

A LIFE IN
LAW BOOKS:

DICK SPINELLI



Courtesy of William S. Hein & Co., Inc.

Dick Spinelli outside his office at William S. Hein & Company, Inc., in Buffalo, NY.

Mention Dick Spinelli’s name among law librarians, and the adjective on everyone’s lips is “irreplaceable.” The recent announcement of his “semi-retirement” from William S. Hein & Co., Inc. prompted accolades for Dick’s performance as a model for conducting business with law libraries. Characterizing Dick as a “law book seller” gives short shrift to his eminent role in the profession of which he has been a part for more than forty years. From his beginnings with Fred B. Rothman & Co. in 1968 to his years with the Hein Company from 1993 to the present, Dick has been a trusted advisor and flexible working partner transacting the business of selling law books (including of course all the evolutionary formats: microform and electronic databases). Dick always has maintained good humor, understanding, and integrity.

So it is no wonder Dick Spinelli is known as much for his friendship and public service activities as for his professional accomplishments. Newly-minted law librarians always have enjoyed meeting Dick; my personal experience confirms that Dick is in his element meeting and befriending new members of the profession, helping them find their way in the “real-world” practice of collec-

tion development. He always makes a new law librarian feel special.

Dick’s involvement in public service is an integral part of his life. His participation ranges from The Spirit of Law Librarianship Award for Public Service, to a charity golf tournament for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, to coaching youth sports teams.

As for “semi-retirement:” the words “Dick Spinelli” and “retirement” are oxymoronic. Although Dick may be scaling back, the consensus is that he will “never retire:” http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/law_librarian_blog/2010/01/dick-spinelli-will-never-retire.html/ That is our good fortune.

A Legal Miscellanea: How did you choose the law book business as your profession? Did you “try out” other work early on, or consider pursuing a different profession before deciding that this was the perfect fit?

Dick Spinelli: Following college and Army service, I joined Johnson & Johnson in 1966 as a management trainee in sales/distribution. During college I had worked for Fred B. Rothman & Co. in the warehouse and as a

shipping clerk, and had remained in touch with the Rothman family. In 1967, Rothman offered me a position, but J&J had promoted me, so I turned down the offer. Later, changes at J&J prompted me to contact Rothman about their offer. That position had been filled, but they created another for me. That is how I joined the law library profession, and I still consider it the wisest decision I ever made.

You began in the profession with the Rothman Company in 1968, and remained there until 1993 when you joined William S. Hein & Co., Inc., where you are today. Could you walk us through the progression of your work from your earliest days with Rothman through your work today with Hein: the positions you have held and the work attached to each?

DS: When I joined Rothman in April 1968 as an order processor in the book agency division, my work centered around the Green Slip service, which had begun on an experimental basis in January, 1968. My tasks included: processing book orders, orders to publishers for books listed in the service, incoming shipments of books, and shipments to libraries, plus checking the invoices sent to customers. Eventually I moved from daily processing tasks to managing.

Later I relocated to their publications department where I worked closely with Paul Rothman. I oversaw their warehouse and inventory control, and processed orders for Rothman publications (periodicals, book reprints and new publications). I had few responsibilities outside the office, although I attended my first American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Annual Meeting in Philadelphia in 1968.

As the company expanded its contracts with law schools to secure reprint rights for law reviews, and distribution rights for back stock, Rothman recognized the need to lease warehouse space to accommodate its growing inventory of journals. Eventually the company outgrew its space in South Hackensack, NJ, and in 1976 began looking for a larger facility. The company explored options in areas as close as northern New Jersey and as distant as Colorado. After months of research and site visits, Rothman decided to build a facility near Denver and move the entire operation to Colorado. Construction began in 1977, the move began in early 1978 and was completed later that summer; the staff relocated in June.

I began to conduct more library visits and attend regional AALL chapter meetings in the mid-1970s. Following the move to Colorado, this role expanded and

I became more visible in the profession via these visits and meetings. During this period a dual focus developed: I had office responsibilities overseeing the staff in the book agency division (Green Slip service), plus warehouse and inventory control responsibilities, and shared the order processing for Rothman publications. Simultaneously, I was spending more time preparing for library visits and presentations. This role continued through early 1993.

In 1993, I joined William S. Hein & Company. My primary responsibilities were in sales and marketing, and I visited all types of law libraries: academic, public, and law firm. I continued to attend AALL, AALS, and numerous chapter meetings.

