

SLA at 100: Preface and Acknowledgements

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Throughout the history of human communication, mankind has done more than merely communicate. From our earliest attempts at civilization, the elements of intelligence, human interaction, information development and information management, knowledge development and knowledge sharing, strategic learning and teaching, communication, and information use have been coming together. Early in our civilization's history, these elements began to shape themselves and stewardship, too, became fundamental in the progress of mankind's growth. Libraries and other such information storehouses were, if not created immediately, certainly not far behind in coming into existence. As civilized people began to realize that information alone is pretty much an empty shell, that information is only of value when information is used and becomes knowledge, they also realized that holding on to and caring for what had been created was as fundamental as the creation of the information itself.

If such sentiments and allusions seem perhaps a little grandiose in the present context, the author seeks the reader's indulgence. Those of us who have spent our professional lives affiliated with the Special Libraries Association (SLA) might be forgiven if we desire—indeed, if we choose—to think about our primary professional association in exalted terms. We have watched the association grow, develop, and, yes, change as society around us has changed. Throughout its history, SLA has been and remains the one professional association in the information/knowledge/learning environment which has recognized and embraced change as its strength. That acknowledged strength—to recognize societal change and to incorporate change into our own organizational framework—has enabled the association to succeed. SLA established itself, remains, and is recognized as the preeminent professional association for information professionals and knowledge workers throughout the world. It has been through its members' understanding of change that SLA has thrived and prospered and achieved its preeminence.

There are those who assert, correctly in my opinion, that SLA's strength in managing change is one of the association's critical assets.* It was at a program at an SLA conference that the theme of change management was so forcefully stated that for some practitioners—myself included—the statement became something of a guiding principle, a way of thinking about our work. David S. Ferriero and Thomas L. Wilding, speaking in San Antonio in 1991 about strategic planning, noted that strategic planning assumes that “change is desirable and inevitable.” If this is the case—and I happen to believe it is—and if change is both inevitable and desirable as we plan strategically for our work as specialist librarians, it can be safely said that change is equally desirable and inevitable in our professional association. From its

* These thoughts, in slightly different form, were first described in the author's essay, “Getting to 100: Managing Change in the Special Libraries Association,” published in *Information Outlook* 6 (5) May, 2002.

earliest days the association has built its strengths on its ability to establish its branch of information services as unique. The true strength of SLA's membership lies in its intellectual and professional diversity. The members of SLA and the parent institutions and organizations for which they provide knowledge services management are truly "incomparable," as one of the profession's leaders has stated. It is because of that diversity that SLA has had such an influence on the information industry and on the broader intellectual and management communities. No specialist librarian is like any other, simply because few of the organizations for which they provide information services are like any other. SLA has been uniquely successful in providing an intellectual "home" for knowledge workers, encouraging them and enabling them to succeed.

During the association's history, there have been many occasions when its members have been called upon to perform extraordinary leadership roles, within the association, in the information industry at large, and in society. These people have brought honor to themselves and to their profession as they have done so, and this book is one member's endeavor to describe the history of SLA as an association unlike any other. In seeking to identify and describe the various societal and professional forces that have influenced SLA's development, the book will, it is hoped, link these forces with the primary issues of the times with which they are associated. At the same time, though, this history must also attempt to describe the development of specialized librarianship from its original manifestations to its present status, its current role as a body of information professionals and knowledge workers who pride themselves on delivering customized knowledge services to their clients. Thus the book attempts to convey both the history of the association and the history of specialized librarianship in the period between 1909 and 2009. In doing so, it provides one more opportunity, that of allowing this member of the association to record his affection and respect for the organization that has been so important for so many knowledge services professionals. We are all better for our connection with SLA and celebrating SLA's centenary is, above all else, celebrating that connection.

