

OLAQ

Volume 24 , Number 1 *The Specialness of Special Libraries* | Pages 19 - 24

7-25-2018

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Silver, K. (2018). Continuously Adapting: The Bonneville Power Administration Library. *OLA Quarterly*, 24(1), 19-24.
<https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1929>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Continuously Adapting: The Bonneville Power Administration Library

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Change is not merely necessary to life—it is life.

—ALVIN TOFFLER
Future Shock

During my 2009 interview for a librarian position at the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), the panel members laughingly admitted that the BPA Library needed “a facelift.” I could see what they meant—the space, crowded with stacks, did not contain a seating area and lacked a “modern technology” feel. Instead, the team had focused its energy on something very important: preserving BPA’s history.

A bit of background about BPA and its library: the U.S. Government built Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams in the 1930s and 1940s as part of the New Deal. Power from these massive projects strengthened the Northwest economy and brought electricity to rural areas that were not served by existing utilities. Congress created BPA in 1937 to sell and deliver power from dams in the Pacific Northwest Columbia River power system. BPA needed a way to centralize all the technical information required to operate one of the nation’s largest high voltage transmission systems and in 1939, the BPA Library was created.

The Library still focuses on supporting the technical reference and research needs of the BPA workforce, but with so much history behind us, our scope has expanded to include 500,000 BPA photographs, 8,000 BPA-published documents, and about ten films. Now, apart from the BPA workforce, we also assist researchers, scholars, and members of the public who are curious about the role BPA played in the development of the Pacific Northwest.

Since 1939, Library workers have painstakingly assembled, cataloged, and shelved these historic materials. I could see that this collection was a real asset but, in truth, had no idea how to maximize it. Instead, seeking ways to increase in-person visits, I started updating the space to make it more inviting. For starters, it contained several office cubes where non-library workers had set up permanent residence. When these people eventually migrated to other locations, I immediately replaced the cubes with smaller visitor stations—the idea being that they would be comfortable enough to stay in for a day but not much longer. With that resolved, I turned my attention to the tangle of stacks that obscured what could have been a main library area for patrons. After weeding the collection for a few years and gaining a better sense of what could go and what could stay, I scheduled a meeting with BPA’s space management department to discuss removing some of the stacks to open up a main space. Thanks to their significant efforts over two years, the Library’s central space went from this:





to this:



and this:



We expanded the seating, installed plugs in the floor for laptop use, set up 24-hour access to the Library through the back door, set up chat on the Library website/catalog (<https://bonpow1.ent.sirsi.net>), and added a self-checkout station. With these changes, we were able to adapt to patrons' more modern needs and access preferences.

The Library also contained a space called the "Public Information Center" that distributed printed BPA documents to the workforce as well as the public. Since few print materials were being requested due to their availability online, we decided to turn the space into BPA's Visitor Center (www.bpa.gov/goto/LibraryVisitorCenter), with interactive exhibits that educate people about BPA's history, current business functions, and geography. One year and \$120,000 later and this:



became this:



and this:



Complete with a kids' kiosk containing iPad games, stamps, and coloring books, the Visitor Center has a little something for everyone who is interested in learning more about hydroelectric power generation and transmission and the development of hydropower in the Pacific Northwest.

Then, very thankfully, someone came along who knew exactly what to do with our historic collection. I hired an archivist named Libby Burke, who took one look at the document collection and said, "These must be preserved!" She rolled up her sleeves and got busy separating the best copies out of the collection, digitizing all 300+ boxes, and working with volunteers to check that the scans were perfect before shipping the print version to be permanently stored in a climate-controlled vault. The next step of this multi-year project is to add the electronic version of these documents to a digital asset management system, through which users will also be able to search our historic photo collection of more than 500,000 images. Again, we seek to improve the user experience by adapting to the ways our patrons prefer to access materials.

Burke also compiled BPA's films into two DVD volumes and hosted promotional film screenings. These films were originally made to educate people on the advantages of public power and to illustrate the uniqueness of BPA's transmission system. If you're curious to see how Bonneville Power Administration has represented itself to the public via motion pictures, you can stream them from here: <https://bit.ly/2K349DI>

Part of adapting is also being aware of what you have to work with, so in 2013 we obtained a professional appraisal of our collection and were pleased and surprised to find that it is valued at over \$18 million! The appraiser noted that, despite our specific focus, we regularly brought in nearly 30 percent of the traffic that Multnomah County Library



(the extensive system serving the Portland metropolitan area) receives on average, monthly per branch. He also observed that the Library functions exactly as former BPA Administrator Dr. Paul Raver envisioned in 1941 when he wrote that it should be “for providing the general public with prompt and complete reports of the Administration’s plans ... [and] for advising the various divisions in the preparation of all reports.”

Looking back through the years, some of the methods we have used to adjust to the changing needs of our users have been quite successful, like digitizing BPA’s entire collection of annual reports, starting an eBook collection, and becoming the clearinghouse for the agency’s engineering standards. Some methods were well-meant but not well-placed, such as: inheriting a website of streaming safety videos from another department only to return them a few years later; cataloging more than 5,000 Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI) documents, then removing them for license agreement reasons; and bringing web-based video training for Microsoft Office Suite to BPA, then transferring it to a different department when funds became too tight. And throughout all of this, our serials collection continued to expand and contract as we adapted, adapted, and adapted.

Currently, the BPA Library is undergoing a new and unexpected change: a major cut that will reduce our staff number and our budget by half. This might be considered less significant when compared to the sacrifices some of our library colleagues have been forced to make, but it’s the most drastic reduction we’ve experienced in our 79 years of operation.

All this time we’ve been focusing on the needs of our users, and now we must bend to the wishes of BPA’s executives, who value our archives over Library services such as books, research, and interlibrary loans. In order to keep the BPA Library going, we must acquiesce and come to understand and support these budgetary concerns. It’s not easy, but the BPA Library must continue to adapt to serve BPA as it is currently. We are an institution that can only survive if our agency does. In the words of H.G. Wells, from his renowned science fiction novella *The Time Machine*, “We are kept keen on the grindstone of pain and necessity.” In other words, change helps us to feel sharp and alive! 

