

## OPENERS

# The Particular Delight of Special Libraries

by Lyn C. A. Gardner

**A**fter earning my master's in English literature, during the long search for a full-time job, I had the good fortune to answer a call for a temporary position at The Mariners' Museum Library to perform an inventory of their collection as part of their retrospective conversion. While I'd worked for my local public library in high school and during my undergraduate years, and had used plenty of college and university libraries in the Hampton Roads area, this was the first time I'd set foot in a special library. The collection was breathtaking. The rare book room held volumes so tall some stood in the space of four normal shelves, with others so tiny they were half the size of my palm. Handwritten logbooks held drawings of ships, often with interesting bindings, such as one with wooden boards and chains with tiny anchors to lock the book. Books in a wealth of ancient and modern languages dated back to the 1400s. One volume consisted of beautiful watercolors painted by a woman who journeyed with her captain-brother around the world.

In addition to the rare books, the library held an amazing depth and breadth of maritime materials on all subjects, to the extent that staff were able to answer research requests from around the globe, and frequently had visiting researchers who'd travel great distances and stay in local hotels

for weeks on end to conduct their research. Some were historians, some genealogists, some enthusiasts, and some creative writers; many of these would share their resulting books with the library, further enriching the collection.

The archives themselves not

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only contained many cabinets of photographs, including a plethora of images of specific vessels, but also held maps, charts, programs for exclusive functions on board luxury liners, tickets, handwritten letters pertaining to the *Titanic* and the USS *Monitor*, detailed plans for Chris Craft boats, and a wealth of material that simply made one catch one's breath with wonder at the sudden immediacy of the past.

I was fortunate to graduate to a full-time position at The Mariners' Museum Library, whose collection I'd fallen in love with at first sight. My fellow staff members all shared

my enthusiasm, and we enjoyed the cooperative, collegial atmosphere of those whose love of a subject inspires them to work toward shared goals. The collection itself was a constant delight. Today, as catalog librarian for Hampton Public Library, I am pleased to be able to indulge in original cataloging for the many interesting acquisitions of the Virginia collection, and I greatly enjoy working in the supportive team environment of our Technical Services Department; but I will always think back with fondness on those golden years at the museum, immersed in that breathtaking collection.

While special libraries come in many shapes and sizes, serving a multitude of general and very specific populations, they share one thing in common: concentration on particular subjects at a level of depth able to satisfy serious researchers, aficionados, and the curious alike. Those engaged in such specific inquiries can find nowhere better to satisfy their interests; and the best part is, the staff usually enjoy the process of researching these requests and learning the results with the same enthusiasm as the searchers themselves. **VI**