

100 Years of Putting Knowledge to Work

The Special Libraries Association
Boston Chapter, 1910-2010

By Ruth Kertzer Seidman
for the Boston SLA Centennial
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In 2010, as we celebrate the centennial of the Boston Chapter of Special Libraries Association, we look back at the events, the people, the activities, and the contributions throughout these years. We particularly note the active role the chapter and its leadership played in the many trends and developments in New England and beyond during this century of world-shaking events and great societal and technological change.

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Origins

Although we like to think of our era as the information age, the first decade of the 1900's was a time of rapid industrial and intellectual development. John Cotton Dana and others recognized that a new type of library was needed to provide specialized, focused collections with pro-active librarians to meet the needs of industry, business, science, technology and government; for this reason, Special Libraries Association was founded at Mt. Washington Hotel, Bretton Woods, New Hampshire in 1909. The motto chosen for the association: "Putting Knowledge to Work".

Of the 23 charter members of SLA, three were Bostonians: Frederick W. Faxon, editor of the *Boston Bulletin of Bibliography*, Daniel N. Handy of The Insurance Library of Boston; and Guy E. Marion of Arthur D. Little.

In 1910, Boston was the first local group to organize what was then called a "Responsibility District". The organizing meeting was called by three librarians: Daniel Handy and Guy Marion mentioned above, and George W. Lee of Stone and Webster Engineering. Other responsibility districts followed and by 1913 there were thirteen additional districts in the US and Canada. In 1924 the Association constitution was amended to designate local groups as "Chapters".

Some early libraries represented in the chapter, beyond those already mentioned, were the Women's Educational and Industrial Union, Simmons College School of Library Science, the Congregational Library, Boston Public Library, Massachusetts State Library, the Christian Science Monitor, the Boston Athenaeum, Harvard Medical School, and Suffolk University.

Early chapter programming topics included "Banking Libraries". This 1922 meeting had speakers from several banks and from the Federal Reserve. During this period, and for many decades, a popular program was to meet at a member's library and learn about the library and that specialty. These events

expanded members' general knowledge and often proved valuable for networking purposes. Indicative of some of the interests of the day, at a program held in 1926, a speaker from the World Peace Foundation discussed "International Documentation: Its Classification and Purpose".

Resource Sharing

The sharing of information was always a major goal of SLA Boston. As we will see, this effort took many forms over the years, from the establishment of a "bricks and mortar" information clearing house, to a regularly-updated list of libraries and librarians, to a machine-assisted list of serial holdings, to videotapes of workshops, to the electronic resources we now use routinely, and on to today's social networking. Along with these efforts were meetings, training courses, support for career development and job placement, and service to the community.

As its earliest and quite ambitious project, the group established the Boston Cooperative Information Bureau in January 1911—a central clearing house and referral center for information resources. It was first located at the "Boston-1915" office. Boston-1915 was an organization of the city's business leaders who wished to modernize the city and improve civic life. They were striving to return Boston to the leading role among U.S. cities that it had played in the 19th century, but with the modern innovations of the 20th century. The Bureau later moved to Thomas Nelson and Sons and then to the MIT Libraries. A classification system based on Dewey was developed and each of the ten major categories had a sponsor who could provide publications and expertise. A modest fee was charged per question.

The first question put to the bureau was for a bibliography of efficiency engineering. *Special Libraries* reports that the request was "advantageously referred to a participant whose office was about fifty feet away from that questioner". This shows the power of being able to link the client with the information.

There does not appear to have been activity at the Bureau after 1916, but we do know that around that time the special librarians of the area were discussing other ways of sharing information. Over the years, the chapter has produced both subject-based listings of libraries as well as union lists of serial holdings. The *Directory of Special Libraries in Boston and Vicinity* was first published in 1920, and continued into the 1980's. Indexes enabled users to locate libraries, and their librarians, according to subjects.

The first union list appeared in 1921: the *Union List of Periodicals and Annuals Taken by Eleven Special Libraries in Boston*. This was a 16-page pamphlet “printed on high grade paper, each page of generous size”. Libraries represented arts and sciences, banking, engineering, insurance, law, social service, and literature. The price was 50 cents. Many editions of what became Boston’s *Union List of Serials* followed. The tenth edition in 1980, still on paper but computer-produced, was a 250-page compilation of over 9000 titles from 80 libraries. The last edition was in 1986.

Internal Communication—Newsletters and Beyond

The chapter utilized various approaches to keep members up-to-date and connected. The first effort, *The Shock Absorber*, was a newsletter published from 1924 to 1926. Each issue was hand-typed, then duplicated and mailed to members; it consisted of a list of items, consecutively numbered throughout the year. For example, November 1926, Volume 3, Number 3 begins with item 41. Topics in this issue include an announcement of a practical course in library methods, a list of new members, news from committees, an item from the Association president, and an announcement of the next meeting. Members were asked to retain their copies, as cross references occasionally were made, by number, to earlier items.

