

THE VIRGIN ARCHIVE

By ROBERT W. MITCHNER

FOR SOME FOUR YEARS I enjoyed the distinction of knowing more about the early activities of Bobbs-Merrill than anyone else. Not hard-won, this distinction came simply because I alone happened to have both access to the papers and time to study them. Now, of course, thanks to the generosity of Mr. Howard W. Sams, the letters, records, and documents pertaining to the Hoosier publishing house up to the year 1940 are available to scholars in Indiana University's Lilly Library. It occurs to me, however, that there may be some interest in a personal account of my experiences in becoming acquainted with those materials while they were still in Indianapolis.

I owe these experiences to a statement I read somewhere, some time during the spring of 1961, to the effect that the Bobbs-Merrill files were about to be given to the Princeton University Library. When my friend, Mr. M. Hughes Miller, then President of Bobbs-Merrill, came to Bloomington to visit the Writers' Conference early that summer, I urged him to reconsider. He assured me that there was nothing to reconsider, for no such step had been seriously contemplated. And he agreed with me that the files should stay in Indiana. Like me, he was convinced that they must be of extraordinary interest, since the Company (then Bowen-Merrill) had sprung from nowhere (in the opinion of the Eastern publishers) just at the turn of the century to revolutionize publishing, especially those

aspects of it which have to do with the advertising and promotion of books. And it had gone on, through the next several decades, to produce a long series of popular novels, an amazing number of which became national best-sellers.

Mr. Miller felt sure that the records were complete; it was his opinion that they went clear back to the founding of the house—or at least to the disastrous Bowen-Merrill fire of 1890. Naturally, I said that I would like to see those files. Almost immediately after his return to Indianapolis, he wrote me that Mr. Sams agreed with him that I should be allowed to do so.

His letter reached me just as the Writers' Conference ended. I went to Indianapolis the next day and presented myself at the Bobbs-Merrill offices, ready to go to work. Here Mr. Miller introduced me to Bobbs-Merrill's oldest (in point of service) and most devoted employee, Lois Stewart Baumgart, who was asked to show me the files and to see to it that I was allowed to inspect anything I wanted to. I promised to try to keep out of everyone's way and not to pry into anything that wasn't directly concerned with the early days of the Bobbs-Merrill Company (as opposed to the current files and the affairs of the Howard W. Sams Company). To begin with, I was given a booklet, written in the 1920's, called *The Hoosier House*; a reading of it was to give me a quick view of the history of the Company. I read the booklet that night. It was intensely interesting, and nearly every line suggested to me something that I should investigate further. Unfortunately, I was to discover, after wasting hundreds of hours trying to follow up its leads, that almost every statement in that little book, especially the first part of it, was inaccurate. Still worse,

practically every story about the history of Bobbs-Merrill printed in the last forty years has been based, essentially, on that booklet.

There were to be other frustrations, too. I ran into the first and worst of them the next day, when I was turned loose among rows of rows of file cabinets, with other cabinets piled on top of them and, on top of everything, stacks of heavy cardboard boxes. The file drawers which contained letters were arranged chronologically, and there were none dated earlier than 1908. When I pulled that 1908 drawer open, I found almost nothing in it. There were all those large, unlabeled boxes up near the ceiling, though, and I optimistically assumed that the files of earlier years would turn up in them. I plunged right into the scanty correspondence for 1908, 1909, and 1910, taking notes as fast as I could write. Then I encountered an inter-office memo from one of the editors, asking to see a certain author-editor correspondence from its beginnings in 1899 or so. On the bottom of this memo the person to whom the memo had been addressed had written these chilling words: "Everything prior to 1906 was destroyed."

I was jolted, but I kept working. What was available to me, even if it was not exactly what I had hoped to find, was itself fascinating; and there were hundreds of drawers of it. Also, my early optimism returned when, some days later, I learned that shortly before Bobbs-Merrill had moved from 724-730 North Meridian Street to its East 38th Street location, Lois Baumgart had been instructed to burn all the "dead" files. Having been with the Company almost all her life (she started out as D. Laurance Chambers' secretary when she and the century were in their teens), she knew the historical value of those doomed files, and she

was unable to force herself to carry out the order. She went to Julius Birge, then a vice-president of the Company, and told him her problem. At his suggestion she, with the help of a sixteen-year-old boy, hid the files away in large boxes and put the boxes where they would not be noticed.

