OBITUARY

Ronald Milton Watterson, 1933–1993

Ronald M. Watterson, a friend and colleague to many of us in the Medical Library Association, died of a heart attack at his home in Sarasota, Florida, on July 12, 1993.

I first met Ron Watterson in 1968 when I joined the University of Louisville Medical Library to work for a close friend of his, Joan Titely (later Adams). Ron was then the newly appointed founding librarian at the Medical College of Ohio in Toledo. In 1967, the first president of the Medical College of Ohio persuaded Ron to assume the challenge of building a new library “in the cornfields” outside of Toledo. This was definitely a “build it and they will come” approach to library and medical school design.

Ron began his twenty-three-year tenure at the Medical College of Ohio on September 1, 1967, the seventh person hired at this new medical college.

Ron began the library effort at a local hospital in a small office that he shared with the Department of Psychiatry. From this site, he personally developed the library’s collection to meet the ever-growing needs of the Medical College of Ohio. Robert G. Cheshire comments that “Ron Watterson brought a real touch of class to Ohio when he became the director of the Medical College of Ohio Library. He built up a library which I envied, especially through his immense skills in book and monograph selection.”

It took eight long, stressful years to obtain state funding, plan, and then build the Medical College of Ohio. Ron was responsible for the planning and development of the Raymon H. Mulford Library on the Medical College of Ohio’s campus, a $7.4 million library that opened in May 1975. The library was exquisite, with all of the details—the furniture, carpeting, plants, artwork, design, etc.—meticulously planned and integrated. This library was truly the most beautiful in Ohio.

I can remember attending the dedication of Ron’s new library with one of my colleagues from Cincinnati. As we drove home, we compared our health sciences library, which we had completed in 1974, to his new library. Our Cincinnati library was very utilitarian in its furnishings, its layout, and its integration into the ten-story medical sciences building. In Toledo, we saw elegance—a grand staircase, an impressive history-of-medicine room, a giant marble-top table, and on and on. In Cincinnati, we had basic earth colors and plain oak furniture with Formica tops. We felt we had been much too pragmatic and should definitely have had Ron as a consultant.

Ron thrived at the Medical College of Ohio. As one of the first faculty members hired, he participated in the total life of the college. He was on the Admission Committee, the Graduation Committee, and served as the College’s marshal for fifteen years. He started the Medical College of Ohio Book Store, the Audiovisual Department, the Archival Collections, and the Rare Book Room. He designed the college’s official flag and worked with the dean in designing both the college’s seal and mace. Ron also designed the handmade fourteen-karat-gold Glidden L. Brooks Award, presented annually to the student who is superior in all phases of the curriculum. The Mulford Library sponsored this award, named in honor of the first president of the college. These were just a few of Ron’s college commitments and many ad hoc responsibilities. Throughout his twenty-three years in Toledo, Ron was assisted in these many activities by Joan Derrick, whom many of us enjoyed working with over the years.

From the beginning, Ron Watterson set library goals based on the concept of creating an information network linking scholars to databases both within the institution and outside through the use of computer workstations. Under his leadership, the Mulford Library was chosen to participate in the founding of the State University of New York Biomedical Communication Network and Bibliographic Retrieval Services (now BRS Information Technologies). The Mulford library served as a resource for the National Library of Medicine’s regional medical library network and was one of the first to join OCLC. I remember attending a meeting, along with Bob Cheshire from Cleveland and Joann Johnson from Ohio State, that Ron scheduled with Fred Kilgour of OCLC. At the time, medical libraries were not a major focus of OCLC, even though Fred had been the medical librarian at Yale. In our early days within OCLC, the MeSH records did not comply with MARC standards, and every month the MeSH headings were automatically eliminated. Ron was instrumental in getting all of us to actively participate in OCLC and in getting Fred to listen to the needs of medical libraries and change some of the OCLC practices.

