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Photos by F. Peter Weil, Newbery Library

*Careful handling of rare research materials is a major concern.
Note the cradle, booksnake, and use of pencil.*

Special Collections Desk Duty: Preventing Damage

*Anthony J. Amodeo
Carbondale, Illinois*

The desk attendant in a special collections, rare book, or archives reading room is in a unique position regarding the conservation of the collections. Both surveillance for the prevention of theft and monitoring the physical treatment of materials are obviously important responsibilities. An additional contribution which deserves attention is the desk attendant's attitude toward the collections and their handling, which is picked up by both patrons and staff. The following suggestions have been drawn up as a sample of the kinds of concerns that should be addressed in the training of special collections desk attendants.

(continued on p. 180)

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Desk Duty, cont'd

Every reading room has its own rules and procedures, but the nature of the materials stored and used in special reading rooms dictates a universal approach.

MATERIALS

A printed list of rules and suggestions should be available for distribution to readers. These rules can be read while materials are being paged. The list might be written so as to encourage the patron to point out damage, uncut pages, and possible conservation needs to the desk attendant, thus giving the reader a conscious stake in the well-being of the collections. The printed rules can also serve as a useful, authoritative "backup" to which the desk attendant can point when a patron exhibits indifference to suggestions regarding safe handling of materials.

Some notification regarding the checking of coats, briefcases, large handbags, newspapers, etc., prior to entry into the special collections room should be clearly posted at or near the entry door; those who enter carrying such items should be politely but promptly dispatched to the checking area.

See that pencils rather than any sort of ink pens are used by readers and staff (including yourself) in the reading room. Ink that transfers to fingers will transfer to paper; modern inks are complex and very difficult to remove.

Keep an adequate supply of decent pencils on hand for patron use. Display them prominently and inform patrons of the no-ink policy verbally as a matter of course when they register.

Do your best to prevent accidents before they happen. Be conscious of situations which may lead to damage or mishandling and watch for them. Prevent pile-ups of materials. Piles of more than three or four books can lead to spills and may subject the bottom books to pressure and abrasion. Be sure to place all fragile items on the reading table separately, not in (or especially at the bottom of) piles of books.

In general it is preferable to limit the amount of material or number of volumes a reader may use at once for safe handling and security. When those special cases arise which require simultaneous use of much material or many volumes, use bookends, bookcarts, and so forth to accommodate materials safely.

Prevent materials from hanging over the edges of tables, where they will be knocked about by passersby or leaned on by the patron. In this regard, very large books and flat, oversized paper (e.g., maps and blueprints) are very susceptible to damage. Reserve an oversized table or two for such items if possible.

Do not allow patrons to write on paper laid over

library materials, whether open or closed. A variety of problems, from paper damage to the damaging of binding structures, may result. A piece of thick book board should be made available for patrons having no table space upon which to write.

Tracing library materials should not, in general, be allowed. If an exception is made, tracing (in pencil only, of course) should be done in such a way that no damage, including impressions from the tracing tool, be done to the original. A piece of stiff mylar intervening between the original and tracing layers may help prevent damage; but if the paper is brittle, this precaution itself may cause damage.

Have a supply of acid-free paper strips available for patrons to use as bookmarks. This can help prevent such harmful practices as "dog-earring," the use of pencils or other objects as bookmarks, or the laying of open books face down. Be sure that the strips you supply are taller than the books used. When dealing with materials that might scratch, chip, or flake (e.g., illuminated manuscripts), use acid-free tissue paper cut in fairly wide strips if bookmarks are necessary.

If you notice that an item about to be given out is so fragile that any use might cause damage, have the curator, conservator, or other senior staff person examine the item before it is delivered to the patron. Also, seek approval before opening any uncut pages in books or pamphlets, in case the uncut state is bibliographically significant. Often a second, service copy is available that will satisfy the patron.

Have a sufficient number of cradles, stands, or other supportive structures available for reader use and see that they are used when necessary. Bringing a stand and booksnake to a patron who is holding a book in the air by one cover while taking notes is both damage-preventive and tactful, especially in the case of patrons with bad sight. Or better yet, anticipate the need and supply a cradle before the item is given out.

A rolled-up piece of felt or piece of plastic foam wrapped in a stable covering (felt or mylar) provides good support for heavy book covers, especially when they would otherwise flex beyond a 180-degree opening.

Some books (e.g., "perfect-bound" paperbacks) may be better off held in the hands rather than flattened on a table. However, be sure that both sides of the open book are supported at all times.

If a book has special bosses or other potentially harmful features, be sure to keep it separate from other materials. A piece of felt or binders' board placed under such a book would be appropriate.

ATTITUDE

When bringing out materials to a reader, the desk attendant or page sets the example in the handling of the materials. Therefore, *place* materials carefully on the reading table or bookstand as if they were bowls of hot soup. Do not slide, toss,



Proper support is important to prevent unnecessary stress to bindings. Shown here, left to right, are a cradle, bookstand, and supporting roll of felt.

throw down, fling or otherwise roughly handle library materials, many of which have value as artifacts.

If a book or pamphlet comes in a drop-spine (so-lander) box or a folder, take the entire package to the patron's table, and open and remove the item carefully in front of the patron. This helps to garner respect for the materials, which are probably in a container for reasons of fragility or value. When the item has been delivered to the patron, be sure to take the box, folder, or other container back to the staff desk or holding area. Items housed in slipcases or other non-conservation containers (especially those which make removal difficult) are best taken out where none can see the shameful deed.

If you know that an item is fragile, tightly bound, or brittle, be sure to tell the patron so. In many cases it is appropriate to give suggestions as to its handling, such as: "This book is tightly bound. Could you please refrain from opening it more than about ninety degrees?" Or, "This paper is somewhat brittle. Could you be sure to turn the pages slowly and carefully without bending the corners?"

