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# A Pearl of a Librarian: The Career of Pearl Von Allmen, University of Louisville School of Law Librarian.

Marcus Walker

*University of Louisville, Louis D. Brandeis School of Law, [marcus.walker@louisville.edu](mailto:marcus.walker@louisville.edu)*

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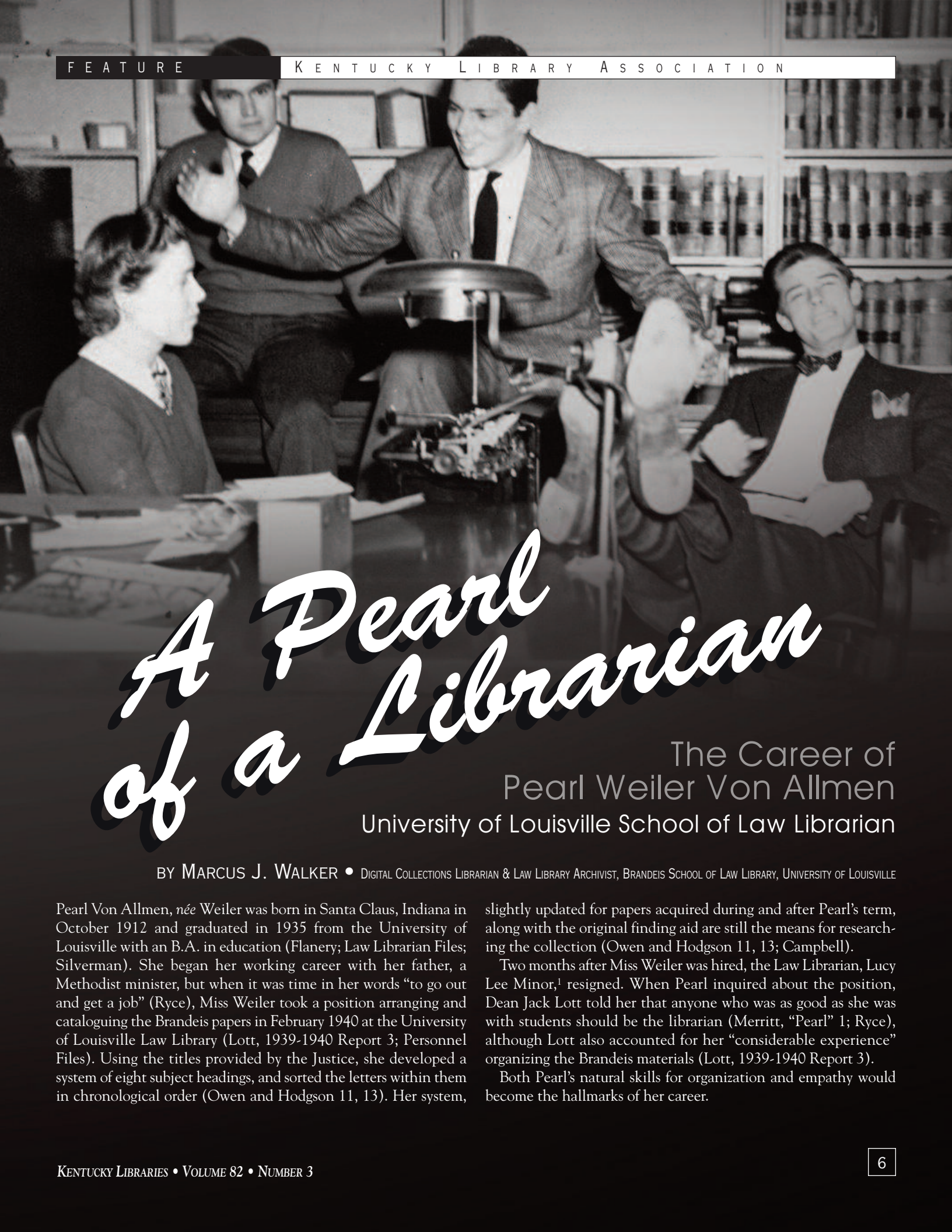
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# A Pearl of a Librarian

