AALL: SOCIAL GATHERINGS, SOCIAL ISSUES

As an organization dedicated to promoting the profession of law librarianship, AALL pursues its mission through many interconnected activities including recruitment, education, training, and developing and promulgating standards. Formal dialogues about professional problems and goals also occur in many informal forums constituting AALL's social side. These discussions play important roles in forming bonds between members and adding an element of fun to proceedings that otherwise could seem a trifle tedious. Yet, just as law librarians develop contacts through informal gatherings, they also consciously connect their professional duties to a responsibility to society.

It is the impulse to gather and to discuss that binds together two aspects of the "social" for law librarians: the desire to gather and to make friends provides the glue that keeps association members together, the desire to proclaim the importance of law librarianship as a profession to society manifests itself as they address important contemporary issues.

SOCIAL GATHERINGS

Law librarians have long used meetings—especially their Annual Meeting—as a forum to meet, to debate important issues, and to socialize. In a 1906 letter to G. E. Wire, A. I. Small wrote "we should have one or two round tables or smokers to informally talk over questions that are of importance." "Informal" is the key word here, for a great deal of activity at Annual Meetings falls outside the strict definition of association business. Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of this informality appears in the skits that have long followed the meeting's concluding banquet.

Skits and Playlets

In 1995, the AALL Archives acquired several scrapbooks collected by the late Marian Gallagher of the University of Washington, containing scripts, photos and programs from Annual Meeting skits and playlets in the 1960s and '70s. (Item 1) This material opened a window on the more playful and creative side of the association, as well as on Gallagher. As Penny A. Hazelton said of her in a Law Library Journal memorial, she had a "natural inclination to find the humor in most everything. Marian was fun at work or play. She enjoyed life and made the best out of it."

These playlets gently satirize the legal profession while also underscoring its important work. Programs from "Six Characters in Search of a Law Librarian" and "How to Succeed in Court without Trying" (Items 2 and 3) show that theater and popular music have inspired AALL humorists. Their creations required a great deal of time and energy to produce, as shown by the cast, crew, and musical numbers listed for "Trail Bosses," the 1963 skit bearing a suspicious resemblance to Gunsmoke. (Item 4)

Legal thespians transform themselves onstage, usually by donning attire proper to their character, as shown in these photographs of Fannie Klein, Ernest Breuer, and William Stern from the 1960 production of "Six Characters in Search of a Law Librarian." (Item 5) Scriptwriters update popular song lyrics to capture their audience's attention. "Hello, Dolly!" became "Hello, Librarians!" in 1965, and wedding bells gave way to classroom buzzers in "Get Me to My Class on Time" in 1974. (Items 6 and 7)

Annual Meeting

Serving as the crucible for creating and strengthening friendships, the Annual Meeting provides much more than a venue for skits. The almost bewildering variety of panels, roundtables, discussions, and reports sometimes threatens to overwhelm longtime attendees, not to mention novice law librarians. AALL organized the Conference of Newer Law Librarians (CONELL) as a means to provide their newer members with "both an educational program and a socialization opportunity." (Item 8) Older members also have acted as informal mentors, making connections with their newer colleagues that often transcend
professional relationships. Helen Newman's March 26, 1942 letter invited Elizabeth Finley to join her on vacation at Green Lake, Wisconsin. (Item 9) A. Mercer Daniel often traveled to Annual Meetings with his law librarian friends, though he usually had better luck than in 1939, when "I lost my bag on the train and Fred [Dennis] came to my rescue." (Item 10)

Newsletters

Newsletters have served as an important outlet for aspiring drawers, scribblers, and wordsmiths in search of an audience. Through sketches, poetry, or even storytelling, chapter publications have amused their readers and raised both quirky and compelling issues. Two cartoons from 1982 examine the less-than-smooth relationship between legal research and advances in computer technology. (Item 11) One suggests that those with poor research strategies will continue to suffer with computers as guides, while the other laments the computer's ongoing displacement of the printed word.

