

PROFILES: A Pilgrim's Progress: Decherd Turner, 1922-2002

by Valerie Hotchkiss

Decherd Turner was destined to be a librarian. True, he was born a farm boy in Pike County, Missouri, but he had the support of his family to follow the road of life in whatever direction he had the inclination and talent to go. At first, he thought he wanted to be a Presbyterian minister. He received the requisite training and ordination at Vanderbilt University and even worked for a few years as a minister. It was not long, however, before life led him down the equally sacred path towards librarianship.

The story goes that his mother went to a fortune teller when she was pregnant. The prophetess said, "You will have a boy and he will be healthy. Otherwise, I can't divine very much because I can't see past the books — rooms and rooms full of books." His mother helped Fate along by giving Decherd an endless supply of books, some of which he read while ploughing the furrows on their farm. In the summer of 2001, one year to the day before Decherd died, I made a little pilgrimage to his hometown of Louisiana, Missouri, on the way home from vacation. Standing on the high bluffs overlooking his beautiful Mississippi, I phoned Decherd. He made me stay on the line while he directed me to the family plot, then told me to call again from town so he could give me a tour. It was one of those rare times in life when a cell phone actually served a good purpose.

The most notable structure in town is a Carnegie Library, a grand edifice for such a small hamlet, replete with renaissance printers' devices incised in stone above the door. My visit inspired him, a few days later, to send me a letter with a story about that same library:

In my day the librarian was Miss Erwin, whom I thought to be a hundred and fifty years old, but from her I heard something that changed my life. I was about ten or eleven years old when one Saturday afternoon, while my parents were doing some shopping in town, I was sitting in the Library. Of course, country kids couldn't check out books, but we were permitted to read and use whatever we wanted inside the Library — as long as we were quiet. Well, on this Saturday I overheard Miss Erwin tell another ancient dame about a communication she had received from her nephew, who was a librarian at Washington University in St. Louis. Now what was the meaning of this? It changed my life. I had always thought that only old ladies could be librarians. This was a revelation. I suddenly realized that a man could be a librarian!

And what a librarian he became. He transformed Bridwell Library at Southern Methodist University from a tiny seminary collection into a powerhouse for the support of theological education. And that was not his only — or even his major — accomplishment. He created, where the land was still empty and void, a truly great rare book and manuscript collection at Bridwell, and he did it with flair. From the Library's extraordinary holdings of fine press printing, crowned, as it were, with Decherd's famous "Triple Crown,"¹ to one of the nation's largest collections of fifteenth-century books, known as incunabula. The incunabula collecting got underway with a bang when he acquired over 200 incunabula in one fell swoop. When Decherd did a thing, he did it with style.

¹ The "Triple Crown" of fine press printing, as defined and achieved by Decherd Turner, is the attainment of the vellum printings of the Kelmscott Chaucer (1896; one of only thirteen copies printed on vellum), the Doves Press Bible (1903-1905; one of two copies on vellum), and the Ashendene Dante (1909; one of six copies on vellum). Since there are limited vellum copies of each — and only two of the Doves Bible — it is a feat that would be hard to match. Needless to say, Bridwell Library houses these three great works printed on paper as well.

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Each collecting coup for Bridwell was celebrated in the Perkins Chapel at SMU. This was his custom partially because the showman in Decherd wanted to flaunt the treasures he had brought to Dallas, but also because of his genuine and heartfelt belief that Gutenberg's Bible, Diderot's encyclopedia, and Matisse's *Jazz* all had equal value as God's creations. In short, this was Decherd's creed. For thirty years, 1950 to 1980, he stayed faithful to his creed, building a magnificent collection of rare books and manuscripts to stand side by side, not as a complement, but as an integral part of the theological collections at Bridwell. Meanwhile, the religious studies holdings grew to become the largest theological library west of the Mississippi. To accommodate the burgeoning collections, he found the resources to expand the building and engaged a young architect named Frank Gehry to draw up some plans. Alas, Decherd said that Gehry's design struck the SMU Board of Trustees as too outré at the time. Decherd's forward-thinking ways also served him well as president of the American Theological Library Association in the decisive years when the ATLA Index and Microfilming projects got underway.

A brief review of only the punch lines of some of Decherd's book collecting anecdotes will serve to illustrate that nothing could stop this Grand Acquisitor from living according to his creed. There was a certain mink coat purchased from Nieman's and delivered (with her own tags sewn in) to a woman in England as part of the deal he made to get the Doves Press Bible on vellum for Bridwell. He said the SMU business manager had a heart attack shortly after receiving the bill. The man recovered from the attack, but never from that invoice. Then there was the time Decherd needed to examine a collection of Irish pamphlets in a filthy coal cellar in New York, two hours before leaving for the airport. Rather than get his traveling clothes dirty, he took them off and studied the collection buck naked for two hours.

