



Among Harvard's libraries - Everyone's wild about Harry

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Among Harvard's Libraries

HOLLIS REDUX

In this space ten years ago, editor Kenneth Carpenter explored the massive undertaking then on the horizon: the retrospective conversion of more than five million catalogue cards into electronic records. The prospect was momentous, and Ken expressed an appropriate awe at the scope and importance of the task. "In six years or so," he wrote, "it will be possible . . . on campus or off, in Belmont, Boston, Omaha, or Osaka, to sit at a terminal and have the access that is now possible only by physically walking to libraries of the university and consulting their card catalogs."

Of course, Recon (as it was known) was not the birth of Harvard's online catalogue. HOLLIS's technical services functions—those electronic tools library staff use to track acquisitions, manage serial records, and catalogue books—had been formally implemented in 1985. By 1992, the Internet itself had reached the end of its brief infancy, and for a small but widespread community of scientists, programmers, and technicians, had become an indispensable medium for moving data from one computer to another. The World Wide Web, however, was still in its incunabular stage: researchers at the European Centre for Nuclear Research spent the Spring of 1992 demonstrating the powerful possibilities of hypertext; at year's end, the "web" of machines that could use the flexible new protocol consisted of just twenty-six servers worldwide.

This tenth Spring since Recon, Harvard library staff have been busy learning, struggling with, and mastering the web-based tools of a new online catalogue, called ALEPH by Ex Libris, the firm that designed it. The OPAC—the public face of the library's online catalogue—retains the name HOLLIS, continuing to honor that early benefactor of the College who more than anyone else set Harvard's libraries on the path to modernity.

Although the change from the old HOLLIS to the new may seem one of degree rather than kind, it is every bit as momentous as that of Spring 1992. For the gnomic efficiencies of the old system, with its command-line interface and its highly technical look and feel, have

now been replaced by the manifold linkages and dynamic interfaces we've become used to on the Web.

The challenges of Recon were enormous: information on cards was transformed into digital data and whirled through networks of vast size, incomprehensible complexity, and uncertain reliability. What we faced then was not merely the loss of index cards, but the loss of a world made up of unique scents and sensations, comforting and fruitful habits. And now—among Harvard's librarians especially, but among her students and scholars, too—a fresh set of fruitful habits must be born.

The transition to ALEPH, similarly, has been no simple task. In the past year, nearly eleven million catalogue records were converted; at cut-over time, there were no fewer than two hundred thousand active loans in the system. The effort has been every bit as great as that required in Recon, or when HOLLIS first came into being. For all the energy and ingenuity required, and despite unavoidable glitches, the cut-over has gone remarkably smoothly. For this, credit extends throughout Harvard's libraries: to Tracey Robinson and Charlie Husbands (who helped design and build the original HOLLIS, and who continue to play their crucial roles in the design and maintenance of Harvard's online catalogue) and to their OIS colleagues, who midwived the new system; to an army of Harvard librarians and other staff, who have devoted their time and intelligence these last few months to planning for the cut-over, training colleagues in the ways of the new system, and explaining it to readers; to the staff members who daily use it, discovering its features and foibles, turning the new HOLLIS into a working online catalogue.

—Matthew Battles
Coordinating Editor

EVERYONE'S WILD ABOUT HARRY

Due to the Widener Renovation Project, the Harry Elkins Widener Room remains closed. At the beginning of the summer, however, I was jolted back into my role as Curatorial Assistant when I happened to walk

past one of the many tour groups led by a student. I stopped to listen as this energetic young man made one wild statement after another about Widener Library, the Widener Collection, and the Widener family. From that day on, anytime I happened upon these student-led tours, I stopped to listen and jot down the yarns they were spinning.

I should state some facts before I get into the fables I've overheard. At the age of twenty-seven, Harry did go down on the *Titanic*, staying behind as expected so women and children could board the lifeboats. He was in England to purchase books, Bacon's *Essays* being one he chose to carry with him, rather than shipping it back to the States with the others. His mother, Eleanor Widener, built the library as a memorial to Harry and to house his collection. In her will, she requested that the Widener Room always contain some kind of fresh-cut flowers. Other stipulations included that Harry's collection be housed in its own room (which she took a hand in designing), that the books be consulted in the Room only, and—perhaps most famously—that the outward appearance of the library not be altered. In the early 1960s, a thief attempted to steal the Gutenberg Bible, fell in the light court, and injured his legs. He was apprehended and sent to prison.

Tour guides have taken these sundry facts and woven them into full-blown fiction. Sitting on the Widener's steps on a summer afternoon, the casual listener might collect such gems as the following:

"At the top of the stairs in Widener Library there is a re-creation of Harry Elkins Widener's bedroom."

"The Widener Room is an exact copy of Harry's study in his home."

"Harry Elkins Widener collected books owned by Shakespeare."

"Each and every morning a dozen red roses are delivered to the Widener Room."

"Flowers mysteriously appear every morning outside the Widener Room."

"Carnations were Harry's favorite flower."

"Harry used to have carnations dyed crimson to remind him of Harvard, and so his mother kept up the tradition."

"A special breed of crimson-colored carnations is delivered every week to the Widener Room."

"Every morning ONE carnation is delivered to the Widener Room."

"Harry Elkins Widener was on a lifeboat but he gave up his seat to a woman and her child."

"Harry Elkins Widener was safely aboard a lifeboat on the *Titanic*, but he ran back to his room to fetch Bacon's *Essays* and died because of it."

"Bacon's *Essays* was found but Harry Elkins Widener never was."

"Harry Elkins Widener went to London specifically to bid on Bacon's *Essays*, and it was the only book he bought."

"Because Harry couldn't swim, Eleanor Widener stipulated that every Harvard student had to pass a swim test or they couldn't graduate."

"The swimming test became so lenient that someone could carry you on their back."

"The swimming test required you to swim 180 meters."

"Eleanor Widener's swim test was ruled illegal by the Americans with Disabilities Act."

"A thief tried to steal the Gutenberg in the 1960s. He made it as far as the window ledge, but from there he fell to his death."

The August 16, 2002 edition of the *Harvard Crimson* reported that (for reasons unrelated to the Widener stories) the Office of Admissions and Financial Aid has decided to "assume full control over prospective students tours, displacing the Crimson Key Society as the exclusive provider of admissions tour guides." It is doubtful, however, that the change signals an end to this fanciful oral history. In reaction to protests from the president and membership of the Crimson Key Society, Director of Admissions Marlyn McGrath Lewis has promised that for now, little will change. "My guess is that the Crimson Key will [continue to] have an advantage," The *Crimson* quotes her saying, "because they're so good at it."

—Denison Beach
Houghton Library