In Honor of Jan Merrill-Oldham: A Celebration of Life
May 10, 1947 – October 5, 2011

Jan Merrill-Oldham, a leader in library and archives preservation who contributed immeasurably to the field, was a mentor and motivator to many, encouraging them not only to enter into the field of preservation but to be movers and shakers as she was throughout her service. Her extensive writings gave others valid resources to utilize in their programs. Jan impacted and touched many of our lives. We dedicate this issue of Archival Products NEWS to honor Jan and her lifelong contributions to library preservation.
Preservation (For Jan)

“What I believe to be true, I must therefore preserve.” – CAMUS

In the photograph, you’re leaning over the porch rail of a funky old converted chicken coop that’s now home for a very different kind of bird. You’re not quite smiling; your gaze is direct, and seems a bit bemused.

I didn’t know you then, the long-haired hippy goddess in wrap-around Indian print skirt, bare feet covered with dirt from the garden. I knew only the later incarnation, weekends and evenings spent with the glowing laptop screen, the slow, patient climb up a flight of stairs.

But much was shared by those two selves—the sly smile and quicksilver wit, the omnivorous curiosity about everyone and everything that crossed your path, the impulse to cherish and protect those things you valued—a tomato plant or an 18th-Century print.

We are now your conservators, your archive, preserving the countless cherished moments. We are worlds of memory, forever orbiting your sun.

Charles Coe
October 15, 2011

Jan Merrill-Oldham: Choose Longevity

I met Jan in 1977, when she was head of Bindery Prep at the University of Connecticut Libraries and I worked in the Conservation Studio at Yale University Library. We got to know each other better in 1979, when Jan came to work at Yale for six months as an intern in an NEH-funded training project. She impressed everyone with her fierce intelligence, her energy, and her devotion to the people and ideas she believed in. It was sometimes exhausting merely to witness the passion with which Jan lived her life; that, however, was more than offset by the joy of watching Jan be Jan.

Jan had a genius for friendship. She remembered the stories you told her about your childhood; she asked after your family and kept track of which sister lived where; she knew your happiness, your sorrows. She asked the most penetrating questions because she truly wanted to understand what you’d experienced, what you meant, what you wanted. You learned to time your phone calls to Jan carefully, as it was quite likely you would be talking a long time! Jan had a way of settling in to a conversation that I can see and hear now: sitting back and down into a chair, a slight change in tone of voice.

I visited Jan after her surgery for breast cancer. Pete was living in Boston during the week, so it was the two of us at their home. We talked until it was clear Jan was tiring, and went to bed. I was awake and downstairs in the morning—ahead of Jan, I thought. But I heard this strange sound outside. I opened the door and there was Jan in the sunlight, deadheading the daylilies while brushing her teeth with an electric toothbrush. I stood and watched Jan be Jan.
Three years later I called Jan when I, too, was diagnosed with breast cancer. We talked about treatment options, about feelings and fear. Jan was sympathetic, but not sentimental; there was no telling me everything would be fine since we both knew that it might not be. Instead, Jan advised me to “choose longevity”, to stay in my life as long as I could. How many times in the years that followed did I watch Jan choose longevity, as she recovered first from a stroke and then from a serious fall; and as she stayed in her life as long as she could through a recurrence of cancer.

Jan is an inspiration. Yes, she was smart as a whip and she demonstrated ferocious work ethic but more than that—for me, at least—she demonstrated how to live in the world. How to choose longevity.

Carla Montori, Head, Preservation Dept, University of Maryland McKeldin Library.

Jan Merrill-Oldham: Friend and Advisor
Every time I walk into my home library I think of Jan and what she taught me about books and special bindings. This started when, as a salesperson, I called on Jan at the University of Connecticut library. The first meeting with Jan lasted 6 hours talking about book structure and library binding. I had never met anyone so knowledgeable about library bindings and what should and could be done to improve the binding structure. Talking with Jan changed my business by offering materials that were thinner and more flexible and made stronger, more flexible bindings. Not only was she a teacher for all conservation and preservation librarians but to book binders and their suppliers.

At another meeting a few years later at her office in the University Library, she asked if I would like to see the library. As we walked through the library, she spotted some special books in the stacks and said “These books belong in special collections.” I helped her gather up armfuls of machine stamped bindings dating from the 1890s to 1910 and took them back to her office so she could reassign them to special collections.

