



An inventory at Widener

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An Inventory at Widener

FOLLOWING the war and with the return to peace-time operations a complete inventory of all collections at Widener was undertaken to determine those books missing, to replace as many as possible, and to remove the catalogue cards for those not replaced in order to eliminate requests for books no longer available. In preparation for the inventory all collections were read by shelf-mark and put in order—a three months' job; this was done by students and the nucleus of a staff brought together to work on the inventory proper.

For the inventory eight staff members work in pairs, checking the shelf with the shelf-list, in which books are listed in the order of their call-numbers. Those missing are noted, and the inventory chief checks them in the circulation file, the reading room collections, among the books in preparation, in the Houghton Library, and in other places, depending on the particular collection which is being inventoried. For each missing book an orange card giving author, title, place of publication, date, and call number is made. After all checking is completed, this card is used in the catalogue as a substitute for the original cards. A complete re-check of the missing books in each class is made one month later to catch those which have been found after the initial search. It was soon discovered that books were turning up even after the one month check; consequently another search is made six months after the original inventory. A few books may turn up after the six

months' check, but there are not enough to warrant another complete revision of the lists of missing books.

Many problems have arisen in taking this particular inventory. One of the outstanding ones is that of acquiring adequate and reliable personnel to see the job through and still carry on the service of the stacks without exceeding a reasonable budget for such an undertaking. From experience the wives of veteran students are the best group from which to draw to do the work; they have either finished college work or have had some college training, they are old enough to be reliable and conscientious and young enough to be able to handle the books and do a thorough job, and they will accept a position on a clerical level for the convenience of working right on campus.

There have been technical problems in the process of the work. Some books have had numbers pasted to their spines different from those assigned to them in the shelf-list, and some have not been listed in the shelf-list; these have been sent back to the catalogue department for correction. In some cases errors were committed in copying somewhere between the assignment of a number and the time the book was placed on the shelf, and in other cases the records were just incomplete.

In spite of the fact that all collections were read by shelf-mark and put in order before the inventory was undertaken, some books are found out

of place on the shelf. A large group of graduate students have access to the stacks at Widener, and with so many people using the collections, it is to be expected that some books will be misplaced. In the future a periodic reading of shelves will help keep the books in order, and it is hoped that more emphasis may be placed on the service of locating books not immediately available on request.

A borrower obtaining a book from Widener makes out a card to be filed designating that the book has been borrowed. Some errors are made in filing from the very fact that the cards are handwritten, and the errors turn up in the inventory. A book may be missing through misfiling and then turn up when a collection is rechecked. Thus far no change has been made in the method for taking books from the library because of the prohibitive cost in changing the system for all the collections or even those used more than others.

Some books have been taken to other libraries in the Harvard system without any record made, and the only way to combat this in taking the inventory is to check those libraries where a particular book or collection of books might possibly be used. If books are found at another library without the

proper charge at Widener, the records are corrected.

With so many people taking books from the stacks for work in their study or stall or for browsing in some part of the building, many books originally missing are found back on the shelf when the collection is re-checked one month or six months later.

These are the problems to be overcome in taking the inventory, but there will be another of replacement upon completion of this work. Some of the missing books will not be important enough to necessitate replacing, but of those that should be replaced, many will be out of print, requiring a studious search of the printed market to place the Widener collections back on as good a level as possible.

To date, with approximately four fifths of the Widener collections inventoried, an average of one half of one per cent of each collection has been missing. At this rate 10,000 volumes will be missing from the entire library upon completion of the work — not too excessive a figure since an inventory has not been taken in the past decade. Present plans call for the completion of the entire inventory early in 1948.

ROLAND H. MOODY

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