

Fall 10-1983

Knowledge Put to Work: SLA at 75

Robert V. Williams

University of South Carolina - Columbia, bobwill@sc.edu

Martha Jane Zachert

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/libsci_facpub



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Publication Info

Special Libraries, Volume 74, Issue 4, Fall 1983, pages 370-382.

This Article is brought to you by the Information Science, School of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

This is the second in a series of our consecutive, specially commissioned papers celebrating the Association's 75th Anniversary. The January 1984 piece will be by Vivian Arterbery.

*Robert G. Krupp, Chairman
75th Anniversary Committee*

Knowledge Put to Work: SLA at 75

Robert V. Williams and Martha Jane K. Zachert

College of Library and Information Science,
University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC

■ This sketch of the Association during its 75-year history explores the central trends and themes of these years in two ways: factually, and in an interpretive sense. It is not, by any means, a definitive history of the Association—a task worth undertaking before the year 2009 when SLA turns 100. Rather it is an attempt to capture the *esprit de corps* which is the essential character of SLA.

ON July 2, 1984, Special Libraries Association will be 75 years old. The history of the Association during those 75 years is a rich one. It parallels and reflects the growth and development of the United States in the 20th century from an industrial to an information society; it embodies the development of the United States in the of book custodianship to one of information management.

Establishment

Late in the evening of July 2, 1909, after a full day of meetings at the American Library Association's Bretton Woods, New Hampshire Conference, a group of 26 persons gathered in room No. 4 of the Mount Washington Hotel for a discussion which was to result in the formation of the Special Libraries Association. They came in response to

an invitation by John Cotton Dana, librarian at Newark Public Library, earlier in the evening after he had presented a paper on "Municipal, Legislative Reference, Commercial, Technical and Public Welfare Libraries." In issuing the invitation, Dana noted that the purpose was to discuss the possibility of forming a "tentative" association to exchange information about these types of libraries.

The idea for formalizing this exchange of information, Dana acknowledged, had originated with Sara B. Ball, librarian at the Business Branch of Newark Public, and Anna B. Sears, librarian of the Merchants' Association of New York (1).

Earlier in the year, Sears and Ball had discussed the need for the exchange of information about "special libraries and special departments" and decided to form a local association of these

libraries in the New York area. Ball discussed the proposal with Dana, who insisted that it be a national group. He organized a series of meetings for the three of them with F. B. DeBerard, statistician of the Merchants' Association (2). Dana and DeBerard then sent out a letter and brief questionnaire to 45 libraries to learn their opinions on the formation of such an organization for cooperative work. The response was enthusiastic and resulted in the call for the organizational meeting at Bretton Woods. By the conclusion of the meeting on July 2, a name had been chosen, a purpose declared, a preliminary constitution written, and officers elected.

This organizational meeting has been fondly called the "verandah conference," denoting the wide, sweeping verandah of the Mount Washington Hotel. More specifically, it should be known as the organizational meeting since the first annual conference of the Association was held Nov 5, 1909, at the Merchants' Association building in New York. Here, 33 persons met, listened to papers on a variety of topics related to special libraries, and formed ten committees for carrying out the work of the new Association. Those attending the meeting at Bretton Woods and in New York constituted the original 56 charter members of the Association.*

The Association was off to an enthusiastic beginning. Committees representing specific subject interests were formed: agriculture, commerce, legislative and municipal reference, public utilities, sociology, technology and insurance. Committees also were formed for publications, membership and publicity; and a journal was established for carrying out the purpose of "furthering effective cooperation..." and "...as a medium of intercommunication..." The purpose of the new association was stated on the first page of *Special Libraries*, issued January, 1910:

*For the complete list, see *Who's Who in Special Libraries*, 1982-83, SLA, 1982.

The Special Libraries Association... hopes to unite in cooperation all small special libraries throughout the country; financial, commercial, scientific, industrial, and special departments of state, college and general libraries; and, in fact, all libraries devoted to special purposes and serving a limited clientele (3).

The members of SLA were dedicated to the idea of cooperative endeavors and resources sharing. Since many were in small libraries without the support of large collections or skilled staff, they knew they had to depend on each other. *Special Libraries* was to be their primary vehicle for cooperation.

The issues of the new journal featured bibliographies of hard-to-find technical materials on a large variety of subjects. A directory of members and other special libraries was published, as well as descriptions of various kinds of libraries and the ways they handled specific problems. In essence, *Special Libraries* became a state-of-the-art bibliography and news medium for the latest developments affecting libraries in U.S. scientific, industrial, and business communities.

