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Delighting in the Written Word and Sharing a Love of Learning

Fay Verburg

Augusta State University, fverburg@aug.edu

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Why I Do WHAT I DO

Delighting in the written word and sharing a love of learning

by Fay Verburg

One of my earliest memories is of my father reading to me at bedtime. I looked forward with anticipation to the next installment of a tale from my copy of *Uncle Wiggily's Story Book*. The "hooks" the author, Howard R. Garis, used at the end of each chapter never failed to make me laugh. "And in the story after this, if the milkman doesn't leave us sour cream for our lemonade, I'll tell you about Uncle Wiggily and the black crow."

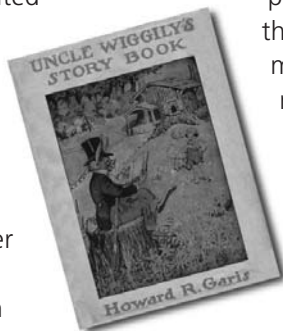
It didn't really matter that I couldn't fully appreciate the concept of a milkman. In suburban Connecticut in the early '60s, the milkman had long been supplanted by the neighborhood grocery store. No, it was the anticipatory spirit of the sentence and the richness of the language that enchanted me.

After I learned to read and reached an age when my mother allowed me to venture further than the end of our tree-lined street, I would walk "downtown" to the public library. Built in 1904, the exterior of the building was constructed of white Vermont marble and featured eight Ionic columns. The interior was no less impressive—the vestibule was lined with Formosa marble, and stained oak glistened warmly throughout. I later learned that the Latin inscription over the main desk, *Ex hoc fonte illa quae summa haurimus*, translates to "We draw the greatest things from this source."

The library became one of my prime destinations—along with the movie theater, Woolworth's and the W. T. Grant department store. It was a place of quiet and sanctitude to me, much like the Congregational Church I attended a few doors away. I spent many an hour wandering

through the stacks, fingering the impressive tomes and drinking in the atmosphere. And it was around that time that I realized there were people who actually got paid to be a part of that environment on a daily basis—the librarians!

At home, my father had amassed a rather eclectic library of his own. By day he worked as a publicist for the Connecticut State Labor Department. After work and on the weekends, he ran a business out of our cellar—the Lyon Hobby Mart. He bought and sold what was termed "paper Americana." I used to venture down into the cellar often, and he would delight in showing me newspapers, lacy Victorian valentines, patent medicine cards, greeting cards, postcards, advertising cards, die-cuts and calendars from days long ago. The collections spilled from boxes that were stacked on shelves and in every corner of the room.



The books my father owned reflected his interests. There were the obvious books on advertising and greeting cards, but he also collected books on, among many other topics, antique dolls and glassware (my mother's passions), history (especially the Civil War), the Pilgrims and early New England (his heritage), movies, circus life, and literature (his favorite poet was Edna St. Vincent Millay).

When I had to write papers for school, I often used the books we had at home supplemented with a select few from the public library. I still have a term paper I wrote in high school English class on the "History of Advertising Cards" that lists a bibliography replete with books from my father's library.

When it came time for me to think about college and my life's pursuit, I reflected on my academic strengths and weaknesses and my likes and dislikes. I excelled in reading, composition and literature and struggled with math and science. Having grown up in a Victorian house populated with antiques and collectibles, in an old mill town, I learned to love history as well. I decided therefore to major in English and minor in history in college.

I was enough of a pragmatist, however, to realize that the attainment of a degree in English alone would not guarantee someone gainful employment. I thought about becoming a teacher like my oldest brother and my elder aunt, but at the time, the thought of being confined in a room with 25 children was not appealing.

So, I harkened back to those librarians working in the quiet of that marble edifice. I thought about how empowering it would be to connect people with books and information. I wanted to be the person someone would seek out to help solve those nagging research riddles. I would become — a reference librarian!

Now, three decades after obtaining my library degree, I continue to delight in the written word and in sharing my love of learning with our students, faculty and

community. Some of the tools of the trade have changed (e.g., card catalog vs. online catalog), but the principles of librarianship remain the same today as that June day in 1904 when my hometown library opened in its splendid, new building.

The American Library Association's statement entitled "Libraries: An American Value" (adopted Feb. 3, 1999) expresses these principles. Paramount among them is the idea that libraries and librarians "celebrate and preserve our democratic society by making available the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions and ideas, so that all individuals have the opportunity to become lifelong learners — informed, literate, educated and culturally enriched."

Thank you, Dad, for instilling in me the love of reading and learning. It has served me well. "And now, if the front door mat doesn't chase the milkman around the clothes post and make him churn the cream into sour milk, I'll tell you next about Uncle Wiggily and Dottie Flufftail." »»

Fay Verburg is assistant professor and coordinator of Reference Services at Reese Library, Augusta State University, where she has been employed for 13 years.

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