

Miles O. Price

Law Librarian, Columbia University

By MEIRA G. PIMSLEUR*

How does one recount the day-after-day effort involved in building, expanding, recreating, and maintaining a great law library over a period of 30 years? How describe the genius, devotion, and loving care that went into this effort? All these qualities, as well as a talent for organization and for the most exacting and judicious use of limited funds, Miles O. Price had in a generous measure, and all were necessary for the successful accomplishment of the task he set for himself.

When Mr. Price came to Columbia in the fall of 1929, the law library had already become a fine, highly developed research library under the librarianship of Frederick C. Hicks and his predecessors. What was there for the new librarian to do, then, but continue to buy and to solicit gifts of books? And if the task involved more than that, as it surely did, what were the factors that limited the optimum use of a fine library? What must be done to achieve excellence, to make a fine library a great library? There was much to be done, and Mr. Price liked to tell the story of the day he came to work as law librarian at Columbia. As he told it, he sat down at his desk and, not knowing where to begin, put his feet up on the desk and leaned back. No sooner had he done so than the dean walked in, and that was the end of leisure moments for Miles O. Price in the Columbia Law Library.

When Mr. Hicks resigned after serving from 1914 to 1928, the law library had grown from 56,427 volumes to 142,268 volumes, the result of a development program meant to be general, and not intended to be spectacular in any particular field. From the very beginning of his tenure, Miles Price's concern was primarily directed to the maximum usefulness of the library as a research tool to both faculty and students. As early as his 1930/31 report, he stated, "It has been my effort . . . to use rules as guides rather than as straitjackets, and to give patrons what they want with a minimum of fuss and a maximum of speed and common-sense." This policy

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he applied as a matter of faith even if it meant, as it frequently did, that Mr. Price, confronted with a reference question as he was leaving Kent Hall at 7 p.m., had to take off his coat and proceed to help the inquirer.

It was his constant goal to maintain and increase the capacity of the law library to meet the research needs of an ever-more-demanding student body and faculty. In his first year of his tenure he drew up various detailed checklists to reveal areas in which the collection was weak, to indicate volumes and sets that must be located and acquired, and to found a program of intensive perusal of bibliographic tools; he did not neglect, either, to notify friends and faculty that the law library entertained a strong predilection for acquiring gifts.

He found that the library was deplorably deficient in complete sets of basic foreign law materials, had gaps in its Roman law and international law collections, and while up to date in Anglo-American treatises, lacked a large percentage of the very early State session laws, as well as some of the less frequently used State statute and digest sets.

Confronted with these large gaps, Mr. Price had to steer a very careful course to achieve the required expansion of the collection using funds inadequate to the task. That the Columbia Law Library is today one of the greatest in the entire world is the result of his untiring and dedicated efforts.

Professor Julius Goebel's vast knowledge of legal history helped guide Mr. Price in developing the collection in this and related fields. With the cooperation of Professor A. Arthur Schiller, he conducted a worldwide search for works on Roman law. He was keenly interested in creating in this law library an outstanding scholarly collection in this field, one otherwise neglected in a world inclined to the belief that only that which is new and modern is worth having.

The library also received gifts of the United States Supreme Court records and briefs each year from the former dean of the law school, Mr. Justice Harlan Fiske Stone. Mr. Price decided to maintain and bind these valuable

materials, notwithstanding great difficulties arising out of cost and inadequate space. The annual binding of the Supreme Court records and briefs has continued through the years against these odds, and the collection now numbers over 20,000 bound volumes. In more recent years, microfilm copies of these have become available, but the law faculty and the law library, accustomed to excellence by Price's standards, prefers the "real thing," particularly in the absence of efficient devices for photo print-out of micro-materials.

Legal theses, many making significant contributions in the fields treated, had for years been received from foreign universities and had been allowed to pile up in an undifferentiated mass. Under Mr. Price's direction, these were sorted, cataloged, and arranged for use, thus adding greatly to the research importance of the collection.

