

Ron Fark

Ron: Well, my name's Ron Fark, I came into the Brown library system in September 1976. I came as Head of Circulation, but then about ten years later I became Head of Reference, and then there were a few other job title changes but stayed in the customer service end of things. I became a member of Scholarly Resources—so that just gives you an idea of the kind of changes that have taken place fairly quickly, actually, when you think about it.

Carina: What were your first impressions of the Rock when you came here?

Ron: Well, you know I had come from a library that was all concrete, the new library at the University of Illinois in Chicago. So this, you know, was similar—concrete, but the Rock was nicer as far as furnishings were concerned, from what I...you know, because when it opened it in '64, they did put in some nice, interesting lounge chairs and things like that, but by the time I arrived in '76 that was beginning to show wear and tear, as it should. And it was interesting to have such a *big*....I thought, a big library of so many volumes open to the public, you know, having such a...million some volumes and open stacks, which is its own headache and was always a headache. Still is I imagine, actually.

Carina: So you mentioned you came in as Circ...you were Head of Circulation, so what did that kind of work involve?

Ron: Well, here's the reason I was hired, I believe: I put in an automated circulation system at the University of Illinois in Chicago, and that was a goal for the library here. Because I had that experience, I think it gave me the edge, and we were still here...they were still charging materials out by hand. They were these three, these slips with like, you know, two carbon

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copies and you filed the back and you punched holes because you put rods through, and then that's how you found out if a book was overdue, and you still had to do that for renewals. I mean, when you think about how really awful that system was...But, you know, that was typical. I mean, libraries, you know, were...I think we referred to them sometimes as IBM cards or something, you know, because then they brought in these sorters you could put the cards through and it would sort them into different due dates, but people had to manually file these. And prior to my arrival in the early days of the Rock, staff who did that actually wore white gloves so they wouldn't smudge, you know, the print, you know, that's the only kind of...sort of...it was kind of, I was gonna say say a dress code, but the early years of the Rock things were that way, actually, people were expected to be fairly well-dressed, and the Head of Circ wore suits, and you know, all of that changed by the time I arrived in '76. So, we actually introduced that...first automated system. It was a CLSI turnkey system, i.e. we had to build a space for our machine, we were responsible for turning it on, and turning it off at night, we had to make sure data was backed up. We did all of the conversion on the fly. So as things were checked out, then we filled out these slips, then we had staff all day and night keying in data from sometimes not-too-legible sheets. That was the way we did it, you know. But at least you were getting the heavily-used part of the collection. We had to try to convince faculty who had hundreds and hundreds of materials out to bring them in so we could put the barcode in them.

Carina: How did that go?

Ron: Mixed results. Some never did come back, but you know, that's just the way it is. So, I will say that the staff pulled...got involved, and they got excited, they were excited about that. Because, you know, there was an in-house-designed acquisition system when I arrived—it was actually my boss, Peter Lipman, had done that. And so there was not really too much else.

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OCLC was just getting started there in the early '70s, so there were no online catalogues, there were no integrated systems, or none of that. So the main focus was this inventory control. So, that was the first event for automation. At that time, there was no security system, so that's when the door guards were checking everyone's book bags when they were leaving, so some people didn't like to do that either, for privacy issues. So, I'm not sure when we brought in the TattleTape, 3M TattleTape system. I may have—it was later instead of sooner—it took a while to get that. So that was sort of that first automation bent in Circulation. You know when the Rock was originally opened, there was a separate science...social science reading room, a humanities reading room, there was staff, they had their own reserve book areas, you know, they did all of that. Now when I arrived, reserves was combined. They had gotten rid of the separate humanities and social sciences but there was still a separate reserve room, it was a big to-do. Also, the semesters at Brown when I arrived, it went...it didn't end until January, you know and you had, like, a one week to ten day break before the next semester started, spring semester. That was very difficult for reserve purposes. There was just no time, you know. But that's—I forget when Brown went—because then, semesters didn't start til late September. Which was ideal if you wanted to do the Cape, right after Labor Day. [laughter] But, you know...for business purposes, moving the semester to where it is currently was a big help, actually, so...

Carina: Thank you. So when you moved into the Reference Department, what did your work involve?

