The American Library History Round Table: The First Quarter Century

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Preface:

A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the 50th anniversary meeting of the Library History Round Table (LHRT) in Washington, D. C. on June, 7, 1998, and subsequently published with other papers of that meeting in Libraries and Culture under the title, "Louis Shores and Library History: At the time the shorter version was written, the only material on the early years of the LHRT to be found was in the papers of Louis Shores housed in a basement storage room of the Louis Shores Building on the campus of Florida State University (FSU) in Tallahassee. This material consisted of one folder containing drafts of the paper that Shores delivered at the 1972 meeting of the round table commemorating its 25 anniversary and some correspondence about the meeting. This folder was supplemented with some correspondence among the early principals of the round table (Shores, Wayne Shirley, John David Marshall, and N. Orwin Rush) scattered throughout Shores' papers.

Late in 1999, a large cache of materials was found by Ron Blazek, a professor at the School of Information Studies at FSU, in a back room of the Harold Goldstein Library which was being cleaned out for use as a conference room. This material consists of three chronologically arranged volumes of letters and other papers covering the period from 1946 to 1960 which had been sent to Shores by Wayne Shirley in 1962. Shores apparently had these early papers bound into the three volumes but subsequent shipments of papers were not so well organized and were instead somewhat randomly stuffed into several file folders. Shores had undoubtedly intended to organize the rest of the material, but never accomplished the task and the papers remained in the dean's office in the basement of FSU's Strozíer Library until the FSU library school moved into its new quarters in the Louis Shores Building in the early 1980s. The contents of the dean's office were moved to the Shores Building and stashed in cabinets along the walls of the storage room in the library. This more detailed paper incorporates the new material that has come to light since the 50th anniversary of the LHRT. The archival papers of the round table have been sent, with thanks to Ron Blazek, to the ALA Archives at the University of Illinois.

The two keynote papers of the first programs of the American Library History Round Table (ALHRT), those delivered by Louis Shores in San Francisco in 1947 and Stanley Pargellis at ALA midwinter in Chicago in 1948, differ in details but share a common vision for the new round table. Both men envisioned the round table constructing a history that could elevate the professional consciousness of librarians. For Shores, it was "the chronicling of our professional achievement as manifested in the ever increasing dissemination of good ideas through libraries." To Pargellis, it was the possibility that "librarians can take inspiration from the lives and achievements of the great librarians of the past." Shores and Pargellis shared a common perspective on history—a conservative position that both, in their original statements, directly contrasted to history as a social science. For them, the purpose of library history was to impress upon librarians the greatness of the profession's past leaders and to celebrate the importance of libraries in American society. They called for a history that commemorated rather than criticized and that inspired rather than informed. To be fair, it must be added that Pargellis allowed for "room in Clio's pastures for every kind of animal, even social scientist's history" and Shores, himself, while refusing to allow that degree of liberality, never insisted on any orthodoxy among the
participants in the meetings of the ALHRT. It was sufficient that they shared his enthusiasm for history and libraries.

At the beginning, Shores and Pargellis had expressed lofty purposes for the ALHRT. While they expressed hopes that serving the scholarly interests of the members of the ALA would be the focus of the round table’s activities, the man who actually chaired its meetings for the next two decades, Wayne Shirley, had more modest ambitions. In 1952, Arthur T. Hamlin, the executive secretary of the Association of College and Reference Libraries (ACRL), wrote to Shirley about a proposal that had been referred to him by Louis Kaplan, chairman of the ACRL Research Planning Committee. Hamlin explained that Kaplan’s committee was interested in sponsoring a history of American academic library building planning and wanted the ALHRT to evaluate the proposal and, more particularly, wanted a member of the ALHRT to undertake the project. Shirley’s reply was short and explicit about the purposes of the ALHRT. He told Hamlin that he and Shores were the round table and while he could give their approval to the project, they could not help: “A.L.H.R.T. is an organization which attempts to please the customers rather than instruct them.” Indeed, through the first twenty-five years of the ALHRT, Shirley and Shores took delight in presentations that focused on the foibles and failures of the great librarians and always took greater delight in a well told tale than in an appropriate moral.