When, in 1957, the Company moved (for the third time in thirty-one years) to a building at 1720 East 38th Street, which had formerly been a candy factory and where there was a large basement storage room, those precious boxes, containing almost all of what now makes up so valued an acquisition of the Lilly Library, were opened and their contents put in file cabinets. And that is where they were when I saw them. Knowing, then, that one planned destruction of old files had been aborted, I persuaded myself that the 1906 catastrophe might also have been less than total. After all, the files in plain sight down there in what I called the Chocolate Room (because that's what a sign above its door said) were not in perfect order. And I reminded myself that anything might be found anywhere, considering the moves the Company had made, considering how little time any of the busy employees had had to spend with old files, and considering that filing had been done, over the course of half a century, by many different people—people with varying degrees of concern with whether anything could ever be found again or not and with individualistic ideas as to where in the files a given letter or document should go. It became clear that no single person—not even Lois Baumgart—knew exactly where any one thing in the file room (or, for that matter, in the library or the “morgue”) which dated that far back might be found, or even *if* it might be found.

It seemed to me that somebody ought to know where things were—and that it was up to me to become that person. I even entertained the notion of repaying the Company for its kindness to me by sorting things out as I went through them, since I planned to go through everything, anyway—everything except the files marked with the Howard Sams sticker or seal. I soon discovered, however, that the jumble was even worse than I had supposed and that if I were to get through that mass of material, I could rearrange only the most obviously displaced items. A file folder in a drawer marked 1922 and labeled with the name of a 1922 author was quite likely to contain letters from (and carbons of replies to) other authors of other years. There were two separate banks of files of alphabetized promotional materials. (These, incidentally, are of great interest to students of the history of American publishing methods and practices, and they are also unique, in that other publishers of that era did not take pains to save such materials.) When I wanted to find out what was done to promote a certain publication of, say, 1911, I had to search in both sets of file cabinets, and I would often find it in neither. It might turn up instead in one of the cabinets supposedly reserved for clippings of reviews; or it might be filed under the working title of the book rather than its published title; or it might not be there at all. When such a folder was found, however, its contents always proved to be of much interest. There would be the earliest drafts of advertisements and publicity releases, revised and corrected by several editors, and there would be copies of the advertisements and releases as they had actually appeared. There often would be rough sketches for the dust jacket, together with drawings submitted by the artist to whom the job was

assigned and a copy of the final jacket itself. There would be suggestions made by various editors for devices to use in promotion, with comments on them by other editors. There might even be drafts of "reviews" written by the editors—or even by the author himself—along with tear sheets of these rave notices as they had actually appeared in print, exactly as submitted. Sometimes these tear sheets, attached to the letterhead of the newspaper or magazine which had printed them, carried a scribbled line at the bottom: "We trust this is satisfactory." Almost anything might turn up in the early promotion files, in fact—even samples of gadgets somehow related to the title of the book, gadgets distributed as gifts to bookstore managers who might place large orders.

After three or four weeks of working ten hours a day in the Chocolate Room, I had to face the fact that the pre-1906 materials were simply not there. It was time to begin looking somewhere else. At Mrs. Baumgart's suggestion, Mr. Miller assigned me a cubicle upstairs in the editorial office, where I could organize my notes and from which I could venture out on explorations. I had already become familiar with the morgue, another basement room where all kinds of valuable items were stored (and also great quantities of things that were there because no one could think of anywhere else to put them). Here were several copies of all the books published by the Company in recent years and all too few copies of some of the earlier books, stacks of records which were too recent to be of interest to me, and box upon box containing all sorts of other things. One never knew what additional things to expect until one had investigated—and one was almost always disappointed. Upstairs, I knew where the contract files and

copyright records were kept, and I had seen and taken notes on some interesting materials there (a few pre-1906 letters, for example, letters in which an author had consented to some alteration in the terms of the original contract or in which a threat to break that contract had been made).