Purpose and Structure

The theme of cooperation and sharing would become the hallmark of SLA in all its activities and publications. Despite the lack of an organizational model in the library or business world at that time, the early members seemed to sense intuitively their need for mutual support.

Sharing and cooperation took place not only through the pages of the many bibliographies, newsletters, directories, manuals, and guides but also in how SLA formed itself as an association. Two aspects dominated the organizational scheme: geographically based units of all local special librarians met and worked together; and subject based units of librarians who kept each other informed of developments in their fields.

The geographic units, later called chapters, were an early development

that proved to be an effective means to carry out cooperative activities, as well as to expand the membership of SLA. These smaller units formed quickly, sometimes as "branches" of SLA or as loosely affiliated independent groups. The "Boston Branch" was formed in March, 1910; the New York Special Libraries Association in 1915; and others in major cities followed. By 1924, there were eight such local associations.

The history of SLA's leadership in the information profession is the history of the work of the divisions. From the earliest days to the present, the divisions have created innovative products that brought about great changes in the way all information professionals do their work.

The local groups were aided in this process by SLA's official recognition and encouragement. "Responsibility Districts" were proposed in 1912, and the district heads formed an unofficial advisory council to the Executive Board. During the period 1913 to 1918, the idea of local groups lay dormant, but in 1919 it was revived and expanded into an enlarged decision-making role. Revisions of the constitution in 1923 and 1924 clarified the role of the local groups as affiliates of SLA. The San Francisco Branch was the first to officially affiliate, followed by Boston and New York.

Over the next few years more local groups were formed, either at their own initiative or with the help of SLA. The local chapters would become the hallmark of SLA, making it distinctive among the national library associations. More importantly, the chapters would become the arena where the central purpose of SLA—cooperation—would be carried out on a day-by-day basis. The chapters were to gain an ever greater

voice in the affairs of SLA—initially through the formation of an Advisory Committee in 1924, then through the Advisory Council, and finally, in 1974, as a separate Chapter Cabinet with an elected chairman serving on the Executive Board.*

If the chapters were the foundation of SLA, then the subject-based divisions were the structural framework around which the Association was built. The divisions became, in fact, the national level *raison d'être*. That this would happen was obvious at the first annual conference, when seven different subject committees were established.

These early committees carried the work of SLA and were responsible for the reputation the Association quickly established within the library profession and in the world of business and industry. The annual conferences were organized around these subject interest groups, and the pages of *Special Libraries* reflected their diligent work to carry out the cooperation theme by keeping each other informed of the latest developments—topical and bibliographic—in their fields. The hundreds of publications by these groups and the thousands of bibliographies they produced are ample testimony to their work.

The subject groups did not hesitate to assert themselves in determining the policies of SLA. In 1919, during the first major reorganization of SLA, the Advisory Council was formed, consisting entirely of representatives of subject groups. The revised constitution of 1924 gave groups official status and, in 1929, the chairs of the groups comprised the Advisory Council. In 1950 the groups were renamed divisions. The 1974 revision of the constitution gave divisions a role in governance of SLA through the Division Cabinet.

The history of SLA's leadership in the information profession is the history of the work of the divisions. From the earliest days to the present, the divisions

*The Executive Board was later renamed the Board of Directors.

have created innovative products that brought about great changes in the way all information professionals do their work.

Work by the Technology Committee in 1910 to create a "Trade Names Index," for example, led directly to the *Industrial Arts Index* (now *Applied Science and Technology Index*). The *Public Affairs Information Service* was first issued as a result of the work of an SLA committee in 1913. The Financial Group organized a model banking library in 1924 and displayed it at a conference of the American Bankers Association.

Other groups soon followed this example and organized similar exhibits at meetings of national associations. The *Technical Book Review Index* (originally developed at the Pittsburgh Carnegie Library) was revived by the Technology Group in 1935 and continues to be an outstanding resource in the field. In 1946, the Science-Technology Group formed the SLA Translations Center, beginning what proved to be an invaluable aid to the scientific community. Several subject divisions gave leadership in the development of the documentation movement and in the use of computers in libraries.

In many cases, ideas originated simultaneously within several divisions; in others, divisions whose members encountered similar problems in their work cooperated closely in developing an idea and making it useful. Division activities were animated by the development of indexes and bibliographies of specialized materials, by experimenting with microfilm, punched cards and computers, and by exploring new means of retrieving information such as descriptors, uniterms, and thesauri. The divisions were where the SLA motto, "Putting Knowledge to Work," was put to work.

