Who Are We Really?

Delgadillo, Roberto C.

Published by Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials

Delgadillo, Roberto C.

Who Are We Really? Latin American Family, Local and Micro-Regional Histories, and Their Impact on...

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/110101

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3393216
11. From Clueless to *Compadre*:
SALALM, When the Sessions Are Over

Paula Covington

Mark Grover and David Block suggested that I add to their more serious remarks, some “anecdotes” about earlier times.1 I thought that over and decided against it. Too many of those folks might never speak to me again! However, then I thought of some of the comments made on the recent survey on SALALM’s structure, mission, activities, and utility. An anecdote or two may in fact be relevant. My first SALALM conference in the 1970s was an eye-opening experience, and three impressions stand out.

First, there were so many bright, knowledgeable, articulate, truly amazing people engaged in our efforts. Second, there was so much to be learned that getting a handle on this sort of task was going to be a true challenge. Third, and strongest, was how willing these brilliant people were to share. It was obvious that collaboration was one of the strong features of this group. Responses to the recent survey attest to this, with comments about the value of attending SALALM, such as: “There’s no substitute for meeting with colleagues, exchanging ideas, planning the future.” Another is that it’s “the most important conference for my professional development.” Still another responds it’s the “only place I can talk about my work.”

This probably should not have been a surprise. Before I interviewed for the Latin American position at Vanderbilt, I had already benefitted from the aid of one of SALALM’s best and brightest. I was in London for several months and spent time at the Institute for Latin American Studies “shadowing” Pat Noble, the Latin American librarian at the University of London Senate House Library. I read her detailed field trip reports, which had invaluable advice, including interesting tips on how to get out of jail if arrested in Managua. She encouraged me to attend SALALM if I were hired at Vanderbilt.

At my first SALALM there were attendees from many countries doing wonderful things. Marietta Daniels Shepard of the Pan American Union spoke about working with NASA and the National Library of Venezuela to use satellite transmissions for OCLC collaboration. She also presented on projects in Latin America to improve the development and production of books. A host of distinguished librarians from libraries in Latin America, Europe, and the US,

including the Library of Congress, seemed to know each other. It was as if they lived in a private special world set apart from day-to-day routine. The theme of the conference was perfect for a relatively clueless beginner to the field: “The Multifaceted Role of the Latin American Bibliographer.” During Anne Hartness and Laura Gutierrez-Witt’s panel on these varied roles, I took notes madly. Up until that point I’d had little or no advice on making acquisitions with a large grant and a deadline. Finally, I was getting some practical guidance. In the recent survey, someone commented on SALALM conferences as “the one chance each year to meet with colleagues,” and, to repeat the above, another noted it as “the only place I can talk about my work.” That was definitely the case for me, especially in the pre-e-mail era when all acquisition work and other correspondence was by snail mail.

The other standout at that meeting was Barbara Valk. She was trying to organize a group to create an index to scholarly periodicals on Latin America—which continues to this day as the Hispanic American Periodicals Index (HAPI). It’s hard to believe now, but scholars had no access to these materials. They had to depend on their own networks and whatever selected references to journal articles were included in the Handbook of Latin American Studies, by leafing through dozens of its annual volumes. My only prior experience with professional meetings was attending sessions of the American Library Association, in which I served on committees preoccupied with constantly rewriting their committee mission statements. Here instead was a pragmatic project fulfilling a real need, one of the first collaborative efforts that many “SALALMIs” undertook. Everyone who worked with Barbara will remember her professionalism, organizational skills, passion for HAPI, and ability to get a group on board.

Experiences just before and after SALALM meetings have been equally educational. An exceptional one was a field trip to Nicaragua in 1983 for ten of us prior to the SALALM meeting in San José, Costa Rica. The week was organized by Ernesto Cardenal’s Ministry of Culture, for he wanted us to see the nueva Nicaragua under the Sandinistas. We also wanted to explore ways to collaborate with or assist newly appointed university librarians. Many of them had received training with Dan Hazen when he taught there on a Fulbright, and were committed to developing libraries for the public and the Sandinista literacy campaign, but had few resources.

A week before we were scheduled to leave, Nicaragua expelled three US diplomats and, in response, the US closed all Nicaraguan consulates in the United States. The day I left, Comandante Tomás Borge, the only surviving member and leader of the original Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), and Nicaragua’s minister of the interior, announced that visas would no longer be required for US citizens who wished to visit. We were nonetheless advised by the State Department not to go. It was a tense trip, but the Ministry of Culture had planned a full schedule of visits to libraries and universities,
and receptions with poets and other distinguished Nicaraguans. Most of us hoped to get a free moment to locate the prolific revolutionary literature, political propaganda, and wealth of poetry and polemics being produced but previously inaccessible.

