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One Person's Junk, Another Person's Treasures: Dissolving a Small Law-Book Collection

by Gail F. Zwirner

DECISIONS TO ELIMINATE a book collection occur for various reasons, including retirement, downsizing a home library, or a sweet deal from an online vendor. Law librarians regularly receive inquiries about the purchase or donation of used law books. Many times these calls originate in a law school's development office after an attorney school seeks his or her law school's advice on eliminating a significant career investment. An attorney may turn to a law firm librarian for advice as well.

Collection development policies vary among law schools and law firms. Old editions of legal materials regularly line the shelves in law school libraries to capture the history of legal citation. Except for some Virginia primary sources and treatise materials, a law firm library patron is likely to see only the current edition of a particular title. Librarians regularly welcome donations. Gifts are a valuable source for out-of-print materials, extra copies of popular titles, and filling in worn or missing items in the collection. Librarians learn early in graduate library school courses that it was the sale of Thomas Jefferson's personal collection that helped recreate the Library of Congress after much of the original collection was destroyed in the War of 1812.

Some libraries celebrate the concept of book donations. A Make a Donation link at the Regent University Law Library's website, <http://www.regent.edu/acad/schlaw/library/barmembers/home.cfm>, leads to the following:

Countless legal researchers and scholars at Regent University have been blessed and enriched by the generous gifts of interested individuals through the years. If you would like to make a gift to the Law Library of either funds or materials, please contact [the associate director].

A phone call to other law school libraries will produce similar referrals to librarians designated to handle donations.

The following are some considerations when deciding to sell or donate a small law-book collection:

Selling

Sets of case reporters have limited appeal, according to a representative at Law Book Exchange Ltd. (LBE), a publisher of legal classics, appraiser, and dealer in used law books. Databases of primary authority, such as those available to Virginia State Bar members through Fastcase, have put case reporter resales in the "dinosaur" category. However, LBE says there is a market for some reporter sets, such as the *United States Patents Quarterly*, a set of *American Jurisprudence 2d*, or even *Michie's Jurisprudence* in good condition. Sets will also carry more value if they include the most recent replacement volumes and pocketparts. LBE is more interested in texts and treatises such as *Corbin* or *Areed*. The great news about treatise purchases of Virginia materials is that LBE is working on a reprint of the second edition of *Minor on Real Property*, a title often sought by our faculty and library patrons, and Virginia law librarians are always delighted to see it in a box of donated materials.

Law Book Exchange will accept e-mail requests for quotes on value. Appraisal fees depend on the size of a collection. A minimum fee is \$50. Send an e-mail to law@lawbookexchange.com with the title, edition reference, number of volumes, and when it was last updated, and LBE will respond with a fee quote.

Librarians also contribute general appraisal information. Librarian and author Ken Svengalis updates his "Appendix of Representative Used Law

Book Prices" in each annual edition of his book, *Legal Information Buyer's Guide & Reference Manual*. The current edition covers prices "as of April 15, 2008, which have appeared in recent years." For example, the price for a set of *Virginia Reports* (vols. 1-251) is \$1,695.

Donating

Two Internal Revenue Service publications (Nos. 526 and 1771) address charitable contributions and outline requirements for the donor and the recipient organization. For example, there are threshold guidelines for reporting requirements, appraisal requirements and sample donor letters. Even if the "final resting place" for donations is a recycling bin or landfill, librarians consider various options before making a non-green decision.

If incorporating the titles in the library's collection doesn't work, librarians use e-mail networks nationally through the American Association of Law Libraries and the association's Virginia chapter. It's not unusual to see regular postings such as:

- I am looking for a free set of outdated *Southern Reporters*;
- Free for postage — S.E.2d volumes 1-555; or
- We have the following law reviews/journals free to a good home or the price of postage
 - *Review of Litigation* — unbound — v.1,#1 through v.20,#2
 - *Virginia Law Review* — v. 46-91 (v. 46-79 are bound)
 - *Washington and Lee Law Review* — v. 57-62 — not bound

Other creative solutions include donations to paralegal schools that need instructional tools, but not necessarily

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the most current edition. Movie producers have inquired occasionally about collections for set backdrops. Advertisements for books appear occasionally in *Virginia Lawyers Weekly*.

Timing is crucial if you are considering downsizing a collection, since currency and condition are important in valuing used legal materials. So try to find a permanent home for your collection before moving them to a wet basement, hot attic, or off-site storage. Another institution will benefit from the donation of books in good and current condition, and your heirs will be free of a burden of disposing of those materials later. ■