

Benn Joseph

Fledging the *Purple Parrot*

A practical experience with CARLI's Book Digitization Initiative

We could all use a little help with digitization. In 2007, the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI)¹ offered the first round of their Book Digitization Initiative to Illinois libraries. Northwestern University (NU) is a member of CARLI, and these awards provide member academic libraries in Illinois a chance to submit proposals to have the Internet Archive digitize and host materials relating to Illinois. Since then, Northwestern University Library (NUL) has submitted three separate proposals that have been accepted and successfully carried out. In each case, the process started out with us submitting a proposal to CARLI.

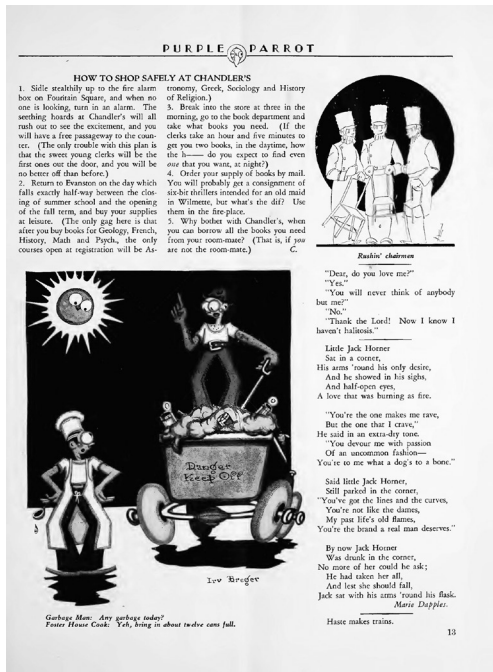
When CARLI first announced this initiative, it was a one-time thing. Today, the Book Digitization Initiative now has a rolling deadline for proposals, so it's easier for institutions to submit applications on an ad-hoc basis when they come across unique or at-risk collections of materials. If CARLI accepts your proposal,

they'll work with you to have your proposed items digitized and hosted by the Internet Archive at no cost to the institution.² CARLI's Book Digitization Initiative provides similar

services as LYRASIS and the California Digital Library. Projects proposed for this offering can't be too massive, but there's not a hard limit as far as extent.

The first award offering was in FY2009, and since then NU has sent transit items and reports from the Transportation Library; Evanston (Illinois) City Directories (circa, 1879–1923) from the University Archives; and most recently the *Purple Parrot*, a humor magazine published by students at NU from 1921 to 1950 (also from Univer-

sity Archives). The *Purple Parrot* contains short stories, poetry, essays, jokes, and a variety of advertisements. Many pieces



Selection of one-panel comics and jokes from October 1929 issue of *Purple Parrot*. View this article online for a more detailed image.

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found in the *Parrot* are particular to NU, Evanston, or the greater Chicago area, and so are rooted in a deeper sense of regionalism (this is a part of the requirements for CARLI's award process—that the materials to be digitized represent Illinois history and are rare enough to be unavailable to most CARLI members but valuable enough for its members to find useful).

The *Parrot* parodied all aspects of life at NU: Greek life, notable faculty members, college romance, and even the *Daily Northwestern*, NU's student newspaper (which was lampooned in the *Purple Parrot* as "The Dilly").

The *Parrot* did not entirely get free reign over these matters, though. University officials suppressed the April 1931 issue concerning "religion" due to it being considered offensive. And in 1948, two female editors were asked to step down from their positions by the Student Publications Board (which published the *Purple Parrot*) over the magazine's supposed fixation on sex and booze.

The *Parrot* ended its run in May 1950, with subscriptions having declined. "The old bird did not always live wisely," said the farewell statement, "but it shall die with dignity." The following fall, the *Parrot* was absorbed by the *Profile*, a campus fiction magazine, which lasted until 1959. The *Purple Parrot* was revived for a pair of issues in the mid-1970s, but it didn't last. These two later issues were not part of those digitized for the CARLI award.

Each submission process on our end differed slightly depending on what was going to be digitized. For the *Purple Parrot* there were no problems with copyright, as it was published by NU. A few of the issues were actually pre-1923 and so were in the public domain. For the rest, we applied a simple copyright statement stating: "In copyright. Digitized with permission of Northwestern University for non-commercial research, teaching and private study only. Contact archives@northwestern.edu for information." For the Evanston city directories, only those published prior to 1923 were selected for digitization.

As for the transit materials selected by the Transportation Library, an attempt was made to grab publications that had been most often requested by patrons, and permission to digitize them was sought from each state agency that had originally published them.