The Career of  
Pearl Weiler Von Allmen

University of Louisville School of Law Librarian

BY MARCUS J. WALKER • DIGITAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARIAN & LAW LIBRARY ARCHIVIST, BRANDEIS SCHOOL OF LAW LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

Pearl Von Allmen, *née* Weiler was born in Santa Claus, Indiana in October 1912 and graduated in 1935 from the University of Louisville with an B.A. in education (Flanery; Law Librarian Files; Silverman). She began her working career with her father, a Methodist minister, but when it was time in her words “to go out and get a job” (Ryce), Miss Weiler took a position arranging and cataloguing the Brandeis papers in February 1940 at the University of Louisville Law Library (Lott, 1939-1940 Report 3; Personnel Files). Using the titles provided by the Justice, she developed a system of eight subject headings, and sorted the letters within them in chronological order (Owen and Hodgson 11, 13). Her system,

slightly updated for papers acquired during and after Pearl’s term, along with the original finding aid are still the means for researching the collection (Owen and Hodgson 11, 13; Campbell).

Two months after Miss Weiler was hired, the Law Librarian, Lucy Lee Minor,<sup>1</sup> resigned. When Pearl inquired about the position, Dean Jack Lott told her that anyone who was as good as she was with students should be the librarian (Merritt, “Pearl” 1; Ryce), although Lott also accounted for her “considerable experience” organizing the Brandeis materials (Lott, 1939-1940 Report 3).

Both Pearl’s natural skills for organization and empathy would become the hallmarks of her career.

When Jens Fredrick Larsen first designed the Attila Cox Library, he intended the space to hold 25,000 volumes (McClain 1). Unfortunately, the architect failed to consider the larger size of law materials (Coyte 29), and despite the addition of a two-story alcove (Coyte 29-30), the number of items the main space held still fell short of that total (Report on Law Library Facilities 1, 5).<sup>2</sup> Overflow materials had to be stored in the basement, making them inaccessible during periods when class was in session (Coyte 38; Report on Law Library Facilities 5), and donations to the library were likely to remain unprocessed due to the lack of shelving (Russell, 1946-1947 Report 2).<sup>3</sup> Despite the shortcomings of the space – indeed, perhaps because of them – Pearl’s “ability, efficiency, and enthusiasm” of handling the library was praised from her very first year (Lott, 1940-1941 Report 10; Lott, 1945-1946 Report 3; Russell, 1947-1948 Report 4).

With the law school population plummeting from 74 students during the 1940-1941 school year to “less than ten” in spring 1943, the remaining staff had to undertake additional duties, the librarian being no exception (Coyte 34; Lott, 1940-1941 Report 8; Russell, 1943-1944 Report 1; Russell to McCormick). Possibly the least glamorous of those extra duties – certainly the most stereotypical – was Pearl assuming the role of school secretary (Weiler to Callaghan; Weiler to American Law Book Company).<sup>4</sup>

However, another of Pearl’s jobs was being the point of contact for those overseas during World War II. Miss Weiler and the remaining law school personnel had received letters from students and alumni in the Armed Forces inquiring about their classmates and the law school. In response, Pearl proposed the *News Letter* (Russell, 1944-1945 Report 2). At the end of the first issue, she implored her readers to “keep writing,” (Weiler, *Law School News* 3) and they very much complied. Distribution of the *News Letters* were originally intended for the Class of 1940 on, however circulation expanded

