PART I

Introduction: Theft as a Disaster

The purpose of this paper is to inform the reader concerning the present state of incidents of rare book and manuscript theft, give some ideas about what one should be doing to prevent theft from institutions, and prepare the reader for dealing with such an incident should it occur.

For a number of years I have argued that the theft or mutilation of books, archival materials, and/or manuscripts from a library or archive is a disaster much like an earthquake or a fire. It is likely to sneak upon you quietly and without notice. The resulting disaster from theft or mutilation may be as devastating as any natural disaster for an institution's collections and staff morale. Just as water-soaked materials caused by a hurricane or flood are certain to be lost forever if timely action is not taken to treat them, so stolen materials will be lost forever if timely action is not taken to attempt to recover them and to stop the thief from any future activity. It
would be well to ask questions about theft and to incorporate theft in a disaster plan as an unfortunate circumstance to rank with those disasters of a more natural origin.¹

Usually a disaster plan is written in two parts: the “before” section that enumerates preparedness issues and activities, and the “after” that outlines recovery efforts, procedures, and resources. The second half of this paper will address what can be done to stop thieves, and it will address these important distinctions of “before” and “after.” However, first I would like to define the problem of rare book and manuscript theft by discussing four important matters: first, what is the magnitude of the current problem of theft from libraries? Second, how do thefts and mutilations come to light? Third, how do thefts and mutilations occur? Fourth and finally, what does the public think? How does the public respond to news of library theft; why is library theft not taken seriously?

I. What Is the Magnitude of the Current Problem of Theft from Libraries?

Librarians responsible for collections have had to be concerned with theft since libraries were invented. The medieval chains dangling from handwritten codices and incunabula at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, England, and elsewhere, while keeping books on their shelves, attest to this simple truth. Where there have been collections of important books, there have also been book thieves.²

Unfortunately, the late twentieth century has been no exception, and theft from libraries is still with us. In fact, as prices for rare books and manuscripts have skyrocketed on the auction gallery floor and in booksellers’ catalogues, in the same fashion, incidents of theft have increased. Between 1979 and 1986 thefts of materials valued at $20,000 or more were reported at Harvard, the University of New Hampshire, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Georgia, George Washington University, Boston College, the Thomas A. Edison National Historical Site, both the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses of the University of California, and The Crerar Library in Chicago.³ During these same years, James Shinn was active stealing books from public and academic libraries all across
the country until the late Bill Moffett heroically put a stop to his activity in the book stacks of the Oberlin College Library.

In the early 1990s, perhaps the most active single book thief in the twentieth century, Stephen Blumberg, was arrested, tried, and convicted for federal crimes relating to the theft of nearly 25,000 titles over a twenty year period from more than three hundred U.S. libraries spread from one coast to the other. For example, in the state of Michigan, Blumberg stole books from at least ten academic and public libraries from Detroit to Lansing to Grand Rapids. If his Michigan thefts were plotted on a map, they would follow roughly the paths of Interstates 94 and 96 which cross southern Michigan and mid-Michigan between Chicago and Detroit. On the West Coast in the Los Angeles area alone, Blumberg hit at least seven academic and public libraries.

In 1987, prior to Blumberg's arrest but at the time libraries were beginning to discover books missing due to his unauthorized visits, the ACRL-Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Security Committee (henceforth RBMS Security Committee) began to gather together in a single listing published reports of library thefts. The Committee called this document "Incidents of Theft," and a committee member volunteered to keep it up-to-date and to issue a revised version just prior to every ALA annual and midwinter meeting. Originally no more than one page, this document amounted to twenty-two pages by the midwinter meeting in February of 1995.

Analysis of the contents of this document is revealing. By asking the question, "What types of libraries reported incidents of theft?", I have found that of the one hundred twenty libraries, booksellers and private collectors that reported incidents of theft to the media, the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America and/or listservs between June 1987 and December 1994, about 46% were academic libraries; about 21% were research libraries, state historical societies, archives, and museums; and 12% were public libraries. Booksellers and private collectors reported slightly more than 21% of the incidents (see Figure 1). It is interesting to note that nine incident reports came to the attention of the RBMS Security Committee member keeping the list in 1988 while 39 were recorded in 1994. With a total of 113 incidents of theft reported between June 1987 and December 1994, plotting the data by year makes for a
dramatic trend line (see Figure 2). Though it may be granted that the committee member who kept this list may have become more skilled at finding reports, this trend is still not one that anyone would wish to see.

