

By THOMAS FRANKLIN CURRIER

Preliminary Cataloging

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DURING THE past few years the term "preliminary cataloging" has, at the Harvard library, been on our tongues with ever-increasing frequency. It denotes a process introduced to free the expert cataloger from certain mechanical and time-consuming work which simultaneously affords a preliminary survey of all books and pamphlets received, whether by gift or purchase, with a view to segregating duplicates.

Briefly described the process is as follows. Purchased books from the ordering department and all gifts are delivered to an assistant attached to the department of cataloging and classification, who checks them with the union catalog. This catalog combines, in one alphabet, the Library of Congress depository cards with the cards for books in the Harvard College Library and the university's numerous departmental and special libraries; it serves also as the library's official catalog. The checking just mentioned ordinarily determines by a single process: (a) if the piece in hand is a duplicate within the library system; (b) for non-duplicates, if there is a Library of Congress card that may be utilized for cataloging purposes; (c) if the form of name of the author (corporate or personal) has been determined for cataloging purposes by our own previous investigations or by the Library of Congress catalogers. The information thus ob-

tained is noted on slips which are placed in the books. The duplicates are segregated for further consideration and the rest passed on to a rather highly organized typists' department. Here, girls trained to this work, type, from the books before them, preliminary catalog cards, containing the necessary data, transcribed mechanically without research. The books, with the cards inserted, are now distributed to the several supervisors¹ in charge of the subjects concerned, who can thus attack the labor of placing them in the library's permanent collections with certain necessary or desirable information spread before them in convenient shape. Because of this preliminary process, the cataloger is relieved of the mechanical work of typing the initial or key cards, or (as an alternative) of making complicated notes for the guidance of a typist. The advantage of this method, as against making notes in advance for a typist to follow, rests in the fact that the cataloger does not have to project her imagination into the future and forecast what unexpected things a typist may do, but has before her an actual card, revealing just how the final card will appear as respects length of title, arrangement of matter, and the like.

To the point when the books come into the hands of the subject supervisors, mentioned above, the work has been done without research, the object having been to

¹ Experiments that have been made in centralizing in the hands of "subject supervisors" the processes of acquisition and absorption of library material will be described in another paper to be printed in *College and Research Libraries*.

push everything along as rapidly as accuracy will permit, avoiding the delays incident to looking up lacking data and settling debatable points. It is believed, after several years' experience, that this combination of processes, covering the no man's land between accessioning and cataloging, is a notable step in reducing the cost of acquiring and absorbing library material and paves the way for placing greater responsibility on the cataloger, as will be described.

How Experiment Started

The first conscious experiment in this direction was made in the year 1925 when the library acquired an unusually large collection of the writings of German philosophers. A cataloger of moderate experience, but a high degree of intelligence, had been assigned to the task of cataloging these books. Short-handed as we were at the time, and with new accessions pouring in, some study of short cut methods of forwarding this important collection to the shelves instead of holding it until it could be taken up volume by volume in the normal retail fashion, seemed desirable. By our first experiment one of our best typists, who had some familiarity with German, copied the title pages on sheets of paper and these copies were edited by the cataloger. It was immediately evident that a skilled typist, with experience in copying catalog titles, could, by familiarizing herself with the simpler rules for collation, prepare a title sufficiently complete and suitable in form to enable her to type it directly on regular card stock. This would make it possible to use the card for the official catalog and thus save one recopying of the title. It was found that a high percentage of titles so prepared needed little or no

editing, provided that the correct heading could be determined in advance. For our German philosophers, a list of correct headings was easily compiled, from which the typist worked. The notable success of this experiment—some 967 volumes were handled at a cost of $34\frac{1}{2}$ cents a title—resulted in applying the method both to miscellaneous collections and to regular work. An accurate but moderately experienced cataloger was, therefore, assigned to the initial process of checking new accessions with the union catalog in order to provide the typist with exact headings, whenever these could be procured from the catalog without research. A large percentage of titles thus came through to the subject supervisor bearing exact headings copied from the catalog; some had presumably correct headings, also derived from the catalog, while for other entries, not found in the catalog, the title pages were themselves adequate. A minor quantity, only, came through without a heading that was either perfectly, or else essentially, correct. (The searcher now uses a special check to indicate that he believes he has found a heading absolutely correct.)

The system was then perfected by ruling that the person in charge of the preliminary searchers should look over the day's influx and eliminate snags, unusual material, and rare books. These should not pass through the preliminary processes, but be distributed directly to the subject supervisor concerned in each case, thus pinning on this supervisor greater responsibility for the physical care of such material while it is in transit, and for its suitable and prompt treatment.

