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## Danielle Steel, Splinters, and the End of Reading: Changes in the Library Over the Last 25 Years

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# Danielle Steel, Splinters, and the End of Reading: Changes in the Library Over the Last 25 Years

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## The Google Divide

If you wonder what's being taught in library school these days, you might be comforted to hear that we still learn about the history of libraries and how to catalog such puzzlers as "The Poems of Robert Frost" by Mordecai Marcus. We also write blogs, learn about metadata and Web 2.0, and question why our relational database projects keep crashing. As library students, we are encouraged to keep one foot in the past while we plant the other squarely in the future.

It can be quite a balancing act.

This gap between the past and the future is what John Berry, in a recent *Library Journal* article, called the Google Divide. It is the difference between librarians whose careers began in the "pre-Google" era and the "post-Google" newcomers. According to Berry, the Google Divide frustrates many librarians. It appears when a post-Google librarian starts talking about his or her blog, or brags too long about the benefits of a Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed. It shows up when a pre-Google librarian shrugs off a new program with a dismissive "We tried that twenty years ago and it didn't work." However, Berry does not think this frustration is anything new. As a profession, he says, "We have always

given vehement lip service to innovation and creativity, to change and progress. So those who were and are new to our profession were and are always surprised ... to find deeply rooted resistance to new ideas and innovation." In other words, take a trip back in library time and you will find people resisting the future.

Is Berry on to something? Is opposition to new ideas part of our library heritage? I interviewed three longtime librarians in the Multnomah County Libraries (MCL) to get their perspectives: Candy Bertelson, an administrator at the Central Library; Margot Moore-Wilson, former librarian at the Sellwood-Moreland MCL branch; and Delette Huffman, former librarian and then human resources administrator for MCL. I wondered if they encountered resistance to



Candy Bertelson

new ideas when they started their careers. And if so, what were some of the divides before the Google Divide?

## Looking at change from the Center

Candy graciously agreed to meet with me at her office on the second floor of Central Library in downtown Portland. If you have never been there, you are missing a treasure.



Nancy Lynn Peate



When you enter the large lobby, you face a striking marble grand stairway. High-ceilinged rooms are filled with natural light and soft colors that enhance their Georgian design. Certainly this beloved building, first opened in 1913, contains a traditional library—but, wait, is that a pirate show at the top of the stairs? Everywhere you look there is something old and something new. This is fitting for an institution that must constantly find its balance somewhere between the past and the future. Yesterday, libraries might have been seen as the warehouses of dead paper; today, digital resources and Google have changed just about everything. The MCL Central Library is testimony to this.

Candy considers herself a librarian first, and a manager second. She performs four hours of public desk duty a week, in addition to her other responsibilities as a Central Library Administrator on the Central Management Team. Candy started as a library clerk in technical services and was a member of the last class of librarians graduating from the University of Oregon in 1978. She remembers learning to use a keypunch machine for basic computer commands and wondering how, as a librarian, she might make use of such obscure skills. In the early 1990s, she used tools such as Archie and Veronica to locate files on file transfer protocol (FTP) sites, and other technologies quickly made obsolete by Web-based search engines.

Candy's early days as a youth librarian at Holgate Branch of MCL in the 1980s present a stark contrast to the focus she sees now on early childhood at Multnomah County. There were no books for babies because, Candy remembers, babies did not read. As it became apparent that more children were in day care and more moms were going to work, the library started offering story talks at different times of day and broadening their focus to dads, working moms, and

child care centers. Candy remembers this as a time of great change when community outreach gained importance.

During the same period, public librarians were influenced by Charles W. Robinson, former director of the Baltimore County Public Library and the controversial proponent of "Give 'em what they want" library service. Candy remembers older librarians counseling that "we should be telling people what to read." Without their wise counsel, people would only read romances, which is what popular literature was called. It was a big shift when the library began emphasizing high-circulating popular materials, and authors such as Danielle Steel appeared on library shelves. The library today carries many copies of best sellers and popular movies. Candy also notes that the huge growth in publishing has greatly increased the number of books available each year. Librarians cannot personally review every book that is purchased, as they used to, so they must rely on readers' advisories from publications and other libraries, as well as requests from users.

Since the renovation of Central Library, completed in 1997, the library has become a hub for Internet use. This has literally changed the way the Central Library is used as it evolves into a digital center for information. Candy remembers when the library first started offering the Internet to patrons. There was a mandate that computers not be used for e-mail; it was not considered an appropriate application for the library. Now, e-mail is one of the major Internet uses and an example of how policies evolve. Another illustration of change involves security in the library, particularly as more patrons access the Internet. Safety remains a concern for people working at all libraries, and may be why some librarians are not as interested in management positions as before.



