

# Old Book Corner—'Treasure from dusty attics'

by Harriet Whelchel  
Tar Heel Contributor

"Treasure from dusty attics," proclaims the sign at 137-A E. Rosemary St. The sign is apt, judging from the nickel paperbacks and old Ellery Queen magazines piled in boxes in front of the shop.

Inside the Old Book Corner, the only rare book store in Chapel Hill, a student browses through yet another sale table of paperbacks. Paul S. Koda, curator of the rare book collection at Wilson Library, peruses the 20th century first editions. In the back of the musty-odored, one-room shop, a woman looks at old books on North Carolina history which are locked behind glass cases.

"We get pretty much all types," said David Rothfuss, a sometimes UNC graduate student who has worked at the Old Book Corner for about nine months. "I guess you could say we basically get people who are interested in reading."

The Old Book Corner was originally just that, a corner of the Intimate Bookshop on Franklin Street, then owned by Mr. and Mrs. Paul Smith. In 1968 the Smiths sold the Intimate, keeping the antiquarian part of it and moving it to Rosemary Street.

Mr. Smith died this past year and Mrs. Smith, who collects books about pre-Columbian Central America, now confines herself mainly to the selling of some of the rarer books. Michael Barnes, a former UNC political science major who never graduated, now manages the shop. He also does most of the buying and selling.

"I married their (the Smith's) granddaughter and they made me an offer," Barnes said, laughing as he sipped his coffee in the shop's cluttered back office.

Barnes considers himself somewhat of a collector, but "not in the strict sense of the word. I have an interest in pre-Columbian America and American travel and description in general," Barnes said. "When I run across books in those fields that I can afford, I buy them."

However, most of Barnes' buying is done for the shop. He trades in area towns and also plans to do some buying during part of a proposed vacation trip to England. Barnes' sources include estate auctions and private collectors as well as other dealers.

"I am working on a guide to booksellers in North Carolina which I hope will be published by the fall," Barnes said.

Though the bookshop buys and sells almost any used books other than textbooks, its active focus is on old and rare books—first editions and association books (ones with a signature or dedication by some famous person). The shop specializes in books on North Carolina history, the Civil War period and the South in general. In addition, Barnes is presently building up the shop's collection of Americana and early travel books.

The shop attracts not only local customers, but also does a large mail-order business. Barnes sends catalogues of first and special editions to customers all over the United States and Canada, in addition to Japan and Haiti. Barnes also provides a search service, using dealer contacts and trade journal ads, to try to locate books specifically requested by customers.

As for selection, the Old Book Corner has a little something for everyone. One can choose from delights such as a 1952 edition of Hank Ketcham's "Dennis the Menace" for \$2.50 or a \$30 first edition copy of T. S. Eliot's "The Confidential Clerk." Barnes said the expensive books,

because they are rare, sell better than the cheaper ones.

The truly serious collector might be interested in the shop's most expensive book, priced at \$6,000. Entitled "A Collection of the Public Acts of Assembly of the Province of North Carolina," (New Bern, 1752), the book is more handily referred to as "Swann's Revisal," after one of the men commissioned by Governor Johnston to collect and revise the laws of the colony.

Its value lies in the fact that its printer, James Davis, was the first printer in the colony; that makes it one of the earliest books printed in North Carolina.

Barnes estimated that the shop sells 12,000 books a year. "Some books sit here a year; other books go out of here in a hurry," he said.

Though the rare book business is relatively free of black market dealings, Barnes remembered at least one adventure with a stolen book.

"We bought a limited edition of a book once upon a time and sold it to some library," said Barnes. "A few hours after we had sent it off in the mail, another library called us on the telephone: 'I'm sorry to say your item listed in Barnes' mail order catalogue is our book. Why are you selling it?'"

This librarian knew the book was his library's copy because it was a numbered edition and the number in Barnes' catalogue matched the one in the library's card catalogue.

Barnes had to quickly warn the

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## What makes a rare book rare?

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"Many people think anything old is rare," says Lawrence F. London, a Pittsboro native who was curator of the rare book collection in Wilson Library from 1955 until his retirement in 1975. However, London says many factors are considered before a book is termed rare.

The edition, or total number of copies printed from a single type setting, is a major factor in judging rare books. The smaller, or more limited, the edition, the rarer the book. Although professional opinions vary, London says 300 (or fewer) surviving copies of an edition automatically classifies a book as rare under Wilson Library's policy.

In terms of age, any edition printed in Europe before 1700 is considered rare, while a rare American edition could have been printed as late as 1820.