As a result, I have had a great time collecting over 300 machine stamped bindings for my library. They are true treasures and I am forever thankful to Jan for introducing them to me.

Over the next years, Jan became a friend and advisor. She was not afraid to challenge the traditional library book binding methods that had existed for over 50 years and suggest new and inspired methods and materials. I feel very fortunate to have known Jan and all of her colleagues during this interesting time of change in book and paper conservation.

One favorite story she told me was about Woodstock. She said she went to Woodstock on the back of a BSA 441 VICTOR motorcycle. I was more than impressed. I will forever have a mental picture of Jan on that motorcycle headed to one of the greatest concerts of all time.

She accomplished so much and contributed even more. I am so fortunate to know Jan and her friends. Thanks Jan, I really appreciate knowing you.

Fritz James, CEO, Library Binding Service

Jan Merrill-Oldham: A Leader, Teacher, and Conscience of Library Preservation and Conservation
Jan was a force of Nature, washing everyone and everything along with her, convincing others of her totally rational approach to all things. She was pre-eminently persuasive, the only person I’ve ever known who could convince others to stop smoking cold turkey. Extremely effective in her chosen field of preservation, Jan arguably has had the greatest impact on the development of
I met Jan in 1979; she was in the first group of four interns who entered Yale’s NEH-supported Preservation/Conservation program. Directed by Jane Greenfield and myself, the program provided for six sets of four interns for half a year each. Their backgrounds were varied and their impact on the field great. Pam Spitzmueller, the Chief Conservator for Special Collections under Jan at Harvard, was another in that first group of interns, and Ann Swartzell, the Administrative Services Officer under Jan, also did a Yale internship.

Jan was a whirlwind; everyone around her did their best to keep up. I loved going to meetings with her: ALA, Connecticut State Library groups, ARL events, Library of Congress meetings, binding workshops. I’ve never seen anyone so delighted to be attending their first ALA—in 1979, nor anyone who retained that wide open pleasure in everything around her to such an extent. No one in her audiences could get enough of her. She explained everything clearly, she wrote beautifully, she imagined real solutions, she motivated all around her. Jan’s editing skills shone, and she almost never turned down any assignment or request. Many times, perhaps regularly, she would fall asleep at her desk or sofa in the early hours of the morning on top of the latest document or report or article she was editing for someone else. It’s a miracle that she produced so many important writings herself for the field.

After putting the University of Connecticut Library on the preservation map, Jan took on the daunting task of building an integrated

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**A Timeline**

1965–1969
BA in English from the University of Connecticut/Storrs.

1984
MLS from the University of Rhode Island.

1975–2010
Actively worked in the area of preservation.

1979
National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship at the Yale University Library allowed Jan to undertake formal training in library and archives preservation.

1979
Attended first ALA meeting

1980–2010

1980–2010
Collaborated in the planning of national conferences sponsored by ALA, ARL, the Society of American Archivists, and the Library of Congress.

1980–2010
Served in ALA PARS from 1980 having served as vice-chair/chair of the...
program of preservation/conservation for the several systems of Harvard’s libraries. She worked wonders, slowly expanding her staff and the services provided, overseeing the building of the beautiful Weissman Center for conservation, ‘working smart’ with other libraries and administrators, digital programs and storage facilities, staff and visitors. I’ve always considered Jan my best friend, but I know there are scores of other people who feel exactly the same—she was such a lovely person to share with the world.

Gay Walker, Head of Preservation, Yale University, 1972-1990, Special Collections Librarian, Reed College Library, 2002+.

Jan Merrill-Oldham: A Remembrance
I first met Jan in 1983 at an ALA meeting when we served on a PLMS committee together. I could sense immediately that this was a formidable woman with formidable energy. She had high standards and could be intimidating to the likes of me, one constitutionally prone to go with the flow. From this first meeting, I paid close attention to this woman. Who wouldn’t? Who didn’t?

I was very pleased that we became friends. She always had time for me at conferences and on the phone. She always asked about my family and how they were growing. She always listened intently and offered valuable insights even with her monosyllabic agreements and encouragements. To hear her laugh was, of course, to have pleased the goddesses.

It was quite remarkable how passionate she was about the engineering and structure of books and how she expressed the need for us to be better stewards of these resources in our care, especially through the collaborations we had with our friends in the library binding industry. Someone somewhere dubbed her the “grande dame of library binding,” but of course she was the grande dame of a helluva lot more than that.