Ron was also very active in the social life of the college. He planned and hosted many parties and social events, and he paid the same meticulous attention to planning and organizing these as he...
did to his library. His skills in coordinating a party were famous. Not just an arranger, he was an excellent cook. Over the years, we often chatted about our favorite recipes.

As I was talking about Ron to many of our colleagues, a common theme was “Ron found this great restaurant in...” “Ron found this quaint hotel in...” “Ron told me about this great place in...” Ron read voraciously, and one of his favorite topics was the food of different regions. If you mentioned a city or country that he had visited, Ron could instantly tell you about the excellent, off-the-beaten-track hotels and restaurants. I often thought Ron should have published some travel guides to share some of his many discoveries.

Some of my fondest personal memories are of evenings spent with Ron in the Maisonette, Cincinnati’s famous five-star restaurant. Despite being only an occasional visitor, Ron always knew about off-the-menu items to order that even we locals didn’t know about. An evening that my husband and I spent there with Ron and Irwin Pizer is now especially memorable, because our profession has lost both these outstanding men within just the last two years.

Ron also loved the arts. Whenever he traveled, he would visit as many museums as he could. He saw every show at the Toledo Museum of Art and read extensively on the arts and on the museums of the world. His tremendous sense of taste showed in both his home and in his clothing. He collected silver and used his travels to add to his collection.

In the professional arena, Ron was very active in the state of Ohio and was instrumental in starting the Ohio Medical Library Directors Group in the mid-1970s. His efforts helped create an esprit de corps among the Ohio medical library directors. Ron loved to hold the meetings in Toledo, and we all enjoyed going there and seeing Ron’s beautiful library and home, even though Toledo is not centrally located in Ohio. Not only were the meetings well planned and run, but there was always some social program, such as a special dinner or cocktail party.

Ron was also a significant contributor to the regional medical library (RML) program. When I was on a sabbatical in 1980 to complete my Ph.D. dissertation, I suggested to the acting director that when she did not know what to do or how to vote on RML issues, she should talk to Ron. To my surprise, she conveyed my comment to Ron, who instantly began explaining the intricacies of the region to her. She gained some extra education, and Ron relished his educational role.

He supported the profession through published papers, journal articles, and a coauthored book. He was an invited speaker at national and international meetings and served as a consultant to many libraries throughout the United States. Ron’s professional groups included the Ohio Academy of History, OCLC, Ohionet, the Ohio Academy of Science, the board of directors of the Biomedical Communications Network/BCN, the user advisory committee of the Bibliographical Retrieval System/BRS; and the Kentucky-Ohio-Michigan Regional Medical Library Network.

The Medical Library Association was Ron’s primary professional group, of course, and he was active on MLA’s Oral History Committee. He enjoyed the annual meetings and would prepare at great length for the meeting and its content, the geographic area, the hotels, the restaurants, and meetings with friends and associates. Many of his closest personal friends were medical librarians. Ron, along with Hal Bloomquist of Harvard, Joan Titley of Louisville, and Irene Graham of Mississippi, attended the International Medical Library Association meeting in Amsterdam and then traveled across Europe. I remember having a wonderful dinner with Ron at the 1985 IMLA meeting in Tokyo, although we both thought we might have to take second mortgages to pay the bill.

Ron Watterson was born in Butler, Pennsylvania, on March 21, 1933, and graduated from Butler High School in 1950. After his military service, he received his bachelor’s degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1959, followed by a master’s of science in library sciences from Rutgers University in 1960.

Ron then returned to Pittsburgh as assistant to the librarian at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Library, where he later became assistant librarian. In 1965, he became the deputy director of the Welch Medical Library at the Johns Hopkins University, serving two years in this position before moving to Toledo.

Unfortunately, Ron was plagued by several serious health problems in his last years. After retiring in 1990, he relocated to Sarasota, Florida, which he had visited annually for years. Sadly, he had only two years to enjoy his well-deserved retirement. Those of us who knew Ron will miss him greatly. Many who did not know him and his contributions to our profession still owe him a significant debt.

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