

Death by the Book

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Mount Greenwood College was an old institution albeit a small one but that was part of its charm. Professor Goldwood was the third generation of his family to be on the staff of the college but unlike his predecessors had no heirs. Due to that fact and his love of the school he bequeathed his home and all that was in it to the school. The home itself was, like its former owner, very old and in poor condition. The most economical thing to do would be to tear it down and, for a time at least, use the land as a campus park. Besides, the school had no funds with which to do anything else.

There was, however, a large library of magnificent books, collected over the past 80 years by the family of Goldwood professors. This library of books had been utilized by the college staff as well as students for reference for many years. The acquisition of these books was a blessing, yet posed a problem. The college library was already too small for the books now in it. The Goldwood volumes would add about 25% to the number of books. Funds were not available to expand the building. A meeting of the staff and board of directors was held to generate ideas for a solution of the problem.

It was Professor Sternbuckle of the Mechanical Engineering Department who suggested the unique solution of making the stacks movable, eliminating the dead aisle space between them. The books would be accessed by sliding the stacks of shelves apart to make an aisle between two selected rows and in doing so close the previous aisle wherever that may be. There were of course, many objections. The stacks of books would be too heavy to allow movement. The books would all fall down if their shelves could be moved. And horrors of horrors, what if a person was in an aisle when it closed? Sternbuckle insisted that a workable and safe system could be devised and, as there were no other alternatives offered that did not entail expansion or a new building, he was given a month to devise a plan which would then be submitted for evaluation. He and selected students went right to work on the project.

A month later, sketches were presented along with a simple model of the proposed system. Details were yet to be worked out but the proposal included a hydraulic system for moving the stacks which would be both powerful and quiet with most of the mechanism located in the cellar space below the library. Key locked levers would be provided at both ends of each stack to activate movement and a safety rail running the entire width of each stack would stop the movement if someone were to find himself within the aisle as it began to move. But of course, the librarian would have the key and would insure that the aisles were unoccupied before activating movement of the stacks. Furthermore, the local Binghamson foundry had generously

agreed to manufacture the needed mechanical parts as a gift to the school, through the auspicious generosity of its president Atticus Binghamson, Jr., who, as his father before him, had been a graduate of Mt. Greenwood. Sternbucle also assured the group that the labor to assemble and complete the installation would be performed by the students of his department as a class project as it would contribute to their education.

The proposal was greeted with enthusiasm by most or in incredulous acceptance by many. Could such a thing be built? But for the most part they understood little of mechanics and bowed to the inventiveness and expertise of Professor Sternbucle. Professor Thayer, a junior professor, was the only completely negative voice saying it would never work and if it did would be difficult and expensive to maintain and take a year or more to build during which time the school would have no working library. Sternbucle retorted that Thayer always had a negative attitude, especial to the Engineering Department and himself in particular. He also countered that the planning and initial construction of the stacks could be completed during the coming school year and actual installation completed the following summer.

Proclaiming the proposal to be brilliant, it was approved with only Thayer casting the dissenting vote. Belle Fenton, the librarian, who had been mostly quiet all this time, as was her nature, asked if she could be allowed to be an observer of the planning and construction since it would be she who would eventually come to operate it. She also suggested that this would be an excellent time to reorganize the library using the Dewey Decimal System. This was approved without either the affirmation or dissent of Thayer who just sulked.

Plans came together, created by the students under the direction of the associate professors of the Engineering Department and the watchful eye and overall plan of Professor Sternbucle. Belle Fenton was there every step of the way, even offering suggestions regarding the less technical aspects of the project, thus ensuring practicality in several instances. Others on staff looked in, for the most part, as a matter of curiosity. Even Thayer was known to show up but always in his negative role. As the school year drew to a close progress was on time and Belle organized the removal of the books from the library. They were boxed and stored in the old Goldwood house for which demolition had been delayed for just this purpose.

After Commencement exercises for the Class of 1900 were completed, the library was closed and construction began in earnest. Many students stayed for the summer and many whose homes were nearby assisted. The project proceeded without major incident and even with minor changes was completed on time. After the system was tested, the books were placed on the shelves with the stacks labeled with the new, for them, Dewey Decimal System. In stages, as books were put in place, the system was tested repeatedly and adjustment made to compensate for the added weight. By the time the students body began to arrive for the fall semester all was deemed to be ready. A formal commissioning was arranged and on the evening of the event everybody who

was anybody, and some who were not, were in attendance at the library. The reading area was converted to a reception hall where the guests assembled. It was a glorious event and the inventiveness of one of their own would be celebrated.

