

# Sins of Omission- Indiana's Deteriorating Book Collections

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"The time has come," the walrus said, "to think of many things; of shoes, and ships, and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings, and why the sea is boiling hot and whether pigs have wings." Even if you don't remember all that from *Alice in Wonderland*, you should know that all books printed from around 1850 to the present are gradually crumbling into confetti because of acid attack and that little or nothing is being done about this situation except to ignore it. So the time has come to think about our collective sins of omission, namely, neglecting and forgetting about the deteriorating book collections on every shelf of every library, public and private, large or small, in the state of Indiana.

What are we going to do about it? Do we really care? Shall this huge investment in time, money and energy, bought, catalogued, and ware-housed for the most part by the funds of past and present tax-payers of Indiana, be allowed to disintegrate into worthless shards of cellulose? It is not too late to act, and we must act, and we must act as soon as possible before even more damage is done!

After all is said and done, who cares? You and I shall probably be dead and gone, or, at least, retired to

a comfortable middle-class old age in a few more years, before the rest of these books are too brittle to read.

Perhaps the user won't notice those older books, and besides, the majority of patrons read the most recent materials which are less than ten years old. Anyway, the most popular books will be readily available in paperback reprints or cheaper hardback editions. In a throwaway society that is fast moving toward optical disks, video tapes, and audio tapes of books, and archival quality microfilms, why save those old retrospective and rare books anymore?

As I mentioned earlier, it is time to face the facts and the fact is that we risk losing our cultural heritage from books on which our democratic way of life depends. Books are for people who think deeply and care greatly about the quality of life and the perpetuation of our social, economic, and political, and yes, spiritual values, which we hope will be passed on as a legacy to our children and grandchildren.

The true, the good, and the beautiful shall not perish from this earth if we will cooperate to preserve Indiana's paper resources for posterity. Many of the great souls who have trod the earth before us have left their

thoughts, their music, the lessons and accounts of their lives in books for us to learn, to laugh, and to admire so that our lives will be enriched. We must not lose all this knowledge. We too are born to help others have better lives even after we are gone. Service to mankind is service to god. That should be our motto and our collective goal.

One such service would be to save books in Indiana, the U. S., and the world from deterioration from acid attack by means of mass deacidification through chemistry. The technology has been developed here in the U. S. All that is needed is the will and the funds to do it.

We all know that the acid paper problem will not disappear by wishing it so. It is a growing crisis in all libraries here in Indiana, especially larger academic ones with older collections going back into the 1800's. Books manufactured since mid-nineteenth century are disintegrating gradually because of high acid content wood pulp paper and lately more rapidly due to contemporary air pollution. For instance, although the Library of Congress book collection now is 19.7 million volumes according to the latest American Library Directory, in 1971 its Assistant Director of Preservation estimated that 97 percent of the nonfiction books published between 1900 and 1940 will have deteriorated because of acid in their paper, pollution, and poor quality ink so as to be rendered useless by the year 2000.<sup>1</sup> A survey done in 1973 by the Library of Congress showed that 6 million of its then 17 million books were "too brittle to be given to the user."<sup>2</sup> This constituted 35.3% of its holdings. To keep only ten percent of these 6 million books (6000, 000 volumes) would cost the Library of Congress 18 million dollars and 30 years in time at the rate of restoring 20,000 books per year.<sup>3</sup>

In September 1980 LC Research scientist George Kelly said, "The Library of Congress has six or seven million books which are so deteriorated that they should not circulate and with some exception, the entire collection should be neutralized and buffered."

According to the *Washington Post* of February 26, 1986, Peter Sparks, Director for Preservation at LC, joining David [Daniel] Boorstein, Librarian of Congress, at a House budget hearing in testimony on the effect of Gramm-Rudman-Hollings budget cuts, referred to the deacidification project as one intended to "remove acid from most of the library's 13 million books."

If one interpolates the 1971 timetable for books printed from 1870 on, it is readily discernible that books printed between 1870 and 1910 will be too brittle to use from 1960 and 1970; those volumes created between 1880 and 1920 will be unusable through the 1970's to 1980; and that books made between 1900 and 1940 will be turning into confetti during the 1990's up to 2000 A. D. This state of affairs holds true for all libraries in Indiana and elsewhere at present and is inevitable, inexorable, and for the most part irreversible.