In that intense time when we considered bookbinding with such passion, I was pleased to be part of the ALCTS group that offered

Jan Merrill-Oldham and Wes Boomgaarden at the Library of Congress 1997

Section, chair of the PARS Nominating Committee, chair of the Task Force on Preservation Digitizing, chair of the Task Force to Initiate Further Action on Alkaline Paper Legislation, co-chair of the Photographic and Recording Media Committee, and member of numerous other PARS committees.

1980–2010
Participated in ALCTS. Serving on the ALCTS Board of directors, the Preservation Microfilming Committee, chairing the ALCTS/ALA Preservation of Library Materials Section, serving on the ALCTS/ALA Legislation Committee, the Nominating Committee and Membership Committee, as well as task forces of ALA.

1983–1995
Managed the University of Connecticut Libraries Preservation Department.

1986

1987–2010
Served as consultant to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Preservation of Research Library Materials Committee.

1989
Connecticut Preservation Task Force and Committee on Alkaline Paper.
training opportunities that we called “binding institutes”, and got to travel around the country preaching with Jan on this circuit. These were in Atlanta, Portland, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Boston, and I forget where else. Of course, the big draw for the folks paying good money to attend these was to hear from Jan Merrill-Oldham. I remember one “institute” in Minneapolis that she was unable to attend at the last minute when the Bell’s Palsy hit her suddenly. Nevertheless, despite the illness she still got us her carousels of 35mm slides on time via FedEx, and Paul Parisi stood in for her and he did indeed a grand job of it, too.

In the early 1990s I was privileged to serve with her on a visiting committee for the preservation and conservation programs at Columbia, which coincided with its waning years there in the City of New York. I was positively impressed by her abilities to communicate with the administration of that program, representing our part of the profession so beautifully and eloquently.

I also loved how she served on our behalf in the Association of Research Libraries in her special assignments there. She made the preservation statistics one of our annual rituals, kept the preservation ideals in front of our libraries’ leadership, and in short made the most of preservation’s big decade.

One of the remarkable things about Jan is how she continued to grow personally and professionally as our work in preservation management dramatically changed its focus from the analog to the digital, which she could see early on was where our futures lay. Even so, she kept the faith about the immense value of legacy collections in their original format. For that, Harvard, with its enormous legacy collections, was the perfect place for her.

My last direct work with Jan related to the renovation of the Widener Library at Harvard. In the early 2000s I visited Harvard with a team of architects and administrators to learn from the Widener team about their approaches to the renovation of that venerable library building. It was immediately clear to the members of my team just how influential Jan had been to the Widener renovation effort to make their result as beneficial as possible for the preservation of the collections there, a result that will surely reap benefits for decades to come.
The day after Jan passed from this earth, I saw her. She appeared on the big projection screen of my classroom, where that evening I taught graduate student librarians-in-training about care for our legacy collections, using all tools at our disposal, including library binding. There she was on that screen, the young star of Library Binding: A Collaborative Effort … still as vibrant and fresh as she was in 1986, just as articulate and lovely as ever. I never tire of seeing her in the video.
She’s still with us.

Wes Boomgaarden, Ohio State University

Jan Merrill-Oldham: Joy for Her Work
I will try to be brief and not talk about Jan’s amazing contributions to the field of Library Preservation. I am sure that others who worked more closely with her than I will provide eloquent testimony to her numerous achievements.

I have one memory of Jan that stands out and that I have carried with me for decades. I was working at the University of Minnesota Bindery and somehow came across correspondence among Fred Alpers, Gary Frost and Carolyn Morrow that described alternative binding(s) that they thought could be accomplished at a library bindery. Being more of an appropriator than innovator, I decided to see if we could build models of the bindings at the University Bindery.

I recall having these models in my suitcase at a conference, showing them to people and seeking their advice and input. I didn’t know Jan well at the time, but certainly knew of her interest in library binding, and asked if she would like to see the models and share her thoughts with me. As I would later come to find is normal for Jan, she was very busy and asked if we could do this later, maybe after dinner. So sometime after 10PM she found me and said, “Let’s have a look”. I handed her the first book and she carefully examined it … no expression; then the second … no expression; finally when she was holding the third book a little smile appeared. I became less nervous and as she examined more of the models she smiled, laughed, almost broke into a small dance. As I write this I can’t remember what we discussed that night but I continue to remember the joy Jan took in these simple bindings, which was really only a small
expression of the larger joy she had for her work, a joy that she shared with all of us.

