

**A Tribute to Harry Bitner  
(1916–2001)**



## Remembering Harry Bitner: Law Librarian, Professor, and Wonderful Colleague\*

Claire M. Germain\*\*

Professor Bitner was an outstanding law librarian who shaped many of our best libraries, who was a mentor to many younger law librarians, and who provided leadership to the law library profession and to legal education generally.<sup>1</sup>

¶1 Harry Bitner had a profound influence on law librarianship as a profession and on legal research as a faculty specialization. He was responsible for some of the key elements and essential features of law librarianship that we now take for granted.

¶2 Many of Harry Bitner's innovations occurred while he was at Cornell.<sup>2</sup> This makes it even more of a pleasure and an honor for me, as the newest of the Cornell Law Library directors,<sup>3</sup> to rediscover Harry Bitner through the memories of his friends, colleagues, and family, and through his own writings.

### Biographical Sketch

¶3 Harry Bitner was born in 1916. He received his J.D. in 1939 and his A.B. in 1941, both from the University of Kansas City (where he was a member of the *University of Kansas City Law Review*), and his B.S. L.S. in 1942 from the University of Illinois. He served as law librarian (1939–42) and instructor in law (1942–43) at the University of Kansas City; reference law librarian, University of Pennsylvania, Biddle Law Library, 1946; associate law librarian, Columbia University School of Law Library, 1946–54; librarian, Department of Justice, 1954–57; law librarian, Yale Law School Library, 1957–65; and law librarian and professor of law, Cornell Law School, 1965–76. He became law librarian and professor of law, emeritus at Cornell in 1976. After “retirement,” Harry Bitner continued his professional work as head of bibliographical services, Fred B. Rothman

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\*\* Edward M. Cornell Law Librarian and Professor of Law, Cornell University Law Library, Ithaca, New York. Many thanks to Crystal Hackett, Administrative Assistant, Cornell Law Library, who did much of the background research and writing on the history of the law library and, in particular, on Harry Bitner.

1. Letter from Robert Oakley, Director of the Law Library and Professor of Law, Georgetown University Law Library, nominating Harry Bitner for AALL Distinguished Service Award nomination to Carl Yirka, Chair, AALL Awards Committee (Sept. 7, 1988) (on file with AALL Archives, Urbana, Ill.).
2. See *infra* ¶¶ 6–12.
3. See *infra* note 5.

and Co., 1976–78, and legal bibliographer, Columbia University, 1981–89. He was a member of the Council of National Library Associations; the American Association of Law Libraries, serving as a member of the Executive Board in 1953–56 and president in 1963–64; and the Association of American Law Schools. Over his career he also served as a consultant to many law libraries.

¶4 Among the awards he received in his long career were the Joseph L. Andrews Bibliographical Award for *Law Books Recommended for Libraries* in 1971 (co-recipient with Meira Pimsleur) and the AALL Distinguished Service Award in 1989 (now called the Marian Gould Gallagher Distinguished Service Award). Not the least of his many accomplishments, he was also a prolific author.<sup>4</sup>

¶5 According to his daughter, Lorraine Gilden, Harry's life revolved around his work. But he also loved to watch football games (he played the sport in high school) and westerns on television. He also spent time reading books on philosophy and Judaica, and was very involved with his synagogue in Connecticut and New Jersey. Charlotte Sherr Kutscher, part of Harry's professional and social life and a lifelong friend from the moment they met at Columbia when she started there as a reference librarian in 1946, remembers him as a bright and compassionate friend and a gentleman in every sense of the word. She still works as a librarian at Middle School 143 in the Bronx.

### Harry Bitner at Cornell

¶6 There have been only seven librarians at Cornell since its founding in 1887.<sup>5</sup> Each made significant contributions to help build the Cornell Law Library into the strong research library that it is today. As the first professionally trained law librarian at Cornell, Harry Bitner played a particularly vital role in the development of the collection and staff. He introduced scientific methods and standards to library processes, and brought professional acumen to the organization and staffing of the library.

¶7 While at Cornell, Harry Bitner considerably improved all areas of the law library, expanded and reorganized the staff, increased and classified the collection, and developed services to faculty and students. He also started the first legal research course at Cornell Law School as part of the first-year course in "Practice Training."

¶8 Harry Bitner arrived at Cornell in 1965 with definite goals. With Miles O. Price, he had done a survey of the law library in 1960 and knew what to expect.

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4. See Crystal Hackett, *Bibliography of Harry Bitner*, 94 *LAW LIBR. J.* 206, 2002 *LAW LIBR. J.* 16.

5. This is in contrast to fourteen deans! The first law librarian was Edward Cornell who actually was a law student put in charge of the library. (His son established the Edward Cornell Law Librarian Chair for the law library director position in 1988.) Following Cornell, who served as law librarian from 1887 to 1891, were Alexander Hugh Ross Fraser (1893–1911), Edward Ecker Willever (1911–35), Lewis Morse (1935–65), and Harry Bitner, who arrived as law librarian and professor of law in 1965, and retired in 1975. He was succeeded by Jane Hammond (1976–93), and I became the seventh law librarian in 1993.

He gave his immediate attention to the preparation of the budget and the organization of the law library. He immediately increased the size of the staff from eleven to sixteen and organized the library into three areas: Acquisitions, Cataloging, and Reference and Circulation, subsequently merging Acquisition and Cataloging into the Technical Services Department. In strengthening the collection, he increased the number of legal treatises and related material in the social sciences and concentrated on the acquisition of international and foreign law materials, particularly those of Latin America.

¶9 In 1966–67 the total number of volumes in the collection was 205,456; book expenditures were \$119,678. The collection passed the 300,000 volume mark in 1974–75; its total of 304,451, mostly in hard copy, ranked twelfth among law school libraries. Book expenditures had increased to \$208,800.