A patron using boxes of manuscripts, multiple folders or other unbound materials should be shown an appropriate method for maintaining the strict order in which these materials are found. Separation of individual sheets for photocopy orders and the like should be discouraged in advance, and the patron supplied with acid-free slips for indication of such copying needs.

Above all, if a patron is mishandling an item

don't be shy about correcting the situation. Use tact, but be persistent. Remember, you are the guardian of the collections in the reading room. No amount of money or environmental control will prevent damage to the collections unless you do your part at the time of use. Be polite and courteous, be fair and reasonable by all means. But when it comes to the physical well-being of the collections, be firm and resolute—if the collections are to last for coming generations, then you must do your job. A hundred years from now it *will* matter.

TRAINING

Desk attendants are often students or interns, perhaps not used to correcting their elders (or professors). Therefore, the initial training in conservation awareness is very important. Ideally this training should be performed by a senior staff member, curator or conservator/conservation librarian. In any case, awareness is best raised by setting a good and consistent example.

If the librarian or paraprofessional doing the training handles a variety of problematic situations over the course of a week or more with the trainee in tow, and if the trainee is taught to respect the materials being used by the example of careful handling of materials and attention to detail set by the instructor and other reading room staff, then the level and tone of awareness will in all probability become part of the trainee's day-to-day work.

Once "converted" and given proper support (especially with problem patrons) most students or interns will respond with a high level of proficiency

in damage prevention. On the other hand (need it be said?), abandoning the new attendant after a few hours' training, and careless handling of library materials by staff, will guarantee future problems. ■■

Letter

Moving Collections

To the Editor:

Mr. Amodeo's comments regarding the need for lots of care and plenty of supervision when it comes to moving books are well taken. Documenting the details of the move is another excellent idea. Many library staff members are so happy to dispose of an unpleasant job they are ready to forget it ever happened. In fact, one of the reasons why some library book moving projects go so badly is that they are planned from scratch by people who choose to ignore the state of the art in terms of current practice and instead have a tendency to reinvent the wheel. Investing in a consultant or, at the very least, a literature search for relevant guidelines and time-tested techniques could produce money-saving solutions. That is one reason why we still see examples of students lined up in a human book chain as well as similar quick and dirty approaches to handling millions of dollars worth of books.

One of the biggest problems in a move of any size is the book truck. The commercial models available today are acceptable for shelving purposes, but if they are going to be heavily loaded, moved over a variety of uneven surfaces and wheeled on and off trucks, they present a whole range of serious problems. Many libraries commonly purchase book trucks with swivel casters on all four wheels because they are easy to push. They are also impossible to steer accurately and will upset at the slightest provocation. An upset on a carpeted floor is bad enough, but when the accident occurs during a move between buildings while the load is being maneuvered across a metal ramp onto a truck body, the books may end up in a street which is not carpeted and often in the rain. Book spines which project beyond the edge of the book truck shelf are easily scuffed and frequently removed entirely when careless or accidental handling brings them into contact with brick walls, door jambs, and other stationary objects. To correct the four-wheel swivel stability problem it is possible to have a local welding shop tack weld two swivel casters on one end of each truck. Thus with two fixed and two swivel casters the tracking will be improved dramatically and the potential for upsets will be reduced.

To handle the big moves safely and economically takes a heavy-duty, industrial-type book truck. Because such a truck is not available commercially it has to be custom designed and fabricated locally.

That sounds expensive and beyond the realm of most moving budgets, but it can be a cost-effective alternative if approached sensibly. Most colleges and universities have maintenance crews populated with innovators who can create a book truck from inexpensive materials. Such a book truck can be designed to protect the books from almost all of the usual moving abuse, navigate easily over all sorts of uneven surfaces, remain upright under almost all circumstances, and have an anticipated life expectancy of at least fifteen years under normal use. At today's prices the materials and labor needed to produce such a super book truck with a capacity of between 100 and 150 books will run in the neighborhood of \$400 a unit. That's a small price to pay for a piece of equipment which will serve such a vital role. For plans and a photo consult "A Utility Book Truck Designed for Moving Library Collections," *Library Acquisitions: Practice and Theory* 3 (1979):33-37.

When it comes to moving materials within the library, "super" book truck does an admirable job. More often than not those moves also result in relocating and rearranging the steel stacks themselves. When that happens the traditional approach has been to take the stacks apart, bolt by bolt, and reassemble the structure in a new location. This is a time-consuming, expensive job especially when union labor rates are involved. In worst case situations stack ranges have been dragged by brute force, tearing carpets and damaging the stack structure.

Another relatively inexpensive, homemade device will allow a whole range of steel stacks to be rolled easily from one location to another without removing so much as one bolt. This device is simple to use, requiring little or no technical skills, special physical endurance, or expensive labor. The basic device is fabricated from scrap steel and recreational vehicle jacks which are designed to roll on six-inch casters. Once again, the innovative maintenance crew can easily fabricate the stack-moving device from commercially available components and scrap steel. A typical unit would cost roughly \$400 to manufacture in this manner, and four such units will easily handle most stack-moving jobs. For plans and photographs consult "Moving Steel Stacks With a Special Dolly," *Library Acquisitions: Practice and Theory* 6 (1982):253-57.

As a profession we tend to give little attention to the mechanics of materials handling. We frequently tend to ignore the fine points of moving and often at the last minute give the chore to a commercial mover or, worse yet, a fraternity in need of a fund-raising project. If we take time to consider the value of the collections we possess we will easily recognize the need to devote more effort to developing safer and less costly methods when it comes to moving our stock in trade.—*Brian Alley, University Librarian and Associate Dean for Library Instructional Services, Sangamon State University, Springfield, Illinois.* ■■