Ron: Well, interesting times. And reference was both...the Reference Department comprised both the Rockefeller and Sciences Libraries, you know, as a department, but each obviously had its own desk to cover. And one of the...I mean, there were a lot of changes that took place

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in reference just about the time that I moved over, which was I think... '76...probably around '87 maybe, thereabouts, I became Head of Reference. And that was just when— there was your computers with some stand alone indexes that you had to load into a computer. Now you had MedLine at Sciences, which was sort of the first. So we first had...the original reference desk, at the Rockefeller Library, you had...the main area was the card catalogue. When you looked into those doors in the lobby, it's just "card catalogue." That was just filled, that was nothing, nothing else, some stacks in the back. And then the area here, that we refer to as Hecker, was all stacks. That's where all the bibliographies were, all the "Zs" were there, and some of the other main reference materials. The reference desk comprised initially of just a plain old desk sitting along the divider between this space and where the card catalogue was. Totally out of view, etc. So one of the first things we did, we decided that reference staff needed to be more visible, some...the one card catalogue unit that was sort of right in the middle...somehow got relocated. I don't know exactly the process, but then we put a desk in the middle where you could see it when you walked in, etc. Now this is an era, too, you know, where we had reference staff scheduled evenings, days, Saturdays, Sundays, you know, it was a seven-day-a-week operation. And I want to go back to Circulation too. When we put in the automation system, Circulation supervisors had to do either a Saturday closing or a Sunday opening because we were the ones responsible for turning the machine on and off. So it was just different then. Getting back to reference, so this was all part...there was a lot of rethinking reference in the '90s, early '90s, and trying to be more out there and more prevalent. But, you know, the initial CD-ROMs were a big hit, obviously. And boy, once the Web came, then that whole Internet thing, that just changed everything so quickly, so dramatically, you know, and the whole ebook thing. You could, little by little, then, you know, we were reading out reference constantly because more things were available electronically. Obviously the card catalogue—I forget the year that we got rid of—but we didn't get rid of the card catalogue initially, it was moved to Level

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A to the space not far from your office. It's, I forget—it might have been the old humanities something area.

Karen: Maybe the Absolute Quiet Room now?

Ron: Yeah. It was right adjacent. So we put the card catalogue there. Because there was this feeling that...when you think of the *person* hours that went into that entity, I mean, it's just amazing. I actually just recently threw a box of cards out that I came across at home, you know. And I always get a kick out of just taking a random thing out, you know, and seeing the work involved, and the initials and the people who cata...So, at any rate, so that first go-round was to move it here. And then we put in tons of electrical outlets, put in the first computing clusters, so I wish I could remember the year that that happened. Do you know when Ernie Costa died? Because that's when it happened.

Karen: No, I don't.

Ron: Yeah.

Karen: I had forgotten his name until you mentioned it.

Ron: He was the library Business Manager, and unfortunately he had a heart attack at work and didn't make it through the day. And so then, as Head of Reference, and that was the project just started, so, I got to work with Brown, you know, architects and building and all of that. It was kind of a cool experience for me, actually. We had gotten a grant or donation or whatever to do this project. So, that was an exciting time, actually, to put in the first reference

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area. You know, and this is, when I was in Circulation, the real pain was keeping photocopying machines going every hour the building was open. Because journals, they weren't electronically available, so you had to go to a machine, you had to make a photocopy, yadda yadda. So, then you bring in this next stage, you bring in the reference area and the work stations and the networked printing. It was a [unintelligible]. [laughter] Because initially we didn't charge for printing [sigh]. If I could even tell you the amount of paper, the amount of toner, the amount of everything...that was just, you know, you'd come in first thing in the morning and there'd just be paper everywhere. So it took a while before, working with CIS, that that got situated where, you know, people had to pay to print. That made a *big* difference. Believe me, a big difference. So, and then you know Reference eventually became Scholarly Resources, you know, which combined with the subject specialists at the Hay, and the Rock, and Sciences, and what you have there in the later years. Is there still Scholarly Resources? I don't know what we have now.

Karen and Carina: Research and Outreach.

Ron: Okay, all right.

Karen: And we're separate from the Hay again.

