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Harry's Morning After

by Jim Scheppke
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Editor's note: Libraries have always enjoyed a lock on the information business. What might happen if we assume the status quo will continue indefinitely? Are libraries prepared for a more competitive environment?

Harry's alarm went off at eight just like it had done for the past five years. Prior to June of 2005, he used to have to get up at seven to make it into the library by about 9:30. The library opened at ten. But five years ago the hours were cut and the library started opening at noon. Harry would never say this to anyone, but he was actually kind of glad to be able to get the extra hour of sleep. He didn't consider himself to be a morning person.

He didn't really consider himself to be a night person either, but last night he didn't get to bed until one, and sleep didn't come until much later. Last night! The recollection hit him suddenly, causing his stomach to knot. Oh God, last night. Last night was the worst night of his life. The Newell City Council decided that the Newell Municipal Library would be merged with the Newell High School library beginning next September.

That damned new Superintendent! It was her idea that when the new high school was completed, an intergovernmental agreement would establish a combined library in the new school. The City would make an annual payment to the school district in order to carry part of the City's library staff on the district's payroll. What was left of the library collections and some of the equipment would move over to the school. Harry would be kept on as the Library Director, at least for a "transition period." In nineteen months Harry would turn 58 and be eligible for early retirement. He'd already been counting the days, but now he wondered if he'd be able to tough it out that long.

A deep depression settled over Harry, and he rolled over in his bed and pulled the covers up higher. He couldn't face getting up and seeing if the morning paper reported on last night's meeting. He was the only library staff person there, so the rest of them would read about it in their papers this morning. With any luck, the reporter filed his story too late for today's paper and Harry would have the chance to tell his staff what happened himself. Or maybe it would be better if they just read about it in the paper. Oh God. Harry couldn't bear to look.

Maybe he should have spoken up last night, Harry thought, but the City Manager had told him, in so many words, to keep his trap shut. The City Manager is really in thick with the Superintendent, ever since he was on the search committee that hired her. Besides, the city will really make out on this deal. They get to lay off the library staff and they get to use the library wing of City Hall for something else, probably police. The school gets a trained Librarian for the first time in years, paid for by the City. Such a deal.

Harry's alarm clock went off again. In the shock of remembering last night he had forgotten to turn it off. It was an antique alarm clock from the 1960's that used to be called "digital" because it had numbers on little metal tabs that

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turned over mechanically. That was before “digital” took on a whole new meaning. Which was why Harry liked it.

When things really started going digital in the 1990’s was when things really started going downhill at the library.

They had done all right in the early days. The State Library bought them some public access computers and they eked out the money to participate in the countywide library automated system. They still used one of those old public access computers for one of the pages to read her e-mail. The library board struggled a bit to set policy for appropriate use of the computers, but after that, things went fairly well.

They never seemed to have enough computers, and people always wanted to do things on the computers that weren’t covered in the Appropriate Use Policy. The policy was never revised because the library board was eliminated by the City Council in 2002. It wasn’t the Council’s idea. It was really the City Manager’s idea to “streamline” the City organization, but Harry wasn’t really sad to see the board go. The board was always more or less of a nuisance, and half the time they really didn’t have anything to do.

When Harry became Director of the library in 1999, use of the library was at an all time high. The library’s budget was pretty good, and the library was open six days a week. The book budget was never really that great, but then being in the library wing of City Hall really limited their space anyway. The board adopted a policy of no popular videos and no popular music “CDs,” as they were called then, so that helped with the space problem.

But then it all started to go downhill. Harry really didn’t see it coming, though now he sometimes wonders why he didn’t.

First came Napster. But that was just a bunch of college kids downloading free rock music in their dorm rooms. Not a threat to the library. But then Napster merged with America Online and began

offering unlimited music and e-books for a subscription of \$4.99 a month. But kids still downloaded music for free from Pirate, a renegade server farm located on an abandoned oil drilling platform in the North Sea. That caused America Online to lower their unlimited “e-media” subscriptions to only \$2.99 a month. That was a killer. That’s when the library really began to feel the pain. That happened in 2003, and by 2005, circulation was in the tank.

That’s when the City Council decided to cut the library hours down to noon to six, Tuesday through Thursday, noon to five on Friday, and ten to one on Saturday. They tried advertising Saturdays as “Family Day @ Your Library” using some free promotional materials, but that didn’t seem to help much.

Harry really believed after he became Director that circulation would never go down. It had only gone up since anyone could remember. He really trusted a book he’d read in the late 90s called *Future Libraries*, which said that print on paper would continue to be the medium of choice “for the foreseeable future.” He remembered how comforting those words sounded: “for the foreseeable future.”

It wasn’t that the new “media readers” were so great. When the first ones started to come out, they were a joke. Overpriced, and the resolution was terrible. But that changed pretty fast. The prices came down and when you could read books and listen to the books being read by your choice of real voices, not to mention having the ability to listen to music or watch movies, that’s when just about everyone needed to have one. When the Palm e-brary broke the \$100 price barrier, Wal-Mart just couldn’t keep it in stock.

Circulation was not supposed to go down. The baby boomers were supposed to constitute the “installed base” for libraries, as some wag had said at a library conference he attended years ago. Boy was he wrong.

And as circulation began to tank, so did everything else. When Martha, his reference librarian of many years, retired in 2004, Harry couldn’t see replacing her. All she



did was sit at the desk and read. Every once in awhile she would get a telephone reference question, but usually folks just wanted to know about the library hours or something else that anyone could answer.

The weekly story time attendance held up pretty well. Every Tuesday at ten, Harry could always count on ten to fifteen preschool kids and their moms. The moms were really good, and a couple even volunteered to keep the story times going when Mrs. Evans, the children's librarian, was out on extended sick leave. But then in 2003, the state legislature appropriated an enormous sum of money, millions, so that local school districts could establish "ready to learn" programs for preschoolers. They held story times in every school and began a well-financed summer reading program, beginning that summer. They even took books and story times out to childcare providers, something Mrs. Evans had

always tried to get Harry to put in his budget request to the City Manager.

When Harry submitted his budget request in 2004, after the new "ready to learn" programs in the schools had begun, neither Mrs. Evans nor the children's services program stood a chance. "You expect me to advocate for the duplication of government services?" was the City Manager's rhetorical question. The knot returned to Harry's stomach with this memory. Damned schools.

Harry looked at his digital clock again. It was now 8:24. Time to get up and face the music. "Better see if this mess made the papers and if it did, I'd better get to the library before anyone else does so I can begin to explain what happened. The staff will want to know who gets laid off and who gets to go to work for the school district. Damn! "I'll let the City Manager figure that one out," Harry mused. 

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