

---

Volume 11  
Number 1  
*Humor US: Librarians and Laughter (Spring  
2005)*

---

July 2014

## What's So Funny About Government Documents?

Jey Wann  
*Oregon State Library*

### Recommended Citation

Wann, J. (2014). What's So Funny About Government Documents?. *OLA Quarterly*, 11(1), 18-19.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1740>

© 2014 by the author(s).

*OLA Quarterly* is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

# What's So Funny About Government Documents?

by Jey Wann  
Oregon State Library

When I first entered the library world in the late 1970s, government documents were a mystery. The Documents staff lived in the room next door to Acquisitions, so I saw them frequently, but I had no idea what they did. The one thing I did know was that their office was overflowing with piles of boring-looking publications, and their conversations were incomprehensible.

I got my Documents toes wet a few years later when I moved from Acquisitions to Circulation, and had to verify requests in the Monthly Catalog. It confirmed my opinion that government documents, while definitely filling a niche, were weird and obscure. Why, then, did I react with such glee every time a cumulative volume replaced the individual MoCat volumes? Was it some sort of documents disease?

I found myself immersed in state documents a few years later when, for a few months, I compiled and packed Oregon Documents Depository Program shipments. It was during a record hot spell, the office was crowded, and the building wasn't air-conditioned. Imagine how thrilled I was, then, to read this in the July 1981 newsletter from the Medical Examiner's Office: "As he wiped the sweat from his eyes, the County Sheriff/Deputy Medical Examiner thought about better ways to spend this hot, mid-August afternoon. Wrestling with decomposed bodies was not on the list." I soon discovered that there was evidently a frustrated novelist working for the Medical Examiner, as I was treated to such gems as this (from the January–February 1982 issue): "Scalpel, a junior pathologist, sat alone at his desk. Another holiday hospital party was ending, and despite his 1971 resolution, the young physician had mingled late near the punch bowl. He rubbed his

microscope gently and turned to seek comfort with a tray of cervical smears."

It turned out that this particular newsletter was notorious for being creative, but gory. In fact, we had a list of depository libraries that asked us not to send it to them.

I spent only a few months in state documents at that point, and then moved on to the (I thought) more interesting worlds of reference and acquisitions. But I eventually found myself back with the Oregon Documents Program again. And, over the years, I've found that government documents are darned funny.

First of all, there are strange things that happen with depository shipments. Federal depository libraries, for instance, have reported getting things like peanut butter sandwiches in their shipments. To the best of my knowledge, the Oregon Documents program has never made such a faux pas, but we have had some problems with shipments. At one point, when all of us who were working compiling shipments were new to the program, we found ourselves choosing publications by color, not title. It took awhile before we realized that there were several different publications that looked exactly alike, but were totally different if you actually bothered to read the title.

Then there are the boxes the shipments are packed in. At the State Library, we re-use boxes as much as we can to save money, but there still are times that we have to buy a supply. One such supply of boxes was printed with "Chili Hot With Beans." Certainly something to spice up an OrDocs shipment!

Then there was the batch printed with "Sausage perishable." We didn't really think anything about this, and happily

"So long as there's a bit of a laugh going, things are all right. As soon as this infernal seriousness, like a greasy sea, heaves up, everything is lost."


D.H. Lawrence



sent out shipments without crossing the printing out. That worked fine until the shipment right before Christmas that year. The documents librarian at one of our depositories was a fan of spicy sausages. The shipment arrived the Saturday before Christmas, when the library was open, but the documents librarian was not there. The vigilant staff, however, called him at home when they saw the “Sausage” on the side of the box, sure that it was a Christmas present that someone had sent to the library. Imagine everyone’s disappointment when they opened it, only to discover the latest OrDocs shipment.

The documents themselves still yield some giggles. The folks at the Oregon Office of Communicable Disease and Epidemiology publish a newsletter called CD Summary, and have a talent for clever headlines. For instance: “Asthma: It’s Nothing to Wheeze at” (v. 51, no. 21); “Look, Ma, no SARS!” (v. 52, no. 9); “A Disease Most Fowl Chicken Pox in the Third Millennium” (v. 53, no. 26). Volume 50, number 15, is about changes to disease-reporting rules, and carries the following caution: “Warning: may cause drowsiness. Do not read while driving, operating heavy machinery, or performing surgery.”

The CD Summary folks are being funny on purpose. Some of the humor in documents, however, is unintentional, but charming. Take, for instance, the title of this publication from the Oregon Game Commission: *1958 Fish Stockings by Watershed*. (When I asked our natural resources librarian what kind of stockings fish wore, he answered (naturally) “Fishnet.”) Then there’s this recent publication from the Oregon Department of Transportation: *A Fitness-for-Purpose Evaluation of Electroslag Flange Butt Welds*. It almost sings!

So never let it say that government documents, or the people who work with them, are without humor. If you need a good dose of laughter, visit your government documents co-workers today! 

## Library haiku

From Revolting Librarians Redux:

patron in corner  
looking at pornography—  
maybe researcher

by Kathleen Kern

The following were contributed by the  
Hatfield Marine Science Center Staff:

Once again, a fine.  
Does anyone check these things in?  
—Book found on the shelf!

Oh, my aching hands!  
Why is this volume bound so tight?  
Photocopy blues.

Paper-cut on my  
Middle finger—I will not  
Show you where it hurts

Journal articles  
I could write grants in my sleep  
though I’d rather dream

I wish to photocopy  
directly onto my brain.  
How would the recall  
be expected to perform?