Each day one or two of us would disappear from the schedule. Dolores Martin of the Library of Congress was interviewing poets. Peter Johnson was looking for ephemera, as usual, especially in garages and other spots that distributed subversive political party pamphlets. I had a friend of a friend with a truck, who used his month’s gas ration to drive me to various shops and agencies. We were followed by an agent of the CIA or some related agency, who was so inept that I finally told him where we were going next. Again, collaboration was the key with those SALALMIs sneaking off to buy multiple copies for their colleagues in crime.

We ended our stay with the momentous appearance of Tomás Borge, who arrived unannounced at a reception and dinner. He kept us well into the night discussing his political philosophy and, when a member from the Library of Congress suggested we had a very early plane to catch, he suggested he would keep us in Nicaragua since we had not been fully converted. He was then given a brief, acerbic lecture by that colleague about his totalitarian practices, much to the consternation of the rest of us.

We flew out early the next morning, but only after dealing with problems of stolen tickets and our inability to use US credit cards in the country, not to mention the military’s threat to impound our boxes of books. At the last moment, we were treated royally by the Ministry of Culture and all problems were waived. San José proved to be a “frying pan into the fire” experience. A bomb had gone off in front of our conference hotel in San José, followed by a 7.6 earthquake and many aftershocks. I remember Howard Karno suggesting it might be the subway beneath us. A subway? In Costa Rica? Inside, Marietta Daniels Shepard was still holding forth on her topic. As the chandeliers were swaying, the alarm clock on the podium went off, the usual way to stop her going overboard. As the room swayed, she simply reached over, reset it for another ten minutes and kept on talking.

We all have many educational experiences told or untold, the quirky travel exploits surrounding SALALM. It is no surprise that Ariel Dorfman, after having heard wacky though true tales of SALALMIs, came to a SALALM meeting with the intention of writing about it. When he showed up I silently recalled various memories, such as of the five savvy Latin American booksellers who were flipped into a ditch on Copacabana and robbed the first night of our 1990 conference in Rio; of one member who broke a bottle of cachaca on the stone floor of the lobby of Rio’s elegant Hotel Meridien and left behind aromas that wafted through three levels for hours.

At the end of that SALALM, a group of us started out to visit some of Brazil’s major cultural sites. The first afternoon we found ourselves stranded
in front of the gas pumps at a new Esso station in Rio, when the key broke in the ignition of our rental car. A barefoot, furry, yellow-striped “Tony the Tiger” danced while a small band played “When the Saints Go Marching In,” to entice customers who couldn’t use the pumps because of our car. The owner was none too happy with us. It was Sunday and a World Cup day for Brazil. Everything was closed, including the agency where we had picked up the car. Two of the group found a cab willing to go into a favela to find a chaveiro who made a rudimentary key while we commiserated with the overheated Tony and the gas station owner. Robert McNeil, being British, managed to find a pub across the street with takeaways to help assuage them. We did make it to Ouro Preto that night, and the rest of the trip was as marvelous as we had hoped.

Another happy post-SALALM memory was riding horseback in Monteverde in Costa Rica with Eduardo Lozano, an expert horseman from the pampas, and Barbara Valk. As we galloped along a dirt road we came clattering into a small village. Casino doors opened from a bar and cowboys came out to observe the noise like a bad Western. We were all gleeful to be racing along with each other on horseback. Only Clint Eastwood was missing!

Ranging from book fairs to rainforest tours, pre- and post-SALALM memories of Latin America, and the friendships made during the conferences, have given so many of us a deeper appreciation and understanding of each nation’s history, culture, society, and economy, in addition to its publishing patterns and practices.

And what of conferences in more recent years? What of conferences now? Sharing ideas about booksellers, learning the identity of emerging writers and scholars, exchanging ideas about how to overcome the lack of bibliographic control in countries where national libraries suffer from weak deposit laws, surely those are experiences common to everyone here, including those who attend a SALALM conference for the first time. At the end of my own first conference I was amazed at how much I had learned, both about books and institutions. I was even more amazed at the many important contacts I had made with book dealers and librarians, not only in the US but in Europe, Latin America, and even Australia. Especially in the era before the Internet, I knew this was more valuable than gold. I also learned that SALALM members were doing many exciting projects and they were passionate about their work.

One of the comments in the recent satisfaction survey was, “SALALM has provided me with much mentorship” from all generations of members. Such sharing, learning, and mentoring aren’t just confined to the sessions themselves. All of us have gained many insights over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine. As my remarks indicate, many of us have taken things a bit further and enjoyed the friendship of our colleagues. I very much hope that this continues to be the case, in this year and the years ahead. Here in Salt Lake City, much attention is paid to exploring the histories of families. SALALM is a different kind of family, but no less close, no less supportive, whether it
be librarians like my two fellow panelists, or booksellers like Howard Karno. We all learn to appreciate one another and learn one another’s eccentricities, and we cannot wait for the opportunity to be together again for yet one more SALALM conference!

NOTE

1. This paper was part of a panel entitled “SALALM: Back in the Day” and also featured presentations by Grover and Block.