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Get Out There, but Don't Close the Desk Yet: Librarians in the Classroom, on Campus, on the Street, and yes, in the Library.

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Abstract

The symposium theme, "Beyond the Desk" has many facets. Among those we want to discuss are the ways that we as reference librarians reach out to involve ourselves in the lives of students and the work of faculty, the new and surprising spaces where we interact with our users, and the many changes in the way we communicate with one another. The work of a reference librarian is increasingly mobile, as well as virtual. In the Harvard College Library Liaison Program, reference librarians involve themselves in the academic life of Harvard, both as a way to reach students and faculty outside of the library and as a way of developing closer relationships between the library, the curriculum, and student life on campus. Librarians are participating in courses not only by bringing the students to an electronic library classroom, but by going into the classroom or lecture hall where the students follow along on their own laptops. One-on-one consultation has become the dominant mode of service both at the desk and away from it. Librarians serve as academic advisers for freshmen, as advisers in the houses (dorms), and as members of house organizations. Librarians join campus community committees and social groups, such as religious organizations and sporting clubs. This creates a sense among students that librarians are part of their community and it serves to inform our thinking about planning programs and services. It also expands our social network and puts us in touch with people who need our help, but might never have thought they did. Even on the street, in restaurants, and airports, we are connected to our users, and even in these places, we are finding ourselves connecting to new ones as well. We will also address how the development of what might be called E-reference in all of its various forms has been a significant part of the expansion of reference services beyond the desk. We will also integrate into our discussions of these topics our evolving identities as reference librarians. In Widener Library, we now have several generations of librarians working side by side, bringing different skills sets to bear on challenges, and operating in different comfort zones. The differences and commonalities in our experiences and assumptions create a set of opportunities for learning from one another, and for collaborating across what might otherwise be cultural divides. Lastly, we will make the point that although reference librarianship has been evolving "beyond the desk" for quite a while, that doesn't mean that we don't need a desk. Changes in library spaces include the trend of implementing information commons, cafes, and lounges - spaces in where social encounters with users happen. These new kinds of spaces are often created in libraries also supporting traditional reference desks. We don't believe that these services replace "the desk" but rather, they provide additional ways for users to interact with us, and for us to interact with them.

Introduction: Some Truths Persist

The work of a reference librarian in our academic environment is increasingly mobile, as well as virtual; reference librarians leave the desk and the library to involve themselves in the academic life of Harvard, both as a way to reach students and faculty outside of the library and as a way of connecting the library with the curriculum and student life on campus. We leave the library to help ensure that its place at the heart of the university is sustained.

We speak of these activities as new, as developed in response to changing patterns of library use, and yet, in some strong sense, they are only a natural extension of a very old tradition of reference work. In 1876, in Volume 1 of *Library Journal*, edited by Melville Dewey, with Charles Cutter as Bibliographer, the article, "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers" appeared. Its author, Samuel Swett Green, is writing in the tradition of the great public librarians of the 19th century, and his voice and views are clearly from another time, but he articulates certain truths that persist and still inform successful reference work. He says:

First. If you gain the respect and confidence of readers, and they find you easy to get at and pleasant to talk with, great opportunities are afforded of stimulating the love of study and of directing investigators to the best sources of information.

Second. You find out what books the actual users of the library need, and your judgment improves in regard to the kind of books it is best to add to it...

Third. One of the best means of making a library *popular* is to mingle freely with its users, and help them in every way...¹

Though he speaks from the public library tradition, he asserts, "Personal intercourse and relations between librarian and readers are useful in all libraries." The article concludes with this affirmation of the pleasures of reference work: "...there are few pleasures comparable to that of associating continually with curious and vigorous minds, and of aiding them in realizing their ideals."

What was true for Samuel Swett Green in 1876 is certainly still true for us; it is, in an important sense, personal.

Our Environment and Our Roles

This is a very exciting time at Harvard. We have a new president, Drew Gilpin Faust, a historian and a working scholar who makes active use of our libraries. As University of Pennsylvania president Amy Gutmann pointed out in her remarks at Faust's installation "We are witness to historical change in the making. For the first time in 371 years, Harvard has chosen for its president... a Southerner — and a woman." We have a new University Librarian, Robert Darnton, a historian of the book, who, this spring is teaching a Freshman Seminar in the College. And just this month, Professor Evelyn Hammonds has been appointed the Dean of Harvard College, the first female ever to hold that position. All three of these new leaders have asked reference librarians to participate in their teaching.

