to figure out how to make the thing work. He was too busy to deal with it. So

I sat down with the manual and learned the basics of DOS. More importantly, however, I learned how a combination of batch files and programmable function keys could be used to eliminate a lot of repetitious typing. From that day until this, I have tried to learn something new about computers every day.

Having found my true niche in the library profession, I went back and got my library degree—something I had put off for 20 years. My library school professor, Edward Miller, encouraged me to enhance my employment prospects by writing about computers for national journals. I had been writing for years—first for science fiction fanzines and then freelance work for the local newspaper's Sunday magazine. It had not occurred to me to write about library science before then, but the combination paid off richly. The exposure helped me land my first job—systems librarian at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York.

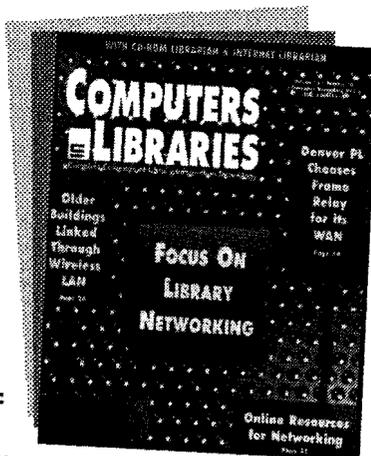
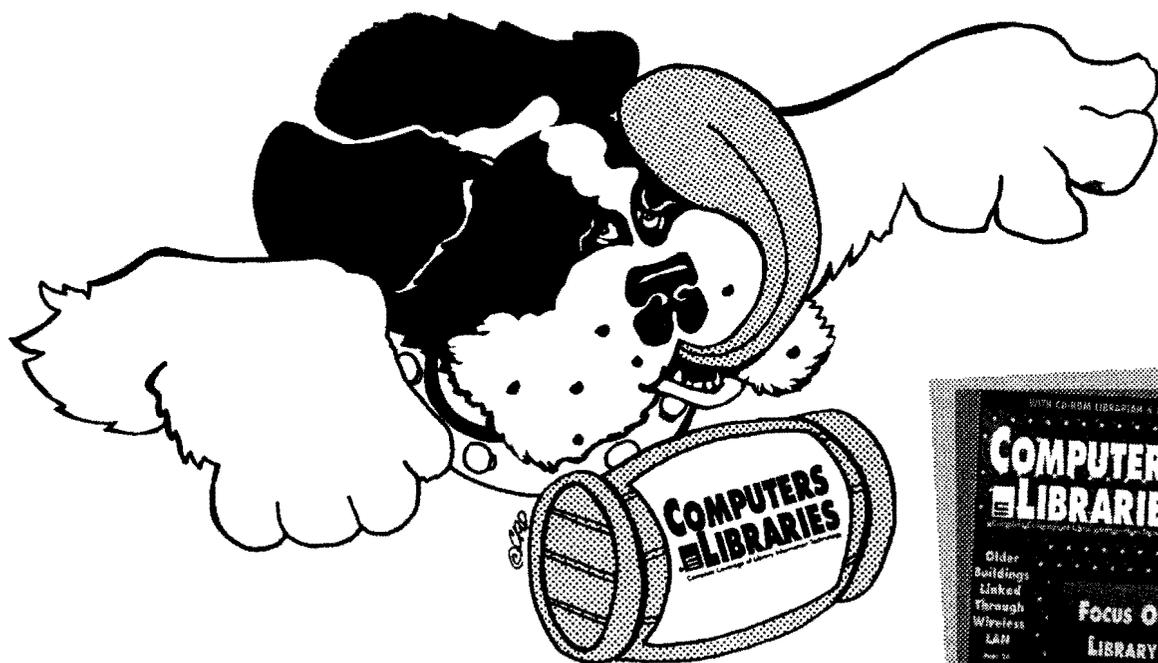
During my years at Adelphi, I was given responsibility for ALICAT, the library's online catalog. This INNOPAC system was a joy to manage. The database was in good condition to start with, and I was able to spend my time making it a little better every day. (You can telnet in at alicat.adelphi.edu. The login is "library." The last I saw, it looked great.)

I was also given free rein to learn everything I could about the Internet, which allowed me to be the resource person when a co-worker needed help with lists, gopher, and the World Wide Web. I also volunteered for reference desk duty, so I could see how the system was being used in the real world. In one of my more memorable stints at the reference desk, I assisted Colin Ferguson, who later went on to fame (and incarceration) as the Long Island Railroad gunman.