Could you describe for us the range of activities performed by a “traditional” law book seller during a typical annual day visit to a large law library?

DS: I am not sure if what I did during a library visit was typical for reps. I emphasized getting to know individuals as much as familiarizing myself with each collection. While new in the profession, I spent considerable time in the stacks, pinpointing a collection's strengths as well as any weaknesses or gaps. I coupled this physical survey with notes and printouts of the library's purchases from our company; this gave me insight into its acquisitions and the type and formats of materials they collected. This preliminary work prepared me for my presentation to the librarians.

During my early years in the profession, I wanted to learn about each library's collection development philosophy, acquisition policies, and goals. I met with as many staff members as possible, individually or in groups. In either setting I wanted to learn their responsibilities; talk about their goals; ask if they had problems/issues with our company; make sure that they had a contact within the company, and let them know they could be in touch with me for any reason; and provide them with some personal history and history of the organization I represented. I wanted to make it clear that communication was the most important factor in dealing with a vendor, and that the best relationships between library and vendor were based on satisfying interactions.

As I gained experience and built a file for each library, I could complete much of my preparation before visiting a library. I was able to search the library's online catalog, check holdings, and review new acquisitions prior to arriving. As a result, subsequent visits required less time in the stacks, allowing more time with the library staff.

(continued on page 8)



In the United States Army, circa 1965.

Those of us who know your work see only its public aspect. What makes up the remaining “behind the scenes” portion of your work?

DS: There is lots of communication, both among members of our staff and with librarians. Being part of a smaller company allows each of us a voice in the organization, and we have influence in product development, customer service issues and staffing. I enjoy the give-and-take in our discussions and in the decision-making process. It is rewarding to listen as well as speak in these exercises, and over the years these experiences have helped me grow and become a more integral part of the company.

When not preparing for library visits, much of my time is spent speaking with librarians on many topics: potential products or services, issues a librarian might have with the company, or follow-up on matters discussed during a visit.

In today’s book/online database-buying climate where the range of sources and media you offer is more complex than in the days of print-only, how have your methods of serving your law libraries changed, if at all? Has the relationship of law book seller to law library/librarian changed since the 1960s?

DS: I do not believe there have been radical changes in how a vendor serves its marketplace. There have been subtle changes with the move from traditional print to online databases because electronic versions tend to be more complex. But the bottom line is this: the represen-

tative must be versed in the nuances of the product, and must enjoy the respect and confidence of the librarian, who also must have confidence in the vendor company and in the product.

In the past when visiting libraries, I mostly met with the directors, associate directors, and collection development and/or acquisition staff. After a print product was reviewed with the staff and the order placed, there was little or no follow-up.

In contrast, marketing electronic databases requires close contact with everyone who will play a role in working with the database. In addition to library administrators and acquisitions staff, many other players enter the arena: reference librarians who use the online database frequently, IT staff who support the resource, and perhaps law faculty members who are frequent users. These additional contacts are essential for future communications because the vendor will need to review new content, alert users to enhancements, and publicize training opportunities.

There have been dramatic and fundamental changes in the law book selling and publishing business over the past forty years. Can you describe those for us?

DS: Early in my career, collection development mostly meant building print collections, completing holdings in existing collections, and preserving these traditional collections. While the more established academic libraries generally had the most complete holdings, there always were gaps. With the creation of new post-war law schools, a fresh demand for books and periodicals was created. Many of these were out of print. This circumstance encouraged law book companies such as Fred O. Dennis, Rothman, Hein, and Oceana to seek licensing agreements with law schools to reprint their journals, and prompted the companies to examine bibliographies and solicit librarians’ recommendations for historical monographs to reprint.

The introduction of microforms to law libraries enabled acquisition of difficult-to-find materials, and offered the option of adding materials in an alternative space-saving format. This development brought modifications to collection development/management policies and preservation policies.

Although today collections of traditional print formats remain vital to the holdings of most libraries, the introduction of online materials has altered collection development and management policies irrevocably, and has revolutionized legal research methods.

(continued on page 9)

The changes in electronic resources coupled with library budget reductions and space limitations have affected the product development philosophy of companies such as Hein. For instance, Hein will continue to provide materials in traditional formats. However, the number of new “traditional” products has been reduced significantly; during the past decade the emphasis has shifted to HeinOnline as the resource of the future.

Did you predict these changes, and if so, did you prepare for them? Or if not, how did you adapt “on the fly” to the changes as they occurred?