The Faculty of Arts and Sciences has just completed a multi-year review of the curriculum of the College. A new plan for General Education has been developed; Harvard undergraduates will now be able to declare not only a "concentration" or major field of study, but also a "secondary field" or minor field, for the first time. Courses are being developed for the new "Gen Ed" curriculum, and reference librarians are working with faculty and members of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Instructional Computing Group to plan these courses, to enrich course web pages and to deliver effective teaching tools for these courses. These courses do not confine themselves to the boundaries of traditional disciplines.

¹ Swett Green, Samuel. "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers." *Library Journal* 1 (Oct 1876): 74-81.

The Report of the Committee on General Education states:

We recognize that the boundaries between disciplines today are porous and shifting. It is less clear than it was thirty years ago where chemistry stops and biology begins, where literary theory stops and art history begins, where computer science stops and linguistics begins, where economics stops and government begins, where neuroscience stops and psychology begins, where mathematics stops and philosophical logic begins. Research today is not only *multidisciplinary*, but *transdisciplinary*.²

It also speaks of Harvard's "institutional DNA." The Report states: "Additionally, there is the question of institutional DNA...Harvard has not been a place of required foundational courses. It is a university dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in specialized areas of expertise, and its curriculum reflects this..."³

Given the complex nature of Harvard's library collections and services, Widener's research librarians serve the essential role of intermediaries between library collections and Harvard's diverse scholarly community. The role of intermediary is one traditional and significant aspect of our work, but the depth and scope of the current activities of Widener's research librarians reveals that a research librarian's fundamental role is that of educator.⁴

Our Communities

There are multiple communities to be considered in any campus environment. The Harvard University Libraries are a complex network of communities within the larger Harvard community. The University Library is composed of the libraries of all of the faculties of Harvard; it also administers and supports significant shared resources, including our online catalogue, web portal, and an array of digital projects.

Within the University Library, the largest community is Harvard College Library, which serves the needs of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, including Harvard College. This constellation of libraries includes the major collections at Harvard in the sciences, fine arts, music, humanities, film, maps, theatre, government documents, and rare books and manuscripts and includes materials in over 100 languages. The College Library employs over 600 staff members including nearly 250 professional librarians and administrators and over 300 library support staff. We also employ over 500 Harvard students.

The Widener Library, the largest library at Harvard both by size of collections and by number of staff, recently underwent an extensive renovation of the entire building. We now have the pleasure of working in a beautiful and much more comfortable and efficient building. Despite dire predictions that libraries would be emptied by the digital age, we have found the opposite is true. People need to congregate in physical spaces and students and scholars want to participate in the profound iconography of the academic library as they work. We believe, to adapt a phrase: "if you renovate it, they will come." Building usage is up, undergraduates constitute over 40% of Widener's circulation, and the Reference Room and Reading Rooms are busy places. We're confining our focus to Widener Library, but if we were to widen it a little to include our neighbor, Lamont Library, which is open 24 hours a day, five days a week, with a café in the library and a newly refurbished Research Services area, we expect we would find confirmation of our assertion.

Within Widener, the Research Services Department is comprised of 14 professional librarians and 3 support staff. Widener's long tradition of reference service relies upon a team of generalists, many of whom have subject specializations, as well, and values deep knowledge of the library's extraordinary collections. These are crucial elements of our program, which serve not only our own faculty and students, but also the larger community of scholars, many of whom travel great distances to use the library.

² *Report of the Committee on General Education*, November 2005, p. 24.

³ *Report of the Committee on General Education*, p. 32.

⁴ *Annual Report of Widener Research Services*, 2006-2007.

We answered 11% more reference questions in 2006-2007 than in 2005-2006.⁵ This is, in part, due to the high traffic in the building, but an increasing amount of our service is being provided away from the Reference desk, given the remote research and communication that has become the norm within our scholarly community. This shift in mode of contact is borne out by the fact that 71% of the questions directed to individual librarians in Research Services (i.e.: those not asked at the desk) came by e-mail. This is a direct outgrowth of the liaison program's success.