Prior to that brush with fame, I made a discovery that led to my own moment in the spotlight. While browsing through the list of keywords in the online catalog one day, I found that there were a number of misspellings. Everybody knew that his or her catalogs contained a few typos, but I was surprised to discover that the word "administration" appeared 10 times in our catalog. I ended up spending three weeks examining the entire keyword file and taking more than 1,000 errors out of the online catalog. I knew I had found something useful when I started looking for the same words as I telnetted to other libraries' online catalogs. I could find errors in any online catalog or CD-ROM database (the three most likely typos in any English language database are "commercial," "reseach," and "adminstration").

I reported the results at the 1992 Computers in Libraries conference in Arlington, Virginia. At the end of my talk, I promised to print the entire list of error words in a subsequent article in *Computers in Libraries* (June 1992). The following winter, I learned that the article was chosen as the *Computers in Libraries* Article of the Year. From time to time, I still hear from the occasional librarian who used my list. However, last year I was pleased to learn that somebody was

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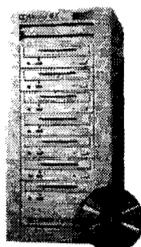
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## The Systems Librarian

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inspired by my work to invent a program that checks the spelling of records being downloaded from OCLC into local online catalogs.

By the end of my time at Adelphi, I had become involved in the Web as a user. Some days I would tally the number of systems and protocols I used in a given day. Starting with INNOPAC and OCLC, moving into e-mail and Usenet, word processing, CD-ROMs of various kinds, FirstSearch, LEXIS/NEXIS, gopher, ftp, Netscape, Lycos, telnet, communications programs, and DOS. Sometimes I wonder how we manage to navigate through all of this without getting totally entangled. To make matters worse in my case, I worked nights at St. John's University where I learned the PALS system, which was originated by Mankato State University in Minnesota and modified by the Westchester County consortium. By the end of my day's work, I had used dozens of different sets of protocols.

All of this was just a warm-up for what awaited me when I changed jobs last fall. I signed on as automation coordinator at the New York University School of Law Library. On my first day at NYU, I looked through my account and found nearly all of the programs I just mentioned and a

huge variety of other options, including numerous legal databases and an HTML editor. In addition, I am now also in charge of a Windows-based library system in a library that is committed to the concept of the electronic library. At the moment, we are heavily involved in a project that will digitize 19th century legal materials and make them available to everyone through the Web.

As I look at my 30 years in the field, I see a definite trend. I started working in a time when computers were unthinkable as library tools. Now, if the computers are down for a day, it seriously damages our effectiveness.

Also, the rate of change is accelerating every day. That means that the next five years will be extremely exciting for library systems people, especially now that the new, high-density compact disc products are on the horizon for this year. In the months ahead, I will be using some of the newest and best tools that technology has provided, and I look forward to sharing my experiences with an audience of information scientists, librarians, and computer professionals.

*Terry Ballard is automation coordinator at the New York University School of Law Library. He can be reached at ballardt@turing.law.nyu.edu.*

## Ameritech Library Network to Present Technology Seminars

Ameritech Library Services' 1996 satellite technology seminars, called *Connections*, were introduced with a free broadcast at ALA Midwinter in San Antonio. Beginning in March, library professionals can tune in each month to the Ameritech Library Network to learn more about technology issues in the library industry. Offered to all public, school, and academic libraries, the monthly broadcasts will feature networking basics such as LANs and WANs, Internet access and network management topics, and creative fund-raising ideas.

The Ameritech Library Network provides library staff with a way to discuss important technology and policy issues with experts that is cost-effective. "Library professionals today must be aware of key issues in technology directions, networking, and Internet access. But obtaining all this information is often costly and time-consuming," said Thomas Quarton, president of Ameritech Library Services. "The Ameritech Library Network assembles and presents pertinent information from a wide variety of technology and library experts so that library staff can reduce travel and seminar costs for professional development."

The technology programs are also designed to be interactive. Each program will feature a topic, ranging from network management and Internet applications to World Wide Web services and network security. Other regular features of the program include live audience participation (via phone, fax, or Internet), interviews with library professionals who have successfully implemented new technology, discussion of funding strategies, and technology directions from information technology experts.

Each broadcast can be viewed as an independent seminar; however, libraries will benefit more when they participate in the full series of broadcasts. "The training in each seminar builds on the previous one. We've organized it logically from the first to the last session," said Matthew Maddox, teleconference producer at Ameritech Library Services. "The Ameritech Library Network subscription price for the entire series of 10 programs is \$1,199 per downlink site. Libraries without satellite access can receive the programs on videotape.

For more information, contact Ameritech Library Network, 800/773-9649.