After thirty years as *spiritus movens* at Bridwell, Decherd headed south to direct the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin. There, his book capers grew by leaps and bounds. In 1986, with the help of his friend and supporter Ross Perot, Decherd brought the famous Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection to the University of Texas. A stipulation of the contract, however, was that he never let the collection out of his sight during transport from Manhattan to Austin. The art shippers packed their van full of such treasures as the first book in English, the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (1475) printed by William Caxton, the four folios of Shakespeare, the first complete Bible in English (1535 Coverdale), the 1611 King James Bible and 1,350 other books and manuscripts from the years 1475 to 1700. When the van pulled away from the curb, Decherd, true to character, jumped in a cab and yelled, "Follow that van!" setting off a madcap rush through New York traffic. (He said he had always wanted to say that.) This kind of joy and whimsy, mixed with the acumen of a businessman and the nerve of a card sharp, were the hallmarks of Decherd Turner's approach to collection development. In addition to the Pforzheimer Collection, Decherd was responsible for the acquisition of the David O. Selznick MGM Archives, the Giorgio Uzielli Aldine Collection, the Robert Lee Wolff Collection of nineteenth-century authors' manuscripts, and a host of other significant acquisitions that quickly propelled the Harry Ransom Center at Austin to the top tier of rare book and manuscript libraries in the country.

Francis of Assisi, whom Decherd admired, said, "It is in giving that we receive." Decherd followed this creed, too. His generosity was extravagant and inspirational. Former Perkins students often speak of his gestures of kindness: a job, a loan, some good advice, or private lessons in the history of books and printing. Decherd brought out the best in others because he was himself the soul of generosity. It was the generosity he inspired in oil men (and women), bankers, business people, and bibliophiles that allowed him to build the collections for which two Texas institutions are now famous.

Decherd's generosity poured forth in the form of little gestures as well. On the day he died, I remember thinking particularly of his neighbor's dog, whom he walked every morning, and all the papers that would not be carefully put on the stoops in the neighborhood as man and dog made their rounds. I thought of the possum that he fed every night, his last stray cat, the bird feeders in his yard that would run empty without him there to tend to things, and all of us humans besides, whom he touched with kindnesses large and small.

Decherd would talk to anyone about books. He never turned anyone down. It sometimes happens that I get a call from the front desk, where someone is asking for advice about an old Bible — sometimes so old, I am told by the visitor, that it is dated in Roman numerals! I know it is just some old nineteenth-century family Bible with leather rot, and I know the anxious visitor thinks it is a Gutenberg and has dollar signs in his eyes. But then I think, "What would Decherd do?" and I cheerfully go out to the desk and lavish my attentions on the visitor and book. I do this not only on the far-

off chance that it might be the Quedlinburg Gospels (something that actually happened to Decherd), but also because Decherd thought every librarian should shine a little bibliographic light wherever possible.

It was not just books and book people that Decherd took under his wing. There are the large gestures of generosity, as when he provided housing, a stable home life, and education for two foreign students, whom he eventually adopted. He also saved more than a few fine presses from extinction and helped a number of authors and artists through difficult times. His most celebrated rescue was of John Howard Griffin, author of *Black Like Me* (1961), whom he hid from the public eye when racial tensions in Dallas ran so high that Griffin feared for his life. Indeed Decherd's other great cause in life was civil rights of which he was an early and vocal supporter.

Decherd loved books and Decherd loved people. And I am not sure he could always distinguish between the two. He said he talked to his books, calling them his "in-house faculty." He once wrote, "When I look at a shelf of spines, I have the same feeling another might when browsing an old family album." For his seventy-fifth birthday, Decherd gave gifts rather than receiving them. And what better gift than a book? He donated his most precious books to Bridwell Library, each delivered with a thoughtful note, designating it as a gift in honor of a particular friend, colleague, or supporter.

A fitting tribute to Decherd Turner might be "*Si monumentum requiris circumspice.*" Look to the two great collections at Bridwell and U.T. Austin put together with enthusiasm, skill, cunning, and sometimes sheer luck. Decherd left a legacy not only of books and great libraries, but also of librarians, inspired by his accomplishments and devotion. Those he taught carry on his work as keepers of our cultural heritage, continuing along the paths of bibliographic pilgrimage. The monument is still in the making. Indeed, Decherd always said that the text that spoke most eloquently to him when contemplating the passing of a man was a passage from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress*:

'I am going to my Father's; and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage; and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought his battles who now will be my Rewarder.' When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the riverside; into which as he went he said, 'Death, where is thy sting?' And as he went down deeper, he said, 'Grave, where is thy victory?' So he passed over; and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

I have no doubt that heavenly trumpets sounded for Decherd Turner, librarian, pastor, collection builder, and bibliophile.