Certainly a book such as this, a narrative history celebrating our professional association, did not simply appear on the scene. The idea was David Bender's, then the association's executive director, some ten years before SLA's centenary. Bender had read the author's narrative history of another organization (*A Venerable and Cherished Institution: The University Club of New York, 1865-1990*, published in 1991), and I was invited to prepare a proposal for a similar book, with the intention that this SLA history would provide an interesting and pleasurable narrative for the association's members. Thus it is written for a general readership and while it is my hope that the book will appeal as well to the scholar, my purpose is to tell the story of SLA. It is a good story, worthy of the telling, and I have tried to keep it moving without academic diversions and distracting citations.

For both the general reader and the scholar, there are possibly a few stylistic considerations that should be mentioned. For example, when I have used footnotes in the book I have chosen to use them in the traditional way, to comment on the text. The footnotes are not, in most cases, intended to provide a source. A bibliography is included for that purpose.

Also, at this point I should make another small comment about style, or more specifically about word usage. Having been associated with specialized libraries throughout my career, I have observed with some discomfort the difficulties that arise from the way we characterize our profession and the operational functions in which we perform our professional tasks. Certainly, as the text will show, what we call ourselves has been a problem from the beginning, simply because the term “special” can mean many different things to many different people (as well having different meanings in different periods of history and in different geographic settings). As a solution for myself, I long ago took to using the adjective “specialist” to refer to the librarians who work in this field (for we are specialists) and I use the adjective “specialized” to refer to the libraries themselves and to the concept or field of librarianship of which we are a part. I have continued that pattern in this history although I have also attempted to retain the “special” formulation in quotations or when referring to a particular situation in which that designation is appropriate.

The writing of this history has been a very personal undertaking for the author, a treasured journey. The pleasures of delving into the history of specialized librarianship, tracing the discipline’s magnificent transition into knowledge services and its trajectory into its leadership role in building the knowledge culture have been particularly rewarding, and I am greatly honored to have been asked to write this book. Obviously such a journey is not taken alone, and it is only appropriate to acknowledge the many people who have contributed to the completion of the task. But compiling such a list of acknowledged colleagues and friends is impossible in such a book, and I have concluded that there is simply no way I can name the many people who—in one way or another—have contributed to this work. So I must acknowledge them as a group, and I do so now, thanking them very sincerely and honestly for their many suggestions, the hours of conversations we shared, and their enthusiastic support for this work.

At the same time there are individuals who must be recognized simply because their specific tasks and contributions were so essential and so critical that the book would not have been written without them. I refer, first of all, to the simply splendid SLA staff, beginning with Dr. Bender who as I say had the original idea. CEO Janice Lachance, who enthusiastically continued to support the project she had inherited, and Douglas Newcomb, who was first given the assignment of working with the author on the project and whose enthusiasm about the project seems to have known no bounds, both served as committed partners for the undertaking. Additionally, people like John Latham (who was assigned to work with Newcomb in 2006, when Newcomb’s professional responsibilities expanded into other areas within the association), Carolyn Sosnowski, Linda Brouard, former staff members Tamara Coombs and James Miers, the late Lynn Smith, and many other fine employees at SLA were supportive, helpful, and enthusiastic about the project. Latham was also responsible, in the late 1990s, for the collection of data that made up the association’s timeline, published in the twelve issues of *Information Outlook* in 1999, thus providing, along with Fannie Simon’s enthusiastic timeline from the 1950s, an essential starting point for this history.

There are others whom I must name, members and colleagues who offered comments and advice about the book. Jane Reed and other staff members at the library of The University Club of New York provided valuable assistance, and I am grateful to them. The group of readers who undertook the difficult task of reading the manuscript and offering suggestions to the author for its improvement cannot be thanked enough: Andrew Berner, David Bender, Mary Dickerson, Mimi Drake, Meg Paul, Davenport Robertson, Dale Stanley, Rebecca Vargha, and Gloria Zamora took on the difficult task of advising the author after the final draft of the book was finished. Their thoughts and guidance have been extremely valuable, and I particularly appreciate their help. Finally, to my partner Andrew Berner the book owes a lot—not least two very careful and constructive readings and the initial and very difficult first editing from the great morass of data accumulated in the research process and put forward in the book's first draft. But the author owes him much, much more, and *SLA at 100* is dedicated to him.

—Guy St. Clair
New York NY
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