The Internet Archive does the actual scanning of the submitted materials, using custom-designed Scribe scanning stations. These scanning stations are actually stands mounted

with high-resolution manually operated digital cameras. The stands are attached to a foot pedal, which allows the operator to easily adjust the distance between the camera and the item being scanned. Pages are hand-turned by the operator, who also does quality control checking of the scanned images once they're in the system. According to Elizabeth Clarage, CARLI direc-



New Yorker parody cover of *Purple Parrot*, February 1942.

tor of collections services, no materials have ever been damaged, either in transit or while being scanned by the operators. The boxes themselves have sometimes been damaged en route, but fortunately the items within have always been packed well enough to avoid any problems. All scanning for CARLI Book Digitization Initiative takes place at a secure location in Ft. Wayne, Indiana.

On our end we had to review the items to be scanned and record anything the might already be damaged, check for continuity of issues, decide how we wanted materials to be digitized (issue-level? volume-level?), and flag them as such for the scanner operators. Since the *Purple Parrot* was housed in bound volumes and had been that way for decades, a decision had to be made regarding how the scans would be grouped, and thus what the level of access would be to the publication. The bound issues, like most any other serial publication in the library, had been bound according to volume or school year, usually a few years at a time. Sometimes it was published monthly, other times quarterly, with production shutting down during the summer months. But there weren't always the same number of issues, and for several years they were instead given names of seasons. In one case they were just given made up names.

In any case, we decided that issue-level records made the most sense, and indicated this in a spreadsheet created by the Internet Archive to hold all the volume/issue/title information. We would include this spreadsheet with the shipping documentation in each box. This is a process developed by the Internet Archive for their own workflow—for them it works quite well, though it was opaque to me as an outsider.

Obtaining the shipping labels was a matter that involved faxing a request form to the scanning site. Because the shipping labels themselves also came from the fax machine, they weren't very legible (and couldn't really be scanned with a bar code reader), but it was still possible to make out the numbers associated with them. This

made it slightly difficult to figure out which packing slips went with which shipping labels. But, soldiering on, we then packed up each box with bound volumes of *Purple Parrot*, which we enclosed in thick plastic wrappers to prevent any moisture issues in transit. Plastic bags seemed to work pretty well. On average, we tried not to ship more than six volumes in each box (using records center cartons lined with bubble wrap), as we didn't want to exceed the box's weight limit or make them difficult to lift.

It took me far longer than I had envisioned to complete all the work leading up to actually sending these materials to the Internet Archive's scanning site in Indiana—nearly two months of work here and there. Once I finally sent them, barely more than a week had elapsed before I was notified that they were available online. So in a fraction of the time it took for me to actually send the items, they had already been scanned and put up (though I was told this isn't necessarily the norm—it's just that I'd taken so long to send them, and they wanted to get the scanning done before the end of their fiscal year).

The Internet Archive was able to ingest the metadata for the *Purple Parrot* from our bib record in NUCat (NUL's online catalog), and although the Internet Archive does have sort of a funky display (for example, the information contained in our Notes field shows up in the brief view for every single issue), the information is all there, the scanned items look excellent, and all are complete and free from error. We're quite satisfied with the results.

If you're planning to engage in a similar project involving rare or unique materials being sent off-site for digitization, here are a few things to consider.

- *For shipping, be sure to use sturdy boxes.* Records center cartons will do, but not if they're not single-walled—and try not to overload them. If you can't lift the box easily when it's full, then there's a strong likelihood someone at the other end will find it difficult, too.

• *It's a good idea to wrap the items in a water-resistant material, such as plastic bags or sheeting, and cushion them as much as possible with packing material.* It's pretty unlikely that the entire box will go missing, but it may encounter some bumps along the way.

• *Take advantage of any shipping insurance that might be available.* It probably won't be easy (or possible) to replace items if they do get lost, but it's certainly better than nothing.

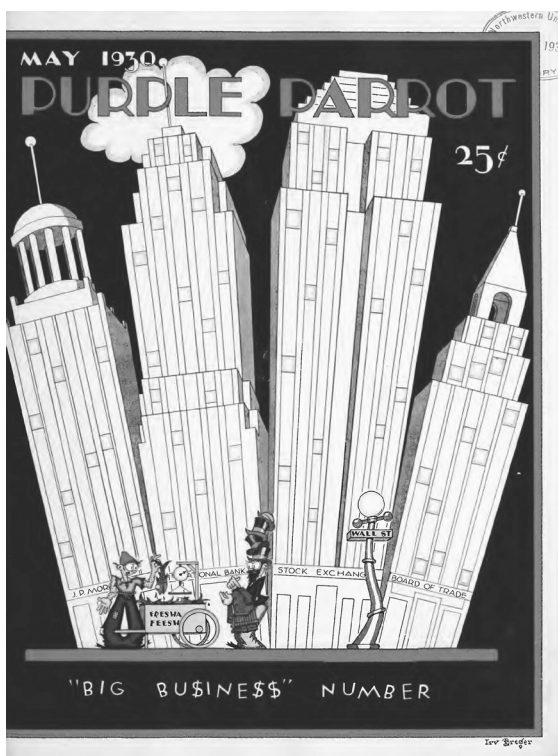
• *It's important to communicate helpful information about what's being shipped in the container itself.* Include a packing list, and if there is anything people at the receiving end should know about fragile items (those that are about to separate from their bindings, for example), add a note.