Through that program, we support Harvard students, faculty, and other researchers in their research spaces (outside the library) by providing e-mail reference, phone reference, consultation, and web-based research guides, both course and discipline-based. We are experimenting with chat embedded in research guides, so users can connect directly with guide authors.

There are deep traditions of decentralization in the University that underlie much of the organizational structure of the libraries. An old Harvard maxim, "Every Tub Rests on its Own Bottom", or ETOB, has been a guiding principle that only in recent years has begun to shift to accommodate necessary centralized functions, services and resources. There is still a dynamic tension between centralization and specialization. As Dave Tyckoson stated in his essay, "That Thing You Do," *All librarianship is local*.⁶ So, programs and services should be designed to support the teaching and research of each library's primary user community. But, because of transdisciplinarity, researchers need to move easily across multiple libraries. This creates new challenges to this model of ETOB. In our reference community, transdisciplinary research and teaching are driving us not necessarily to centralize our services, but rather, to think creatively about developing the network of librarians who teach. The human network must be sustained alongside the fiber: a strong network of librarians who have gotten out from behind their desks and who have the will to collaborate across functions and organizational boundaries.

Beyond the Library: Liaison Work

There are 12 liaisons in Research Services, serving or co-serving 31 academic departments, committees and programs. The liaisons based in Widener serve primarily Humanities departments, with Social Sciences and Sciences served by our colleagues in other libraries. The program has been in place formally for more than 6 years. We would note, here, that in Widener, reference librarians do not have responsibility for selection. Bibliographers are responsible for collection development, and reference librarians for service to researchers. One of the first steps after getting out from behind the desk, for us, has been to establish closer working relationships with the bibliographers, so that our work, which is intertwined with theirs but divided by organizational structures, can be more seamless. We have, as a result, all gotten out from behind our respective desks, to teach together and to collaborate.

Because Harvard is not a place of foundational courses, course-integrated research instruction is also "local." Liaisons work with their departments to determine how best to bring the library into focus for its students. During a typical year, over 150 course-integrated research instruction sessions are taught by librarians in Research Services, some team-taught with bibliographers and with colleagues from other Harvard libraries. This number expands dramatically when the instruction provided by reference librarians in other Harvard College Libraries is added. Most sessions take place in the library, since members of the faculty want to encourage their students to immerse themselves in the collections.

The liaison program got us out from behind our desks, and over time, it has grown organically, in response to changes in the curriculum and in departments' needs. Each liaison has the freedom to pursue his/her work, to design the program best suited to the needs of faculty and students, and to follow those where they lead us. They lead us, in fact, all over the campus.

⁵ We began collecting off-desk statistics officially during the fourth quarter of 2005-2006, so this is based on partial data from that year.

⁶ Tyckoson, Dave. "That Thing You Do." *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 47.2 (2007): 111.

As important as our library spaces are to us, library liaisons recognize that the library is only one place where we encounter our researchers. The “teachable moments” are happening all over campus and librarians need to identify where and when they are. There are over 6,700 undergraduates enrolled in Harvard College and over 3,500 graduate students in the programs of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.⁷ At Harvard, ninety-seven percent of all undergraduates live on campus in one of the 12 residential Houses. Each House accommodates 350-500 students with its own dining hall, library, common rooms, and facilities for academic, recreational, and cultural activities. From the Harvard College website: “Houses are places where learning occurs all the time, whether in the dining hall as students share a meal with instructors and visiting scholars, or in House tutorials or seminars taken for degree credit.” The Houses differ from simple dormitories in that each House offers instructional opportunities (tutorials and small classes) and promotes activities related to music, drama, theater, sports, public service, and other special interests. The house system encourages interaction among students, faculty, and other House affiliates.

Another way in which we can reach students beyond the library and the classroom is by playing an official role in their academic life. Many of us work with the College Dean’s Advising Programs Office, serving as Freshman Advisers. We advise them on their class choices, their adjustment to college life, their workload balance, and help them to manage performance expectations, both their own and those of their parents. This role has not only allowed us to create close relationships with first-year students, but also requires us to become expert in the curricular requirements of the college. It can be as challenging as it is rewarding. While it is not the kind of work that will benefit every library liaison, some of us whose work grounds us squarely in the Humanities find it enriching to become expert in which combination of Organic Chemistry, Evolutionary Biology, and Math makes for the best pre-med course of study.