During the same period of time in which the divisions were making major contributions to information analysis and bibliographic control of subject literatures, the chapters were making a role for themselves, both locally and at the Association level. Local union

catalogs and directories which crossed subject lines were produced by nearly every chapter. They emphasized resources and expertise close at hand and provided impetus for development of ways to bring the concepts of sharing and cooperation into the daily workplace of virtually every SLA member.

Regular, frequent meetings provided another dimension of sharing; peer identification and role-modeling were available for the first time to many who worked in one-person libraries. This constant demonstration of the value of membership was a potent factor in the growth of the Association. The practical need to make the ideals work at home, every day—not just at annual conferences—provided the training ground for later generations of officers and workers of the Association, a value of the chapters not fully anticipated or realized until the initial generation's impetus ran down and difficult days loomed.

Despite the many "tinkerings" with SLA's two-pronged organizational structure—chapters and divisions—it has not undergone radical change since its original establishment. An ad hoc

The survival of SLA as an independent and vital organization has been in doubt several times—even at the moment of organization on July 2, 1909.

committee appointed in 1955 to study this structure reported that it was "sound and flexible." It seems to have served the Association well. Grieg Aspnes, SLA President, 1951-52, expressed this philosophy succinctly when he said that SLA was "designed from the bottom up" (4). In his view, the two keys to the success and uniqueness of SLA were that each local chapter was a place where a member could go

for help, advice, and social interaction, while the divisions enabled the member to know and work with colleagues in the same subject field.

Cycles of Crisis and Growth

Though the membership chart (Figure 1) makes it appear that these 75 years have been a period of constant growth and expansion, the detailed records of SLA tell a different story. The survival of SLA as an independent and vital organization has been in doubt several times—even at the moment of organization on July 2, 1909. In issuing his call for the meeting in Room 4, Dana used the term “tentative” to describe the formation of SLA; once it had “proved itself worthy” it might be affiliated or merged in some way with ALA.

This tenuous state of existence continued to plague SLA long after it “proved itself worthy.” Affiliation with ALA did take place in 1911 and proved beneficial to the fledgling Association for a number of years. Annual meetings were held in conjunction with ALA conferences, and attendance and support were undoubtedly higher than would have been possible without ALA. Leaders in ALA, such as Dana, Joseph L. Wheeler, and Charles C. Williamson, were also leaders in SLA. Cooperative ventures between the two associations took place to the benefit of the profession at large.

The first concern of SLA, as of any organization, was survival. The first few years were not troublesome. Leadership quickly passed from Dana to other equally capable hands. Finances of the Association were limited but solidly in the black. These positive aspects abruptly changed in the period 1916 to 1918. Deficits began to appear, and leadership was lacking. This was SLA’s first grave crisis. It was weathered by the same forces that have reversed other crises in later years: the assertion of strong leadership and the involvement of members (5).

The next crisis was one that threatened the independence of the Association as a separate organization with specific goals. During 1923 and 1924, a small group of members actively campaigned for the disbanding of SLA and the formation of a “business section” within ALA. The crisis reached the confrontation stage at the general business meeting of 1924. Former President Rebecca Rankin laid two proposals before the membership: to completely disband and affiliate as one or more sections of ALA; or, to expand on the success of SLA by integrating the local associations (i.e., the chapters), hiring a paid secretary, and establishing a permanent headquarters. A lively discussion of these two proposals ensued. The record (6) indicates that those who spoke for continuing as an independent organization were greeted by applause, whereas the proposal to disband was a

Despite the decision to remain independent of ALA, cooperation between the two associations continued in the form of joint meetings and work on unemployment problems in the 1930s and during World War II for the relief of devastated libraries in Europe.

minority one and easily defeated. After this meeting, the proposal to disband occasionally arose in brief “mutterings” in letters to the editors of *Library Journal* and *Special Libraries*, but it never again received serious consideration by the membership of SLA.

The 1924 decision to remain independent of ALA was reached without feelings of bitterness or distrust but, instead, out of a desire to continue the independent progress that had been made in the years since 1909. Nevertheless, some members undoubtedly did distrust ALA and feared that if they

affiliated as a section, they would lose control over their own affairs, particularly when it came to designing programs and publications for specific groups of special librarians. Some of the leadership in 1924 recalled all too well how SLA had been ignored and rebuffed by ALA during World War I when it had attempted to cooperate in the design of special library programs in the War Service work (5). Other SLA members felt that the Association would be divided among several units of ALA, making it impossible to focus attention specifically on the needs of the small special library.