Pargellis had been drafted for the duty and had no continuing involvement in the ALHRT. Shores, as one of the ALHRT founders, did. From 1947 until 1970, he served as secretary of the new round table with his close friend, Wayne Shirley, as chairman. It was an informal organization at best. For the first two decades of the round table’s existence, there were no by-laws governing the operations of the group. When asked about by-laws in 1971 by ALA’s Flora Colton, N. Orwin Rush reported that Shores "seems to think that something was drawn up but is not sure" and Wayne Shirley had no idea. There was never even an official membership list—Shirley and Shores and, later, Rush and John David Marshall simply passed a sheet of paper among the people attending the programs and anyone signing it was considered a member. There were no dues to be paid and there were no business meetings following the programs. Life was simple.

It was, however, a simplicity that did not fit into the increasing complexity of the ALA’s organizational needs. Early on in the history of the round table, Shirley and Shores ran afoul of the bureaucratic regulations of the ALA. For the first few years, Shirley and Shores had scheduled programs for both the annual ALA conferences and the midwinter meetings. Shirley attempted to procure at least one biographical paper for each meeting and, accordingly, had persuaded Cora M. Beatty who headed the Membership Services Department of ALA to present a paper on Sarah C. N. Bogle for the 1953 midwinter meeting.

At the 1952 midwinter meeting, ALA Council had adopted a policy statement that was intended to "discourage program meetings" during midwinter meetings. The primary effect of the decision would exclude announcement of such programs in the official schedule of meetings and preclude such events from being held in the blocks of rooms reserved for ALA meetings if they were needed for official functions. This position statement did not, of course, preclude Shirley and Shores from holding a program but did make it difficult and Cora Beatty who, as an ALA official, agreed with David Clift that it would be inappropriate for her to be an active participant on a program at an ALA midwinter meeting.

Shirley was in a quandary. He wanted Beatty's paper but could not force her to deliver it at the midwinter meeting especially against the wishes of David Clift. Her suggestion that the delivery be put off until the summer conference in Minneapolis was impossible because Shirley had already filled that program. Cora Beatty rejected the counterproposal that someone else read the paper at the midwinter meeting in Chicago saying, "I should still be participating in a program meeting, and I would not feel comfortable about it under the circumstances." Shirley and Shores held the meeting at the 1954 midwinter ALA meeting and titled it a "business meeting" for the ALA conference program. Three papers were delivered: Lawrence Clark Powell on Sydney Bancroft Mitchell; Marian Manley on the Public Affairs Information Service; and Virginia Hollingsworth on Electra C.
Berninghausen was scheduled for a presentation on the other an "informal talk." Shirley early on established a pattern of having two something on Bogle instead. She declined.

Public Affairs Information Service candidates. Shirley got to the Milam, Luther Dickinson, worked closely with he had was ALHRT presentations on Midwestern librarians for the 1954 on California library history for the a difference in the mean he had ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee at the 1953 midwinter conference the matter. Shirley's response to Gordon Gaskell who offered to read a paper on the Boston Mercantile Library Association at the 1952 conference was typical. He wrote Gaskill that the program was full, but included, vaguely, that there might be a slot at some future meeting. To be sure, a few papers and presentations included in the program had been originally offered to the ALHRT officers by people unknown to them. When Allen E. Kent of the Wisconsin State Historical Society approached Shirley about giving a paper on Frank Hutchins, Shirley had no idea of who either Kent or Hutchins were. But the paper had been referred to him by Helen Wessells, editor of Library Journal, and Shirley invited Kent to read it at the 1954 annual conference in Minneapolis. This was an exceptional case. Kent's paper fit into Shirley's Midwestern conference theme and Kent, having been introduced through Wessells, was no stranger.