The chapter discontinued *The Shock Absorber* and from 1927 to 1934 used the national journal, *Special Libraries*, as its main news source. The *Boston Chapter News Bulletin* began in September 1934 and continued regular publication for the rest of the 20th century. Over the years it was to grow much beyond a small newsletter for chapter business; with advertising to cover printing and mailing costs, the bulletin featured photographs, news about members, descriptions of libraries, book reviews and occasional theme issues. For example, a 1977 issue had “Library Management” as its theme, with a number of articles on this subject written by chapter members.

The last paper issue of the *News Bulletin* was in 2001, and at that time an online version appeared on the chapter’s web site. This continued for several years. With the advent of email, the chapter, as do many other organizations, finds that the regular publication of a newsletter is less necessary. Today we use email as well as the SLA Boston Wiki for internal communication, and we have a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Support for Career Development

The Education Committee started in 1922, with William Alcott, an early leader in the chapter and the association, as its chair. Courses, often with a dozen or more sessions, were offered on such topics as cataloging, classification, and reference. In the 1930's new course topics included publicity and book mending. Beginning in the late '20's the Education Committee also developed apprentice classes for library assistants.

Ruth Leonard of the Simmons College faculty was an active member of the chapter and the Association. She took over as chair of the committee in 1938, and expanded it to collect as much information as possible concerning the many educational opportunities in the vicinity. This indicates the role of the chapter, and Ruth Leonard's vision, in the expanding interests and capabilities of the membership.

After World War II, basic courses in librarianship were no longer the focus. All-day seminars on new topics of interest were introduced. As will be shown below, library management and topics related to library technology were the order of the day.

In the mid-1970's, a Simmons College School of Library Science student chapter was formed and a student liaison function added to the chapter's executive board. Over the years Simmons has been a leader in preparing students for careers in special libraries. Herman Henkle, the Director of the library school in the late 30's and the 40's, was Association President in 1945-46. He had a particular interest in education for special librarianship, and in 1939 announced a new course in special librarianship. It was taught for many years by Ruth Leonard, who was among the earliest proponents of the subject specialist approach, internships, and the development of professional standards. Later James Matarazzo became the special libraries educator at Simmons; he continued to provide national leadership in the field, and has been an excellent mentor who offers effective guidance for his students, both while they are in school and throughout their careers.

In 1980 the Chapter began its "Day on the Job" program for Simmons students interested in a career in special librarianship. Chapter members are matched with students who spend a day at the member's library. This has proved a very popular program and continues to be held annually.

The Affirmative Action Committee, now called the Diversity Committee, encourages broader participation in the profession by offering library education scholarships to members of underrepresented minorities.

In recent years some organizations have seen less need for special libraries as electronic resources have become increasingly available at the desktop, and laptop, of the end user. In response to this, the chapter has offered programs on new ways to utilize special librarian skills, such as in competitive intelligence work, data mining, knowledge auditing, and taxonomy.

Promoting the Value of the Special Library

Over the years the chapter has made efforts to communicate the value of the special library to decision-makers in organizations that have in place or are considering having special libraries. The Consultation Committee offered one day of free consultation to organizations, such as companies and non-profits, regarding their special collections. The service in many cases demonstrated the expertise that a special librarian can provide. In 1987 the committee published "A Planning Guide for Managers: Establishing a Company Library". Over 125 copies were sold.

Responding to Historical, Economic, and Technological Developments

World War II

The chapter was very active in supporting the war effort. Participating in the Victory Book Campaign, members collected recreational books for the troops as well as technical books for use by the armed forces. The chapter ran a major project to provide subject headings for the vertical files of the Civil Defense Library of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety, Planning and Technology Division. The final list of these headings was also published in the chapter bulletin.

Volunteers from the chapter staffed the Information Booths for Servicemen at both North and South Stations in Boston. Members of the chapter worked as volunteers in the library of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety. Chapter meetings reflected the war effort. At one meeting a librarian from Camp Devens spoke about libraries at military facilities, and at another the librarian of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society spoke on nutritious vegetables to grow in victory gardens. A War Roster Committee fostered communication with members who were away from the area, serving in various capacities.

Members created bibliographies on specific topics related to warfare, civil defense, and post-war planning. Here are some of the titles: "Selective Bibliography on Blackout"; "Aerial Photography in the Detection of Camouflage"; "Bibliography on Sabotage"; "Bibliography on Consumer and the War"; "Medical Books for the Laity"; and "Bibliography on Post War Planning". This list gives an indication of some of the questions that were coming to the chapter members in their libraries, and of the work being done for the war effort in the organizations their libraries served.

