



HOT TOPIC:

Discussion of *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* by Nicholson Baker

Baker's Book Sparks Sizzling Discussion in Minneapolis!!!

by **Marcus Hochstetler**

The hot topic at the 2001 AALL Annual Meeting and Conference lived up to its sizzling hype. What subject could ruffle the collars or get under the skin of many librarians? Only a book charged with passionate and often heated commentary on the use of microfilm to preserve historical newspapers could achieve this result.

The title under scrutiny is the much-maligned *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* by Nicholson Baker. **Kathie Sullivan**, reference librarian at Downs Rachlin & Martin and chair of the Annual Meeting Program Committee, introduced the program and led the discussion of this book. "Our annual conference about New Realities and New Roles for both libraries and librarians covers many of the major ideas represented in Baker's work: digital vs. paper collections; sizes of and arrangement of library space; staffing and budget concerns; and responsibilities for preserving information for future generations," Sullivan noted.

Troy Johnson of Creighton University School of Law, who chairs the Micrographics and Audiovisuals Special Interest Section, summarized the key points

from *Double Fold* before fielding questions from the audience. Johnson highlighted Baker's purpose for writing the book. "Mr. Baker formed a nonprofit association of his own — the American Newspaper Repository — in hopes of obtaining old newspaper runs from the British Library," Johnson said. One title Baker sought was the 1888 to 1958 *Chicago Tribune* newspaper. He had to compete against book dealers for the various foreign newspaper runs being auctioned off by the British Library. Ultimately, Baker was able to obtain more than 90 titles, which are listed on his Web site at <http://www.oldpapers.org>.

"As to newspapers, [Baker] contends that only the original paper copies can adequately convey the real sense of the historical record," explained Jerry Dupont, executive director of Law Libraries Microform Consortium, in "Double Scold," an article published in the June 2001 *Legal Reference Notes*. "His two main grievances are the loss of color in black-and-white microfilming and the undeniable fact that some of the early newspaper filming was sloppy."

Baker's experiences were not the basis for ill will among librarians attending this session. The main sticking point for many audience members was his description of the actions of several members of the Library of Congress and other large research libraries, which converted these newspaper runs into microfilm and in many cases, destroyed the originals in the process.

"As a rare book librarian and preservationist, I feel that he's telling me how to do my job," one participant proclaimed.

"I encourage everyone to read this book," another preservationist added. "Borrow it from a library if you can, because he raises some important issues to consider, even if you don't agree with his conclusions."

At one point, Baker describes how some librarians at the Library of Congress had claimed that books were literally turning to

dust and must be saved through microfilm. These statements came from a popular movie called "Slow Fires," which was produced to encourage support for funding of various microfilming projects and is often shown in library school classes. Baker disagrees that these newspapers are disintegrating. He further disparages the use of microfilm as substandard in quality to the originals.

Responding to such criticism, one audience member urged the audience to consider using microfilm for preservation. "We are being far too civil to Baker; he is a madman," the audience member said. "[The book] is filled with vituperative, irrational, and impractical suggestions. He overstates the case against microfilm. My books are falling apart and microfilm is a viable option for storage of these materials."

Counteracting this argument, another participant suggested that "the questions Baker raises about what materials are being discarded by libraries that receive public funds is legitimate. If the public gives money through taxes to the library for the purchase of materials, it expects the library to keep them."

An audience member commented on how law libraries in particular are affected by this criticism: "We are fortunate to have dependable microfilming companies which provide replacement copies of microfiche in a timely fashion. Also the color issue is not really relevant to law libraries."

Despite this fact, many in the audience still held firm in their opposition to Baker's assertions and accusations. As the fervent comments arose in the packed room, the palpable tension was broken only by the final remarks of an impassioned attendee. "I was going to lend this book to someone else for their reading enjoyment," she said. "However in the spirit of our discussion, I am going to return to my library, tear it apart and microfilm it!"

This discussion brought to the forefront issues of preservation that will continue to challenge librarians in the future. Those who take their charge as keepers of the historical record will grapple with how to maintain the accuracy of that information.

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