Words, as well as drawings, serve artistically creative librarians. Steve Campbell of the Atlanta Law Libraries Association penned "An Ode to the Forgotten" for the cover of the chapter's September, 1984 issue, in which he elevated law librarians to Olympian heights: "Rise, Law Librarians, Rise/and take your rightful place within/the annals of the Law." Andrea Battel adapted "Twas the Night Before Christmas" for the New Jersey Law Librarians Association's 1995 Holiday party. (Item 12) Scott L. Fisher drew on his "journey of video viewing and popcorn overdosing" to pen a less poetic but entertaining essay on "The Librarian as a Fictional Character in Film," providing a checklist of celluloid librarians from such films as The Music Man, Foul Play, Ghostbusters, and Sylvia. (Item 13)

The Minnesota Association of Law Libraries Newsletter provides one of the most notable examples of creative prose among law librarians. Beginning in September 1983, MALL introduced its readers to "A Paige from Life," a serial by law librarian and romance writer Jan Boies. (Item 14) The serial followed Paige, staff librarian for Blacks, Hornbook & Nutshell, Ltd., as she juggled work and romance. When "Paige" finally ended its run after 26 episodes, MALL replaced it in 1987 with "Conan the Librarian," a tale from the time when "men were real men, women were real women, and reference librarians were real reference librarians." (Item 15)

Entertainment and Education

AALL members enjoy combining social gatherings and professional education, but they are also conscious of the need to maintain a healthy balance between the two. Concerned librarians have sometimes wondered whether social events, especially those hosted by publishers, have overshadowed the organization's educational agenda. Helen Newman wrote to Laurie Riggs in a March 13, 1939 letter that several AALL officers felt that "we should not accept such lavish entertainment as we did" from a law book publisher. (Item 16) Newman herself thought that the publishers "very sincerely wanted to show us a grand time and that there were no strings whatever attached to their hospitality."

In the September 1988 AALL Newsletter, President Margaret Leary wrote on the need to maintain the Annual Meeting's balance between education and entertainment. She recommended asking vendors and publishers to match the money spent on social events to the money spent on educational events. J. Wesley Cochran wrote an October 7, 1988 letter about the problem of "one-upmanship." (Item 17) "Each meeting tends to be more dazzling than the last, and I think that we tend to remember our meetings not for what we learned but for the ways in which we were entertained." The problem has proven endemic to many professional associations seeking to make their gatherings more exciting while maintaining what Cochran called a "commitment to progress in professional education."

Social Issues

In its bylaws, AALL dedicates itself to "promote and enhance the value of law libraries to the public, the legal community, and the world." Its officers, committees, chapters, and members have often interpreted this mission in a broad manner. As vocal participants in the legal community, law librarians
Social Gatherings, Social Issues

joined together in part “to address the social issues that affect us as members of our profession and as members of the human family,” according to a 1986 history of the Contemporary Social Problems Special Interest Section. The CSP/SIS, which later changed its name to the Social Responsibilities SIS, embodies AALL’s commitment to social issues as much as any group within the association.

Social Responsibilities SIS

The SR/SIS had its roots in the Conference of Concerned Law Librarians, which was established in 1971 to bring many of the pressing issues from the turbulent 1960s to the attention of AALL members. The Conference’s December 1971 Newsletter reported that its petitions calling for law library service to prisoners, a loan program to diversify recruiting, and official association support for the Equal Rights Amendment had enjoyed a favorable reception at the AALL Business Meeting, although its resolution demanding the immediate withdrawal of American troops in Vietnam fared less well. (Item 18)

The issues have changed, but the SR/SIS continues to serve as an important conduit connecting AALL to broader social concerns. In 1984, the section focused its Annual Meeting Program on “Intimate Violence,” using the “personal, social, and familial alienation” pictured in George Orwell’s novel 1984 as a background for a discussion of alarming trends in domestic violence. (Item 19) Two years later, the SIS drew up a resolution calling for AALL to support “the efforts of those law library workers who have documented and are legally challenging the practice of discrimination in salaries,” and the Executive Board approved it on July 9, 1986. (Item 20)

Reaching a Broader Community

The Conference of Concerned Law Librarians had expressed particular concern about the problems prisoners face when seeking legal information. Members gathered information for a list of law libraries serving prisoners, and later produced “Recommended Collections for Prison Law Libraries.” Elizabeth H. Foe’s January 18, 1972 letter to Viola A. Bird said, “Michael Renshawe, Carleton Kenyon, and I came away being very proud of AALL because we are the only group that is actively producing something which can be used by the prison wardens.” (Item 21)