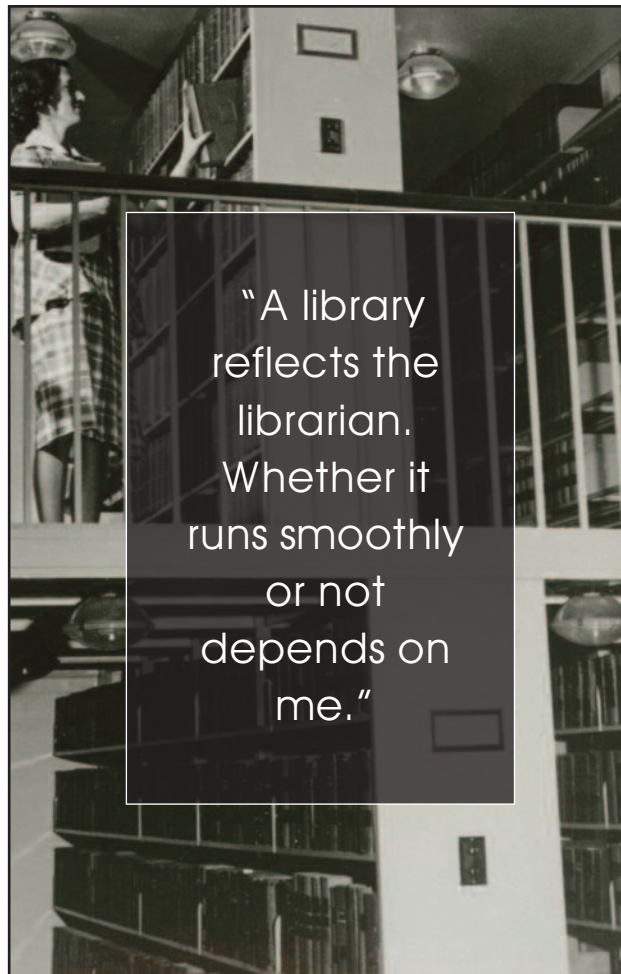
to include at least two hundred alums from more than a dozen graduating classes (Weiler, *Law School News* 1; Russell, 1944-1945 Report 2), allowing nine more issues to be published before Miss Weiler ended the *News Letters* in February 1946 (Weiler, *News Letter* 1).

Miss Weiler’s marriage to Albert Von Allmen did not take her away from the library immediately (“Weddings”), but as it was the mid-twentieth century, her domestic role eventually overtook her career, and Pearl stepped down in September 1947 (Russell, 1947-1948 Report 4; Ryce).

Mrs. Von Allmen’s successor, Cara Fiskien, came to the law school from the main University of Louisville Library (Russell, 1947-1948 Report 4; Coyte 38). She served as law librarian for two years, resigning in January 1950 (Russell, 1947-1948 Report 4; Russell, 1949-1950 Report 3). Miss Fiskien – by then Mrs. Kirven – was followed by School of Law graduate Mary Jo Arterberry, but she left after six months (Russell, 1949-1950 Report 3). When Professor James Merritt, then the faculty supervisor of the library, asked Pearl to return as librarian (Russell, 1949-1950 Report 2, Ryce)<sup>5</sup>, her August reappointment was anticipated “with a great deal of pleasure” (Russell, 1949-1950 Report 3).

As little happened with shelving woes in the interim, Mrs. Von Allmen returned to a still overfilled library. Slight relief came when additional stacks were constructed in 1954 and the basement extension two years later (Coyte 43; Law Librarian Files). The increase in shelving was fortunate, because in 1957, the collec-

tion of the Louisville Law Library Company consisting of some 20,000 volumes was donated to the School of Law (Coyte 44). Although Pearl worked to weed and sell unneeded duplicates (Coyte 45-47), by the point the gift was completely processed, the reported number of volumes in the School of Law collection was 49,471, nearly double the original *alleged* capacity of the Cox



<sup>1</sup> Miss Minor is notable in her own right, as she was heavily responsible for the relocation of the collection from the old downtown law school building to campus (Biggs; “Brandeis Gifts”).

<sup>2</sup> That report, written in 1947, gave the volume count as 23,637.

<sup>3</sup> The situation was especially ironic, as inadequate space and the fragmentation of the collection were specific concerns raised regarding the library in the downtown facility (Horack 3, 4; McClain 2).

<sup>4</sup> In those letters, Pearl referred to herself as “Secretary,” not “Librarian” or “Law Librarian” as she does in other correspondence, including the *News Letters* below.

