THE SPECIAL LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION (SLA) - PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK

By R. Frederick Casey

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., USA, the Special Libraries Association (SLA) is the international association representing the interests of nearly 15,000 information professionals in 60 countries. Special librarians are information resource experts who collect, analyze, evaluate, package and disseminate information to facilitate accurate decision-making in corporate, academic, and government settings. The Association offers myriad programs and services designed to help its members serve their customers more effectively and succeed in an increasingly challenging environment of information management and technology. SLA is committed to the professional growth and success of its membership.

The mission of the Association is to advance the leadership role of SLA members in putting knowledge to work for the benefit of decision-makers in corporations, government, the professions, and society as well as to shape the destiny of our information and knowledge based global society.

This society, based on knowledge and underpinned by information, demands that information professionals and special librarians lead or guide these developments. The Special Libraries Association must exist to provide a positive environment for networking, communication, research, skills growth, and other developmental opportunities for these professionals to develop and enhance their competencies, aptitudes and attitudes. This Association ensures that its members are prepared and empowered to have a growing and significant international impact, through the application of knowledge and information strategies, for the benefit of their enterprises, their clients and society at large.

The Special Libraries Association is a leading organization in information and knowledge industries -- a catalyst in the development of a global knowledge-based economy, and a strategic partner in the information-based society.

A Brief History

The term 'special library' was developed by SLA's founder, John Cotton Dana, a Newark, New Jersey librarian credited with developing the first special collection,
in an effort to identify an emerging profession. In the spring of 1909, Mr. Dana delivered a paper at the American Library Association (ALA) meeting entitled "Municipal, Legislative Reference, Commercial, Technical, and Public Welfare Libraries." He brought attention to the needs of his colleagues and invited those "who may be interested in this movement" to stay after the close of the session.

The ideas that came from that March gathering in Atlantic City were intensively discussed by a group of 26 librarians on the veranda of the Mt. Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire. The participants in this "Veranda Conference" decided that the demands of their jobs had actually created a new kind of librarianship -- that of library service geared to meet the needs of specialized situations. These librarians were breaking completely new ground. They felt they had everything to gain by forming a working group to tackle their problems and serve their collective specialized interests. Thus, the Special Libraries Association was formally organized on July 2, 1909, with Mr. Dana as its first president. With the founding of this new organization, complete with its own Constitution, the term "special library" was born. The first conference of the new Association was held in New York City on November 5, 1910, with approximately 48 members in attendance.

**Association Structure**

The Association has since evolved to an organization whose mission is to advance the leadership role of special librarians in the information society. Association members form an international network of information professionals with a common interest in meeting information needs and putting knowledge to work. Committed to the professional growth and success of its membership, the Association has a tradition of special support, services, and opportunities for modern information professionals, enabling them to succeed in an increasingly challenging environment of information management and technology.

The Association is governed by a Board of Directors elected by the members. There are 14 board members: President, President-Elect, Past President, Treasurer, Chair and Chair-Elect of the Division Cabinet, Chair and Chair-Elect of the Chapter Cabinet, and six Directors, one of whom is elected by the board as Secretary to the Board. The Association's standing committees are authorized and defined by the Board of Directors. Committee chairs and members are appointed by the President. In many instances, there are chapter or division counterparts to the Association standing committees. In such cases, the committees provide guidance for operations and methodology for their chapter and division counterparts. Official representatives to other organizations with allied interests
are also authorized by the Board of Directors and appointed by the President. The site of the Association office is determined by the Board.

The Association's first headquarters was in Providence, Rhode Island. In 1931, it moved to New York City. There, it became incorporated as a not-for-profit membership organization, and remains classified as an IRS section 501 (c)(3) organization with educational and scientific objectives. SLA retained its office in New York until 1985, when the Board of Directors seized the opportunity to build inter-association relationships and strengthen its U.S. government relations program by relocating to Washington, D.C. The move was credited as a major milestone for the association, and was attributed to the innovative stewardship of David R. Bender, Ph.D., SLA's Executive Director since 1979.

Under the policies defined by the Board of Directors, the Executive Director is responsible for the activities and duties of members of the Association staff and for implementation of board decisions. Senior members of the staff act as staff liaisons with each Association committee. Currently, the Association employs a 40 person staff which supports a variety of functions and programs, including: Leadership Services; Finance and Administration; Computer Services and Technology; Fund Development; Membership Development; Research; the Information Resources Center; Conferences and Meetings; Professional Development; Career Services; Public Relations; Publications; and Government Relations.

SLA also maintains a strong member-driven organization of active chapters, divisions and caucuses. During the 1996/97 association year, there were 56 chapters (51 in the United States, three in Canada, one in Europe, and one in the Middle East), 27 divisions, and 12 caucuses. The chapters, organized by geographic location, hold meetings throughout the year which enable SLA members to become active locally in the affairs of the Association. Divisions are organized to provide a network for, and represent members with specific subject interests, special formats of materials collected, special techniques, or types of employers. Caucuses are informal groups intended to serve as a focus for the interaction of members who share a common interest not covered by any other unit of the organization. The chapters, divisions, and caucuses serve as an information network, and it is this network that is frequently cited by SLA members as their single most important reason for joining the Association.

Publications History

After its organization in 1909, the new association lost no time in establishing its voice. In 1910, the serial publications program was established to provide a
vehicle to communicate Association news, professional opportunities, and information affecting the profession to the membership. These publications also helped to serve as a forum for the exchange of research and information impacting the profession. Its first journal, Special Libraries, began as an eight-page pamphlet in January 1910. The April 1910 issue of Special Libraries contained the first directory of special libraries, devoted to 23 subject fields. Book lists and bibliographies in high demand were constant features. In 1916, editor Dr. John A. Lapp effectively defined "the basic purpose of the special library, namely to put knowledge to work."

This gave the Association its motto -- 'Putting Knowledge to Work.' The serial publications program has considerably expanded since its 1910 inception. Special Libraries was published monthly from 1910 to 1980, when it became the Association's quarterly scholarly journal. Publication of the SpeciaList monthly newsletter, detailing Association and member news, also began in 1980. The four-page newsletter had increased to eight pages by 1989. At that time, the demand for more Chapter and Division news, feature articles, and advertising allowed SLA to double the size of SpeciaList to 16 pages. SLA's membership directory, Who's Who in Special Libraries, was first published as a separate publication in 1981. In January 1997, Special Libraries and SpeciaList were retired, welcoming a new, more technologically attentive and advanced 48-page glossy magazine -- Information Outlook.

The Association is evolving with our members as we move to become a virtual association, one which can provide information and services to our members 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Our award winning Web site, found at: www.sla.org, contains pertinent information for our members, and is a host for several chapter and student group sites. In the interest of providing the best information and benefits to our members, SLA is committed to working for its members' professional growth, continuing education, and future information needs.

In October of 2000, SLA will host a worldwide conference on special librarianship. 'The Information Age: Challenges and Opportunities,' is scheduled for October 16-19, 2000 in Brighton, England. More detailed information will be appearing soon on SLA's Web site: www.sla.org.
For information about becoming a member, please contact our membership department at: membership@sla.org
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