Shores and Shirley more typically tapped their colleagues, their friends, their students, the friends of colleagues, the friends of friends and the friends of students to fill the programs. In 1950, Shores had Hazel Pulling, who had served as assistant dean of the library school at Florida State University under Shores, and Carl Vitz, who had hired Shores as a page in the 1920s at the Toledo Public Library, on the program. Marian Manley, whom Shores knew from ALA committee work spoke in 1952 and again in 1954. David Berninghausen, chair of the ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee of which Shores was a member, talked about the history of the committee in 1953, and Robert Lester of the Carnegie Foundation and Ben Powell, both of whom Shores had known well since the 1930s shared the program in 1956. And, of course, Wayne Shirley was ever ready to step in when no suitable presentation could be found as he did in 1959 and again in 1964.

Shirley followed a similar approach in his quest for good presentations for the ALHRT. If there was a difference in the manner in which Shores and Shirley undertook the task of acquiring speakers for the programs, it was that Shores tended to find people and then squeeze a presentation out of them while Shirley tended to find a topic and then to find someone willing to undertake it. Shirley sought out Lawrence Clark Powell for a paper on California library history for the 1953 ALA conference in Los Angeles and wanted biographical presentations on Midwestern librarians for the 1954 Minneapolis conference because he believed that the ALHRT audiences wanted papers that were geographically appropriate. When Wayne Shirley had an idea, he was reluctant to abandon it. The failure of Cora Beatty's paper on Sarah Bogle to appear on the program did not mean he had moved on to more fruitful topics. In 1953, he approached Robert Lester, as someone who had worked closely with Bogle over the years, about the idea. Lester declined, but suggested three other names, Carl Milam, Luther Dickinson, and Dorothy Rowden, each of whom also declined, but suggested further possible candidates. Shirley got to the point of approaching Marian Manley who was scheduled to deliver a paper on the Public Affairs Information Service at the 1954 mid-winter meeting, asking her to drop that topic and prepare something on Bogle instead. She declined.

Shirley early on established a pattern of having two presentations at each meeting, one a formal paper and the other an "informal talk." The difference between the two was, it seems, left to the speaker. When David Berninghausen was scheduled for a presentation on the Intellectual Freedom Committee at the 1953 midwinter
meeting, he wrote to Shirley to ask whether a formal paper or an informal talk was appropriate. Shirley answered, "If you want the paper to appear in U or Wilson Bulletin, write one, if you do not have a preference in this respect, speak for thirty minutes knowing that your remarks will not be recorded."

Many of the early papers of the round table were published in the Wilson Library Bulletin and other library publications, but many others were lost being only discourses of the moment. When Ed Holley reviewed John David Marshall's 1961 compilation of the papers read before the ALHRT, An American Library History Reader, he noted the unevenness of the presentations and gave the clear impression that more of them should have been lost.

While the meetings of the ALHRT were well attended, the impact of the round table on the ALA itself was negligible. The published proceedings of the ALA conferences that summarized the round table meetings for the 1950s and 1960s frequently ignored the ALHRT, probably because Shores as secretary neglected to send in a report and, when the proceedings did summarize the round table meetings, they often simply called the ALHRT the "American History Round Table." Though there had been a high level of interest in the ALHRT programs, the round table was looked upon by ALA staff members and the body of progressive librarians who proudly "look to the future rather than the past" as, at best, a harmless hobby and, at worst, a waste of effort and time.

It is quite obvious from the bibliographic work of Michael Harris that the ALHRT was not responsible for the renaissance in library history that Shores hoped for in the twenty-five years he and Shirley controlled it. Library history was being produced independently and without regard for the ALHRT which remained, ultimately, an informal forum that perhaps delivered its greatest value to the ALA by providing intellectual entertainment in the midst of the dreary array of utilitarianism that fills an ALA annual conference.