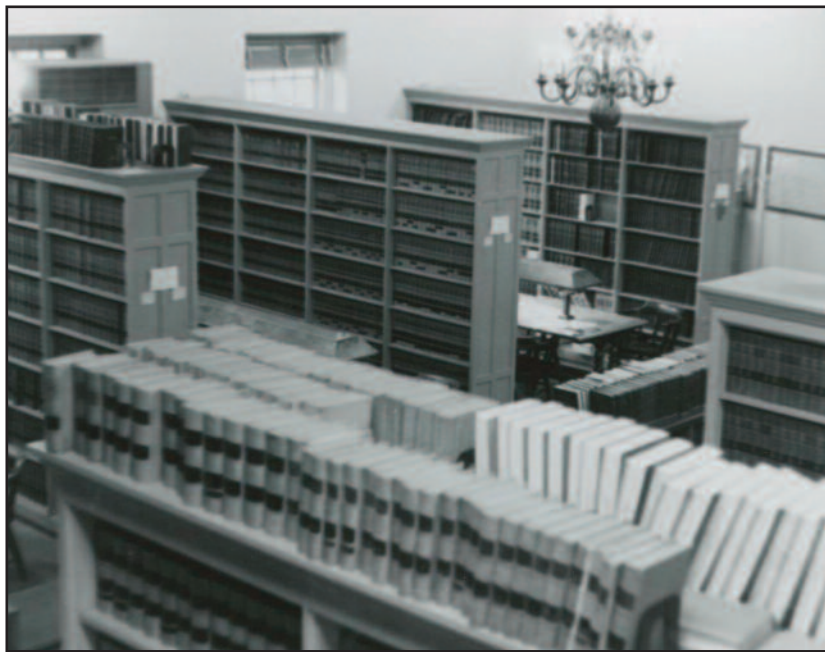
<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Merritt also left the School of Law temporarily, spending a year as Librarian at Hastings School of Law before returning to Louisville (Russell, 1947-1948 Report 1; Russell, 1948-1949 Report 1).

Library (Informational Take-off).

In the midst of having to perform shelving “legerdemain,” Pearl regularly attended conferences and courses held by the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) (Csaky; Law Librarian Files; Ryce). By 1961, the biennial law librarian institutes along with Mrs. Von Allmen’s on-the-job, “old-fashioned, hard-working, self-made” skill earned her professional certification by AALL (Coyte 84-85; Csaky 191-192; Law Librarian Files).

In July 1965, Pearl was awarded faculty status, making her the first female faculty member in the School of Law (1965 Board of Trustees; Coyte 85; Merritt, “Pearl” 1; Ryce). While she was the designated instructor for legal research that fall, unlike Csaky and Ryce stated, it was not the first time Pearl was a teacher in the law school, and that might have been her most impressive contribution during the war. Whether it was out of necessity, respect, or some combination, the former Miss Weiler was entrusted with the Legal Bibliography course during the 1944 and 1945 calendar years (Russell, 1943-1944 Report 2; Faculty Minutes). There was, however, a notable difference: the wartime class roster consisted of perhaps eight students, while as faculty she taught every first-year student, with as many as 225 in an incoming class (Merritt to Dillon 2; Merritt, “Pearl” 1).

Mrs. Von Allmen continued to advance both as law faculty and as a librarian. The same year she became faculty, Pearl was elected president of the Louisville Library Club and as Secretary-Treasurer of the Southeastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries (SEAALL) (Coyte 85). In 1967, she was promoted to Assistant Professor and Law Librarian (1966 Board of Trustees; Coyte 85). In 1970, Pearl became Associate Professor, Vice President of SEAALL, and was selected as teacher of the year by the law school chapter of the Sigma Delta Kappa legal fraternity (1970 Board of Trustees; Merritt to Dillon 2; Merritt, “Pearl” 1; Ryce). Two years later, Mrs.



Von Allmen was elected as SEAALL President (Csaky 192; Merritt, “Pearl” 1; Ryce).

James Merritt, by then Dean of the School of Law, wrote a letter to University President William Ekstrom recommending promotion for Mrs. Von Allmen to full Professor along with an equivalent salary adjustment in December 1971. While Ekstrom did not object to an increase in salary, he was “not prepared... to recommend the promotion of rank” as he felt her rise in rank was too fast. “If you are suggesting discrimination,” Ekstrom wrote, “I think you will have to contend that a male librarian without a degree in either law or library science would have been promoted more rapidly!” Whether or not there was discrimination, Pearl was still being judged by standards that would not have been applied to her either time she was hired.<sup>6</sup>

As such, Dean Merritt wrote John Dillon, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, admitting he “may have presented the matter to [President Ekstrom] with an insufficient background” (1). Merritt listed Mrs. Von Allmen’s teaching duties, the recognition she received from faculty and students, her contribution to the textbook *Fundamentals of Legal Research* (“the standard text in the field”), the length of time she served as law librarian,<sup>7</sup> her ability to “manag[e] the law library under almost impossible circumstances of student overcrowding and lack of shelf space,” and, finally, her low salary in comparison to her peers nationally and locally (2-3). That time, Merritt’s case succeeded, and Pearl received full

Professorship and an increase in salary (1972 Board of Trustees; Law Librarian Files).