As I type this letter thirty plus years later, reflecting on how important that brief conversation was to my career, I am sure it is only one example among many instances of Jan's generosity and spirit to all of us.

Bob Strauss, Vice President, Preservation Technologies LP

Jan Merrill-Oldham: A Teacher, Mentor and Friend

Jan was many things to many people, but what strikes me about Jan is that she gave you exactly what you needed when you needed it. If you needed a teacher, she was there. If you needed a mentor or simply a sympathetic ear, her door was open to you. She was all of those to me as well as a role model in her support for young professionals. She took a chance on people and routinely brought together the best and brightest and believed in them, even if they themselves were not yet sure of their footing.

My memories of Jan include her never ending enthusiasm for work and for people, her office with the endless piles of papers on every surface, her love of rabbits, and her life-long love for Pete. My last meaningful conversation with Jan was at ALA in Anaheim. She and I hadn't talked in a while, and she invited me to walk with her back to her hotel. During that long walk we talked about work, life, and finding meaning and happiness in both of those things.

We stand on some very large shoulders in this profession. Jan's contributions to Library Preservation are substantial, as are her contributions to those of us lucky enough to fall within her grasp. We honor our teachers and mentors by working every day to advocate for our collections, and by giving back to the profession in meaningful ways. We also honor them by nurturing our passions outside of work and by taking time for our friends and colleagues. I will continue to do that in Jan's honor and in honor of all of those people who have given me their time and support over the years.

Beth Doyle, Head of Conservation Services Department, Duke University Libraries

Jan Merrill-Oldham: A “Can Do” Voice and Truly a Visionary

Jan Merrill-Oldham was an active member of Heritage Preservation Board of Directors from 1998 – 2001.

Even though Jan worked for Harvard's prestigious and sophisticated libraries and was a leader among her peers, she understood Heritage Preservation's mission, which is in part to provide practical and doable preservation and collections care best practices information to and products for small and medium sized libraries, museums and archives.

Jan was always a “can do” voice at Board meetings and when we would call upon her, which was frequently, she was truly a visionary who understood that no matter the size of the staff, sometimes all volunteer, and budget of a collecting organization, they could take steps to improve the preservation of their collections for future generations.

Examples of Jan's contributions to our work include helping us to develop the
Jan Merrill-Oldham: A Force of Nature

In nearly all my communications with colleagues, Jan is described as a force of nature and indeed her energy and drive has carried the field of preservation and reformatting forward in a way that is amazing for a single person’s influence.

In the early days of preservation Jan was a voice for the value of commercial binding, but the right kind of binding with criteria that she helped to develop by working with binders and the trade association, LBI. She helped develop the standard (ANSI/NISO Z39.78-2000) and then wrote the guide published by ALCTS to help librarians understand the standard. The guide was updated and published through ALCTS recently and while perhaps not the top seller, it fills a need, as the early edition did, to help librarians understand how to use the standard and get the best product for the long term.

In the area of reformatting Jan was also instrumental in training programs and serving on committees both within ALA/ALCTS, nationally with NEH and internationally with the British Library. Again she wrote and spoke and helped to set the foundation for the microfilming standard that was used by NEH to develop a broad and very successful grant program. Indeed, Jan successfully applied for reformatting grants to share the vast library collections of Harvard with other libraries across the nation and indeed the world.

She lent her keen mind to all sorts of issues, presented them in programs, on committees and in written publications. Her vita reads like the history of preservation and she sat on many institutes, task forces, committees and served as consultant on state and nationally formed groups to develop preservation process into a program that all libraries continue to benefit from. Having heard Jan speak early in my library career, I know that as a lecturer in library programs she must be stellar. I know that I will never forget her presentation which I heard in the 80’s where she used the idea of the umbrella of preservation to protect collections. Digital preservation was on Jan’s radar and she worked tirelessly to establish a program at Harvard after working with a Google scanning project at Harvard.

Areas where Ms Merrill-Oldham are recounted here:

* Recognized leadership in professional associations at local, state, regional or national level, with emphasis on the Division; Ms Merrill-Oldham served on numerous ALCTS and PARS committees for nearly thirty years and which you can review in her vita. You will see the many related organizations where she also served including state programs, NEDCC, ARL, CLIR, Library of Congress, and the British Library.

