PERMANENT PUZZLE EXHIBIT

IN THE SLOCUM ROOM
PRESERVING A PUZZLE COLLECTION for Future Generations

by Rik van Grol

In 2006, the Slocum Room was opened, which is located in the Lilly Library of Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. Jerry Slocum donated his entire collection of over 30,000 puzzles to the library in order to preserve the collection for the future. In March 2010, I visited the Lilly Library together with Jerry Slocum and a few other collectors. During the visit we looked at the collection and were informed about the way the collection is being managed and preserved, but above all made available for research, teaching and the general public. The following information reports on our visit, but predominately addresses the issue of preserving a puzzle collection for future generations.
When Jerry’s collection kept growing he constructed a building in his garden solely to house his puzzles. Already at that time he realized that if he wanted his collection to remain intact that he needed to find a good home for it. We often see wonderful collections being lost because they are not kept together as a collection (e.g. the John Ergatoudis collection). After Jerry Slocum retired in 1993, he finally had the time to start looking for a way to organize “eternal” life for his collection. It took him well over a decade to find a suitable location.

Just preserving the puzzles for the future is not so difficult. Buy a small building or warehouse, store the collection, lock it up and throw away the key. However, what is the use for a collection if nobody can ever look at it, let alone try out the individual puzzles that make up the collection. So, Jerry’s search was not just for preservation, but also for accessibility. At first Jerry focused on museums, which seems logical since the objective of museums is preservation and presentation. Museums organize exhibitions and take good care of their collections.

However, accessibility is only partly covered by exhibiting collections to the public. In the case of puzzles you would like to hold them and study them closely. This is generally not possible in museums. Museums decide what is on display and generally collections may not be touched. After Jerry realized this, he shifted his attention to libraries. Libraries hold collections of books and make them available to the public. Of course the borrowing-aspect may not be suitable for puzzles (too vulnerable), but this is also true for old and valuable books.

In the 1990s and the 2000s Jerry visited many libraries while he was working on several of his books. Each time he would also study the way the library operates. The differences were quite considerable. Then of course the library should also be interested in puzzles. For a library to store a collection of puzzles is quite novel. In the end it was the Lilly Library that came out as the best option, both in the way they operate and their enthusiasm in receiving such a special collection. Before elaborating on this, first a bit of history about the Lilly Library.

In 2010, the Lilly Library celebrated its 50th birthday. Indiana University (IU) began acquiring a significant collection of rare books in the early twentieth century, and by 1942 the university established a Department of Rare Books and Special Collections within the Indiana University Libraries. The history of the Lilly Library started with the donation by Josiah Kirby Lilly Jr. of some 20,000 rare books and 17,000 rare manuscripts between 1954 and 1957. The collection from Lilly was one of the most important private collections in the world, and when it was combined with the collection from the university the result was a collection of remarkable scope and significance. Between 1957 and 1960 the collection was further enriched with many individual and collective purchases. In 1960, IU President Wells proposed the construction of a separate building to house the collection, and soon enough public money was raised and the Lilly Library was realized.

In the years to follow the Lilly Library kept on enriching and broadening the collection under the leadership of David A. Randall (former principal bookseller to Mr. Lilly), William R. Cagle, Lisa Browar, and since 2001, Breon Mitchell.

Above: Flat puzzles are individually stored in a folded piece of paper in an envelope. At right: Bloomington Campus, ALF, forklift in vault.
The donation of the puzzle collection came with a few conditions:

- to keep the collection together and expand it—maintaining the collection
- make available a permanent room for several purposes—the Slocum Room
- to display a permanent overview of the puzzle collection
- to prepare temporary exhibitions of puzzles
- to have hands-on puzzles to try out
- to give lectures on puzzles and related subjects
- to preserve the collection the best possible way, and last but not least,
- to have the entire collection available for viewing and study—accessibility

Maintaining the Collection

The first condition is the preservation of the collection. Having it being split up would be a waste. Not to enlarge and broaden the collection, such is done with some other collections, would also be a bad thing. A true collection needs to be cherished, improved, and expanded. To ensure this, Jerry has made a substantial donation to the Lilly Library such that from the interests a curator can be paid. For further expansion the collection depends mainly on gifts, and this is carefully coordinated, as not every gift would improve the collection. Remember that each puzzle received needs to be processed and the time of the curator is limited. A few years ago you may have noticed the announcement in CFF about a Curator of Puzzles [2]. In July 2007, Jillian Hinichliffe enthusiastically took up the job [3]. For the upcoming time she is extremely busy receiving and processing the well over 30,000 puzzles. As of 2011, 25,000 puzzles have been sent to Bloomington. For the time being Jerry will keep a small but representative part of his collection at his Puzzle Museum in Beverly Hills, CA.

The Slocum Room

A large and easily accessible room on the ground floor of the Lilly Library is called the Slocum Room. This is the permanent room in which visitors can look at both a permanent and a temporary exhibition of puzzles. They can also try out over a dozen puzzles, and there are occasional lectures about the puzzle collection. Since its opening it has become one of the most popular areas of the Lilly Library.

Preservation of the Puzzle Collection

The preservation of a collection seems trivial, but you need to realize that only a small part of the collection will be on display. The majority will be stored. Being stored, a few things are important: (1) the storage place should be safe, not so much against burglary, but in terms of its climate, (2) the handling, packaging and storage should not damage the puzzles. As for (1), the puzzles are partly stored onsite at the Lilly Library, and off-site in the Auxiliary Library Facility (ALF), see [4] and [5]. Both locations have robust anti-theft protection and controlled climate conditions. The ALF is huge, and a second even bigger storage space has been built right next to it. As for (2), each of the 30,000 puzzles will go through a process in which they are registered and packaged. The bulk of the puzzles will be packaged together into made-to-order boxes or in standard file boxes (grouped by puzzle type). The old and/or delicate puzzles will be individually packaged into made-to-order storage boxes. Some boxes are handmade, some by entering hand-gathered measurements into a state-of-the-art Kasemake boxmaking machine, one of only six in the USA. All materials used are acid-free and of archival quality. This is especially important for documents, but it may be better for puzzles as well. For puzzles probably the humidity is more important. In the Lilly Library and in ALF the humidity is kept at respectively 55% and 30%.

Accessibility of the Puzzle Collection

The last condition, an important one for choosing the Lilly Library, is the accessibility of the entire collection of puzzles. Many libraries allow full access, but it may take days to get what you are looking for into the reading room. At the Lilly Library you can order a puzzle (or several) and usually have them delivered to the “reading” room the same day. Puzzles can be studied and handled in the reading room. They cannot be taken out of the room, but after consultation users are often allowed to take pictures. In principle puzzles cannot be mixed up (especially sequential movement puzzles), but you can always ask. So far about 25,000 puzzle have been delivered by Jerry to the Lilly Library. Currently you can find more than 24,000 puzzles on the website [6].

References

[2] Rik van Grol, Puzzle News (8), CFF 64 (2004), pp. 29-31

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