Joining the staff and directors were most of the teaching assistants, the students who participated in planning and construction, Atticus Binghamson, Jr. and his mother Leticia, the mayor, chief constable and several other political figures who had never before been on the campus, or possibly on any other school campus for that matter. After preliminary speeches, some planned, and some volunteered by undistinguished individuals seeking some sort of recognition, Professor Sternbucle was generously thanked for his invaluable contribution to Mt. Greenwood College as was Mr. Binghamton and his family, and praise was given for the support of the mayor, of which in fact, there had been none.

Belle Fenton was presented with the key to the levers that initiated the movement of the stacks. It was Professor Sternbucle who presented her the key and after doing so, he quietly told her that he had placed a duplicate key in the center drawer of her desk in the event of the loss of the one that would hang from her neck. He assured her that there were no other keys. After Belle thanked him she invited those present in the reading area to join her in small groups for a demonstration of the features of the movable stack system. She had arranged to have several students act as ushers, keeping the size of each group manageable in the confined spaces of the stacks themselves.

Punch and hors d'œuvre were served and everyone congratulated everyone even if it was just for being there. There were some small private conversations of a divergent nature. Several Junior professors were grumbling that they had been passed over for tenure while that "idiot" from the Literature department, Professor Thayer, had been granted full tenure. It was Sturnbucle who commented, "Now we will have to put up with that incompetent fool forever." Thayer, of course was there and telling everyone who would condescend to talk to him that the new system would soon break down and be an embarrassment to the school ... and Sturnbucle, a particular embarrassment along with it. Undoubtedly those comments found their way to Sturnbucle.

After all who wished to take Bell's guided tour had done so, she found her way to the punch bowl where her friend Jennie Royce quickly presented a glass of cool refreshment, much needed. Jennie and Belle were inseparable friends and Jennie was there just to be a friend. As they conversed, Belle noticed Professor Sternbucle emerging from the cellar and thought he was just too fastidious about checking on all his machinery and gadgets down there. After a time, she was surprised to see Thayer and Sturnbucle in conversation, apparently amiable, but brief. Thayer then approached her with a piece of paper in hand saying, "I am told that your shelves include the newest book by Jerome K. Jerome", handing her the small white piece of paper. Belle replied, "Oh yes, *Three Men on the Bummel*", wondering if it was

Sternbucle who had given him this information. The three spoke for a while about the new book and Jerome's previous publication, *Three men in a Boat*. Thayer asked if he could see the new book and after she looked in the index cards for its exact location, she requested Thayer to follow her.

Belle guided the Professor to the proper stack as he protested that he never would understand a mathematical system for finding linguistic information. She then checked the aisle presently open and being assured that it was unoccupied, returned to the stack where she had left Thayer, inserted and turned the key, permitting her to move the lever, actuating the system. The stacks quietly and smoothly moved aside opening a new aisle. She offered to assist the professor in finding the book but Jennie was frantically waving for her to come to her. Thayer said he would find it himself and after letting him know it would be found near the center of the stack, she hurried to her friend.

Jennie said that Professor Sternbucle wanted her to meet the mayor. The two were at the corner of the stacks at the opposite side aisle she had just left so the two ladies started to move to their location. At that moment, Belle saw Professor Sternbucle wave to someone at the entrance to the library. Presently, the door swung open and the lights switched off. Four students entered carrying a litter upon which was a huge cake festooned with lit candles and crying out, "Happy Library Inauguration!" Of course every eye in the room went to them. There were Ooo's and Ahaa's and everyone applauded, repeating the student's acclamation. As the student near the door restored the lights a shout of "STOP! STOP" was heard followed by "NOooo!" and then a scream that finally faded to silence. It had come from the book stacks. Belle recognized the distressed voice as that of Professor Thayer's and rushed to the aisle in which she had just left him, She was followed by a horde of others. But the aisle was now almost closed and she could see Thayer crushed between the stacks, seemingly, quite lifeless.

As others approached there were gasps of horror and pleas to "Get him out of there!". Professor Sternbucle began to berate himself, "What have I done? How could I have missed something in my design? ... Thayer was right all the time, it is unworkable and dangerous!". Belle was startled at this and said, "Calm yourself Professor" and took his hand to comfort him. a puzzled look came on her face and she lifted his hand to her lips imparting a light kiss upon it. Then she released it quite abruptly and announced that she would open the aisle and asked everyone to stand back from the stacks leaving only Sternbucle, the constable and the school nurse with her.

After insuring that the partially open aisle at the front part of the stacks was clear, she activated the system and the stacks parted. As they did so, the lifeless form of Professor Thayer, released from the grip of the shelves, crumpled to the floor. His hands fell away from their apparent desperate grasp of the emergency bar in front of him as he fell. Belle had to restrain the nurse from rushing in until all motion stopped.

