

MAC

A Remembrance of Preston McMann (1919-1998) and Old Oregon Bookstore

By Charles Seluzicki

Preston “Mac” McMann, founder (with Charles Soule in 1949) and proprietor of Old Oregon Bookstore in Portland, Oregon, died on January 16th, 1998, a little more than a month before his seventy-ninth birthday. As the earliest ABAA member in the Pacific Northwest, Old Oregon not only became a haven for book lovers for nearly five decades; it was an outpost of our profession and its more serious concerns. In this respect, the legacy of Old Oregon is a great one. Book selling in our region flourishes, in good measure, because of his high standards and his generosity to upcoming generations of booksellers. Mac had the respect and friendship of many in our world.

Mac was born on February 20th, 1919 in Presque’ile, Maine. His early life was difficult, almost Dickensian. His father was a whiskey smuggler and his mother abandoned him to the care of his remarkable grandmother who encouraged his early love of reading. Through her influence, the young boy took his official first job, tending the stove in the town library where he discovered the novels of James Fenimore Cooper. It was there, too, he unearthed, with equal horror and fascination, a reproduction of George Catlin’s painting of the Mandan purification ceremony in the hours he was allowed to roam and read after the library closed. These experiences remained vivid to him and he cherished them; they had shaped him and informed his passion for his primary specialty, Western Americana. One need only leaf through his copies of Howes, Smith and Adams to see the years of careful study, notes, insertions and emendations that accumulated in the margins of these classic works. He kept detailed bibliographic files on Catlin, especially the foreign editions and advertisements, for years. The impact of that first encounter with Catlin’s painting would stay with him throughout his life and he would sometimes probe its deeper meaning.

During this early period, Mac discovered book scouting as well, flipping books he found for a nickel to earn extra spending money. After graduating from Goodwill Academy he rode the rails, seeing the country, encountering a cast of desperadoes and characters along the way that would fuel endless hours of storytelling and reminiscence. It was the Depression. He was on his own, finding his way. Always drawn by the printed word, he would take jobs hawking newspapers, especially in New Orleans and San Francisco. In San Francisco, at the age of 18, he opened his first store, a tiny space off Market Street, where he sold used books to streetcar commuters. During that time he would meet the young Warren Howell in John Howell Books. A whole generation was in its formative stages.

Mac came of age as a bookseller in Boston. Working from a small apartment on Beacon Hill, he discovered Goodspeed's and remembered into the late years the generosity, fair treatment and encouragement he received there when he walked through those familiar doors with a stack of rare Benjamin Franklin imprints. He started working Goodspeed's want lists and always chuckled when a title came in the door years later that was one of their permanent wants. This was his unofficial tutelage in the antiquarian book trade and he was clearly a quick study. World War II was looming, and Mac would soon be off to the Pacific Islands, working in an Army Air Force intelligence unit. But things were different now. During a visit to Wichita in search of work, Mac met the pretty Quaker girl who would become his beloved wife, Phyllis.

After the war, Mac worked as a customs inspector in Portland and went to law school for a while. The first of his four children was born and he continued hunting books in his spare time. He was also developing a small career as a writer for magazines like TRUE DETECTIVE and POLICE REPORTER where he published short articles on a variety of scammers, forgers and war criminals. He was fascinated by the underworld of crime and deception, from the careers of petty flim-flam men to the labyrinthine world of international espionage. He always had large stocks of these books in his store and was conversant in the novels of Hammett, Greene and Le Carre. Outlaw narratives and sensational tracts from every period delighted him. He remained a prodigious reader with an imagination equal to his interests. The store, in its largest incarnation, numbered a quarter of a million books which, it is fair to say, mirrored his many interests.

When Old Oregon Bookstore opened in 1949, sharing space with a piano store owned by Charlie Soule who provided a loan (and a certain business savvy that Mac marveled at) for the purchase of an especially good collection of travel books and Northwest Americana, the time was right.

Hyland's Book Store (oh, the tales of rare Western books, brand new and wrapped in brown paper, sitting on those overstock shelves since the turn of the century!) and Cameron's were already Portland institutions; the new book department of J. K. Gill was a cultural center, promoting readings and signings.