As the method developed, it became evident that the subject supervisors should keep constantly in mind that the persons engaged in the preliminary checking were

not to be held responsible for anything except copying with perfect accuracy such data as headings and call numbers found in the catalog, comparing with care, title, date, and edition, for the purpose of revealing duplicates, and noting certain other matters that experience found useful. These checkers were not, when there was doubt in the matter, to attempt to prove identity of authorship, provide full names, search bibliographies, look up anonyms, or attend to other matters more properly the duty of experienced catalogers. It was not for the searcher to determine, for example, whether the book in hand by Frederick Law Olmsted was written by father or son. So far as cataloging was concerned, the prime object of the preliminary processes was to prepare, without research, a provisional card for the use of the subject supervisor. To this card she could devote the energy of scholarly editing without being hindered either by the mechanical labor of typing the initial card herself or by writing out notes from which the card could later be made by a typist—the marking of title pages for this purpose being, of course, taboo. Matters had to be adjusted, however, so that the provisional card would, in a sufficiently large percentage of cases, prove good enough to serve as the permanent official card for the union catalog, thus sparing the danger of errors from a second copying and waste of time from additional proof reading. Other information found and noted by the preliminary searcher was to be regarded as a by-product to be used with discrimination.

When the subject supervisor received books by such well-known authors as Abbott Lawrence Lowell or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, she would be confident that the spelling of the names and the

date of birth (or of birth and death) had been correctly copied from the catalog. She would not herself have to go to the catalog to verify the data and, from her knowledge of books and authors in her subject, she would be absolutely sure of the identity of the author. When, however, she received a book by a person with whom she was not familiar, even if the author's name were as distinctive as Frederick Law Olmsted, it would be necessary for her to be constantly on her guard lest she (or, as usually happens, her successor) be humiliated, later, by a father-and-son confusion in the catalog. In fact, a competent supervisor will normally select from her day's influx the books for which she deems it necessary to verify the searcher's findings. This verification is the more essential if, as may happen when large gift lots are handled, some little time has elapsed between the time of preliminary searching and the cataloging, for a good catalog is perpetually in a state of flux.

Some Results

While the preliminary processes just described originated in a desire to simplify the routine of cataloging and decrease its cost, it became obvious that they would be of perhaps greater value in introducing a new routine in the matter of receiving, checking, and absorbing new accessions of library material. The two processes, (a) of determining the question of rejecting or retaining duplicates after a collection has been checked with the catalog, and (b) of making the necessary cataloging records after a decision as to duplicates has been reached, are, to a great extent, one and continuous. The person of good judgment, who has sufficient information about the book or collection to decide the first

matter is usually in a position, if trained and experienced as a cataloger, to attend to the second matter, often with but moderate additional labor and expense. This is particularly true of difficult material. The result then of this new method has been to pass on to the cataloger-classifier, who is responsible for a subject, a far greater share in deciding the question of whether duplicates in her field are to be rejected or retained. This procedure has been particularly useful when the staff is handling large collections devoted to some special topic. Furthermore, it centers the responsibility for sane and efficient treatment on those individuals who, from knowledge of the subject, technical experience, and familiarity with the library's collections, can best bear such responsibility. By having such additional duties placed on their shoulders, the persons concerned take greater interest in their work and increase their knowledge of the subject and of the library's holdings. They thus become daily more useful than if they confined their duties merely to recording what is put on their desks to record, after someone else has studied it and made essential decisions.

"Subject Supervisors"

During the period of incubation, while the method thus described was being worked out, there was considerable questioning by the heads of departments as to the wisdom of thus increasing the duties and responsibilities of those whose principal duties had hitherto been confined to the processes of cataloging and classification. It seems evident, however, both from the standpoints of economy and of satisfactory results that the decision as to retention of duplicates may, in large measure, be most appropriately apportioned to the catalogers

and classifiers specializing in definite subjects, and that to these persons we might well assign the title "subject supervisor." It is well to emphasize the idea that not only must these persons have had past experience in cataloging and classifying, but they must also be the actual persons who are daily engaged in, or closely supervising, this work on their own subjects. The distribution of the vast influx of books to several persons, each more or less expert in her special subject, is, on the very face of it, a wiser practice than concentrating the responsibility on an accessions chief who attempts to cover the multitude of subjects within the scope of a large scholar's library and to deal with the many languages involved. Surely a policy is untenable whereby each department of the library (order, catalog, reference, etc.) has its own specialist in each field in which the library is active.

Running parallel to this increased responsibility of the subject supervisors has come the annexation, to a greater or less degree, by the supervisor in charge of the preliminary searching process, of the management of gift accessions, including large collections and the daily dribble. A minor, but essential, advantage resulting has been the diminution of books to which, on receipt, the library's marks of ownership have been overhastily affixed, the item being rejected after more careful scrutiny. At present, the library stamps and bookplates are affixed almost as the last process, and thus valuable material may be more easily earmarked for special care in the mechanical, and at times abused, process of stamping and plating.