Liaison work is now an activity common to a great enough number of academic libraries and for a long enough time, that there has been time to reflect on it, study it and publish about it. In the 2003 article “New Roles and Opportunities for Academic Library Liaisons: A Survey and Recommendations”, research librarians at Rutgers University found that their top recommendation for effective liaisonship was to make “direct and personal contact with faculty and students whenever possible”⁸. The Rutgers article also analyzed the data from a survey of librarian liaisons about their liaison work. We decided to re-issue that same survey to our colleagues in Research Services in 2008, five years after the Rutgers survey so we could compare the results.

The Rutgers survey revealed that the top three most useful ways to connect with faculty were via e-mail, face to face contact and by telephone. Our 2008 survey confirms that e-mail and face-to-face contact are still the most useful method of making connections with faculty, yet at Harvard, the value of giving a formal presentation not only out ranked e-mail and face-to-face as a method; it was ranked most useful by 100% of our poll respondents. Getting out and being seen “on stage”, as it were, seems to get the attention of our faculty more than any other way.

Top 3 Most Useful Ways to Connect With Faculty			
	At Rutgers in 2003		At Harvard in 2008
1	Email	1	Presentations
2	Face to Face	2	Email
3	Telephone	3	Face to face

⁷ *Harvard University Fact Book 2006-2007*. Cambridge, MA: Office of Institutional Research, 2006.

⁸ Glynn, Tom and Connie Wu. “New Roles and Opportunities for Academic Library Liaisons: A Survey and Recommendations.” *Reference Services Review* 31.2. (2003): 122.

Top 3 Most Useful Ways to Connect With Students

	At Rutgers in 2003		At Harvard in 2008
1	Face to face	1	Face to face
2	Instruction	2	Email
3	Email	3	Instruction

Bottom 3 (least useful) to Connect with Faculty

	At Rutgers in 2003		At Harvard in 2008
1	Newsletters	1	Newsletters
2	Campus Mail	2	Campus Mail
3	Office Hours	3	Office Hours

Bottom 3 (least useful) to Connect with Students

	At Rutgers in 2003		At Harvard in 2008
1	Consultation Forms	1	Office Hours
2	Telephone	2	Telephone
3	Office Hours	3	Consultation Forms

We were not surprised to see that our experience of the most useful ways to connect with students, as well as the least useful ways to connect, were entirely in agreement with the Rutgers results from 5 years ago. While it is true that what worked well then still works well today, we also must acknowledge that new ways of connecting have emerged since then as well.

How Liaison Work is Changing

A crucial question in the Rutgers survey is "Do you see the need for liaison work as increasing". In the Rutgers results, 66% said yes to this question in 2003. In our survey in 2008, 80% said yes. One of our colleagues expounded on this opinion in his comments:

"I think that the scope of library liaison activities is expanding. In addition to research guides, consultations, special tours, and research classes, I have also been engaged to discuss course assignments, advise on department and course web pages, consult on humanities computing projects, meet with prospective grad students, visit scholarly institutes, and more. The trend, I think, is towards a more scholarly engagement with departments in the form of co-teaching, introducing students to special collections, adding "library" components to course sites, etc."

The Silk Road Project, a non-profit cultural and educational organization founded in 1998 by cellist Yo-Yo Ma, led Cogan University Professor of the Humanities Stephen Greenblatt to design a new course called *Imaginary Journeys: Travel and Transformation in the early 17th century*, wherein three imaginary ships leave England and travel, ultimately, to Virginia and Massachusetts. Students assumed the role of travelers, themselves, reading *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest* in tandem with accounts of first encounters from the period. Librarians were integrated into the course, attending lectures, and contributing to the course's rich virtual environment. When we considered which e-resources might be useful to the course, which included those for anthropology, history, economics, the history of science, literature in several languages, the arts, music, geography, and a host of other disciplines, we realized that it defied our normal approaches. This course was offered as Humanities 27, a non-departmental course, representing well the transdisciplinarity we spoke of earlier. It is one of many to come. The General Education review has led to a new course structure; we are now able to work collaboratively with the Instructional Computing Group, experts from the Bok Center for Teaching and Learning and faculty in support of these courses, rather than responding to them once they have been published in the course catalog.