Shirley and Shores had capitulated on the issue of programs at midwinter meetings principally because they wished, above all, to be allowed to continue the round table without opposition or imposition of rules on the ALHRT. If program meetings at midwinter were forbidden, they could live with that. In 1960, however, David Clift went too far, at least to Wayne Shirley's thinking, when he began appointing ALA staff members as liaisons to the various units including the round tables. On November 22, 1960, Clift wrote to Shirley offering him the services of Richard Harwell, then associate executive director of the ALA, as staff liaison to the ALHRT. Clift's letter appeared to be an offer and he told Shirley that Harwell was willing to serve "should you wish this done."

Unfortunately, Clift made the appointment of Harwell before hearing about its acceptability from Shirley and when Harwell wrote Shirley to express his pleasure at the prospect of serving, Shirley was furious. He wrote Harwell expressing his outrage at what he considered a professional discourtesy. After he had calmed down, Shirley wrote Clift again with what was his central objection—that the ALHRT consisted of himself and Shores and, since he always had the program set long before the annual conference and since he and Shores paid extraordinary expenses themselves, there was no possible function for an ALA liaison to the ALHRT. He asked Clift, "Do we need a staff liaison to do these things better?" Clift was inclined to withdraw the offer and when Harwell left the staff of ALA to become librarian at Bowdoin College, Clift did not name a replacement.

Harwell was undoubtedly chosen by Clift because of his interest in things historical. While he was never asked to contribute a paper to the ALHRT and there is no evidence that he attended a meeting, he did publish an article in the Wilson Library Bulletin in 1960 that was reprinted by John David Marshall in one of his anthologies.

The intensity of Shirley's reaction to Harwell's appointment was at least in part brought about by his jealousy in guarding his and Shores' control of the ALHRT. From its beginnings, he and Shores were the ALHRT and reported to no one. Indeed, there seem to be only two instances when anyone else was allowed officer status in the organization prior to their turning control over to John David Marshall and N. Orwin Rush in 1969. Shirley appointed Jesse Shera temporary chairman for the 1952 midwinter meeting which neither Shirley nor Shores could attend and James M. Babcock was named co-chairman of the meeting at the 1965 Detroit conference because he provided the meeting room and persuaded Frank Woodford, who had recently published a centennial
history of the Detroit Public Library, Parnassus on Main Street, to speak on the history of the Detroit Public Library. While Babcock merely sat at the head table during the proceedings. Shera took a more active role. Indeed, in a small way, Shera's session concluded more business than all of the meetings of the ALHRT during the first twenty-five years of the round table under the direction of Shirley and Shores. Shera arranged for two of his students at the University of Chicago Graduate Library School to deliver papers at the meeting he chaired. Sister Christine Varner spoke on the development of special libraries in Minneapolis and St. Paul and a beginning doctoral student, William Landram Williamson, talked about the 1876 ALA conference. In the discussion following the papers, Williamson deplored the condition of ALA's own records and a motion made by Marlin Manley urging the ALA's executive board to provide the funds and resources necessary to preserve and maintain its historical records passed unanimously.26 This was probably the only such action made by the round table for the first two decades of its existence. It was made clear to both Shera and Babcock that theirs were temporary appointments and carried none of the powers associated with such positions.

It was not simply the idea of the ALA watching over the ALHRT through Harwell, but the general movement by the ALA to evaluate the contribution of each of its constituent parts, including the round tables, that prompted Shirley's reaction. As Clift was asking Shirley if he would accept the appointment of Harwell, the ALA's Program Evaluation and Budget Committee (PEBCO) sent Shirley a memorandum asking for a detailed account of the round table's programs of activities and its future plans for review and evaluation. The report from the ALHRT was to be prepared by the officers, but with the coordination of the staff liaison, Richard Harwell, who was named in the memorandum asking for Shirley's attendance at the 1961 meeting of PEBCO at ALA midwinter.27 Shores prepared a brief statement for the PEBCO meeting that evidently satisfied the immediate requirements,28 but it was evident to Shirley that the encroaching bureaucracy of the ALA was threatening what was valuable to him about the ALHRT.