Post WWII—Route 128 Becomes "America's Technology Highway"

The greater Boston area emerged as a center for science and technology after World War II, largely because of the wartime R & D done here in electronics, materials science, and other fields. High tech firms grew exponentially, particularly along Route 128, and special libraries made significant contributions to the growth of these companies. In the 1950's the chapter's Science-Technology group became active and sponsored as many as four programs each year.

Some examples of programs:

In 1957, a chapter meeting was held at the Polaroid Corporation in Cambridge. Dr. Edwin Land greeted the group and spoke about the company. This was followed by a demonstration of the new Polaroid transparency-making equipment. Over the next two decades, this was a typical SLA Boston meeting: it was held at a major local company whose librarian was a member of the chapter, often at the company's expense, with presentations about the latest work that company was doing.

In more recent years, the chapter developed new ways to cover the cost of meetings with much-appreciated support from vendors. This also reflects a change over time in the relationship of the chapter with the vendor community. No longer looked at as a separate entity, vendors have become integral parts of the chapter and the relationship between librarians and vendors regarded as collegial. (This is true at the association as well as the chapter level.) Vendors provide speakers and help in developing programs as well as financial support. Many of our members, including those in leadership positions, have worked for vendors, and in the course of a career may move back and forth from library settings to vendor positions.

In the 1970's the chapter started holding annual Reference Updates. At these well-attended programs librarian subject experts developed and distributed bibliographies on "hot topics", some of which were technology-based. For example, two of the topics in 1975 were Metrication, a major interest in those days when we thought the US was going to go metric, and Solar Energy. These Reference Updates continued into the 1980's.

During these years, reflecting the major concerns of the Boston area, special libraries in finance, publishing, government, and various academic specialties continued to be important along with science and technology.

Significant Changes in Information Technology

In the post-war period and on up to the present, rapid developments information technology have been a key focus for the chapter. We have held numerous programs, courses, and workshops to keep the members current.

Some representative topics have been:

- 1956 Machine Literature Searching
- 1966. Basic Punch-Card Techniques for Librarians
- 1969 Automating Serial Records, at a visit to F.W. Faxon, where attendees viewed the IBM 360/40 and its use for maintaining the data for 30,000 serial titles
- 1973 Selective Dissemination of Information
- 1988 Desktop Publishing
- 1991 Digital Imaging Systems
- 1992 The Internet
- 2000 Advanced Content Management and Portal Strategies
- 2005 Great Gadgets in Libraries

Library Management

Another focus for the chapter has been the application of management techniques to library service. Some programs reflecting this focus over the years:

- 1964 Communicating with Management—Are Standards the Answer?
- 1973 Cost Effectiveness
- 1978 All-Day Management Workshop. Basic principles of marketing, resource allocation, and costing, followed by session using the case study method to develop skills

- 1981 Marketing and Public Relations for Libraries and Information Centers
- 1983 Records Management
- 1995 Copyright in the Electronic Age
- 2008 Negotiating: What Every Information Professional Needs to Know

New England Scope

Although focused on the greater Boston area and called the “Boston Chapter”, the group actually serves most of New England. With the exception of the Connecticut Valley Chapter, the Fairfield County (Connecticut) Chapter, and later the Rhode Island Chapter, for much of its first century the Boston Chapter was the only SLA presence in New England. In the 1950’s the chapter held an “annual out of town meeting”; in 1955 that meeting was in Providence, RI with speakers from the Providence Public Library and the *Providence Journal*. Rhode Island became a separate chapter in 1977; Boston helped the new chapter by publishing its first three bulletin issues as inserts to the *Boston Chapter Bulletin*.

As organizations with special libraries grew in other parts of New England, the Boston Chapter named outreach chairs and planned programs in these locations. For example, in the 1970’s the chapter twice held a “Worcester Day” and starting in the early 80’s programs have been held in southern New Hampshire and central and western Massachusetts. Since 2004 the chapter has held an annual program in Portland Maine.

Merger with the Connecticut Valley Chapter

The Connecticut Valley Chapter (CVC) of SLA was founded in 1934. Previously special librarians from Connecticut met informally and at round table discussions at Connecticut Library Association meetings. In March, 1934 a group of eleven special librarians got together to discuss the possibility of forming their own chapter, and met with the New York Chapter of SLA to discuss the benefits of an organized local chapter. The Connecticut librarians decided to form their own chapter and the first officer elections were held in early June. Approval from SLA followed a few weeks later. In 1941, the SLA Conference was hosted by CVC in Hartford.