We initially wanted to avoid using the phrase “embedded librarian”, but in fact, it’s not a bad analogy. We are doing more than tagging along for the ride: Increasingly, librarians are working with faculty and their teaching fellows as a member of the team, integrating their services into the development, preparation, and execution of the course. In addition, we are not only involving ourselves in the design of new courses, we are becoming students ourselves. One of our colleagues audits a course each semester in one of the areas to which she is liaison, Study of Religion and Folklore. She reports that faculty usually introduce her at the beginning of the semester and sometimes call on her to provide information; as a result, students tend to recognize her and feel more comfortable emailing her with questions, while she in turns has opportunities to gain subject knowledge and to understand the student experience better.

As important as it is to “get out there” and engage with people in person, new technologies, particularly those that fall in to the broad category of “Web 2.0” tools are providing us with many new ways to interact with faculty and students. The research guides of today are more than webliographies, or lists of useful links. Customized research portals deliver library content in a more holistic way. Recent research portals that we have developed with multiple librarians across disciplines, faculty across departments, and graduate student collaborating together include:

- Interlibros: Research Guide for Classics & Medieval Studies
- poetry@harvard
- Rinascimento: Research Guide for Renaissance Studies
- Traditions: Research Guide for Folklore and Folkloristics
- RLL-Romance Studies
- GRW-Germanic Research Web

Some of the features of these portals include:

- Deep links for browsing subject headings in HOLLIS, our library catalog.
- Deep links to e-books, recommended articles and electronic reference book entries
- Flash video series on special collections featuring librarians and faculty.
- “Nested” Menus Within web-based topic boxes.
- Rotating resource spotlight JavaScript tools.
- Rotating slideshow feature to display digital collection images.
- Video introductions using flash.
- Embedded RSS feeds from online newspaper and other media.
- Chat reference service via Meebo.

The internet and all of its evolving uses is ultimately only the means to an end. The goal is academic discovery. Librarians must create web resources that bring students to the library collections, a great deal of which promises to remain only available in print for some time to come. The nature of reference work today is that we must step outside our comfort zones in the library or behind the computer and position ourselves physically in the communities that we serve. We must communicate in multiple ways by making equal use of technology for creating a virtual presence and our social skills to create trust with students and faculty. Chatting with a student about their dissertation research at a department gathering is a more likely to serve as a catalyst for the forging of a lasting connection than a web-page posting about library services will. The Rutgers survey found that the most effective channel of communication with students was not e-mail, but face-to-face. Five years later, we have found that this is still true. Facebook is good, but face time is better.

New Ways to Get Out There

- Formalize the “embedded librarian” relationship with a class. Attend the first class of the semester for a few key courses in your subject area. Ask the faculty member to introduce you.

- Serve as an academic adviser to students. Participate in student advising, as requested by the department or program.
- Become an affiliate of a dorm, house, or other student social organization in order to get to know students beyond the classroom. Ask them if they use the librarian, if they know their library liaisons, or if they have suggestions for you to be a more effective liaison.
- Seek out opportunities to serve on University-wide committees, not just library ones.
- Get to know the Departmental assistant or secretary. (e.g. Take them to lunch!)
- Vary your method of communication: E-mail is necessary these days, but make flyers and hand deliver them to your departments' faculty and graduate students mailboxes. You might also run into some of them when you drop by.
- Schedule regular "office hours" in a student cafeteria.
- Audit a class.
- Attend religious services or join in and support non-profit organizations on campus.
- Create in-person recognition with your faculty by attending departmental parties, or colloquiums, or lecture series. Go out of your way to meet people, or as one of our colleagues reminds us, "Make sure to work the room."
- Go out of your way to greet students and faculty when you see them on campus, in restaurants, in the grocery store. (A very important connection was once forged between a librarian who introduced herself to a well-known faculty member as they stood together in line at the Whole Foods on Christmas Eve, commiserating over waiting until the last minute to do their grocery shopping!)
- Host receptions in the library for specific user groups (e.g. Offering beer and wine and food in the early evening will bring in the graduate students.)