I had found, too, a bank of small drawers in which had been kept on cards the records of the MSS submitted to the Company and the disposition of those MSS. From these cards I learned that during the exciting days of the early 1900's, when eager agents and would-be authors were sending in MSS so rapidly that it was almost impossible to deal with them adequately, *Tarzan of the Apes* had been rejected, as had been Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Gene Stratton-Porter's *Freckles*, and many other books which were to enrich Bobbs-Merrill's competitors, including *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall*, submitted by the author of Bowen-Merrill's first best-selling novel, *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, and returned to him three days after the MS had been received! Promptly accepted by Macmillan, *Dorothy* became an even greater and more enduring success than *Knighthood*, which Bowen-Merrill had promoted so tirelessly and effectively that there was great public enthusiasm for anything else its author might write. This rejection may have been an error of judgment (assuming it wasn't mere accident), but it was not an error of taste. One reviewer—a "real" one—described *Dorothy Vernon* as a mere rehash of *Knighthood* and even less worth reading. Other legitimate reviewers agreed with him. Almost no one liked the book except the public. And this public, ironically, had been created by Bowen-Merrill—that is, by the three ingenious and industrious young men respon-

sible for the sudden emergence of their Indiana publishing house on the national scene: William H. Bobbs, Charles W. Merrill, and John J. Curtis. A New York newspaperman wrote, in 1901, of the Company's amazing success, and in the course of his article he makes the point I have just hinted at:

This once "obscure publishing house" has organized victory in a remarkable way, which has not yet received adequate attention. Its possession of great keenness of judgment in the matter of books needs no demonstration; its career is proof enough. Where credit is mostly due to it is in its development of a new territory, but imperfectly covered before its advent, its cultivation of an enormous class of readers, whose purchasing powers were tested to the full with "Alice of Old Vincennes," written by the late Maurice Thompson at the suggestion of Messrs. Bowen-Merrill.

In the course of further explorations of the building, I found a narrow windowless room just off the long hall leading to the production department. I had often noticed the door as I went down the hall to the coffee machine; finally it occurred to me that I had never seen anyone go through it, and that perhaps I should see what was inside. I obtained a key and went in. There I found ceiling-high shelves piled with huge thick books, all very dusty. Some of these contained royalty records going clear back to the early 1900's; others, covering the same period of time, contained detailed production records. These were prizes I had almost given up hope of finding. On other shelves were boxes containing manuscripts, some of which had been printed from and others of which had proved unpublishable but for some reason had not been returned to their authors. I put all these aside to be taken down to the morgue where they belonged. Then I noticed that one of

the end walls of the narrow room was not really a wall but only a semipartition, one which stopped a few feet short of the high ceiling. There was a door in the partition and I tried it, but it was locked. I spent two or three days studying the royalty records (and wishing they went farther back in time than they did); I think that locked door was always on my mind. Finally I asked for the key, and a two-day search for it was organized—but it could not be found. All the more reason, obviously, why I had to see what was behind that door. I put on the coveralls I wore when my researches involved grubbing about in dusty places; then I climbed up the shelves and over the partition and dropped down into the tiny locked room. I opened the door from the inside and looked around.

At first I saw only Howard W. Sams Company records and other things which did not concern me. But then I discovered treasures that concerned me very much: records that had to do with the activities of the publishing house in its earliest days—even before the March 17, 1890, fire that was supposed to have destroyed everything. Among these were some flat black books with onionskin-like pages which had served in some way the function of carbon copies. Here were the earliest royalty records: handwritten statements of amounts paid to James Whitcomb Riley for his initial efforts, to the compilers of some of the first of the Company's still famous series of law books, and to a great number of authors whose names I had never heard and who had written books with titles unfamiliar to me. There was no desk or chair in the room, hardly more than a closet, so I sat on the floor as I pored over these new discoveries. When I had to leave, I pulled the door shut behind me, knowing that until a new lock could be installed I would

have to continue to enter by climbing over the partition. And one morning (the lock never was changed) while I was studying another kind of old record book, I heard Lois Baumgart ask one of the office girls if I had come in yet. "Oh, yes," the girl replied. "He's already in his rompers, climbing the walls."

It was all great fun—often frustrating but always exciting. I discovered no more secret rooms; I was forced to face the fact, finally, that I had seen everything and that no additional material relating to the period in which I was particularly interested remained to be unearthed. I envy those scholars whose interests lie in the years from 1915, say, to 1940, for the Bobbs-Merrill files for those years now in the Lilly Library seem to be gratifyingly complete. I had counted on learning everything about the trials and triumphs of the Hoosier publishing house just at the turn of the century—but I learned enough. Now, in fact, I see that I have more information, all of it fascinating, than I can ever use.

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