When she did reach the crumpled form it took her but a moment to announce, "He is gone", a statement which none who observed could have doubted. Belle and the others entered the aisle but her attention was on the shelves. She herself had placed it there just three days before but the volume of *Three Men on the Bummel* was conspicuous by its absence. She did not understand what was happening.

Professor Sternbucle started to move off saying he must go down to the cellar to see what had gone amiss to cause such a tragic accident but Belle said, "No, Wait" and turned to the constable asking him to secure the door to the cellar until a proper formal investigation could be organized. The constable recognized the wisdom of this request and in spite of the instance of the professor that only he was qualified to investigate, stationed two of his large political friends at the door. Now the first order of business was to place a barrier in the aisle to prevent accidental movement of the stacks and upon the arrival of a doctor and several police officers, finally to remove the body to a private place.

No one consciously realized that Belle, being in charge of the library, had assumed command of the situation and all, including the president of the college, mayor and even the constable, simply followed her suggestions as if they were commands. She just seemed to know exactly what to do. After the policemen were set to the task of taking names and recording statements, and Belle had gone to her desk for pencil and paper, she suggested that she, Professor Sternbucle, the constable and one policeman, as well as her friend Jennie, descend to the cellar to look at the condition of the mechanisms. Sternbucle's objections were overruled by the constable and the door was opened to them. At the bottom of the steps, Belle quietly spoke to Jennie who immediately went to the far side of the cellar looking for ... something. Belle, on the other hand, led the little group directly to a cluster of valves. She had become familiar with them as Professor Sternbucle had pridefully showed every detail of her design to her during the installation. She reached for the one with the red handle whereupon the professor exclaimed, "Belle, don't ... it will be oily!" she quietly said, "I know." and grasping it, found it to be fully closed. Belle said, "I suspected as much". The professor, with an oath said, "How could that be?" The hydraulic fluid for the emergency stop system had been shut off, thereby, disabling the emergency bar.

Belle's response was to turn to the constable and say "I think you should place Professor Sternbucle under arrest for murder." As Sternbucle tried to bolt for the stairs he found himself in the tight grasp of the policeman. He turned to Belle and inquired, "What the devil do you mean?" For the benefit of all present she explained by addressing the accused man.

"I didn't know what to think but you set me to wondering when we found Professor Thayer squeezed between the book shelves and you were so quick to agree with what he had contended all these months. That reaction from you was quite out of character and I began to review the happenings of the evening. When I took your

hands in an effort to calm you they were a little slippery and I brought them to my nose and detected the faint scent of hydraulic oil. You had visited the cellar earlier and shortly afterward told Thayer about the new publication of Mr. Jerome's, knowing he would be intensely interested in seeing it." she then turned to Jennie and asked, "Did you find it?" Jennie nodded and said, "In the back among a lot of mechanical things." Belle continued, "You had brought in that book just for this purpose several days ago, I thought it a generous donation to the library, and you had known it would be on the shelves. But sometime before this evening, you removed it and hid it where Jennie found it. That insured that Thayer would be taking some time trying to find it." "Preposterous!", was the professor's reply.

Belle continued. "When Thayer was at the center of the stacks, right where you wanted him, you had me called away on the pretext of meeting the mayor but before that could happen you signaled your students to dim the lights and bring in the cake, another device prearranged for this terrible deed." "How could I ... " the professor started to say but before he could continue, Miss Fenton resumed her accounting of events. "The lights within the stacks had not been effected but all eyes were directed toward the cake, except of course those of poor Mr. Thayer, who was still intent on locating the missing book. During this time you activated the mechanism and Thayer was caught by the shelves before he realized they were in motion." It must have been horrible for him!" The spare key for the levers is not in my drawer ... I checked ... and I suspect that it is still in your possession."

The constable directed the police officer to search the professor and the key was soon produced from one of his pockets. The rest is history. Sternbucle was later judged to be insane and nearly a year later hanged himself in his room at the mental hospital. The movable stack system was restored to working order and a secure lock was placed on the cellar door with the key available only to a trusted few. In addition a locking bar was put in place each time an aisle was opened and only the librarian was allowed to retrieve books for students and faculty.

In spite of these precautions, there were frequent breakdowns of the system, stacks becoming misaligned and refusing to move and hydraulic lines rupturing. Thayer was right all along and shortly after the demise of Professor Sternbucle, his library system followed him to oblivion. In point of fact, the mismanaged collage followed close behind. The plans for the library system were lost forever and nothing resembling that invention of the insane professor was to be seen again, ... that is until the later part of the twentieth century when movable stacks of file cabinets appeared in many doctor's and other offices, this time hand operated sans hydraulics and complicated mechanical devices.