Wayne Shirley was forced to consider the future of the ALHRT and he and Shores discussed the possibilities beginning in 1964. Shirley had turned 65 and was facing retirement from his job as librarian at the Wentworth Institute and Shores, at age 60, had begun to contemplate his own retirement as dean of the library school at Florida State University. Both men realized their involvement in the ALHRT would have to end eventually. Shirley suggested that Shores take over as chairman with John David Marshall as secretary at the 1967 ALA conference, an idea that Shores rejected persuading Shirley to stay on for a while longer. Shores and Shirley discussed the possibilities of merging the ALHRT with the History Section of the Reference Services Division, of becoming associated with the American Historical Association, and of founding a separate association of library historians operating within historical units in each library association (Special Library Association, Medical Library Association, etc.) and in the American Historical Association.29

In 1968, the ALA Committee on Reorganization called for the regularization of the round table. The demand was that the ALHRT establish a formal membership with dues and by-laws and provide for the formal election of officers. Since the ALHRT had no real membership and never held business meetings, Shores and Shirley were in a quandary. Both were willing to submit to the reforms proposed by the ALA but were uncertain how to effect them, particularly since there was no mechanism by which someone could officially join the round table.

In response to the ALA demand that the ALHRT conduct itself more as an ALA unit, Shores developed an elaborate justification of library history based on the document he had earlier sent to PEBCO that, while failing to answer the questions posed by the ALA about the round table, did provide something of an agenda for the ALHRT when he detailed what the round table could do for ALA. He called for the writing of a history of the ALA, the publication of a directory of librarians who had been assigned the duties of official historians of their own libraries, the development of support for libraries to deal with their own archives, an ongoing bibliography of library history publications and works in progress, and support for oral history projects. He did not deal with the issues raised by ALA for by-laws and a membership list and completely ignored the demands for organizational accountability.30
The ideas submitted were not new for Shores. Since 1961, he had been trying to negotiate a grant from Crowell-Collier, publishers of Collier's Encyclopedia for which Shores served as editor-in-chief, to fund these and other projects through the ALA. It was an effort that Shores approached with his customary enthusiasm and pursued with vigor and one that, like too many of his projects and plans, achieved no results.31

While Shores thought his formal response to the demand that the ALHRT regularize its activities adequate, the ALA kept pressing and both Shores and Shirley realized that something had to be done to preserve the round table as a functioning unit. In 1969, N. Orwin Rush and John David Marshall took over as ALHRT officers, largely at the suggestion of Shirley who wanted them as interim officers until the question of an official membership could be resolved.32 They continued to serve unopposed until 1972 when what many considered a coup occurred and Michael Harris was elected chair with David Carlton Libbey of Southern Connecticut State College and a frequent customer33 at the meetings of the ALHRT over the years as secretary. Harris was a Marxist revisionist to whom the notion that history was to be in the service of the profession or entertainment was absurd. Harris represented a new generation of library historians for whom the ideals of historical research were more compelling than pious hagiography and who seriously attempted to make sense of the historical record. For many, it was nothing less than the storming of the citadel.

Harris' election, however, was only a natural extension of Shores' concern with the round table. Shores had known Harris for years and had been a mentor to the young librarian, encouraging him in his writings and his doctoral work. In March, 1968, Shores had written Harris who was then a doctoral student in the library school at Indiana University to thank him for sending him a copy of Harris' Guide to Research in American Library History. Shores suggested to Harris that there were several research projects that he would like to see Harris undertake, all involving the significance of library history: "One of the jobs I'd like to see you do, because I think you could probably do it better than anybody else, is to study the impact on library history since World War II created by at least three, and possibly four, forces." Shores went on to specify the ALHRT, the Library History Seminar Series, and the Journal of Library History as the first three. The forth area was vague for Shores but had as its focus the relationship of library history to history as practiced in departments of history in colleges and universities. He wrote Harris, It is my dream and hope that not only will history and historians influence the writing of library history, but I think there is a possibility that we who write library history may yet introduce a new dimension into historiography, provided we don't tiptoe as we have with science and the scientific method." With that, Shores who had just retired as dean of the library school at Florida State University, passed the bucket to Harris, telling him, "I believe the new generation, of which you are a fine representative, will have the courage to stop being ancillary."34