The library's policy on the collection of foreign law was reviewed in its entirety in 1931. Thereafter the collection effort was intensified through years during which Mr. Price strove to gather basic legal works from almost every country in the world. During the years from 1932 through 1938, Mr. Price's assiduous efforts filled existing gaps to complete nearly 300 sets of foreign law materials. In order to make the most judicious use of available funds, he engineered a survey of all the foreign continuations to which the law library then subscribed. As a result of his thorough study of the means by which available funds could best be used for this purpose, he concluded that our collections from certain countries important to the development of law should be virtually complete, even though this meant that, temporarily at least, other areas of interest would be neglected until additional funds should become available. The library thus systematically collected publications of France, Germany, and Switzerland and, to a somewhat lesser degree, of Italy. For other foreign countries, basic codes and statutes, plus some law reports and periodicals, were considered sufficient for the time being. This decision remained a policy for nearly 20 years, leading to very great strength in the collections of those European countries so developed. However, during the intervening time, the library had to terminate many periodical subscriptions, since depression years came along. These cutbacks were hazardous decisions, for it was difficult to be sure which periodicals could safely be dis-

continued. In later and more prosperous years, as Mr. Price had feared, it proved to be almost impossible to fill in the gaps in the sets that had been allowed to lapse. Finding the missing issues was a tremendous chore—and finding money to pay for continuation subscriptions that had meanwhile soared in price, was still another.

When the European market was closed "for the duration" of World War II, Mr. Price turned his attention to the south and explored the countries of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay for Latin American books and sets. As a result, many of our previously incomplete sets were completed and much new material was added to expand our Latin American collection. Price's forward look toward Latin America, not always concurred in by others, has been justified by the increased involvement of the United States and American scholars in every aspect of Latin American life. An excerpt from his 1942 report states

The Library Committee states that there is little or no original contribution to legal theory in Latin America; that the texts and commentaries are nearly all merely rehashes of French, Italian and German writings on the same subjects, and that the case law is relatively unimportant. The Committee believes, therefore, that we should concentrate merely on statutory material, as session laws, codes and commentaries, for most Latin American countries. It is agreed that for Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Chile and Mexico there should also be law reports for the central governments but not for the provinces, and that any learned periodicals should be acquired. This omits most texts, and that for all but a very few of the most important jurisdictions, publications from the provinces.

The librarian of the Law Library of Congress is now in South America on a six months buying trip, following a similar one to Mexico and Central America this year. Since the available copies of wanted material are decidedly limited and are being picked up by others (such as Los Angeles County Law Library, which is making strenuous efforts to build up a good collection), Columbia must without delay decide upon its policy or be left behind in this important field.

In the early years of Mr. Price's tenure, an attempt was made to introduce and build a criminology collection in the law library. Books and other materials were transferred from the

general library; others were purchased and housed in the law library. A criminology catalog was begun, and a reference librarian engaged. After a few years and the loss of the reference librarian, the open location of this collection led to many losses and the cost of maintaining still another catalog seemed unwarranted. The project was therefore abandoned and the collection was returned to the general library. Now, after a lapse of 30 years, the law library is again building a research collection in criminology, reflecting the interdisciplinary approach to legal problems evident in other fields, and which Mr. Price recognized even then.

Other gaps in the law library's holdings also received serious attention during Miles Price's years. The collection of early session laws, mentioned earlier, remained one of Mr. Price's great aims for the library. He combed catalogs and lists, sought out dealers, and was on constant alert for these source materials in American law. When the library found funds, either by appropriation or gifts, he purchased original session laws, happy at times to acquire only one or two pages of an original colonial document. When funds were wanting, Mr. Price purchased less valuable, but still important copies.

Judicial council reports, which even today are not published by all States, were systematically collected. This required a great deal of patient correspondence with many State agencies, and Columbia's collection was eventually as complete as perseverance could make it. This project and others of a similar nature, originally started by Miles Price, continued all during his tenure as librarian and have been followed by his successors.

Mr. Price's dedication to the eventual greatness of Columbia's Law Library was also reflected in his expansion of its holdings in English law. Canadian and English law materials had already been recognized as of great importance and Mr. Price's thoughtful acquisitions made the law library a major research institution for the study of Anglo-American law.