Perhaps another reason Pearl finally received the recognition she deserved from the University administration is because her peers clearly already respected her; by that time, the librarian “without a degree in law or library science” had been elected president of SEAALL (Csaky 192; Law Librarian Files; Ryce).

<sup>6</sup> The need for a law librarian to have a degree in either law or library science was then only a recent occurrence. In January 1967, a joint committee of the Association of American Law Schools (AALS) and the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) proposed a change in standards pertaining to law school libraries and librarians (1967 Annual Meeting, 24; Joint Committee (1967), 230-231), which both organizations approved in 1968 (1969 Annual Meeting, 14; Joint Committee (1969), 265). The standards, self-stated to be “much higher” than those they replaced, required legal and library education as well as meeting AALL certification qualifications (1969 Annual Meeting, 14; Joint Committee (1969), 265). However, although the AALL placed a premium on law and library degrees, it was still possible to be certified with no degrees at all provided the candidate had “[l]ong-term responsible professional library experience and outstanding contribution to the profession” (Certification, 434). Pearl, as you recall, had been certified for quite some time prior.

<sup>7</sup> Merritt gave her tenure as “thirty-two years,” which would credit her with the time she had spent away from the Law Library.

After decades of calls for an expansion to the library facilities (Hervey; Report on Law Library Facilities 5; Von Allmen, "Some Facts" 1),<sup>8</sup> on December 1, 1971, Mrs. Von Allmen was invited to join an advisory committee for an addition to the law school building (Elbert to Von Allmen). Pearl put her standard amount of work into planning – she gathered materials on recently relocated or constructed law libraries; consulted with librarians involved in like projects on matters as varied as measurements, furniture, and periodical boxes; drew plans; and created detailed reports based on her findings and wishes (Law Librarian Files).

The new wing was anticipated to be ready around the winter of 1973-1974 (L&N; Ryce). While the structure itself was complete, delays in the purchase of shelving pushed the relocation back to August 1974 (UL Gets New Law Library). That would turn out to be a tragedy.

In March 1974, not long after she was interviewed for the article above, Pearl was struck by a cerebral hemorrhage and soon went into a deep coma (Csaky, Merritt to Miller). She was granted six months paid leave (1974 Board of Trustees) and even a raise in the interim in anticipation of her return (Law Librarian Files; Miller to Von Allmen).

Pearl never recovered, and she passed away on November 8, 1974. Colleagues recalled her strength, loyalty, honesty, enthusi-

asm, and cordiality (Csaky 191-192, Merritt, "Pearl" 1-2, Petrilli), and family and friends donated money to the law school on her behalf (Law Librarian Files).

I will end this article with two anecdotes, as they seem to give even more personality to Mrs. Von Allmen.

A colleague of hers, Barbara Thompson, recalled a time when she felt intimidated asking to use a stapler from the library her first year on the job. Eventually, she worked up the courage to ask Pearl to borrow the stapler for an hour. *Exactly one hour later*, Thompson said, Pearl came to her office and took the stapler right out of her hand. "Your hour's up."

Yet when another less functional office supply resulted in the donation of "The Pearl Von Allmen and/or James Merritt Memorial Pair of Scissors with Attached String Thereto," Pearl was ready to give the snark right back and accepted the scissors "on behalf of the numerous cut ups who patronize our hallowed halls" (Law Librarian Files).

I find it hard not to respect someone like that.

Marcus J. Walker  
[marcus.walker@louisville.edu](mailto:marcus.walker@louisville.edu)

<sup>8</sup> In fairness to the architect, Jens Larsen, although he did not realize the difference of size between typical library materials and law books, he did intend for the law school building to be built with wings from its outset (McClain, "Newsletter" 1).

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