In her early days of library work, Candy remembers a constant fear of lay-offs, major budget issues, and a perceived hierarchy, both between the Central Library and the branches, and between professionals and staff. This is something that Candy believes people are working hard to change. There is more collaboration and a stronger team approach today than ever before. Slowly the hierarchy is broken down in part as the budget strengthens and attitudes change. The library continues to grow and change.

### **Perspectives on change from the branches**

Because of her long association with MCL, Candy can speak first-hand about the Central workplace. Has her experience been similar to that of a branch librarian? I interviewed two librarians, Delette Hoffman and Margot Moore-Wilson, at a coffee shop near the Sellwood-Moreland Library, to find out. Delette retired from Multnomah County in 2004 as a human resources administrator. Margot was the Sellwood-Moreland branch librarian for many years and also retired in 2004. Both Delette and Margot still work as on-call staff for the library.

Delette and Margot started their library

careers on a lark. Delette began as a clerk “for the winter” in 1980 at Sellwood-Moreland. She was soon promoted to a supervisory position and stayed for 24 years. That same year, Margot answered a clerk posting at the old Hollywood Library, took a typing test, and was handed her work schedule without further training. On her first day, she learned how to operate a new technological device, the light pen.

Both Margot and Delette were interested in getting an MLS, but by then Oregon no longer had a library school and distance learning programs were not prevalent. It was neither practical nor economical to earn an MLS degree in Portland if you could not leave for one to two years due to work or family. Margot and Delette each earned degrees in other programs on their way to becoming librarians: Margot has a master’s degree in urban planning and Delette has two bachelor’s degrees, one in business and one in humanities.

Delette and Margot remember a strong sense of elitism surrounding the library when they first started. Some of the librarians they met projected an attitude that libraries were only for people who knew how to use them. Margot remembers new patrons sometimes wandered in through the front door, saying, “I had no idea there was a library here” because the library system was resistant to publicity. Later, this changed as public service was emphasized. When Delette was promoted to the library’s only full-time employee as the Clerk-Librarian (combining two positions into one), one change that surprised her was that she was not given a desk. She was expected to rove around the library, offering assistance at the right time, in a manner suggestive of a Nordstrom’s clerk. She remembers being exhausted at the end



Delette Hoffman and Margot Moore-Wilson



of the day, and leaning on the circulation desk for rest, all for want of a desk.


One innovation that Margot and Delette would have welcomed was splinter-free bookcases. Staff constantly got splinters from the bookcases, and especially from the circulation counter because funds were so limited that the circulation desk was only finished on the side that patrons could see. Margot still has a scar on her thumb from a particularly nasty splinter. Perhaps it was not so bad that Delette did not get a desk!

In 1986, the Sellwood-Moreland Library was remodeled and both Margot and Delette remember this as a time of frantic worries about budgets. One of the goals of the remodeling was to make the library more competitive with bookstores, by having prominent displays of subject books such as “Cooking” and “Gardening.” Margot and Delette remember this arrangement being resisted by some of the library staff because the displays were constantly shifting and books were moved out of their Dewey Decimal positions. During the remodeling, they parked the bookmobile outside, running electrical and phone cords up the side of the wall, through the window, and out onto the street so that they could continue providing service. Certainly a large gap exists between this era and today’s environment in which facility managers cast a distrustful eye on such things as extension cords and unsecured windows.

In those pre-Google days, there were threats of popular culture and alternative media encroaching on the library’s turf. Both Margot and Delette voiced that librarians feared that libraries were going to become obsolete. Everyone was starting to say that “books weren’t going to be around any more” as television became embedded in our culture. Similarly, the introduction

of audio cassettes was touted as “the end of reading.” Both librarians remember these echoes of today’s worry that the Internet will be the end of libraries.

### **Divides before and after Google**

Talking to these library veterans makes one thing clear. Before the Google Divide, there was the Elitism Schism—and budget issues and popular culture wars and many other examples of resistance to changes. Some day, the pre-Google librarians will have moved on and post-Google librarians will be the Old Guard. Perhaps librarians will look back fondly to the days before the PepsiCo “Gotta Have It” Central Library had a corporate sponsor. Newly-hired librarians will be shocked that the public library did not always have its signature brew pub and ice-skating rink, and patrons and staff alike will have a rough time adjusting to the new holographic catalog. When the day comes that librarians are recognized and paid as well as Danielle Steel, surely we can expect less frustration with new ideas and innovation. Until then, there is still one thing I know for sure. The author of “The Poems of Robert Frost” is Mordecai Marcus. Or is that Robert Frost? 

### **References**

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