At about the time Mr. Price came to the law library, the international law collection had been separated from the general law collection and housed in a separate section. Mr. Price engaged the library's first reference librarian, Florence Ferner-Zagayko, who remained in that position until her untimely death in 1965. Mr. Price constantly sought, with her devoted cooperation, to enlarge and develop this great

collection. As a result of their combined efforts, the Columbia Law Library holds a collection of international materials unmatched in New York, and, very probably, anywhere else.

A major development in the Columbia Law Library resulted from Mr. Price's interest in and awareness of the importance of classification and subject heading uniformity. Professor Schiller had worked several years to develop his well-known foreign law scheme.¹ It was put into effect under Mr. Price's direction. How well I remember, as a junior cataloger in Miss Basset's department, the daily conferences on where to classify each book as it came along. Each new classification number assigned was tested for logic and accuracy and its fit into the scheme. After testing its effectiveness with the smaller foreign law collections, where it proved workable, the entire foreign law collection of the law library was reclassified. This was a monumental task involving not only reclassification, but re-typing of cards, remarking, and reshelving of thousands of books. At the same time, the filling in of lost volumes and incomplete sets went on steadily, if sometimes shakily, for lack of funds. Mr. Price, in those years, did all the book selection, and many hours of his working day were spent studying the lists of second-hand and new book offerings that poured in. In later years, as I daily searched the catalog to guard against duplicate purchases, I was constantly amazed to find so few items lacking in our library. To this day, searching second-hand catalogs is an almost fruitless task, since we lack so few items, and those we do lack are no longer available as advertised.

One of the notable developments in the law library field resulted from Mr. Price's recognition of the need for professional reference service; the law library secured such services for the first time under his aegis, and during the post-war years when great numbers of veterans were students in the law school, the service was expanded to include two reference librarians and an evening staff as well. At the present time, there are again two full-time reference librarians on the staff of the law library. Recently I asked a colleague to tell me what he remembered

¹ Schiller, A. A. *Foreign Law Classifications in the Columbia University Law Library*. Rev. ed., prepared for publication by Dorothy Chamblertlain. Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications, 1964. Pp. 93.

especially well about Mr. Price from having worked for a time in the Columbia Law Library. The answer was prompt and unhesitating: "Mr. Price stands for me as the symbol of service." This is the unanimous accolade awarded Miles O. Price by all who knew him and explains in no small way the development of the law library from 1929 to 1961.

The importance of Government documents was well understood by Mr. Price, and despite the fact that the general library contained an almost complete depository collection, the law library was to acquire sets of Federal and State materials under his guidance. One of these, acquired from the Senate library, was the "Serial Set" of Congressional documents, about 9,000 volumes at the time of acquisition in 1948; it has been kept continuously up to date.

Early in Mr. Price's tenure, he started routing to the faculty a list of recently-acquired materials called "Chronicles of Kent." This fell by the wayside for want of personnel and time. In December 1947, the weekly acquisitions list was again initiated and its slightly-changed and much-enlarged successor "New Books and Pamphlets" is still circulated, not only to faculty, but to about 250 libraries and librarians here and abroad. Many law libraries now follow this practice, initiated by Miles O. Price.

Someone else will probably write about Mr. Price's constant interest and pioneering work in the development of the Library of Congress

classification scheme for law (Class K). He was one of the first fighters in the cause of classification for law books, and the now-published KF classification² came to completion largely while he was on the Library of Congress committee appointed to develop its final form. During the 50 years between, there were discussions, panels, and meetings ad infinitum, on the need for and the development of this classification, with Miles Price always at the forefront.

Depressing figures are revealed in reading Mr. Price's annual reports. In nearly every report, one encounters the cry for more funds to keep Columbia great; for more space for students; for better working conditions for staff; and finally for a new building to house the library's 400,000 volumes, many of which had already been moved to other areas on the campus. Mr. Price labored long and arduously on the building plans. Every inch of space finally allotted for books, materials, and staff was painfully won. When the edifice was completed, the time had come for Mr. Price, then 70 years old, to retire. He was never to occupy the office of the librarian, which he had planned. It remains for us who follow him to continue in his footsteps—to love the Columbia Law Library, and to serve it well—and to this goal we are all dedicated.

² 61 LLJ 223-85 (1968).