Despite the decision to remain independent of ALA, cooperation between the two associations continued in the form of joint meetings and work on unemployment problems in the 1930s and during World II for the relief of devastated libraries in Europe. This cooperation, however, was more appropriately performed as between peers, rather than as between mother and child. SLA then worked for the establishment of what has become the Council of National Library and Information Associations (CNLIA), a forum in which special interest and general library associations have an equal voice to speak on issues that concern the entire profession (7).

A tenuous "affiliation" with ALA continued until 1950 when the SLA Board of Directors voted to sever it completely. The ALA tie was, apparently, broken because the Board wanted to strengthen the role of CNLIA as a federation of library associations.

The Association managed to survive the Great Depression without a great deal of difficulty even though there was little money to carry out needed projects. Much of the credit for financial stability and progress in this difficult time was due to the husband and wife team of Herbert and Mary Brigham, the editor of *Special Libraries* and the Association's part-time paid executive secretary, respectively. SLA worked vigorously on employment problems, and the business and finance groups

were especially active in promoting the economic advantages inherent in special libraries.

The next major crisis was of an entirely different nature than the previous ones. Occurring in the late 1940s, it was perceived by the leadership as one of morale. The war years had been a time of growth and renewed vigor as special librarians were called to organize and retrieve the massive amounts of information created by the war effort. The response within SLA came primarily from the divisions whose subject literatures were expanding most rapidly. These divisions worked to draw in all who were affected and who could help find solutions to the new and disturbing library problems. The effort, though well-intentioned, might in the final analysis be called a classic failure to see the forest for the trees.

The fervor of these newly oriented divisions, and their accomplishments, attracted large numbers of new members and sold edition after edition of their bibliographic tools. As they disproportionately gained in size and in human and financial resources, as compared with their less-affected fellows, the emphasis on divisions and their work became pervasive throughout the Association and seemed to eclipse the former emphasis on *sharing without regard for individual division affiliation*. Common goals for all SLA members appeared to be lost in a scramble for what looked more like political clout than professional acumen.

An apparent cycle of division (and in some cases chapter) open competition for members followed by financial stockpiling and political one-upmanship struck some members as unhealthy in its disregard for the Association and the common problems of all members. To other members, not to give prominence and power to the divisions (or chapters) was simply not moving with the times.

Tension permeated Association-division-chapter relationships. In 1948 one writer referred to a "moral decline," and went on to catalog the

problems facing SLA (8). It is difficult for the historian in the 1980s to know whether this was an instance of legitimately changed priorities, or a myopic suspension of the sense of proportion between the Association and its subunits; the latter seems most likely. Much of the evidence supports the view that division affairs became uppermost to many members, leaving the Association's survival a poor second.

When Irene M. Strieby assumed the presidency in 1947, she called attention to this malaise in her presidential address, calling it a "year of self-analysis" (9). She recognized that if progress were to be made, changes were necessary. Her presidential address, appropriately titled "Now Is Yesterday's Tomorrow," called for 10 specific changes that would revitalize the Association. Between 1948 and 1950 these recommendations were heatedly debated. They passed, virtually intact, thanks in large part to the tireless and brilliant work of Ruth Savord, former president and chairman of the Constitution Committee.

The 1950s were an exciting time for the library profession in general and particularly for SLA. Numerous developments that we now take for granted were initiated in libraries during this period. Many, perhaps the majority, were designed specifically to deal with the problems of handling scientific and technical information. Early uses of punched cards, microfilm scanning equipment, optical coincidence systems, and other machines for handling scientific and technical reports were described in papers in *Special Libraries* (10).

Special librarians were leaders in these developments because so many of them evolved in the governmental agencies and the commercial organizations where they worked. The term "documentation" had appeared occasionally in the special libraries literature as early as the 1930s; now it appeared frequently. In 1955, SLA hosted a Post-Convention Documentation Institute attended by members as well as leaders in the field of documentation in the United States and Europe.