DS: I am not sure I predicted all the changes. What I did not foresee was the enormous potential scope of electronic content. Prior to the birth of HeinOnline, I considered electronic resources to be more useful to a practitioner than to an academic. However, the success of HeinOnline, The Making of Modern Law, and other databases which emphasize retrospective materials has surprised me. While I never doubted the value of HeinOnline, I don’t think any of us foresaw the impact it would have on law publishing and legal research.

Traditional law book sellers knew their books: the subjects in them, how they were organized, their physical characteristics, cost. They also knew their libraries and the needs of their customers. Has this knowledge-based “advisory” approach faded with the panoply of materials available combined with the relative transience today of publishers’ representatives, and if so, what has replaced it and why?

DS: I believe that regardless of whether the product is print or electronic, the publisher’s representative must be as knowledgeable as possible, or the buyer, researcher, and publisher all will suffer. The rapid growth of online resources has made it difficult to maintain familiarity with all available databases, but more than minimal knowledge of content is necessary, plus the recognition of the value of that content to a particular library. An understanding of how the product works from the researcher’s perspective is important and can be a valuable selling point.

A representative must understand a library’s philosophy of collecting and its target subjects. For example, offering a small county library international law materials, or perhaps even federal materials, likely will be met with a negative response, whatever the format.

While I am aware of the transience of publisher’s representatives in some organizations, especially the larger ones, my experience is with smaller companies where the

staff has tended to remain stable. When change is inevitable, preparation is thoughtfully conceived. In the case of Hein, the transfer of duties from one person to another within the sales force always is orchestrated carefully so that both the salesperson and the library can adjust readily to the changes. For instance, Hein now is in the process of making the transition from me as the primary outside sales representatives in the U.S. to Steve Roses, who arrives with fifteen years’ experience in the marketplace. So far it has been smooth sailing, and we are confident that will continue throughout the transition.

I discern one development which likely will alter the habit of regular library visits. The advent of remote sales/training presentations through web conferencing and webinars could obviate the necessity of maintaining an outside sales force, which is becoming prohibitive for smaller companies. As the complexity of online resources increases, vendor staff members with knowledge of the content of new online collections, combined with expertise in search options, and understanding of enhancements, such as linking to other resources in a database, could conduct web conferencing with libraries. This would provide a cost-effective way both to advertise a new product and to train library staff, as well as provide the necessary personal contact while dispensing with the high cost of frequent travel.

You have been fortunate to know and work with some of the great names in legal publishing and law librarianship. Who among them were your mentors/friends? Can you give us an anecdote or two from your days of working among them?

DS: I have had numerous mentors over the years, and each has left a mark on my career. Fred Rothman had an enormous impact on me, both professionally and personally. His business sense, his operational methods, his ethics, and his ability to read the pulse of the profession were instrumental in my professional education. He was my role model. Paul Rothman, as an extension of Fred, also influenced me, both early and later on. More recently at Hein, Bill Hein, Kevin Marmion, Dan Rosati and others have been extremely influential. Their encouragement, support and their commitment to the highest ideals have been inspirational.

Early in my career librarians such as Julius Marke, Marian Gallagher, Mary Oliver, Harry Bitner, Balfour Halévy, Meira Pimsleur, Morris Cohen, Earl Borgeson, and Al Coco, to name but a few, were instrumental in my early development. Others such as Leah Chanin, Roy Mersky, Roger Jacobs, Dan Freehling, Kathie Price,

(continued on page 10)

Dick Danner, Margie Maes, Frank Houdek, Ed Edmonds, and Jim Heller, again to name just a few, contributed substantially to my professional growth. From each I have absorbed something valuable; my hope is that I have given back to each who has helped me along the way.

There are many stories, both humorous and serious, that I could tell. After forty years in the profession, I have seen, heard, or been told so much that I have forgotten more than I can remember. One that comes to mind was back in the 1960s when the Rothman Company was still in New Jersey. Often we would have visitors from New York: one was Julius Marke when he was at NYU. I always had the impression that Julius considered crossing the Hudson more dangerous than George Washington found crossing the Delaware in 1776. Julius seemed convinced there was a good chance he would be waylaid by hellions before he could make safe harbor in Manhattan. Julius also had unlikely culinary tastes; while at St. John's University, the local IHOP was his lunchtime haunt.

