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FBI Closes Case - 125-Year-Old IWU Book Part of \$20 Million Book-Snatching Case

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December 15, 1992

Contact: Bob Aaron, 309/556-3203**FBI Closes Case****125-Year-Old IWU Book Part of \$20 Million Book-Snatching Case**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.—You just know it's going to be a tough day, when you arrive at the office at 7:15 in the morning and find a package sitting on your desk chair from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

That's what happened last Friday (Dec. 11) to Sue Stroyan, an associate professor and head of Illinois Wesleyan University's Sheean Library.

"My first thought," Stroyan said, "was 'Oh my God. We've done something terrible to some government documents.'"

The package—which arrived the previous day when Stroyan was off campus—contained a letter from FBI Special Agent Jerry Tucker, and a musty book, published in 1867, with the curious title, "Swingin Round the Circle" by an author with the even more curious name of "Petroleum V. Nasby".

The book, which according to its title page is about "men, politics, and things", is illustrated by Thomas Nast (1840-1902), the legendary American political cartoonist who created the elephant and donkey as symbols of the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively.

Stroyan finally tracked down Tucker at the FBI's Omaha, Neb., Field Office around 10 a.m. Friday and was informed that neither herself nor any member of her staff would be going to jail.

The FBI was returning the 125-year-old book to IWU now that it was no longer needed as evidence in the biggest book-snatching case in U.S. history.

The Nasby book was one of an estimated 28,000 rare books, valued at perhaps \$20 million, purloined from 378 libraries--mostly on college campuses, including Harvard University, Occidental College, University of New Mexico, University of Oregon, Washington State University, and University of California-Riverside--in 45 states and Canada by a bibliomaniac named Stephen C. Blumberg.

"We didn't even know the book was missing from our special collection," said Stroyan, who joined IWU on Aug. 1. "We have no idea how valuable or unique the book is."

Stroyan added, "Agent Tucker told me that he had worked for three years on the case and that as a result of that experience he has a great deal of respect for libraries and librarians.

"A great deal of the last three years for Agent Tucker," Stroyan explained, "has involved going through books and trying to find out who they belong to."

Blumberg made this task difficult since he was expert at obliterating library marks. A 1991 "Los Angeles Times" report observed, "Where libraries had used embossed identification stamps, he soaked and ironed pages. As a last resort, he cut out the identifying stamp."

To help pinpoint ownership of books found in the "Blumberg collection", a nonprofit Ohio group, the Online Computer Library Center, has set up a database. However, some experts concede many books will never be traced back to their rightful owners.

The IWU book is an example of how Blumberg may have removed telltale signs of true ownership. The title page and another page of the book have neat and carefully cut rectangular holes, where the IWU stamp may have appeared. The inside back cover has been scraped until the words "Buck Memorial Library, Illinois Wesleyan University" are barely visible.

The book snatched by Blumberg from the IWU library (at an unknown time) was written by David Ross Locke (1833-1888) under the pen name of "Petroleum V. Nasby". Locke was an American humorist, who created the satirical character, Nasby, a corrupt and illiterate preacher. His Civil War writings, though humorous, savagely attacked slavery and were enjoyed by President Abraham Lincoln.

Locke was born in Vestal, N.Y., and left school at age 10 to work for various newspapers. His first letter, under the name of Petroleum V. Nasby, was published March 21, 1861. It was a satire that has been called "the opening gun in Locke's personal campaign against slavery."

Locke's writings brought financial success and he became the owner of the "Toledo Blade", the Ohio newspaper, and editor of the "New York Evening Mail". He was offered political posts by presidents Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, but declined them.

Among Locke's other books are "The Nasby Papers" (1864), "Divers Opinions of Yours Trooly, Petroleum V. Nasby" (1865), and "The Nasby Papers" (1893, published after his death).

"Swingin Round the Cirkle" is part of IWU's special collection, which includes many older books originally on the university's open shelves when Buck Memorial Library served IWU's library needs; first editions; signed editions; letters; uniquely sized materials; and memorabilia from the congressional career of the late U.S. Representative Les Arends.

Over two decades, Blumberg stashed rare books, antiques, stained glass, oriental rugs, musical instruments, photographs, victrolas, 50,000 antique brass doorknobs, and countless other things into a 17-room, three-story, red-brick house in Ottumwa, Iowa—a house that at least one observer described as something out of the "Addams Family". Additional items were found in nearby storage facilities.

The "Blumberg collection" contained the "Nuremberg Chronicles", a history of the world penned in 1493 and other items valued at \$644,000 from California's Claremont College, as well as the first book published in Connecticut, a 1710 religious tract, "Confessions of Faith", a document pilfered from the Connecticut State Library.

Blumberg, a one-time Chicago street person who could have lived on a \$72,000 annual income from a family trust fund, was arrested by the FBI in March, 1990. An informant was paid \$50,000 for information that led to Blumberg's arrest, according to a report in the March, 1991, edition of "American Libraries".

He was convicted by a federal jury in Des Moines on four felony counts of conspiracy and interstate transportation of stolen property in January, 1991. Blumberg's defense team entered an insanity plea, arguing

their client had a "delusional fantasy" that compelled him to "rescue" the books and other memorabilia from "indifferent" owners. He was sentenced to nearly six years in prison and fined \$200,000 in August, 1991.

While some have described Blumberg as "dirty" and a person who "bought his clothes at Goodwill and ate many meals in soup kitchens", when it came to burglary he had touches of class akin to the sophisticated cat burglar portrayed by Cary Grant in the Alfred Hitchcock classic, "It Takes a Thief".

Blumberg often gained entry to restricted collections by flashing a bogus card, identifying himself as "Matthew McGue", a University of Minnesota psychology professor. When he was arrested at the University of California-Riverside library in 1988, Blumberg had a satchel loaded with lock-picking tools, various libraries' schedules, and a news clip about a shortage of campus police; he was convicted on two misdemeanor counts of trespassing and possessing burglary tools. He was adept at evading electronic security systems and was agile in climbing to rooftops and using dumbwaiters to enter restricted library areas. Blumberg, who stands 5-feet, nine-inches tall and weighs 130 pounds, has been described as "Spiderman".

Other times, Blumberg's techniques were less sophisticated. According to some reports, he had accomplices at some campuses simply toss books out of library windows to him--a tactic that he might have used to mimic an 18th century papal nuncio, who was known to be a bibliokleptomaniac. The "Los Angeles Times" observed in 1991 that Blumberg's chances of knowing "the papal nuncio's famous method is likely; he stole several copies of 'Bibliokleptomania', an authoritative history of book theft." At two campuses, officials suspect that Blumberg simply drove a truck up to a loading dock after hours and grabbed books by the box full.

After her brush with the biggest book thief in U.S. history, Stroyan has mixed emotions.

"I feel honored in one way," Stroyan quipped, "that we had something at Illinois Wesleyan 'worthy' of the 'Blumberg collection.' But, in another way, I feel burgled—our space and privacy has been invaded. So that's disturbing.

"One thing is for sure, though," Stroyan added. "We're going to have a higher sensitivity when it comes to security at Sheean Library. We're going to be very security conscious when it comes to our special collection in the future."

Editor's Note: For interviews with Sue Stroyan about the "Blumberg Collection", call IWU Public Relations-News Services at 309/556-3181. Research for portions of this article was conducted by Debbie Demchuk, an IWU freshman from St. Louis, who is majoring in political science.