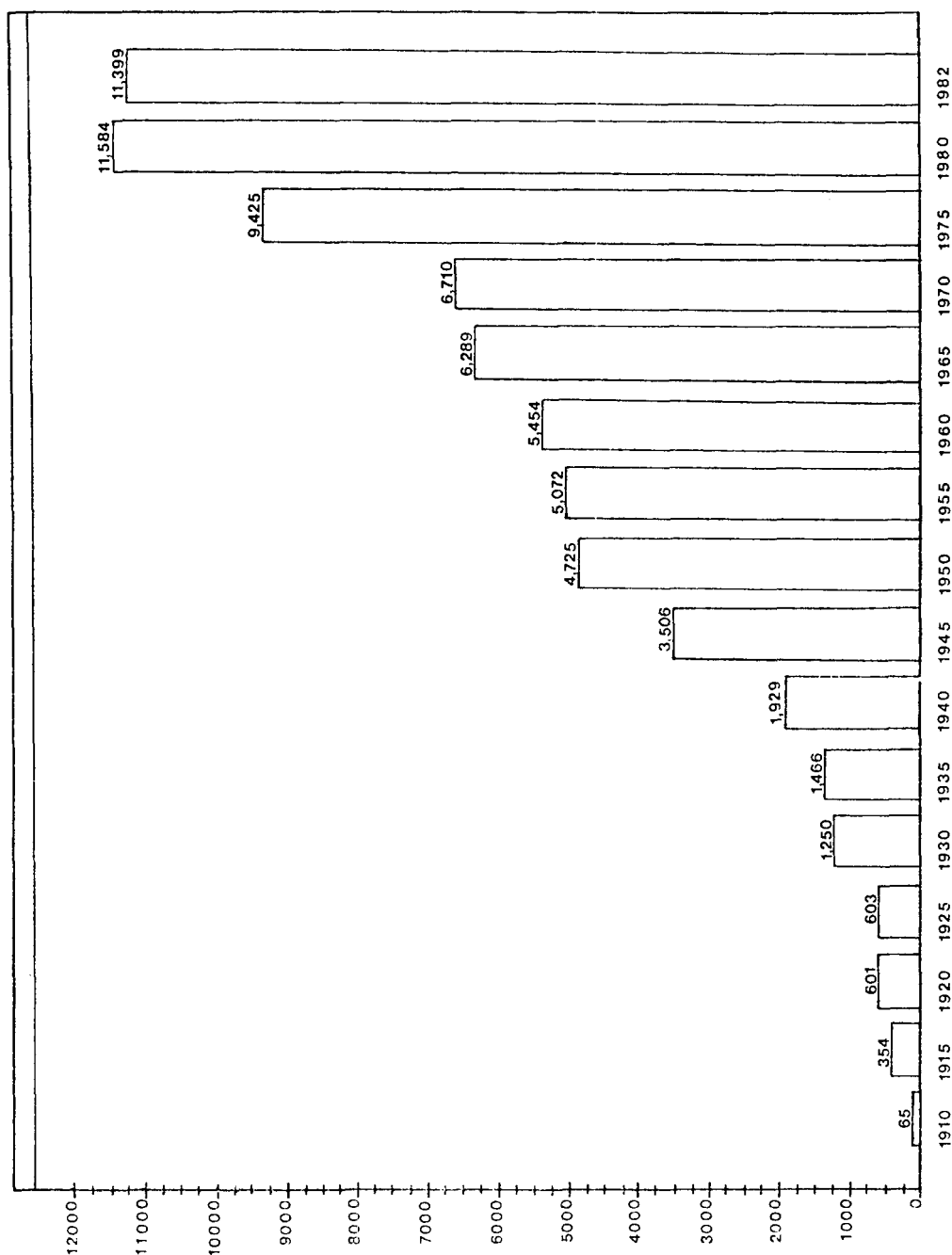
SLA/ASIS merger plan touched the most sensitive nerve of special librarians—their identity. The merger discussions confronted this problem immediately in debates about the name of the new organization. There was a feeling on the part of some SLA members that ASIS discredited the terms "special librarianship" and "special librarian" by considering them subsumed in "information science" and "information scientist."

The changes, while not a drastic restructuring, did open up the Association to wider participation and representation. Board meetings were opened to members, and its decisions were communicated to the membership through a newsletter. The Association offices were modernized and expanded, and *Special Libraries* was improved by the addition of a paid editor. SLA was on the move again.

The interest in documentation among a large number of SLA members led indirectly to another major decision regarding the future of the Association. Serious consideration had to be given by the Board to a merger with the American Society for Information Science (ASIS).

Founded in 1937 as the American Documentation Institute, ASIS was an organization of representatives of vari-

Figure 1. Membership in SLA, 1910–1982, at Five-Year Intervals.



Source: SLA Archives: *Special Libraries*.

Note: Data for early periods are not completely reliable because of different counting practices regarding membership categories. Membership reported at the business meeting at the annual conference have generally been used.

ous affiliated societies and institutions with an interest in scientific documentation activities. In 1952 it became a national professional society comprised of individuals, as well as representatives of institutions and other associations. During the 1950s and 1960s, membership expanded and interests were broadened to include a wide variety of areas related to information processing and research. The adoption of its present name in 1968 (11) reflected this change in emphasis.