When it became inescapable that a real election had to be held, it was Shores who took Harris aside and told him what to do. Before the nominations could be closed with the names of Rush and Marshall entered as the only people standing for election, Harris thrust his conference badge in front of Peggy Sullivan, the main speaker of that session, and asked her to submit his name. She did, and Harris was elected.

The round table itself, it might be argued, did little more than provide entertainment for ALA conference attendees but it did keep the cause of library history alive and formed a sort of public advertisement for the more serious concerns of library historians. The ALHRT and its leader, Louis Shores, were directly responsible for the establishment of the Journal of Library History (JLH) and the Library History Seminar series, both of which have become significant in the dissemination of research in library history. JLH and the seminars were, from the beginning, designed as a forum for scholarly research and not for the informal displays of enthusiasm for history that the ALHRT programs had become. Indeed, Shores considered the JLH to have been his most significant contribution to library history. As the two founders prepared to turn over the forum to the next generation, Wayne Shirley felt the need to evaluate the contributions of the round table when he wrote Shores in 1968 about the future of the ALHRT:

For 21 years we have provided programs at each Conference; nor have we asked for anything from ALA save a place to meet and a program announcement. In return we have, with the aid of John David Marshall, provided
library school students with a much better knowledge than we had. All library schools buy the Marshall titles, and I was pleased the other day to note that Marshall, Shirley & Shores35 is still in print. I feel also that in our own persons we have provided a sense of history as between us we have heard Dewey, Bowker, E.C. Williams and Putnam, and we have even had a speaker who knew Poole! We got out the list of founding fathers which LJ printed. Again and again our papers have appeared in LB (sic for LJ), WLB & ALA BULLETIN.... So I feel we have much more than repaid ALA for what they have done for us.36

Shirley was right. He, Shores, Marshall, and Rush kept the cause of historical studies before the library community through a period of increasing emphasis on technological change in libraries and through a period where research in library and information science was increasingly dominated by models derived from the social sciences. But, the demands of the ALA for accountability and the movement of the library community for democratization within the confines of the ALA forced the opening of the ALHRT to a new generation of librarians and, with the election of Harris in 1972, the rest is history.

6. David Clift to Officers of Divisions, Round Tables, Boards, Committees, and other library groups meeting with ALA in Chicago, February 2-6, 1954, October 30, 1953, LHRT Archives.
7. Cora Beatty to Shirley, September 18, 1953, LHRT Archives.
8. Shirley to Beatty, September 21, 1953, LHRT Archives.
10. Shores to David Clift, November 12, 1953, LHRT Archives.
13. Shirley to Lawrence Clark Powell, September 22, 1952: Shirley to Luther Evans, March 31, 1953, ALHRT Archives.
15. Shirley to Lester, February 12, 1953, LHRT Archives.
18. Shores or Shirley repeatedly claimed attendance at seventy-five to one hundred during the 1950s, though only twenty-five to thirty people signed the sheet passed around to record attendance. This would not be considered an unusual proportion.
23. Clift to Shirley, April 19, 1961, LHRT Archives.


27. Clift to Shirley, November 23, 1960; Clift to The ALA Program Evaluation and Budget Committee, November 23, 1960, LHRT Archives.


30. Shores to Ruth Warneke, June 15, 1969, Louis Shores Papers, Florida State University, School of Library and Information Studies, Tallahassee.


32. Shirley to Shores, July 18, 1968, Shores Papers.

33. Wayne Shirley habitually used this term for attendees at the ALHRT programs.

34. Shores to Michael Harris, March 27, 1968, copy supplied by Michael Harris.


36. Shirley to Shores, March 27, 1968, copy supplied by Michael Harris.