II. How Do Thefts and Mutilations Come to Light?

It is common for a library to be unaware that materials have actually left their premises until a telephone call from an alert book dealer or law enforcement agent arouses suspicion. Recovery of materials stolen then often becomes the signal that all is not right. On the other hand, evidence of forced intrusion or apprehension of a person in the act may rather abruptly signal a theft or mutilation. More subtle indicators such as altered bibliographic records or substitutions may be the alert that a staff member has stolen valuable materials. It is also possible that regular inventories may reveal a systematic pattern of loss without providing any explanation. The most difficult discovery to grapple with is what insurance adjustors call “mysterious disappearance.” That is when an important and
valuable item that is seldom used from a rare book collection may one day turn up missing when it is called for without there being any sign of intrusion or other irregularity. This may be the hardest type of theft to confront because feelings of denial must be overcome before one is emotionally able to take positive action. The mutilation of bound periodicals and art books also may not be discovered until someone goes to use them again. And sometimes what appears at first to be theft may, in fact, turn out to be mutilation. For example, in the fall of 1994 when the University of New Mexico first found that things were not right with women's studies materials in the periodical stacks, librarians thought they were dealing with a theft. Later, they found the missing materials, in a sadly mutilated condition, hidden behind other shelved materials elsewhere in the library.

In order to have more than just anecdotal information about how libraries make discoveries of thefts, in December 1994 a member of the RBMS Security Committee sent a survey to about 300 libraries
victimized by Stephen Blumberg. The very first question asked was "How did you first discover that Blumberg stole books from your library?" Libraries are still returning the survey, but preliminary data analysis reveals the following findings: that of 169 surveys returned, 130 or about 77% first learned that something was amiss when the FBI contacted them (see Figure 3). One institution was contacted by local police, three got on the case because of publicity about Blumberg, and two heard from another library to which their books had been mistakenly returned by the FBI. Only three institutions, or less than 2%, discovered some evidence of theft in their buildings. Twenty-one libraries, or about 13%, said to their knowledge Blumberg never visited and the survey must have been sent to them in error. (I call these places "in denial" libraries!) It is clear that the statistical evidence confirms what has been suspected from anecdotal evidence: libraries are often unaware that they have been victimized.

III. How Do Thefts and Mutilations Occur?

There seem to be three broad categories to account for how thefts and mutilations occur. These categories are patron theft and mutilation, insider theft, and burglary.

Patron theft and mutilation account for the most common disappearance or destruction of materials in libraries. The college student who occasionally slips a book past the book detection system or rips an article out of a journal because the photocopying machine is out of order falls into this category. Those with political or religious motives who steal or destroy certain types of controversial materials from circulating collections also fall into this category as do those who steal or mutilate materials from circulating collections for resale and financial gain. All types of libraries are particularly vulnerable to these kinds of activities because they usually welcome any reader into their open stacks and other unsupervised areas of collections, and they do this over long hours and, in academic libraries, often late into the evening. Older libraries may have valuable items which remain in their circulating collections because staff is unaware of their increased value in the antiquarian marketplace.

Insider theft amounts to theft committed by a library employee whether he or she is a professional librarian or a member of the
FIGURE 3

Questionnaire
Regarding Stephen Blumberg

1. How did you first discover that Blumberg stole books from your library?
   - Books discovered missing
   - Blumberg found in secured area
   - Contacted by other law enforcement agency.
     If so, which agency?

   - Evidence special collections area had been broken into.
     If so, what evidence?

   - Other. Please explain.

2. Approximately how many items did you find missing?  
   - Books
   - Manuscripts
   - Do not know how many.

3. Approximately how many items did you recover?  
   - Books
   - Manuscripts

4. In retrospect, did any of your staff remember that Blumberg visited your library during business hours?  
   - Yes
   - No

5. Do you know when Blumberg allegedly removed materials from your institution?  
   - Yes (give dates)
   - No

6. Did your institution do regular inventories before you discovered the theft?  
   - Yes
   - No

7. Do you do regular inventories now?  
   - Yes
   - No

8. What security measures did you have in place at the time of the thefts?  
   - Motion detectors
   - Perimeter intrusion devices (i.e., contacts)
   - Proprietary keyways
   - Electronic locks/access cards or codes
   - Security patrols
   - Cages, or other locked areas
   - Other (please specify)

9. Have you added to or enhanced your security systems since the thefts? Please explain.

   -
   -
   -
   -
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support staff. It can occur anywhere along the materials processing chain and even after materials have reached their shelving location. This sort of thievery may be the most difficult to detect since insiders are usually in a position to cover their tracks pretty well. It may also do the most damage to staff morale both before and after its detection. It can be quite devastating for a library staff member to come under suspicion, and once an insider thief is unveiled the honest employees who remain on the staff must deal with their feelings of being betrayed by a trusted colleague.