In 1985, AALL formed a committee to address the under-representation of African-Americans, Latinos/as, and other minorities among law librarians, and it continues its work today as the Committee on Diversity. Such members as Leinaala R. Seeger have helped this committee devise programs, including the Minority Internship Program, to expand the base of librarians from which AALL draws its membership, as noted in her April 23, 1990 letter to Penny A. Hazelton. (Item 22)

AALL members also work outside committees to increase awareness of social issues such as diversity. In the June 1994 RSLL Newsletter, Rhea A-L Ballard urged her colleagues to study the implications of multiculturalism because “we are in a unique position to promote cultural diversity in our staffing, collections, and services that we provide to an increasingly multicultural clientele.” (Item 23) In the Colorado Association of Law Libraries September 1987 newsletter, Pat Taylor reported on a survey of working parents to help law librarians understand and debate the problems faced by parents who work. (Item 24) A year before the CoALL survey, Michael S. Miller wrote “Self-Help Law: A Sampler” for the AALL Legal Information Service to the Public Committee to help librarians make the law more accessible and to increase “legal literacy” among the public. (Item 25)

Taking stands, taking action

In 1978, the Executive Board resolved to issue guidelines to help AALL members draft and implement affirmative action programs. The Board’s decision put J. Myron Jacobstein “in a bit of a quandary,” as he told Marvin R. Anderson in an October 17, 1978 letter. (Item 26) How could the association compose guidelines that would both respect the diversity of its members and anticipate all the problems and opportunities among a wide variety of law libraries?
The 1991 Annual Meeting in New Orleans illustrated the problems posed by controversial issues. Several members expressed misgivings about meeting in a state that had passed such restrictive anti-abortion legislation, while others registered “concern about the SR/SIS distributing only pro-choice literature at the meeting,” as President Penny A. Hazelton wrote in a July 1, 1991 memo to the Executive Board, the staff, and the Program and Local Arrangement chairs. (Item 27) She said, “I think this controversy raises an important question that I am not sure is solvable. What role should a professional association play in issues that seem to some unrelated to the profession of librarianship?” Hazelton concluded that the association’s primary goal is to protect and foster a free and open dialogue among its members, who ultimately decide whether to take concerted action on controversial issues.

Sometimes, members take stands that the AALL later adopts for its institutional voice. In the late 1980s, the FBI made several attempts to infringe the confidentiality of library records and obtain information on “suspicious” users more easily. Bob Doyle criticized these efforts in the September 1988 CALL Bulletin, writing that librarians objected to “being bullied; being asked to create suspicion and potential problems for the innocent; and discriminating against people who have certain kinds of names or accents.” (Item 28) In Spring 1989, the Executive Board took up these objections to urge Congress to continue protecting the privacy of library patrons. (Item 29) At the same time, the Committee on Legislative and Legal Developments produced a pamphlet on state and federal laws that protected an individual’s library records. (Item 30)

Law Librarians: Committed to Social Issues

As members of the association, law librarians act as unofficial professional representatives whenever they work to bring about a more equal and just society. When Morris L. Cohen accepted Judge Thomas Buergenthal’s July 1, 1981 invitation to join the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, he acted in his professional capacity as a law librarian to help the Institute build a research library. (Item 31) While not overseen by AALL, the project was rightfully regarded as an assignment of “utmost importance for the promotion of human rights education and research in our hemisphere.”

Not all social activities have such broad scope, though their narrower focus makes them no less important. The March/April 1994 NOCALL News reported on efforts by the Northern California legal community to gather food to “help feed more than 100,000 low-income children who will not receive subsidized meals when their schools recess for summer vacation.” (Item 32) This food drive addresses more basic concerns than the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, yet it makes the same demands on the energy and commitment of the people who form AALL. As Suzanne Dyer said, “This is a great opportunity for all of us involved with the law to do something positive for the community at large.”

AALL’s members have always understood that their professional and personal responsibilities sometimes take them far outside the walls of a law library. These are the social sides of AALL: building the convivial ties to help the profession thrive and championing justice and fair play to maintain its high profile in both the legal community and society at large.

This exhibit was prepared by Andrew Nolan under the direction of William Maher at the University of Illinois Archives at Urbana-Champaign. The photographs and documents are from the AALL Archives administered by the University of Illinois Archives. The Archives welcomes additional AALL records and information concerning AALL’s social gatherings and its encounters with social issues, both past and present. Send materials and inquiries to:

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