The considered merger of SLA and ASIS appears to have been a natural outgrowth of the similarity of interests and overlapping memberships of persons in both organizations. Both ASIS and SLA had strong sections whose members led the profession in the development and use of modern techniques in computer-based information processing systems, particularly in relation to scientific and technical information and its management. These common interests, in addition to the practical aspect of operating one headquarters and one publications program, seem to have led to the discussions of a merger in 1968.

Early discussions, carried out by a committee consisting of past, present, and future SLA presidents and special appointees from ASIS, appear to have been fruitful. It was not long, however, before serious reservations were raised by the SLA membership and the Board of Directors. The location of a headquarters, the potential involvement of a merged association in federal government contract work, the fate of the nontechnical divisions of SLA, the apparently unequal financial resources of the two organizations—all raised difficult questions. Agreeing on an appropriate name for the new association proved to be particularly troublesome to members of both organizations since it involved serious philosophical differences of self-identification.

Discussions continued through 1970 and part of 1971, and a proposed merger implementation plan was published in 1970 (12). In January 1971, the SLA

Board of Directors requested that the Joint Merger Committee take a straw poll of members in both organizations to determine their attitudes toward the agreement. The Joint Committee reported its results at the June 1971 SLA Board meeting. Simultaneously, the SLA members of the Joint Committee recommended that merger discussions be discontinued. The Board of Directors accepted this recommendation, terminating the discussions.

The decision of the Board seems to have been based on the results of the straw poll, which showed that 53.7% of the respondents were in favor of merger, 37.6% were against merger, and 7% were undecided. In its statement to the membership the Board said: "The total of those against or undecided is 45%, which is the most significant fact in the results of the tally because it shows that there is no clear mandate to continue merger discussions" (13). However, in choosing to base its decision on this percentage, the Board ignored the fact that only 29% of the membership had responded to the poll. It also chose to ignore, as was pointed out by critics of the decision in letters to the editor of *Special Libraries*, that 53.7% were in favor of the published merger agreement and 62% had responded affirmatively to a related question on continuation of planning for a merger (14).

For some members of SLA, the decision brought angry outcries and attempts at reversal; for others it was a relief to have the issue settled so that other work could continue. Relationships between SLA and ASIS would continue to be cordial and cooperative, but the merger issue has not been seriously considered again. Both associations continue to maintain satisfactory rates of growth and engage in a number of joint ventures of service to the profession.

In a very real sense, though difficult to define precisely, the SLA/ASIS merger plan touched the most sensitive nerve of special librarians—their identity. The merger discussions con-

fronted this problem immediately in debates about the name of the new organization. There was a feeling on the part of some SLA members that ASIS discredited the terms "special librarianship" and "special librarian" by considering them subsumed in "information science" and "information scientist" (15). Although this issue was a minor part of the official proceedings, it seems to have been a major part of the unofficial discussions and attitudes of SLA members, especially those in the humanities and social science divisions.

Definition and Identification

Perplexity over identity is not new to SLA, the dilemma has been with the Association since its founding. While it has been a source of irritation at times, particularly in attempting to set guidelines for membership requirements, it is also the spark that ignites the dynamic life of the Association. Special library advocates repeatedly find it necessary to defend their use of the term and to demonstrate precisely what is "special" about themselves. The arguments and the demonstrations have enriched and extended our perception of the information profession.

At the first annual meeting of SLA, John Cotton Dana offered a tentative—and admittedly incomplete—definition of a special library as "the library of a modern man of affairs" (16). He noted that the traditional library has been viewed as one for the "reader of polite literature" in contrast to the special library which is for the person involved in business, industry, and commerce.

While Dana emphasized the nature of the collection and its users, his successors in SLA preferred a definition that centered on the librarian and how the work was done. John A. Lapp, editor of *Special Libraries* from 1910–1915, recognized this trend when he stated in 1916 that the purpose of the special library was "... to put knowledge to

work" (17). SLA President Richard H. Johnston (1914/1915) extended the definition of the special library and pinpointed how it is different when he responded to critics of SLA. The real key to special librarianship, he claimed, was anticipation of the needs of users, getting information in advance of actual need, and sending it immediately to decision-makers. "The public library, or the special collection, stands ready," said Johnston. "It answers him who comes to it. Such an attitude is the death of the special library" (18). Johnston maintained that there was a major difference between the collection of specialized materials and the special library idea. The true special library, he insisted, one is "that is applied, rather than applied to" (19).