It has been found that the preliminary searching thus described can be done suitably by the better grade of student assistants, each of whom puts some twelve or

fifteen hours a week into the work. It is wiser not to keep a person at the job too long at one period, since it requires close attention to detail which cannot be given by a person physically tired from long standing at the catalog. It is, moreover, necessary to have a sufficiently large number of persons assigned to this work so that current acquisitions may go through from day to day with the utmost promptitude, to save the occasional need of hunting for books that may be in process. It has, at times, been our custom to establish a list of persons who may automatically be taken from their regular work for an hour or two each, when there is danger of delay in handling the day's accessions. The chief of the typing department in turn sees to it that work is so arranged that live and important books are pushed through her department immediately on receipt. It is our intention to have these live and current books in the hands of the subject supervisors within twenty-four hours after they come into the department. In this way each subject supervisor is made responsible for the prompt handling of books in her field. New English and American books have, in the past, usually been put into circulation from one to three days from the time of receipt in the department, with a full set of cards in both catalogs within an additional day or two. This speed depends largely on the exertions of the subject supervisor.

A word as to "continuations." Normally, these are distributed at once to the serial division and are not handled by the preliminary searchers. As the serial division makes its record, it notes such titles (e.g. monograph series) as need analyzing. These titles are passed on to the preliminary searchers and go through the same routine as other monographs, being special-

ly marked by a characteristic slip in order to procure prompt attention and speedy routing. Since the serial record notes them as received, they must not be delayed in the hands of the subject supervisors. Being already recorded as received on the serial records, there is the greater need that they should not be delayed in the later processes of acquisitioning and cataloging.

Duplicates thrown out by the preliminary searchers must undergo scrutiny, first by the supervisor in charge and, when desirable, by the subject supervisors or by specialists available, with a view to spotting valuable items not obvious to searchers inexperienced in such matters. The searchers are, however, instructed to notice, and set aside for inspection, all books with annotations on fly leaves or margins, that contain inserts, or that bear seemingly interesting autographs.

Savings

At Harvard, this combination of the preliminary search to determine the correct catalog heading and find possible Library of Congress cards, with the survey of material to reveal duplicate copies, has reduced a process, which in some libraries requires three separate searchings in two card catalogs, to a single comparison of the book with the union catalog. When it is remembered that the rate of such search is less than twenty titles an hour, the savings for a yearly accession of 50,000 titles might be as high as 5000 hours when three searchings are necessary. In the year 1938-39, at the Harvard library, it took 2370 hours to perform the preliminary searching for 39,982 titles, an average of only 16.9 titles an hour. At this rate the saving is greater, i.e. some 3000 hours for one searching saved, and 6000 hours for two. The saving in time is more than that

of two full-time assistants, or the equivalent of from \$2000 to \$3000 annually. Assuming, however, that for one-third of the titles further verification is necessary on the part of the cataloger, the saving might still be as high as from \$1700 to \$2500, for one as against three searchings. Additional saving results from this new method in the fact that the mechanical checking of titles with the card catalog and the typing of the first card are done by persons of less pay than the cataloger or subject specialist. So many elements go into this figure that it would be a difficult or impossible task to reduce it to exact statistics, but if we assume a saving of but two cents a title on these two processes we get an additional saving of \$1000 on a yearly output of 50,000 titles. Another notable, but indeterminate, amount is saved by the elimination of conferences and discussions between subordinates and chiefs of the accessions and catalog departments, when questions arise as to individual items or lots. This, I am sure, will be acknowledged by those who have watched intimately the progress of work in the staff of a large library.

To sum up, the Harvard library, benefited by its combination official, union, and depository L.C. catalog, now unites two processes in its work of accessioning books. These two processes are, (a) the survey of new material with a view to discovering duplicates, and (b) a preliminary checking to prepare the way for cataloging. This checking reveals, as occasion offers, the correct entry heading, the existence of

L.C. cards that may be used for cataloging, the location of copies in department libraries, and other useful data. Following this preliminary work, a skilled typists' department prepares provisional cards for the cataloger, thus relieving the latter of the time-consuming labor of preparing her key card herself or of making complicated notes with a view to having the result reduced to card form by a typist. The annual savings for 50,000 titles added by this method might be from \$2500 to more than \$4000; moreover, it surely reduces the time needed to make new books available. Further, the subject supervisor who has a larger share in the duty of comparing duplicates and deciding what shall be rejected, acquires a more intimate connection with the development of the subjects assigned her, frequently gets more closely in touch with those of the faculty whose fields are concerned, and becomes increasingly the center of information for her own field of work. The placing of all books in her subjects promptly in her care pins down her responsibility for these books—a most useful procedure when a question suddenly arises as to the disposition or whereabouts of a given item or a special lot. There has been very little excited search for a missing item in our staff of classifiers and catalogers, and supervisors have become wary of disclaiming knowledge as to the whereabouts of a book or pamphlet in their particular fields, for it is becoming an axiom that a missing uncataloged book is always found just where it ought to be—in the subject supervisor's hands.