

In Memoriam: John Oldick

Bob Nardini

John Oldick, chief of the Collection Development Division at Queens Borough Public Library, died on August 21, 1997, after he was struck in traffic the day before while walking near his home in Greenwich Village. I heard this news over the telephone, having called John to talk about a branch project we had been working on together. I'd read his latest e-mail message right before making the call and looked at it on my computer screen as I heard about his death from another member of the library staff.

Many others knew John Oldick far better than I did. A book vendor's contacts with a librarian are occasional, usually brief, and centered on business at hand. In the seven years he worked at Queens, John and I met on perhaps five or six occasions, at a couple of hours per visit, with occasional e-mail and phone contact. Yet doing business is never all business, since librarian and vendor, or any buyer and seller, must present *themselves* to one another. Time is always short, making for concentrated courtships that quickly distill into an essence of what librarian and vendor need to know about one another.

One of my earliest and freshest memories of John is a lunch at an ALA conference in San Francisco. We'd agreed to meet at a pub not far from the Embarcadero. The place was crowded with nowhere to sit, so we worked standing up, surrounded by a noisy lunchtime crowd, our folders and papers beside our sandwiches and beer, all resting on a wooden ledge that hugged the wall. John inspected our surroundings and, clearly not

a stranger to pubs, assured me that this seemed a pretty good place to take up our business. What that business was I don't remember, but I do recall him telling me, once we'd finished it, that I'd been his last appointment of the conference and that the wonders of the city were now on tap. He was a compact man with a wiry kind of energy, and he walked off in the direction of Market Street, propelled by as crisp and purposeful a step as I'd ever seen, blessed with an afternoon sky that was high, blue, and glorious. He grew up in Fort Plain, New York, one of the old towns of the Mohawk Valley, and once told me what he liked about having settled in lower Manhattan. He could leave his building, head in one direction or another, and walk for hours, sure of finding parts of New York he'd never seen before. In his own neighborhood, he said, he loved the fact that at any hour of the day or night there was life down on the street. If he felt like having an ice cream cone at two in the morning, well, he could find one. I'm sure on many occasions he set off for that cone or for one of the far reaches of Manhattan with that same sense of engagement with a city that I'd witnessed in San Francisco.

Each day he rode the subway across Queens to the central library. The ground floor of the building is as animated as a bazaar, books stacked in displays and the aisles between them crowded with residents of New York's second most populous borough, young and old inspecting the library's wares, lining up for a terminal, carrying on a hundred simultaneous conversations, flirtations, arguments, and

other engagements with one another, in a dozen different languages. Queens circulates more titles than any library system in America, and it was John's job, working from one of the upper floors, to coordinate selection and acquisition of materials for the central library, its 62 branches, and some 2 million residents of Queens.

He knew his business. He needed to, to buy books on the Queens scale. He learned the book trade as an insider, in a publishing job and as owner of a bookstore before working as a librarian in all three of the city's systems: New York, Brooklyn, and finally Queens. He mapped out the book publishing world and covered

swaths of it for the library system, with blanket orders, first copies, Greenaways, approval plans, and firm orders, whatever worked, and automated the library's acquisitions routines while he was at it. Could a vendor help? He'd listen to any suggestion a sales rep might have, decide quickly, and tell you why or why not. A rep might come away from a meeting with more business or might come away with less. A good call either way, or so John, with a grin and a laugh, could make it seem.

The people of Queens, those of us anywhere who buy or sell books to put onto shelves for readers—we're all the poorer for his death.



NEED HELP WITH ASIAN MATERIALS?

OCLC AsiaLink service offers everything you need to establish, maintain and promote Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and Korean materials. Staffed by Asian language experts, AsiaLink provides customized acquisitions services, collection development and pre-selected, shelf-ready collections. Promotional materials and regular updating options are also available. Call OCLC AsiaLink for more information at 1-800-848-5878, ext. 4386 or e-mail marcia_stout@oclc.org.



FURTHERING ACCESS TO THE WORLD'S INFORMATION