

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Interview

In the PaLRaP Spotlight: Chris Ritter

Head Librarian, Antique Automobile Club of America (AACA)

Library & Research Center, Hershey, PA



Interview by Stephanie Campbell

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Tell us a little about yourself, specifically, your career trajectory and what led you to special librarianship?

Although I did play “library” as a 7-year-old (all of my picture books had date due slips and pockets), I didn’t grow up wanting to be a librarian. I entered Bloomsburg University as a marketing major but changed course when I fell in love with the history electives I was taking. I’d ultimately graduate with a history degree, but during my time at Bloomsburg I was a student worker at the town’s public library. I’d work a few hours in the evenings and all day every Saturday. The Bloomsburg Public Library staff were pleased that I actually showed up every Saturday and, even better, I wasn’t hung over.

During my time at Bloomsburg, I got to interact with the public and I quickly fell in love with the work. I also got to watch the director, Hal Pratt, run the library and tell stories during children's events. Hal was a master storyteller and a great director and he always seemed to handle his job with ease.

When I graduated from Bloomsburg, I didn't have too many job options (I had a degree in history after all), but a little town north of my hometown of Reading, was looking for a director for their small public library. I didn't immediately need a library degree so, in August, 2001 I started working for the Bethel-Tulpehocken Public Library. It was a small library so I did just about everything from collection development to children's programming. I even cleaned the bathrooms on a regular basis. From 2003 to 2004 I was the cataloger at the Lower Macungie Library and returned to Berks County again from 2004 to 2008 when I was the director at the Wyomissing Public Library. I earned my library degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 2003.

By early 2008, I was burnt out and feeling unfulfilled working in the public library world and pondered a major career change. Just when I was about to become a realtor or flight instructor, the job opened up at the AACA Library. At the time, I enjoyed tinkering on airplanes and motorcycles and really wanted to do research on a regular basis. To top it off, Hershey was within commuting range of my house. I immediately hit it off with the AACA's Executive Director and their retiring librarian so, in November 2008, I made the leap into the special library world.

Can you briefly describe the AACA library's services for members and the public?

The [AACA Library](http://aacalibrary.org) (aacalibrary.org) was formed in the late 1970s as the library for the Antique Automobile Club of America, a car club whose focus is on restoring (and maintaining) factory-condition road vehicles. We're an automotive reference library that is open, and free, to the general public. For people unable to visit us in Hershey, we offer research services for a fee. Club members get 1.5 hours of free remote research every year.

Our collection contains over 2 million items including sales literature, shop manuals, handbooks, training aids, photographs, ads, event programs, press kits...the list is endless. If it has anything to do with the automotive industry, we probably have something on it. Like any library, the needs of our users are diverse. Some people come in to look through our latest automotive magazines while others scour manuals and service bulletins to make their vehicle run smoothly. We also do a fair amount of work for authors and television production companies.

The Harrisburg/Hershey area is home to numerous car shows and auctions. Can you share some statistics of research requests, visits, etc.?

Fall Meet week [the Eastern Division AACA National Fall Meet, considered one of the largest antique automobile shows and flea markets in the United States] in October is undoubtedly our busiest time on site. During that week over 300,000 people descend on Hershey for the world's largest and finest automotive swap meet. The week is topped off by a spectacular car show on Saturday. If the weather is bad that week, my library is elbow-to-elbow crazy. If the weather is good, things are manageable.

We stay busy throughout the rest of the year by processing more than 2,500 information requests. Our members are spread out across the globe so it is not uncommon to do work for a Pennsylvania resident in the morning, someone from California in the afternoon and then get an email overnight from Europe.

Our onsite traffic will probably explode in the near future. The AACA is in the process of buying a new building that will house a greatly expanded AACA Library and we hope to be in our new facility in 2020. The building is along Hershey Park Drive near Hershey's Giant Center. Hershey Park Drive has over 6 million people traveling on

it every year. I'm very excited for the future of the expanded facility but, if I'm being honest, I have to say that I'm a little nervous, too.

The kinograph film machine project described on your website is incredible. How many films have you recorded and uploaded to your YouTube channel?

We are quite proud of our film scanner, now known as "Mike's Movie Machine [named for Mike Reilly, AACA Library catalog librarian, who was instrumental in the project]." We didn't have the money to buy a commercial unit so, with a little imagination and elbow grease, we built our own. If you aren't familiar with the project, the machine takes a picture of every frame of a 16mm film. Software then stabilizes the image, we overlay the audio, and, voila, our films are digitized. While commercial units cost over \$100,000, we have a little more than \$5,000 invested in ours and we used an Indiegogo campaign to fund it.

We have over 175 videos on our [YouTube page](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyQIIDBS93GzsPART300GSw) (some of them are library spoofs) ([youtube.com/channel/UCyQIIDBS93GzsPART300GSw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyQIIDBS93GzsPART300GSw)) and probably 50 of those films are the work of our Movie Machine. We have close to three hundred 16mm films in our collection so there's plenty more scanning to be done. The output quality of our machine is awesome, producing better than 2k resolution. Not bad for something that started its life in my garage.

The bookmobile project is another exciting development. What are your plans for using it?

Yeah, our bookmobile project is pretty exciting and we proudly unveiled it at our spring meet in Charlotte in early April. The AACA Library bookmobile isn't like any other bookmobile you see on the road today – it's a 1955 Chevrolet that served as one of Anderson County, South Carolina's bookmobiles from 1956 to 1990. From 1990 until 2011, the truck sat unused in a storage garage until two of our members purchased the garage with all of the contents inside. Those two guys then donated the truck to us in 2011 and it has undergone a 7-year restoration. Each nut, bolt, wire and everything else was replaced or restored, bringing the truck back to its original beauty.

Going forward, it will serve as an ambassador to the old car hobby. We'll have it at plenty of AACA events across the country, but it's going to do its best work at non-club events where we can expose people to our club, talk about libraries in general and the importance of preserving history. We'll be visiting schools, hospitals, civic clubs, parades and pretty much anywhere we're invited. There's even a children's book in development so the sky's the limit.

Describe a day-in-the-life at the AACA Library.

Well, we are a small library with a small staff so every day is different. Yesterday started with some phone calls and basic research that covered 1918 Oldsmobile trucks, a 1965 Ford Mustang, 1993 Ford Ranger accessories and 1940 Chevrolet station wagons. Pretty diverse range, right?

Then we received a large shipment of donations that included press kits, sales catalogs and reference books. These items weren't immediately cataloged, just separated for the next step which will see us searching our own collection to make sure we don't add any duplicates.

Later in the day, I researched some recent donations of Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild models and literature then shot a video with a Guild participant for our next library update video. (If you aren't familiar with the Guild, look it up or visit my library because it was awesome.)

I ended the day by reading some books about designing new libraries and moving large collections. Our building process will start this time next year so I better get back to reading!

Can you tell us why you became a librarian/why you do what you do?

I'm a librarian at the AACA Library because I love hands-on research. I love getting my fingers dirty with old paper and I also know what it feels like to restore a car and be in desperate need of help. Getting an old car to start after it has been dormant for decades is a huge rush and I like knowing that sometimes I play a small part in solving a puzzle.

My favorite library moment came when a group of students from Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport visited my library one Saturday morning. When they first showed up, they were quite lethargic and less than thrilled to be in a library on a cold Saturday morning. I gave them a quick overview of the library and turned them loose in the stacks. When they saw all of the material we had they were literally running through the place yelling "Look at this!" To see that transformation, in less than an hour, was pretty special and I think those kids will look at libraries a little differently now, too.