Burglary of library collections is much like the theft of art objects from museums. When a burglar steals library collections rather than library equipment or money from fines or vending machines, the burglar usually seeks valuable items which can then be sold. Blumberg was just this sort. When he was arrested he had more than 25,000 books in his home in Ottumwa, Iowa waiting to be sold once they were no longer “hot.” How did he burglarize institutions?

At the Claremont Colleges in California he broke into Special Collections after hours, skillfully penetrating specially keyed locks and a keyed elevator to remove books by the book truck-full to the loading dock, no doubt, where he may have parked his vehicle. He succeeded in evading Campus Security patrols of the exterior of the library in the hours between 12 midnight and 6 a.m. At USC [the University of Southern California], he is “suspected of gaining entrance by scaling an elevator shaft to reach a collection the public could not even see.” At the Connecticut State Library he may have remained in an elevator shaft after closing in order to bypass their extensive security system of motion detectors to reach a vault area where their most valuable items are stored. Library staff from New Mexico State University testified in court that he had their keys. Stipulated evidence read into the court record during his trial revealed that keys from six other institutions had been recovered from Blumberg’s possession. At UC, Riverside where he was arrested for trespassing in 1988, his briefcase was found to contain burglary tools. He even did his homework on a private collector in Los Angeles and managed to obtain the plans to his electronic security system from a box in the crawl space beneath the man’s home.

The moral: nothing is safe. I will address what can be done about
this in Part II. However, there is one final and very important issue to be discussed.

**IV. What Does the Public Think? How Does the Public Respond to News of Library Theft? Why Is Library Theft Not Taken Seriously?**

Because acquiring books is seen as intrinsically good, and because stealing books is rather like a cousin to borrowing—and borrowing is acceptable behavior at libraries—book theft from libraries has often been taken lightly by the media and accepted as “ok” by society in general.8

For example, on “Trial Watch” produced by KCET television, Los Angeles, in a news report which aired following the arrest of Stephen Blumberg, Robb Weller, the reporter on camera, spoke of Stevie as someone who only borrowed books. Weller’s statements were followed by those of Blumberg’s attorney, Don Nickerson, who indicated that Stevie had not been charged with any real evil like stealing cars even though some of the books he took from libraries were worth more individually than a Mercedes or Lexus. Misinformation may even have been given: “[Stephen Blumberg] never sold any of the materials,” according to Weller.9 It is not clear that this is true. One must keep in mind the fact that Blumberg had a rented store front in Texas from which he was selling stolen goods. Many of the rare books he had in his possession were incredibly “hot” and had he tried to sell them, they would have been recognized as stolen by book dealers and auction houses around the world. His previous history of mental illness was used to excuse his behavior. Finally, throughout the news report, humor was used to belittle libraries, and Blumberg’s serious mistreatment and mutilation of the stolen books was minimized.

Rarely are the human and institutional costs resulting from thefts such as the one reported by Robb Weller of KCET acknowledged by the media, society, our laws and the courts. For example, in the state of Michigan, the state penal code classes theft of any library materials as a mere misdemeanor. Therefore, in 1992 when Robert John Martin, Jr. of Ionia, Michigan, stole hundreds of books from at least eleven libraries including public libraries, the state library, and
a major university, he was convicted only of “larceny by conver-
sion under $100,” and spent only four days in jail.

**PART II**

**I. What Can We Do to Stop Thieves? What Solutions Are There?**

Unfortunately, the library theft cases I have referred to are not isolated examples. Since the arrest of Shinn in the early 1980s, a number of examples of professional book thieves have come to light. Often they have lived the life of the transient, living out of vehicles, and preying on libraries and bookstores as they wend their way across the country. I have even heard concern expressed among law enforcement agents that some know one another and some times cooperate and/or exchange favors and spoils.