¶10 He rearranged the collection and started using the newly established Library of Congress “K” classification for United States law in 1967 to classify the entire collection, requiring an increase in the cataloging staff and major shifting in the stacks. In 1975, the staff consisted of eight professional librarians and fifteen support staff, a total of twenty-three staff members. Three additional staff members, one professional cataloger and two assistants, worked on the classification project between 1967 and 1972, which brought the total staff number to twenty-six.

¶11 He developed a more effective program of reference and circulation, which included keeping the library open for more hours, retrieving unbound journals, and providing copy services. Under his direction, the library produced a *Cornell Law Library New Acquisitions* list arranged by subject, and the staff brought to the attention of the faculty recent law review articles in their fields of interest. He also started a program of exhibits.

¶12 In the words of his secretary, Crystal Hackett, who has worked at the Cornell Law Library from 1964 to date, “He had a commitment to his staff. He fought to raise the status of the professional librarians with the university and improve working conditions for the staff. And he won! He would listen to the faculty, students, and staff. He cared about them.” Crystal Hackett remembers him as a “quiet, gentle giant. People who did not know him were afraid of him at first, but were quickly put at ease when he started talking. He enjoyed getting to know people and would ask about their families.”

### The Legacy of Harry Bitner

¶13 Even in an era of wide-sweeping, revolutionary changes in the production and dissemination of legal information, Harry Bitner still epitomizes the qualities that make for a great academic law librarian:

- serving faculty and students, first and foremost;
- building strong collections—in his time they were print, now increasingly they are digital—of Anglo-American law, but also international and foreign law;

- critically evaluating legal scholarship and using expert bibliographical skills; and
- sharing knowledge about legal information and teaching legal research methods.

¶14 The memory of Harry Bitner lives with us every day. Even today, we at Cornell, as well as so many other law librarians throughout the country, regularly go through the “green slips”<sup>6</sup> to decide what to acquire for our library. When we have difficulty making a decision about whether to purchase a legal history reprint, our first thought is that Harry Bitner would immediately know what to do. But, luckily, we can still go back to the list of recommended books<sup>7</sup> he developed for the Association of American Law Schools to see if he rated the item as a “must have” for a law library collection.

¶15 If law librarians now enjoy the benefits of AALL as a strong professional organization, it is because of Harry Bitner’s tireless work in “launching” a campaign to establish the first headquarters during his presidency;<sup>8</sup> and in so doing he helped move AALL from a family-style operation to a truly professional enterprise.

¶16 One of Harry Bitner’s major legacies is his magisterial book, *Effective Legal Research*,<sup>9</sup> coauthored with Miles O. Price in 1953. It was the first standard book on legal research and, with its many later editions, is still considered to be one of the best in the field.

¶17 Harry Bitner was eager to pass on his knowledge of law materials and legal research. At Cornell, he started a new program of instruction in legal bibliography as part of the first-year curriculum. Within AALL, he developed legal research education programs and helped start the series of rotating institutes that was such an integral part of the Association’s educational efforts from inception in 1964 to cessation in 1975.<sup>10</sup>

¶18 He was also one of the first “global law librarians,” starting in the 1950s when he was an Eisenhower Fellow. In the 1960s he spent time in Africa helping to create the first law library in Tanganyika (now Tanzania), then a newly independent former British colony. In his words, “[T]he need to assist in the development of foreign law libraries throughout the world and particularly in the underdeveloped countries is becoming increasingly important. On the other side of the coin is the great need of the law libraries in this country to receive legal materials from these places. . . . Here is another area where we can contribute much to

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6. Those very handy 3" x 5" bibliographic slips that Bitner and the Fred B. Rothman & Co. devised as a selection tool for new publications. These are still published today by William S. Hein & Co.
  7. ASS'N OF AM. LAW SCHOOLS, *LAW BOOKS RECOMMENDED FOR LIBRARIES* (Harry Bitner ed., 1967–74).
  8. See Harry Bitner, *[Report of the] President*, 57 *LAW LIBR. J.* 177, 177 (1964) (describing the importance of establishing “a central Headquarters Office with full-time personnel” and the special fundraising campaign then underway).
  9. MILES O. PRICE & HARRY BITNER, *EFFECTIVE LEGAL RESEARCH: A PRACTICAL MANUAL OF LAW BOOKS AND THEIR USE* (1953).
  10. See Laura N. Gasaway & Steve Margeton, *Continuing Education for Law Librarianship*, 70 *LAW LIBR. J.* 39, 47–48 (1977).

librarianship as a profession by cooperating with other library and legal organizations in supporting such activities which can lead to better international understanding.”<sup>11</sup>

¶19 To continue the legacy of Harry Bitner, his family has generously offered to fund a “Bitner Research Fellows” program at the Cornell Law School, honoring his love of, and commitment to, the law school library and the Cornell community. As his son-in-law Richard Gilden said: “Harry spent his life dedicated to legal research and legal bibliography, and was keenly interested in international legal jurisprudence, philosophy, and historical geopolitics.” The new program is intended to foster the law library’s standing as a center for international legal research. It will cover travel and housing costs for visiting scholars and law librarians, with a special focus on attracting scholars from developing countries who could not otherwise afford to come to an institution like Cornell to study and share their knowledge and insights.

¶20 Harry Bitner is remembered as a man of many talents who was most generous in sharing his vast knowledge with younger librarians. His law librarian colleagues remember him as a librarian extraordinaire and a fine gentleman. The Cornell alumni remember Professor Bitner as a beloved and enthusiastic teacher whose impact was felt by all of his students.

¶21 All in all, Harry Bitner is an inspiration to us all and a model to follow.

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11. Bitner, *supra* note 8, at 179–80.