Ron: Okay. You know, what comes around, whatever. There was some, you know, value to that I believe, but, you know, it's just sort of a different era now. And so, of course, when I was still in Reference and they brought in the bibliographic software, management systems like Endnote and that, that was a big to-do, and so, I mean, I think it's wonderful, you know the changes that have taken place. You know, when I think about the early years in Circulation, the

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big deal were for people to get study carrels. It was a huge demand, there were more demand than there were carrels, you had to limit it to grad students who were actually working on a thesis, and seniors working on an honors thesis, that was the criteria, they had to get signatures. I don't know that there's that demand anymore. No idea, you know. But everyone wanted to have their materials right there so it made sense. Yeah, open stacks [sigh]. Amazing...stuff, inventory. And you know, we didn't have the resources to do real inventory. So, who knows what's...how I would...I think... hopefully, I don't think they've done it here yet, where you can just go down the aisle with a device and it will tell you what's missing and hopefully, I don't know if they've haven't done that...well, it would be great. RFID tags, but I guess there's a cost involved in that, too. So I'm just rambling.

Karen: We love it.

Carina: This is wonderful. In fact I was, you know, as you're talking, I'm looking through all my questions and you've hit on every single one of them. And that's great. So, you know, I wanted to ask you... so you came in the '70s you said, the mid or late '70s. How, so, from the beginning, from when you started until right now, what are your impressions about the overall change in the spaces and how they're being used, and why do you think this is?

Ron: Well, I mean, you know, it's going to this whole "library as place," and we...I...we weren't even open these long, long, long hours, initially. That was something...libraries closed at ten o'clock on some nights. So with my years here, that kept increasing. Because students—not so much as, I think, access to materials as just having this place that they could be away from the dorm and stuff. So, I think academic libraries have always needed to provide that, you know, and then the whole concept of bringing in a coffee shop. I mean, you know, [laughter]

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when in my initial years, you...you know, if you [slaps wrist] tried to bring in water or coffee or anything, it was taken from you. So, library as keeper of books is kind of long gone in general, other than your, obviously, special collections, that's a totally different story. I'm sure this is all...it's needed. It's a necessity. I...I don't know where the end is, to this whole migration. You know, one of our fears always was that students needed to have, particularly in Reference, needed our involvement in how to do good research, and quality research, and to be able to do critical thinking and all of that. I don't think that's gone away. You know, is that role becoming more of a role for faculty in the classroom than librarians? I don't...I'm not going to go there. And, so, I think that question is still relevant today. And some faculty are very good about, and always were, about bringing their classes in and being able to show them the tools, for those particularly in different grad programs and things. I assume it's still going on, and we need to keep that niche going. We really do. Customer service to me was always a big deal. And whether it was the olden days or later days, and I hope that doesn't get lost in the migration. Because now, even in real life, you have to do so many things online you can't get to a real human. And I get upset with that every so often. And I like some of the ways that things are easier to do, but I still want that option. And so I think libraries need to—you know I've been seeing more public libraries and academic libraries since retirement, and I think they do a good job yet of really being available for their user population. So I don't want academia to forget that. [laughter] It's important. It is important. Good quality service.

Carina: Do you...how have librarians changed?

Ron: Oh, gosh. Well, I mean...

Carina: Or the profession.

Ron: The profession. Well, I mean I guess you so easily are placed in a speciality, you know. And so you either are like a public service librarian versus technical service. And so you were a cataloguer and a cataloguer forever, and quite honestly there were people who were in that area of profession that could not deal with the public. And not being a negative, it's just that was not their...that's not why they went into it; they wanted to catalogue material. I think all that's more blurred now, I think, I believe so. You still unfortunately become labeled pretty quickly about your expertise. And you know, in my day you had to have an MLS, you know, to be a librarian here, and then I saw that change, where a different Masters was good if it was in the technical or subject area. And you continue to see the MLS as being not as important. At least, that seemed to be the case as I was leaving—I don't think that has changed. And you know, is that good or bad? You know, I know library schools are changing and obviously, I had just maybe one class in 1971 or whenever I was at library school that actually touched upon automation. You still did...you made your own cards, catalogue cards, and all of that, so this is, you know... So it's...but bottom line is your users haven't changed a whole lot. Their expectations are different, I think, just because it's about instant gratification. People used to not...you would page things from a location, and bring them, and they'd be available the next day and that was all right. I don't think that's okay anymore. It's gotta be now or never. Interlibrary loan has changed so much. You know, when I started, you didn't do interlibrary loan for undergraduates. Umm-mmm, it was just for faculty and grad students. And that changed fairly quickly in my time here but that wouldn't work today, would it? So, things like that are kind of—when you think about it—are mind-boggling in a way, how we've progressed, I think. The whole borrowing from other institutions, the direct borrow, all those things which I think are exciting, and only growing. Are they still...still growing, I assume? That's a cool thing. Have they started to lend eresources, have they worked that out yet?