Fortunately, the situation is not hopeless, only grim. Library materials in varying stages of disintegration may be quickly identified by several methods: inventory of the collection, inspection of returning books by circulation personnel, reports from patrons from shelving and browsing, regular shelf-reading by shelvers and subject bibliographers, and finally, subject research print-outs by selected date groupings from on-line catalogs done in conjunction with OCLC, and RLIN, or regional or state networks like SOLINET or INCOLSA for Indiana.

Once identified, these materials must be closely examined, their paper condition graded and noted, and appropriate action taken on a priority basis. Methods of treatment may consist of polyester encapsulation (favored by the Library of Congress over lamination), mass treatment by diethyl zinc gas, or ethyl or methyl magnesium carbonate vapor, low-temperature storage, full restoration, minor repairs, alkaline boxing, or, finally, individual microfilming to preserve the intellectual content of the volume. At the Library of Congress, microfilming now costs around 45 to 50 dollars each for the average book, but to treat the same volume restore it to its original format would cost 10 to 15 times as much.<sup>4</sup>

The cheapest methods of preservation are low temperature storage, mass deacidification, and then microfilming. Of course, certain standards must be maintained, such as an ideal temperature of 70 degrees F and a relative humidity of 40% as well as the use of 16 or 35mm silver halide positive micromicrofilm in either reels or fiche, preferably reels.

Furthermore, the archival qualities of vesicular microfilm should be investigated more closely and early on as this type of film has certain redeeming qualities over halide microfilm, such as less cost and high durability. Vesicular film also resists scratching and tearing, does not support bacterial or fungus growth, and withstands discoloration, stain, and fading during storage.<sup>5</sup>

Indiana's public libraries contain 14,618,201 volumes as of 1982, and the state library has another 707,541 volumes, all of which are no exception to the general deterioration of books. So where restoration or repair will not suffice, microfilming and mass deacidification are the quickest, cheapest, and most enduring solu-

tions. Actually, all new books should be deacidified first, followed by the retrospective books as soon as possible.

It is suggested that the Long Range Planning Committee of the Indiana State Library Advisory Council and the Indiana State Library itself establish a research project to study how much Indiana's book collections have suffered from acid attack, which books are too brittle for mass deacidification and so are worthy of archival microfilming, and to estimate what sort of funding would be needed for such an undertaking as well as how long such a project would last.

It would also be helpful if the Governor would appoint a commission of subject scholars, expert bibliographers, and experienced archivists and conservators to decide which paper resources should be saved and in what order of priority.

Finally, the State of Indiana should establish regional preservation and conservation centers throughout the state, perhaps at each ALSA headquarters, not only to teach preservation practices, but also to deacidify and to microfilm collections within their purview. Further, mobile units for mass deacidification should be scheduled to service rural libraries and smaller townships.

The State of Indiana must consider the needs of unborn generations and prepare well in advance to save crumbling library collections. Let us not fall into the grievous error of omitting to save our cultural heritage bound in paper. The education and acculturation of those Indiana citizens who will see the dawn of the 21st century may hang in the balance.

If a coordinated effort of academic, public, and special libraries, all cooperating with the State Library, to deacidify in mass or to microfilm all acidic book collections is not accom-

plished in the next 14 years, then future Hoosiers will not forgive those librarians or administrators who did not have the foresight, the courage, and the will to preserve the technology, the arts, and the sciences, in short, the accumulated knowledge, which supports contemporary civilization in the sovereign State of Indiana, whose inspired prophetic symbol is the golden torch of liberty and enlightenment illuminating midwest America.

Let Indiana serve as a glowing leader to our surrounding sister states in saving our intellectual and cultural heritage from the ravages of acid paper degradation. The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it, namely, preserving knowledge for coming generations.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Frazer Poole, "Thoughts on the Conservation of Library Materials," *Library and Archives*, Boston: Atheneum, 1972, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>Karen Lee Shelley, "The Future of Conservation in Research Libraries," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 1 (January 1976), 15-18.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>Association of Research Libraries, Systems and Procedures Exchange Center, *Preservation of Library Materials*, Kit 35, Washington: ARL, Office of Management Studies, 1977, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Don M. Avedon, "The More Practical Microfilm—Vesicular," *Library Resources and Technical Service*, 24 (Fall 1980), 327.

**A study of  
"lobbies" in  
Washington  
D.C. is not  
a course in  
architecture**

What are special interest groups doing to influence Congress? and, ultimately, to change your life?

**ASK YOUR  
LIBRARIAN.**