After each issue initially became available in the Internet Archive, our hope was to increase their exposure by creating links to the digitized issues, both in NUCat and on the Northwestern University Archives Web site. Other institutions have used separate Web pages to provide access to the digitized materials, which is a useful way to link directly to specific issues and thus bypass the Internet Archive's peculiar search functionality altogether.

The library produced a promotional piece on the *Parrot* in the fall 2011 issue of *Northwestern* magazine (which is sent to alumni). This led to a slight increase in the

number of *Purple Parrot* downloads listed for each record in the Internet Archive; most of them are hovering in the 30s or 40s. But that's nothing compared to what is displayed for many of the transit publications from the Transportation Library or the Evanston city directories (some of whose downloads number in the thousands). These latter items have had a much longer period of expo-

sure, though, and we're pretty sure that *Purple Parrot* downloads will increase as time goes on. Eventually we were able to create a Libguide for the *Parrot*, which made finding each issue much easier. Libguides are not only easy to create, but they also serve up information in a relatively aesthetically pleasing and easy to read manner. Plus they show up in Google searches, which drastically increases patrons' ability to find them.³



Big Business cover of *Purple Parrot*, May 1930.

The benefit of scanning and presenting the *Purple Parrot* at the issue level, in this case, is that it makes it much easier to access each cover. The covers are the most striking part of each issue, so having ready access to them is ideal. Larger reproductions of covers from some of the earlier issues hang in our reading room at the Northwestern University Archives, and patrons ask about them often.

Students who have leafed through the print versions of the *Parrot* have always found them enjoyable, and their cries of

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will have to be given its own category as will materials on Kosovo if it becomes a fully recognized independent country. Libraries will need to stay aware of geopolitical changes in order to keep the organization of their collections relevant.

Rearranging library collections is not merely an exercise in the pursuit of having an up-to-date catalog, but it also affects critically how a library connects with its patrons. From my experience, miscataloged materials can cause great consternation among a library's readership. Libraries need to realize that patrons are not disinterested seekers of information but are individuals with their own convictions and personal interests. Imagine a person of Polish descent going to a library and finding all of the books on Poland lumped into a section called "Eastern Bloc" or someone with Kenyan roots finding all of the books on Kenya grouped under "British Empire." Such scenarios could be incredibly offensive to the patrons and embarrassing to the library, hurting the library's reputation and size of readership.

("Fledging the Purple Parrot" cont. from page 69)

"This is so cool" never fail to bring a smile to our faces, not to mention our surprise that there are actual undergraduate students using these materials. And that's really the primary demographic for the *Parrot*. Since it's a humor magazine written by students at NU, it provides current students a direct link to the past in a context they're comfortable with (humor), as opposed to publications like the student newspaper, the *Daily Northwestern*, which provides valuable day-to-day information and artifactual vignettes in the form of advertisements, but doesn't always generate the same connection.

The *Purple Parrot* shows students what was funny at NU in the 1920s, 1930s, and so on—and generally what was funny for their demographic, as some of the content included in the *Parrot* is syndicated College Humor material.

Recently, a group of students doing research for NU's next Senior Week (a week-

Nations rise, nations fall, and libraries must keep up with the geopolitical tides. As librarians we are keenly interested in keeping our collections as up-to-date as possible, but this means more than just acquiring the latest books and media materials. If our collection organization does not reflect modern political alignments, we could appear at best incompetent and at worst insensitive or even bigoted. A key goal for libraries is to draw people into the world of reading, research, and exploration of new knowledge. If their collections do not reflect current realities, people will see libraries as anachronistic and pointless. If our libraries are to be relevant repositories of knowledge, they must update their catalogs to show ever evolving political realities.

Acknowledgement

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long celebration that takes place around commencement) found the *Parrot* useful in providing not just context, but actual material (jokes, one-liners, etc.) that they could use in their advertising, publications, and so on. Our hope is that as a digitized resource, NU students will find more than just resources for a project in the pages of the *Purple Parrot*. We hope they'll find a connection to NU, and a connection to the students that came before them.

Notes

1. You can also view information about the project on CARLI's Web site at www.carli.illinois.edu/collman-digit.html.
2. Take a look at Northwestern's materials at the Internet Archive site at www.archive.org/details/northwesternuniversity.
3. Our Libguide lists each issue chronologically, and can be found at <http://libguides.northwestern.edu/purpleparrot>. *~*