There is a case to be made that you are the best-known person in law libraries who is not a law librarian. Conversely, you know virtually everyone in the profession, from the newest CONELL (Conference of Newer Law Librarians) program attendees to the eminences grises. What role has the “people” part of the profession played in your own approach to your work?

DS: The people part has been the most influential and the most gratifying aspect of my tenure in our profession. Over the years I have met, spoken, worked, and grown with many who had an impact on my life and my professional success. Many librarians have taken the time to “teach” me their side of the profession, and although I was not trained as a librarian or lawyer, I feel I have been accepted in the profession as a colleague.

I always enjoyed it when librarians visited Fred Rothman. Meira Pimsleur and Balfour Halévy especially were quite lively, bringing stories to share and insights to pass along.

My long relationship with Roy Mersky was akin to riding a roller coaster with as many peaks as valleys. We often had good times together, and just as often would disagree. At times it was trying, yet in the end the relationship became very positive, one that I now look back on with great fondness. Roy was a very caring man, a side not many in the profession saw. I never will forget his support and understanding when my wife was diagnosed with cancer. His thoughts and concerns during her illness and following her passing were not

widely known, but I appreciated them. When I was diagnosed with cancer, Roy, like many other colleagues in the profession, stayed in touch for updates, and made sure I was faring well. He remained that same caring individual until his death.

What have you found to be the most satisfying part of your work? The most fun? The most trying?

DS: The most satisfying part of my career has been the people. I value the time spent with a new law librarian as much as with a library director.

I would not have remained in the profession this long if I had not been enjoying myself. There is so much more to a career than just the work involved. A major part of the joy I have experienced is getting to know colleagues outside of their office or library. We have played golf and tennis; attended baseball, basketball and football games; visited together at their homes and met their families; shared meals, danced together at the AALL Annual Meeting, and in general just looked forward to each visit whether it was at their library or elsewhere.

A difficult aspect of my work has been the extensive travel. While I thrived on the direct contact with the customers, my absences must have been difficult for my family.

Another difficult part of the job has been keeping current with the philosophical and technological evolution in law librarianship. Many factors influence our profession, and publishers must remain savvy enough to weather the changes and nimble enough to shift direction when necessary. Both the Rothman and Hein companies were able to adapt to changes and thrive.

You are known for your public service orientation, both within and outside the profession. Can you tell us a little about working with your charity golf event, and your involvement with the Spirit of Law Librarianship Award for Public Service?

DS: I have tried to balance my professional and personal lives. The Spirit of Law Librarianship Award is a rewarding part of the professional side that bridged the gap by bringing to light the independent public service activities of members of our profession: what they did outside the four walls of their library for the betterment of their community. One might say that through these community activities they found balance in their lives.

Roy Mersky and Rich Leiter conceived and established the Spirit Award. Paul Rothman supported the idea both philosophically and financially, and later was joined by Bill Hein and Kevin Marmion. I have had the privilege

(continued on page 11)



Staff at Fred B. Rothman & Co. shortly after the move to Denver, circa 1978. Dick Spinelli is at far left; founder Fred Rothman is at extreme right, with his son Paul beside him.

of serving on the award selection committee. It has been enlightening to learn where and how librarians have donated their time and efforts to their communities, and how these pursuits have given them a feeling of accomplishment outside the workplace.

Away from my office I have derived immense personal gratification through charitable and volunteer activities. As a committee member for a charity golf tournament in Denver which has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, I have participated in working towards a cure for the disease which took the life of my best friend's daughter at a very young age. By serving with this group and on the Colorado Board of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, I joined with her parents in their efforts which began more than twenty-five years ago to find a cure.

The other "extracurricular" activity which gave me immeasurable satisfaction was coaching sports teams. I considered this an extension of the teaching and training I enjoyed with colleagues in my office. Whether it

was my son's T-ball, Little League, or soccer team, or my daughter's softball teams, coaching and seeing its positive influence on the kids brought me enormous satisfaction. Observing the kids' satisfaction as their efforts brought them improved skills and transformed them into "team players" made the days, weeks, and months of coaching very gratifying.

Any parting thoughts on the future of the law book selling profession?

DS: I have been fortunate to belong to a profession where I have found room for alignment of professional and personal goals. My colleagues and their outlook on life have played a most positive role in my own life. As I look back on the past forty years of my career, I recognize that it was not planned, nor had I formally been prepared for it. But it has been a career far more rewarding than I ever could have predicted. I am looking forward to continuing to contribute to both the Hein Company and law librarianship in the years ahead.



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