Throughout the early decades, members of SLA found it necessary to defend both their Association and their use of the term "special librarian." They did so unhesitatingly in the library press and in their daily innovations of information products and services. During the 1920s every president seemed to find it necessary to grope for new words of explanation. Despite the existence of many definitions, the membership has found it necessary to continue its collective search for the definition of "special library" and "special librarian." Former SLA Executive Director Frank McKenna compiled more than 30 definitions which had been suggested from the years 1909 to 1976 (1). Though they vary in detail and emphasis, in the aggregate, they accurately reflect the changes SLA has undergone during this time. Some are responses to changes within SLA; others mirror social changes in our environment. Some are attempts to formulate membership qualifications; others are more concerned with new information products and methods for delivering them.

There is a sound of defensiveness in the definitions on McKenna's list. Perhaps because special librarians have so frequently found it necessary to assert their "specialness," their right to that

phrase, while at the same time recognizing that every library is unique in some way, and thus "special." There is also a sound of frustration in the early formulations of definition. Perhaps because the term lacks the clarity of specificity and has to be stretched to account for both the nature of our collections and the nature of our services. All definitions reflect some part of the totality. Special libraries and special librarians are a diverse lot, ranging from archivists to information theorists, from small, narrow collections to large ones embracing many interrelated subjects.

not been the only contenders. Guy E. Marion, SLA President during 1918–1919, used "information center" to refer to the work he was doing at the American Brass Company in 1905 (21). This term, along with "documentation center" and "documentalist," enjoyed a vogue in the 1950s and 1960s but caused much of the tension in the SLA/ASIS merger consideration.

Despite these differences—perhaps because of them—SLA has survived and prospered. It has undergone significant changes in terms of the groups within the membership that were predominant over the years. From 1910 to

Diversity and homogeneity each have left their marks on SLA as strengths and weaknesses. The strength of our diversity has resulted in cross-fertilization based on the sharing of information access and management methodologies through SLA's programs and publications at every level of the organization. Is it a weakness inherent in this diversity that has precluded SLA from leadership in the development of those pre-eminent 20th century devices for resource-sharing—networks?

The Association, perhaps recognizing the impossibility of arriving at a satisfactory resolution of the definition problem, has continued to use its preferred terms somewhat loosely. As Elin Christianson points out in her historical review of the special libraries movement, the term "special library" exists in at least two senses: the general, denoting the nature of the collection; and the specific, referring to the nature of the service (20). The latter definition is the one that early leaders, like Johnston, had in mind. The more general usage is a reflection of the reality SLA had to accept in building a viable association.

The terms "special library" and "special librarian," even though they have been the primary ones used during the 75 year history of SLA, have

about 1930, librarians serving a business clientele were dominant in membership, program structure at annual conferences, and overall leadership of the Association. This focus gradually shifted in the 1930s and early 1940s when the social science groups began to dominate, taking the lead in the development of bibliographies, manuals, and guides to deal with social and economic aspects of the national scene.

The late 1940s and the 1950s marked the ascendancy of the scientific and technical librarians, a group that grew and expanded at a faster rate than any previous group within SLA. During this time, government librarians rapidly increased their ranks in SLA. The 1960s and 1970s have been periods of consolidation in which no one group has provided dominant leadership. The

emphasis on business, social sciences, government and science/technology in SLA has thus paralleled aspects of the history of the United States for the past 75 years.

L'Envoi

Diversity and homogeneity each have left their marks on SLA as strengths and weaknesses. The strengths of our diversity has resulted in a rich cross-fertilization of ideas based on shared information access and management methodologies through SLA's programs and publications at every level of the organization. Is it a weakness inherent in such diversity that has precluded SLA from leadership in the development of those preeminent 20th century devices for resource sharing—networks?

The historian looks in vain for Association-sponsored networks. Certainly, special librarians have involved their libraries in networks, both single and multitype; some 8000, representing 25% of the total U.S. network participants, are special libraries according to the most recently reported survey (22). Yet, in the 75 years of SLA history, mention of Association sponsorship of a network, or even of parallel networks (to reflect the diversity), is not readily discernible. The historian might choose to interpret this as indicative of the strength of local cooperative schemes among chapters and of the success of training many individual special librarians in techniques for sharing through these local arrangements so that now opportunity and individuals have come together without the need for involvement at the Association level.