There were some interesting people in Portland in those budding years as well. Frank Sciosca and his wife Mary were Mac and Phyllis' neighbors. Fred Jacobson was in the process of building a remarkable collection of twentieth century literature. Stewart Holbrook was writing prolifically and occasionally creating convenient fictions about a book he had seen or a conversation he overheard at Old Oregon for the purpose of a morning article in the Oregonian. Soon, Martin Schmidt was at Special Collections at the University of Oregon. The young soon to be Pound scholar John Freedman and then Reed student Gary Snyder were working at the store at various points. Poets, anthropologists, historians: many bought the books that started them on their paths at Old Oregon, many returned with news from the world.

Meanwhile, Mac and Frank scouted and, later, took trips to California (where Frank and his family soon moved). I can easily picture the two of them, sorting out the days' books in the living room, stacks everywhere. It was a pleasure that never left. Even during their last visits together those quiet smiles of satisfaction and anticipation, sparking with glee and the occasional giggle ("Now that's a cookie, Frank!"), appeared at the promise of the next book.

Over the years Old Oregon emerged as a large scholarly bookstore. The scholarly books sustained him. After one large university sale, he took his family with him for a long stay in England where he enriched his stock and this city from afar with varied delights: long runs of Jazz Society, Left Book Club, Hutchinson International authors. The rarities came as well: the herbals, the plate books, Lady Morgan's commonplace book, filled with letters and drawings. Bob Hoyt took care of things at the shop then, processing and selling the shipments as they arrived. It was a different time, a time when really good books were still cheap.

Mac would remember, with no small sense of irony, how he struggled to sell his Curtis, housed in its original mahogany cabinet, for a few thousand dollars as he looked at results of the same set's recent auction record. Still, he had had a fair share of great finds: "The Murders in Rue Morgue," the original correspondence of Henry Stanley's secret reports from the Belgian Congo, all the unique Oregon imprints, the remarkable brand books. Along the way he found time to be a major partner in Champoeg Press which published rare Western narratives in beautiful letterpress editions printed by Lawton Kennedy.

Relationships in the trade flourished through the years. Jeff Dykes and Mac stayed in regular contact over the years, sharing news of a Billy the Kid pulp or an issue point on a Charlie Russell calendar at the drop of a ten-gallon hat (they both had them.) Jack Bartfield was a dear friend. They visited whenever they had the chance: Portland, New York, London, Amsterdam. Mac was Portland agent for the sale of a Childe Hassam mural that Jack purchased and he turned up a set of armor that Jack needed for a customer to boot. They never lost touch with one another. The California booksellers always remained close: Warren Howell, Helen and Reg Hennessey, Dick Mohr, Bob Hawley (his hilarious postcards to Mac deserve a book of their own), Peter Howard. The list of friends goes on. California was especially familiar; there was a special ease and affection associated with dealing books in a world where so many paths had crossed for so long. Likewise to the north, Vancouver, B.C.: Bill Hoffer, Don Stewart, Steve McIntyre.

As Portland came of age, so did many of her collectors. Some of them saw another side of Mac, at least initially, and freely shared their sense of terror at their first meetings in later years. His gaze was penetrating; his wit, always at the ready, could be sharp. If a few timid souls paled at his uncommon directness, he remained convinced that the books would always speak for themselves and that

the rest would be sorted out along the way. It usually was. He was tough and suffered no pretense or boorishness. But he was also uncommonly generous and forgiving. He was a man who loved his family and who could be described as quite traditional in many ways; he was also possessed a radical political sensibility and was especially fond of those young dealers whose lives reflected those traditions. Many lasting friendships were forged at the shop. And even in the later years when Mac's heart condition prevented free movement, the spirit of the place, fueled by his bright memory and love of conversation, remained unchanging.

A memorial service was held at the First Presbyterian Church on January 23, 1998, appropriately enough, the place where that rare and famous repository of Northwest cookery, *THE WEBFOOT COOKBOOK*, had been published 100 years before. There were tributes and a piper who played during the service and then led the crowd down Alder Street back to the bookstore for a reception and hours of memories. Karin Welch, faithful shipping clerk of twenty-five years, handmade the memorial program and has been granted the store name for possible future use for her good services during Mac's final illness. Mac is survived by his wife and co-worker of over fifty years, Phyllis, his children and grandchildren. The Old Oregon Bookstore officially closed its doors on March 15, 1998. The store archive is now at The Oregon Historical Society.

The idea of the end of an era is often invoked on such occasions, though it is rarely fully warranted. But the passing of Old Oregon signals such an event, at very least here in the Northwest. Old Oregon was a wonderful place, a touchstone. Mac will be sorely missed.