Guest Editorial

The Ties That Bind
(December 31, 2000)

I write this editorial on the cusp of the *real* millennium. There are no grand parties planned. There will be no worldwide watch as midnight moves around the planet. We will not be riveted to the television as we were last year as each community greeted the New Year. It will be a quiet turning of the page as we move into the new millennium and a future we cannot even begin to imagine.

The end of the year is always a period for wistful reflection. This year has special meaning for me. At midnight on December 31, 2000, the incomparable Betty Bengtson and I metaphorically will clink champagne glasses. She will retire after ten transformative years as director of university libraries at the University of Washington. I will begin my tenure as the new director, standing on the shoulders of giants.

In preparation, I have been cleaning out files, moving offices, and letting go of my former responsibilities and anticipating the new ones. When weeding my reprint file that spans two decades, I was struck by how quaint and old-fashioned many of the file names now seem—bibliographic instruction, BITNET, super catalogs, information superhighway, virtual libraries, GUIs, Mosaic, CD-ROM networking, and LCS/FBR. However, there were some gems in those outdated files, and I want to share three of them with you.

The first was a light-brown booklet, measuring 3 by 5 inches, with twenty-four yellowing pages. I nodded in concurrence as I read *Five Objectives of a University Library* written by William E. Henry, librarian at the University of Washington, in 1927.[1] Reflecting on thirty years spent in a university library, Henry wrote that his "conclusions may be wrong. They are at least sincere." With language that seems quirky, yet melodic, to the new millennium reader, he wrote eloquently of the five objectives of a university library:
- The objective of content
- The objective of assembling and organizing
- The objective of distribution for service
- The objective of staff
- The objective of housing for preservation and service

Henry concluded his essay with an admonition to future generations:

> While each of these objectives possesses an individuality and a meaning quite distinct, it still remains that each and all gain vital significance, not as an end in itself but as a means to one infinitely important end which is the purpose of all library service, namely: to put the individual of the present in possession of the experience of the past in whatever line he may select and for the final good of the future.

A smile came over my face when I found the file entitled WITS. Ten years ago, before the Web had transformed the way we work and live, I was part of an interdisciplinary group of women at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We gathered to discuss issues of "Women, Information Technology, and Scholarship" in one of those Victorian wooden houses still standing amidst the brick Georgian buildings on many Midwestern campuses. WITS was one of those totally satisfying experiences (which happens all too seldom) when we move out of our own professional circles to engage deeply with individuals from other parts of the university. After a heady semester of guest provocateurs and rambunctious discussions, we concluded the seminar by

defining our "ideal information technology." We wished the future would bring us:

Technology that is mobile (international, remote controllable, solar-powered, available as a lapel button), compact, flexible in size, personally customized, sensitive to users and to the environment, accommodating of multiple input and output modes, and inexpensive.

Technology that provides conceptual quilt piecing, nonlinear information coding, expert problem-solving systems, translations of jargon into understandable language, a broad array of information (including telephone numbers and household information), all languages, images, and retrieval customized to one's personal history.

Learning and training is to be done through mentor mom, computer goddess, or parole officer models. We desire that progress be monitored with feedback as one works (both within and between sessions, through an 800 e-mail number, and with split screens), compassionate and sympathetic peers and teachers, active participation in the learning process, and multiple learning modes.

Technology where issues of privacy and control are manifested in technology being a birthright, empowerment of the currently powerless, protection of personal information, the easy sharing of ideas and information for all, and free access to basic services.

In the decade since WITS, I now have some of what we wished for as I "beam" a business card from my handheld PDA to that of my colleague.

The third gem I ran across was an editorial by Tom Gaughan in *American Libraries* entitled "Larger-than-life Librarians, Part One."[2] He wrote of the late, great Hugh Atkinson who was larger than life while he lived and is even larger now. This one made me a little misty. Tom recounted Hugh's trademark motorcycle, his eye patch, his biker boots, his word play, and his eclectic reading habits. I remember Hugh's knack for hiring, inspiring, and mentoring (without them really knowing it until years later) future library leaders. I remember his office with that big oval table, but no desk. I remember his asking me in 1980 to imagine what libraries would be able to do when they would have the power of mainframes on individual desktops.

As we sally forth into the new millennium, we know that we will be living in times of deep change. The boldest of us will even try to predict the future. But as one wise soul said, "those who make crystal ball predictions often end up eating glass." It is my prediction that librarians at the end of the twenty-first century will look back on our writings, reflections, and predictions and find some gems such as I found in W.E. Henry's words, Hugh's actions, and the WITS collaboration. When it comes down to it, it is the influence of individuals and the relationships among them that build community and enable us to do work worth doing. Whether we experience their influence firsthand, learn from the stuff of legends, or connect through a faded pamphlet, these are the ties that bind and inspire us in a future we cannot even begin to imagine.

BETSY WILSON
President, ACRL
and Director of University Libraries
University of Washington

Seattle, Washington

Notes

1. William E. Henry, *Five Objectives of a University Library* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 1927).

2. Tom Gaughan, "Larger-than-life Librarians, Part One," *American Libraries* 25, no. 9 (Oct. 1994): 804.