* Significant contribution to professional literature; Her list of publications is nearly four pages long, many articles published in ALA/ALCTS publications but also in associated organizations such as ARL with spec kits and preservation publications while not neglecting smaller local publications within her state.

* Exemplary research in ALCTS areas; her subject knowledge of preservation and
reformatting is vast, broad and deep and she questions problems, plans solutions and shares generously with her discovery and in a way that any size library can use.

- Recognition of achievements, i.e., awards, citations: She has received the Esther Piercy Award, the Banks/Harris Award and an ARL award.

Jan’s long commitment to the betterment of collections through action in her institution, within her state, and within the national and international organizations has assisted the preservation community to gain recognition, to gain understanding, and to have an advocate with untold energy and vision. The preservation community has been touched in so many ways by Jan, from her personal mentoring, her publications, her willingness to serve on committees, task forces, working groups and not just to serve but to contribute her energy, insight and indeed her vision of preserving collections for future generations.

Jeanne Drewes, Chief, Binding and Collections Care, Preservation Directorate, Library of Congress.

Jan Merrill-Oldham: Focused on the Future

Jan Merrill-Oldham was my longtime friend and colleague. We met in 1980 in San Francisco at the first ALA meeting we both had the chance to attend. We were soon working together on projects from the Pre-Conference on Library Binding that met in Los Angeles in 1983, to our co-editing of the 8th Edition of the LBI Standard for Library Binding, 1986, to the first edition of the Librarian’s Guide to the LBI Standard for Library Binding, 1991 and the second edition in 2008. We worked in 1989 on a video on Library Binding produced by the Library of Congress. We both were speakers at international conferences on binding in Nancy, France in 1993 and in Stockholm, Sweden in 1997.

I was fortunate to have known Jan and to have had the chance to work so closely with her. I learned so much. I also got the chance to meet Jan’s husband Pete and to work with Pete at Acme Bookbinding for 18 years, until he retired to care for Jan as she fought cancer.

Jan will be missed. There simply will be a hole where Jan’s bright smile and deep knowledge long served the library community. But her work will live on in the stacks and archives, both print and digital, and in the community of students who learned so much from this consummate teacher.

The letter that followed was written by Jan to her staff when she was forced by deteriorating health to leave her position at Harvard. As always, Jan was focused on the future, and on the people she worked with and the programs/services they made possible.

Paul Parisi, President, Acme Bookbinding

References


Paul Banks and Carolyn Harris Preservation Award http://www.al.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alcts/resources/ano/v15n4/ano15n4_evts_awards.cfm

Works by Jan Merrill-Oldham http://www.worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n82-16780
September 27, 2010

Dear Staff of Conservation Services, Imaging Services, and the Weissman Preservation Center,

As of today I am officially on the disability payroll, a circumstance that I could not have imagined a year ago. I’ll remain on that payroll until retirement, which will allow me the privilege of recovering what health I can and help to move our programs out of limbo and assure them good new administrative homes. My decision comes as no late surprise to me; I knew in February of this year that there would be a very long road ahead and this is surely proving true.

I cannot tell you how much it has meant to me to work with so talented a staff as you—colleagues who have fire and passion in their hearts fed by shared values and determination. I have loved every day of our work together...not just the silky ones, but the rough and scratchy days as well—the days that help us grow.

I hope that you will continue to draw great pleasure and pride from your efforts. You have helped to create a very special program and an unprecedented phenomenon of sorts. With administrative support and your continued efforts, the opportunities for learning and creativity that present themselves will be limitless. May you thrive.

With my heartfelt thanks and best wishes,

Jan
In Honor of Jan Merrill-Oldham: A Celebration of Life

Jan Merrill-Oldham

Leader
Visionary
Generous
MENTOR
Advocate
DRIVEN
Knowledgeable
Curious
LOVING WIFE
Passionate
FRIEND.

PROFESSIONAL
Consultant
Formidable
Influential
LECTURER
Mover & Shaker
Futurist
Author
Bright Smile
Fault MODEL
Persuasive
Collaborator
Motivator
Quick Wit
INTIMIDATING
Motivator
“CAN DO” VOICE
Quick Wit
Researcher

We will miss you, Jan!

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