First editions are especially attractive to collectors, and the older, the better. London reports that one of the fewer than 100 good remaining copies of the Gutenberg Bible, the first book printed on movable press (1455), sold this year at auction in New York for \$2 million.

However, 19th and 20th century first editions are also valuable if the author is famous enough, for example Browning, Keats or Dickens in the 19th and Frost, Hemingway or Fitzgerald in the 20th.

A great prize for a private collector is an old book whose pages have never been cut.

"The point of collecting is to find a copy of a book in as near condition as when the printer finished his work and delivered it to the publisher," Michael Barnes, manager of the Old Book Corner, said.

An association book is one that is not necessarily rare in itself, but contains a signature or dedication by some famous person. The book's value increases relative to the importance of the signer.

Books printed by private press, with hand-set type and small editions (25 to 100 copies), are collector's items, as are books with fine bindings or illustrations.

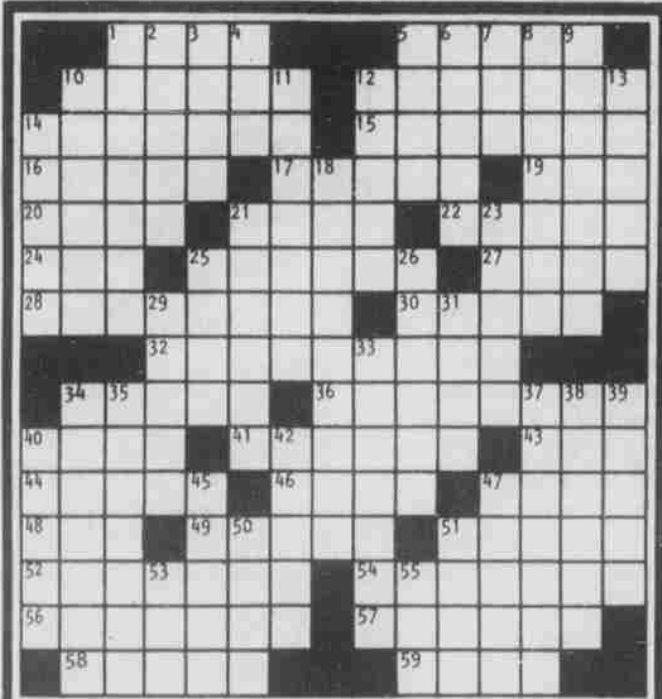
Along with the edition, usually the most important factor affecting a book's value is its condition.

"The better the condition," says London, "the better price the book will fetch. We use the term mint condition; that means it couldn't have been better."

### THE Daily Crossword

by Jack Luzzatto

- |                         |                              |                        |                        |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>ACROSS</b>           | 36 Demanded strongly         | <b>DOWN</b>            | 1 Inescapable bind     |
| 1 Hindu prince          | 40 Tea plant                 | 2 Protective wear      | 3 Rough rider          |
| 5 Yielded gracefully    | 41 Cream pail                | 4 Sky Altar            | 4 So. African settler  |
| 10 Diminishes gradually | 43 Somewhat crude            | 5 So. African settler  | 6 Young night bird     |
| 12 Dried off            | 44 Sultan's decree           | 6 Young night bird     | 7 Tiny                 |
| 14 Fall back            | 46 Following that            | 7 Tiny                 | 8 Absolute superlative |
| 15 Publicity item       | 47 Kitchen herb              | 8 Absolute superlative | 9 Yearnings            |
| 16 In first place       | 48 Casablanca is here: abbr. | 9 Yearnings            | 10 Security of office  |
| 17 Blazing              | 49 Seconds in crime          | 10 Security of office  | 11 Got top billing     |
| 19 Dead heat            | 51 Cold feeling              | 11 Got top billing     | 12 Twaddle             |
| 20 Change course        | 52 Meantime                  | 12 Twaddle             | 13 Legal documents     |
| 21 Cut short            | 54 Kind of poem              | 13 Legal documents     | 14 Rotational part     |
| 22 The hot corner       | 56 Intensifies               | 14 Rotational part     | 18 Prescience          |
| 24 Mouths               | 57 Shakespeare poem          | 18 Prescience          | 21 Snooze              |
| 25 Battled              | 58 Low or mean               | 21 Snooze              | 23 Weapon handles      |
| 27 Singer Burl          | 59 Suds                      | 23 Weapon handles      | 25 Legal document      |
| 28 Witty comeback       |                              | 25 Legal document      |                        |
| 30 Orkneys, for example |                              |                        |                        |
| 32 Afterwit             |                              |                        |                        |
| 34 Greek letter         |                              |                        |                        |



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