These distressing facts and developments have not gone unnoticed in the library world. In the early 1980s, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (henceforth RBMS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (henceforth ACRL) upgraded its Security Committee from *ad hoc* to standing “with the charge to develop and disseminate appropriate guidelines to secure library collections [...] to serve as a resource for libraries who have experienced a theft, to serve as a liaison with other organizations . . . whose interest were deterring the theft of library materials, and vigorously promoting the proper prosecution of library thieves.” By 1982 this committee published “Guidelines Regarding Thefts in Libraries” which called for the appointment of Library Security Officers (henceforth LSOs) among other things. The 1994 edition of these ALA/ACRL guidelines appeared in the November 1994 issue of *College and Research Libraries News* following their approval in June 1994 by the ACRL Board of Directors. These revised “Guidelines Regarding Theft in Libraries” amount to a section on what librarians and libraries ought to do before a major theft or mutilation of materials occurs in order to be positioned to respond to the unfortunate circumstances of an actual incident. A second section enumerates the proper steps to take should a theft or mutilation of materials be discovered. There are two appendices. The first appendix lists con-
tacts who will assist in the recovery of stolen materials. The second consists of model legislation to offer legal protection to libraries.

Looking at these guidelines more closely, what positive steps can a library take before a theft occurs? Every library director should appoint a Library Security Officer (LSO) and establish a Security Planning Group. The LSO and this group can get to know the institution’s public relations personnel and establish contact with local law enforcement long before any problems arise. It is also important to establish contact with local book dealers.

If an institution is an academic or independent research library, the name of the LSO should be reported to the ACRL-RBMS Security Committee for inclusion on the LSO list available from the ACRL office and to be eligible for participation in the LSO listserv, a listserv for reporting incidents of theft established in the fall of 1994 by the ACRL-RBMS Security Committee.

Preventive measures which can be taken in a library, no matter what type, include implementing the ACRL-RBMS “Guidelines for the Security of Rare Book, Manuscript and Other Special Collections” if such collections are a part of the institution. Other measures include: making sure that collections are marked in some way for proof of ownership; maintaining accurate catalogs or other records of ownership; eliminating cataloging backlogs; conducting regular inventories of collections; following ethical hiring and management practices; and reviewing collections to identify rare or vulnerable materials in open stacks areas.

Now, what advice do the “Guidelines” give to one who has just discovered a theft? By way of summary, one should remember that in virtually any case at least three types of action must be taken. Action must be taken to notify. Action must be taken to inventory. And action must be taken to chronicle events. And all of this must be done at the same time, often by the same individual unless a Security Planning Group can be established in advance of an incident. Let’s look at the “Guidelines” for more explanation and greater detail:

1. Notification: notify the LSO and appropriate library administrators upon suspicion that a theft has occurred.
2. Discovery of Theft and Collection of Evidence: Is there any evidence of intrusion connected with missing library materi-
als? Is there any indication that a patron, staff member, or other has stolen books or other materials? Has someone been caught in the act of theft or mutilation? Has a systematic pattern of loss been discovered? Have materials stolen from the library been recovered? Is there any other evidence that a theft has occurred?

3. Evaluation: The LSO must evaluate evidence with administration, law enforcement personnel, the library security group, and legal counsel as appropriate, and determine a plan of action.

4. Actions: Take inventory and compile a list of missing items. Notify appropriate stolen and missing books listservs and databases and other appropriate listservs. Appendix I of the “Guidelines” has a very important list of these resources. Notify local booksellers, and appropriate specialist dealers. Request action from law enforcement agencies. Since they tend to work along hierarchical lines, the most local agency should be contacted first. Request action from legal authorities. Transfer vulnerable items to a more secure location, if appropriate.

5. Publicity: Historically libraries and archives have tried to “hush up” thefts, or they would simply ignore them for fear of being shunned by donors if the thefts came to light. It is safe to say that this argument no longer holds credibility, nor is it seen as ethical in the professional library and archival world. There is virtually no institution—big or small, prestigious or not—that has not experienced problems of theft at some time. Law enforcement personnel know from experience that publicity about a case will stop a thief from stealing further. The question is no longer a question of whether to notify. Rather it has shifted to a question of who should do the notifying and who should be notified. The LSO, administration, law enforcement, and public relations staff should plan an appropriate publicity strategy. News releases should be prepared to alert staff and the community to the problems and actions taken. Staff, especially, will be inclined to spread rumors if they are not informed honestly. This may demand a delicate balance as sometimes a lack of information may be
perceived as a withholding of information. The LSO or the public relations officer should handle inquiries from the news media. Be sure other staff know to refer inquiries to the designated person.