Karen: No.

Ron: No. All right, just curious.

Carina: Except journal articles, you know...

Ron: Yeah.

Carina: Sometimes, but not ebooks.

Ron: Sure.

Carina: Okay, so I have one more question, and then anything else you'd like to add. My last question is: Do you have any funny, strange, or interesting memories of the Rock? Maybe a story about a patron, a co-worker, a student? Please no identifying information.

Ron: [laughter] Well I think I could probably go on quite a way, a long way about this.

[Unintelligible] Well, I remember a coworker, and we went out for lunch. And lunch was a little delayed. And so we rushed, rushed back, and my coworker had a, like, a one o'clock meeting, and probably got into the meeting like ten after one, and she said that a faculty member had interrupted her at the desk, so she was delayed. Of course, she still had the napkin from lunch tucked into her waistband. [laughter] We got a good laugh from that for a long time, actually, I just thought that was pretty cute. You know, obviously Brown has some wonderful students through the years. And a certain student who will go nameless, but was in my office numerous

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times because he had the tendency to charge things out for, usually, a young co-ed student.

We would send this particular student an overdue notice, well usually, it was, of course, reserve material. He had no idea who the person was, that he checked the material for. [laughter] But he was liable to get it back. You know, things like that—he seemed to lose his ID all the time too. I guess people took it, probably. People would go, people would figure that out pretty easily. So it's...we had good times, you know. One of the most difficult things for me was when I arrived September 7th, 1976, the Circulation Department, which was mostly union staff, they were on strike. And that strike lasted for three months. And it was a wage re-opener clause in the contract, it wasn't the expiration of the contract, and they ended up accepting the wage that was offered initially. The University librarian at that time had hired temporary help, so you know, that...it was just, I was twenty-eight years old, I arrive, when I was interviewed, you know, this wasn't happening. And it's a wonder I didn't just turn the other direction and leave, quite honestly. But I survived. But there were hard feelings from that for years. Maybe even to this day. You know, so you know some of the greatest challenges for me were things like union grievances and arbitrations and job description changes, and you know, when we decided that course reserves shouldn't be a separate entity, and combined it with our regular Circ, and it took a lot of work and energy. But you know, this isn't necessarily for the history, but, it's, when you think about those changes. One of the things that will, you know I think we left a terrible, it was just awful...was Alice Brendel, and her family. You know, I saw Alice leave on a Friday and then she never came back to work. And that was such a hard time on the staff. You know we had the professionals come to kind of talk to us, to kind of try to because I know it took a long time for them to find them, and just the end result, you know, was just a, not...a lot of places never have to go through that. You know, so Alice. Alice was just, you know, it's amazing what can happen, I think, in the real world. But I always, I have a sense of humor, I've always had that. I try to remind, you know, librarians sometimes don't. (laughter) But it's it's helpful. In

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many circumstances and etc. So, I may have other...I can't think of other outstanding stories right at the moment, you know, but there are many.

Carina: Sure. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

Ron: I think I'm cool. Thirty-five years in this place was an interesting time. You just think, when I first arrived, Lyman Bloomingdale was on the Building Committee for this building, and he would come in and he would talk occasionally and you know he was really proud with the way things had turned out for the Rock. And you know, he would always have his little bag of books that he was bringing from his New York residence to give, you know, but he was so down-to-earth, you know, and...but he was just proud of the Rock. And a few years ago, a number of years ago at a conference, and I was always going to check this out—that any library that's called a Rockefeller library, it has seven steps going up to it. It was based on this, like, seven steps of learning, or wisdom, or all that. Do some investigating in that, because it's my understanding that any library that's called...that has the Rockefeller title...you walk seven...and you do, there's seven stairs up that one landing. So at any rate, that could be a tale, you know, but...I always thought that it sounded exciting, too, you know. And so, yeah, the Rock. It was a great place. Still is a great place. Students still love it, I am sure. So, yeah. This room, when you look at where technology is going, it's a quite, quite exciting time, really. So. I think I've talked enough today.

Carina: Thank you so much. That was so wonderful.