CVC, throughout its existence, had members from a variety of organizations: academic, manufacturing, insurance, management consulting, scientific and technical, publishing, and public libraries. Initially, the chapter held monthly meetings from September to May, and tried to vary the location

around the state, with emphasis on visiting a special library. The meetings were usually preceded by a networking hour, where members could exchange information about their activities, or just “meet and greet.” The topics covered in meetings ranged from international reference sources to the Internet, competitive intelligence, and knowledge management. Frequently, the chapter hosted visits from the SLA President, and also the candidates for SLA President-elect. The chapter also held an annual Educational Workshop, where members often learned, in later years, about cutting-edge technologies. The chapter published several union lists and bibliographies, as well as a Monthly Bulletin and an annual Membership Directory. In 1984, the chapter celebrated its 50th anniversary at a special occasion at the Hartford Club. In 2007, it was decided to merge the CVC Chapter with the Boston Chapter of SLA.

The Chapter and the Association

As we have seen, Boston was the first Special Libraries Association local affiliate, and over the years has provided significant support and leadership for its parent organization. Special Libraries Association held its annual conference in Swampscott, Massachusetts in 1921 and 1925 and in Boston in 1935, 1946, 1957, 1972, 1986, and 1996. Many members of the Boston Chapter have been leaders in the association as chairs of committees and task forces, authors of SLA publications, board members, and officers. The following Boston Chapter members served as association presidents:

1912-14	Daniel N. Handy
1918-19	Guy Elwood Marion
1923-24	Edward H. Redstone
1929-30	William Alcott
1935-37	Howard L. Stebbins
1945-46	Herman H. Henkle
1979-80	Joseph M. Dagnese
1990-91	Ruth K. Seidman
2001-02	Hope Tillman
2004-05	Ethel Salonen

Wider Horizons

Chapter members are concerned with policy and legislation affecting libraries and information services. We want to become informed on emerging issues, and beyond this, have an opportunity to influence policy, both by

participating as individual citizens in the political process and by having representatives from SLA Boston involved at local, state, regional, national, and international levels.

In the 1970's The New England Library Board established a Panel of Counselors representing each type of library (public, special, school, academic) for each state. SLA Boston named the Massachusetts special library representative on this group which met twice a year with the heads of the six state library agencies. The group discussed national legislation and regional resource sharing as well as key developments and concerns in each state. An important topic was intertype library cooperation—a new idea at that time that, after many years, has come into regular practice.

The chapter has been cooperating with the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners on various projects including preparation for the White House Conferences (see below) and has had speakers from the Board at chapter meetings. As an example, in 1981 a staff member from the Board discussed library legislative issues and how to lobby effectively at both state and federal levels.

In the 1990's, the chapter participated with other library organizations in Library Legislative Day on Beacon Hill. Members familiarized themselves with important library and information issues and visited their state senators and representatives, advocating for support on these issues.

The White House Conference on Library and Information Services was held in 1980 and again in 1991. Each state developed issues and prepared delegations for these events. Many states held pre-conferences. The chapter cooperated with other library groups and the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, and had significant input both years. In 1991 the state planning committee, with representatives from the SLA Boston Chapter, emphasized proposals and activities that would have a lasting effect on library services in the Commonwealth, whether or not specific results emerged from the White House Conference itself.

As the new millennium began, IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations held its annual conference in Boston in 2001—IFLA's first in Boston and its first time in the North America in many years. The SLA Boston Chapter participated in local planning for the conference, and staffed a booth arranging for visits to local libraries. Of equal importance, many of the chapter members had the opportunity to participate in this important international gathering.

The Chapter Today and Looking Ahead

The Chapter's strategic direction and program planning is keeping pace with the professional requirements of its members. During the recent economic downturn, program planners have been conscious of the need to keep costs for programming low, so that price won't be a factor in a member's decision to attend an event. Recent programs aim to help members develop or enhance marketable skills, with programs like "Negotiating the E-journal Site Licensing Process." Other events facilitate networking in fun, informal ways such as Dine-Arounds, or a night at a Pawtucket Red Sox minor league baseball game. This year programming has taken advantage of the benefits of collaborating with other groups for program development. This keeps costs to the Chapter lower, invites a larger pool of people to attend, and brings together people with overlapping interests. The baseball game was coordinated with members of the Rhode Island Chapter. In April a joint program was held with the Boston Knowledge Management Forum.

Today, SLA Boston boasts over 460 members who live and work throughout New England. With the 2008 merger of the Connecticut Valley Chapter with the Boston Chapter, we now enjoy the benefit of combined programming and infrastructure (including scholarship management and student relations) which has the potential to increase the value of chapter membership by providing more opportunities to participate in more places. Considering the size of the Chapter's geographic footprint, the SLA Boston Chapter may consider a name change. With members in all of the New England states, the name SLA Boston no longer fully describes our membership.

Looking ahead, SLA Boston is committed to helping librarians and other information professionals augment their skills to respond to their organization's changing information needs. We continue to identify innovations for information professionals and organize programs to learn about these. SLA Boston is also known for being one of the most socially engaging chapters, and our networking events have witnessed the beginnings of great projects, professional relationships, and more than a few careers.

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