6. LSO’s coordination of staff efforts should include compilation of inventories. This may simply be noting the loss of a few items, or it may mean an extensive inventory of the entire collection which may take months. Each constituency notified will ask at least the same two questions: “What is missing or stolen?” and “What is its value?” Therefore, arrangement for appraisals of lost or recovered materials must also be made. The FBI may not be willing to enter a case unless the value of the missing material can be judged sufficiently substantial that felony charges can be anticipated in the event an arrest is made. Preparation of communications to staff about progress on the case must be handled. And finally, creation and maintenance of internal records of actions followed during the progress of the case must be undertaken. Names, telephone numbers, and addresses should be included when appropriate. This will prove to be an invaluable record later as memory fades. It can be used to assure trustees and insurers that appropriate actions have been taken. And each new law enforcement officer or detective assigned to the case can be brought up to speed quickly by reading it. If the case drags on for a long period of time and institutional personnel change, it may become the only accurate record of what occurred at the time the theft was detected and what action was taken at that time.

Finally, the appendices attached to the “Guidelines” include useful information. The first is a list of resources that may be placed in a library’s disaster manual.

The second, as was stated above, consists of model legislation to offer legal protection to libraries. It is the RBMS Security Committee’s hope that librarians will take this model to their state legislatures and demand improvement where inadequate state laws exist. Our law makers ought to be encouraged to review the inadequate treatment of larceny from libraries as it appears in many
state codes. I have discovered that in Michigan the current law—the Michigan Penal Code and the Revised Judicature Act of 1961—currently classes theft of ANY library materials as only a misdemeanor. This model legislation recommends that theft of materials valued at less than $500 be classed as a misdemeanor, theft of $500-$5,000 be classed as a Class I felony, and theft of above $5,000 be classed as a Class II felony. Once we can begin to prosecute book thieves as common criminals by equating the monetary value of what they have stolen with the value of other stolen goods, then the criminal can be prosecuted fairly, and equal justice will prevail.

**SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS**

In conclusion, let me say once again: preventing theft in libraries is a difficult and complicated problem. Theft is a disaster. It is a real problem which is as serious in the late twentieth century as it has ever been. It is often the case that libraries do not know that they have been victimized until stolen material is recovered and returned. This is the case despite the fact that thefts and mutilations originate in a number of ways. Equally guilty of theft are patrons who customarily use the library for ordinary information needs, trusted staff, and common thieves who force their entry for illegal purposes. These serious crimes are made worse by a media and a public that find such events amusing and trivial, totally ignoring the human and institutional costs associated with such behavior.

Fortunately, there are steps that librarians can take to stop thieves. Librarians can make sure that their libraries have a Library Security Officer and Library Security Planning Group in place. They can secure collections by keeping accurate and complete records of holdings, marking for proof of ownership, and conducting regular inventories and assessments of vulnerable materials. If, despite these precautions, an institution is visited by a thief, librarians can fight back by notifying the appropriate authorities immediately, including law enforcement authorities. They can spread the word about the incident as soon as possible in order to prevent the perpetrator from continuing in such vicious employment. Careful atten-
tion to taking inventory, issuing publicity appropriately, and chroni-
cling events internally will facilitate a healthy recovery for all
concerned. Finally, all librarians must press immediately for the
revision of antiquated state laws which make the prosecution of
book thieves a joke. Let us join forces in this important task.

NOTES

1. Susan M. Allen, "Theft in libraries or archives," College & Research Li-


2. ________, "Using the Internet to report rare book and manuscript thefts,"

3. David S. Zeidberg, "We have met the enemy . . . collection security in


5. ________, "The Blumberg case: a costly lesson for librarians," AB Book-


8. Holbrook Jackson, The anatomy of bibliomania (London: Soncino Press,


11. Zeidberg, "We have met the enemy . . .," 21.

12. Susan M. Allen, Chair, "Guidelines regarding thefts in libraries," by the
RBMS Security Committee, College and Research Libraries News 55 (November


15. Ibid., 942.

16. Allen, Chair, "Guidelines regarding thefts in libraries . . .," 645.