The homogeneity of SLA's broad membership lies in its commitment to technical excellence in daily work. It shines through SLA conference programs, continuing education reports, publication title pages, and tables of contents. Is it this singlemindedness that leaves little energy for the seemingly more distant issues of professional education and theoretical



1909 1984

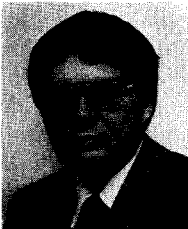
research? True, SLA has had committees and programs related to these concerns; it has provided a forum and invested small amounts of money. But again, the historian looks in vain for the big commitment, the compelling leadership.

Organizational survival depends on constant monitoring of the relationship between available resources and changing priorities. SLA's resources have had their ups and downs; its priorities have remained responsive to the central focus of the membership—their special libraries. Successes have been significant, and the future provides opportunities to once again reassess priorities. Special librarians have reason to be proud of their past. They have indeed put knowledge to work. In doing so, they have enriched and expanded the horizons of the entire information profession by their methodologies and their service-oriented philosophy.

The ideas and principles of the founders have guided SLA well. Dana's final words to the Association seem as appropriate now as in 1925: "The special library, with its real achievements in the immediate past, and its immense possibilities for the future, is the result of the invasion of the library by new people . . ." (23). Had he foreseen the library/information world of the 1980s, Dana might have noted that the invasion will include new techniques, new technologies, new subject disciplines, possibilities, new principles—perhaps even a new name for the Association.

Literature Cited

1. "Special Libraries Association." *Library Journal* 34(8):358 (Aug 1909); McKenna, Frank E. "Special Libraries and the SLA." In *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, 28:386-443, N.Y., Marcel Dekker, 1968.
2. Ball, Sarah B. "Reminiscences of Things Past." *Special Libraries* 50(5):211-212 (May/Jun 1959).
3. *Special Libraries* 1(1): 1 (Jan 1910).
4. Aspnes, Grieg. "The Real Strength of SLA." *Special Libraries* 43(4):139 (Apr 1952).
5. Williams, Robert V. and Martha Jane K. Zachert. "Crisis and Growth: SLA, 1918-1919." *Special Libraries* 74(3):254-264 (Jul 1983).
6. *Special Libraries* 15(7):157-162 (Sep 1924).
7. Zachert, Martha Jane K. and Constance Crawford. Unpublished oral history interview with Elizabeth Ferguson, 1968. Available: SLA Archives, pp. 70-71.
8. Paradis, A. A. "Whither SLA." *Special Libraries* 39(7):231-233 (Sep 1948).
9. Strieby, Irene M. "Now Is Yesterday's Tomorrow." *Special Libraries* 39(8):225 (Oct 1948).
10. Taube, Mortimer. "Memorandum for a Conference on Bibliographic Control of Government Scientific and Technical Reports." *Special Libraries* 39(5):154-160 (May/Jun 1948).
11. Taylor, Robert S. and Harold Borko. "American Society for Information Science." In *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, 1:303-307, N.Y., Marcel Dekker, 1968.
12. "Merger Implementation Plan." *Special Libraries* 61(7):390-394 (Sep 1970).
13. "SLA/ASIS Merger Discussions." *Special Libraries* 62(7-8):301 (Jul/Aug 1971).
14. *Special Libraries* 62(9):369-374 (Sep 1971).
15. *Special Libraries* 61(6):309 (Jul/Aug 1978).
16. Dana, John C. "The President's Opening Remarks." *Special Libraries* 1(1):4 (Jan 1909).
17. "The Annual Conference." *Special Libraries* 7(7):127 (Sep 1916).
18. Johnston, Richard H. "The Special Library vs. the Special Collection." *Special Libraries* 15(6):127-130 (Jun 1924).
19. Johnston, Richard H. quoted in Marion, Guy E. "A Further Remembrance of Things Past." *Special Libraries* 60(8):536-537 (Oct 1969).
20. Christianson, Elin B. "Special Libraries: Putting Knowledge to Work." *Library Trends* 25(1):399-416 (Jul 1976).
21. Williams, Robert V. Unpublished oral history interview with G. E. Marion, 1966. Available: SLA Archives, pp. 20-22.
22. Eckard, Helen M. "NCES Survey of Library Networks and Cooperative Library Organizations, 1977-1978." In *Bowker Library and Book Trade Annual 1982*, N.Y., Bowker, 1982. p. 348.
23. Dana, John C. "The Growth of Special Libraries." *Special Libraries* 16 (no. 6): 183-184 (Jun 1925).



Robert V. Williams is assistant professor and Martha Jane Zachert is professor, College of Library and Information Science, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.

