



Those Were the Days

by Carol Billings

“Boy the way Glenn Miller played — songs that made the Hit Parade. Guys like us, they had it made. Those were the days!”

Only the youngest or most pop-culturally-deprived AALL members will fail to remember Archie and Edith Bunker sitting in their Brooklyn living room reminiscing about how much better things used to be. Those like me, who have been working in libraries for more than a quarter century, sometimes pause in the midst of our technologically advanced, politically correct, and bureaucratically regulated work places to wax nostalgic about the 1960s and '70s.

I walked to my first job at the University of Pittsburgh library in my prim shirtwaist dress, pumps and white gloves. President John F. Kennedy had vowed to put Americans on the moon, but the most modern inventions in that library were telephones and manual typewriters. I interned in several departments, entering documents in a gigantic Kardex and filing catalog cards and check-out cards bearing Dewey classification numbers.

At Northern Illinois University, some of us on the staff took a class that involved making punch cards. We then fed the cards to a processing machine the size of a small bus filled with a maze of colored wires that we were supposed to plug into a confusing network of outlets.

At the University of New Orleans, I toiled at original cataloging, relying on the National Union Catalog and classification schedules. Our enemies in the circulation department took the punch cards that recorded each day's transactions and generated a computerized print out.

I entered the law library profession in 1976 and went to work in the Supreme Court building, then a bastion of the Old South. All seven justices were white men who ran their offices as little fiefdoms. The only African-Americans were men called porters — jobs that combined the duties of gophers and janitors. Many employees were related by blood, politics or social connections to judges or prominent lawyers. Justices' secretaries earned higher salaries than librarians. Veterans on the staff with high school diplomas resented the professional library director, who was hired a few years earlier and brought two other librarians on board. The old-timers whispered complaints to the lawyer-patrons about how they hated the new-fangled classification and rearranged stacks. Our

student workers were two male law students known as the “night boys.” “Night girls” were deemed out of the question because there was no security for the building. Although the library was open to the public, pro se patrons were not especially encouraged.

Our library's first computer was purchased in 1980. We joined the Online Computer Library Center OCLC network soon afterwards. In the '90s, the library acquired software for bibliographic control of the collection. The earliest Lexis and WESTLAW contracts were managed not by the library but by the clerk's office, and only justices' law clerks had passwords. Lengthy negotiations with both companies eventually enabled the library to offer service to attorneys and the public for a fee.

Change has occurred so gradually that we tend to forget how far we've come. The Old South is now passé. Many African-Americans hold important positions on the court staff. Three of the seven justices are women, and one is African-American. And “night girls” outnumber their male counterparts. Every staff member receives a new computer regularly. The public has access to the Internet and a variety of free research products. The justices, court staff and lawyers recognize our staff's expertise and appreciate more fully what we can do for them.

Many of the reforms that we enjoy are mixed blessings. The improved job classifications, salaries and fair employment policies require burdensome reporting, record-keeping and restrictions on hiring and promotion practices. Uniform policies imposed by the justices, fiscal administrators, legislative auditor and property-control department demand huge amounts of time on matters that seem of little benefit to the library. The building security, disdained by justices of yesteryear, is now so intrusive that many patrons are offended by the hoops they must jump through to enter the library.

So are we better off? Or do we have reason to long fondly for the good old days? We certainly can't imagine going back to a time when computers were few and e-mail was nonexistent, but all this electronic stuff certainly hasn't simplified our lives or given us less to worry about. So for those of us “of a certain age,” it's nice to sit back in our easy chairs and hum, “Those were the days!”

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