What you can do to prepare yourself

- Read the campus newspaper or other campus publications every morning.
- Subscribe to departmental or student listservs.
- Understand the structure of the university and know who the key players are
- Draw upon the expertise of colleagues, especially those who are not directly involved in liaison or reference work. Most will be very excited to share and give advice.
- Expand the scope of your professional development. Attend an academic conference in your department's subject area.

And if any of these things daunt you, get together and get out there!

This work does not align well with an expectation that a work-week is Monday - Friday from 9 am to 5 pm. However, there are things we can do to try to keep our balance.

- Design your work schedule around department events and be prepared to be flexible, e.g. If you're a morning person and you usually work 8 to 5 and a department reception is at 7pm, take the morning off if you can - you'll be more likely to still have the energy you'll need at 7pm!
- Find out what library services your department values the most and focus on that.
- Consider that teaching a one-time, one-hour research class can take less prep and performance time than creating a web-based, subject specific guide.

Don't be afraid to negotiate with faculty. If they want an instruction class tomorrow and you'll be out of town, suggest other dates or find another colleague who is available.

A Balancing Act

The continuing need to staff service points seems to be in conflict with the need to "get out there," but we think the two are synergistic. We also see this as a blend of new and old, rather than a division of new from old, where

the old is left to fall away and the new replaces it.

At Widener, we are fortunate to have multiple generations of reference librarians working as a team. This gives us access to a variety of skills. In a library like Widener, it takes years of working with collections to develop the kind of expertise that allows you to do in depth work. Longer service staff also represent the collective memory of the department and of the institution. This collective memory is invaluable; experienced reference librarians can put their hands on a print source which has no digital surrogate in a way that a younger colleague whose experience has begun in the digital age may well not be able to do. Conversely, our colleagues whose professional experience has begun in the era of the Internet bring their own set of research skills and talents to the department. Rather than create a conflict where the two approaches compete for dominance, we think the mix of generations is important to the institution as it looks the future. The blend of longer service staff with younger colleagues helps us to maintain balance in our services, as well. If we were to begin to enumerate the balance of strengths, they would include: deep local knowledge, experience, wisdom, energy, willingness to experiment, and continuous learning from one another.

Conclusion

The traditional Reference Desk is reactive by its nature; Liaison work is proactive. Paradoxically, Liaison work builds demand for reference desk service, by building an expectation that librarians, who are “easy to get at and pleasant to talk with” and who understand the community and are an active part of it, will be there. Reference Librarians must make concerted efforts to get out from “behind the desk,” both virtually and in-person, to bring our knowledge into the spheres where students and faculty travel. Getting involved with campus life not only helps us to be more informed about the curriculum, but also presents opportunities to us to anticipate changing needs and to develop resources to meet them. It also means that some librarians have to go well beyond what has been their comfort zone. Reference librarians not only need the interpersonal skills to provide prompt, cheerful, accurate and efficient service at a desk, they now need to have the interpersonal skills to “work the room”, make friends, and influence people. Effective social networking, accurate and meaningful needs assessment, and the ability to build support for the library are what will sustain us. By working together and drawing upon our various strengths, we have the opportunity to heed Green’s advice and to achieve the three benefits he identified.

We must always be on the look out for opportunities to connect, but fate and coincidence do their fair share as well. One of our favorite liaisons anecdotes concerns our colleague who is the liaison to the department of History and the department of African and African-American Studies. Two years ago, just a few days before she was planning to head to Columbia for that year’s Reference Symposium, our colleague received a rather urgent research request from Prof. Henry Louis Gates. Skip Gates, as he is known at Harvard, is a preeminent scholar of African and African-American Studies and one of our campus celebrities. Our colleague found the answers Skip was seeking, but hadn’t able to call him with the results before she left for New York. As she exited Penn Station dragging her suitcase behind her up 6th Avenue, she was thinking about what she hadn’t finished before leaving. Just then, at an intersection just south of Times Square, she heard someone calling her name. Looking in that direction, she saw a black town car stopped at a light. The back seat window rolled down to reveal Skip Gates. “Hey, how’s it going with my question?” he called to her. She updated him right then and there in the 2 minutes it takes for scores of pedestrians to cross 6th Ave. Then the light changed and Skip shouted, “Thanks a million” as the town car sped off.

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