

For Lack of a Nail

Jean-Paul Revel, Caltech.

A few months ago I read a most exciting article in a scientific magazine. It seemed to me that the ideas presented had the potential to revolutionize all of microscopy and I got very excited at the vistas opened by this unexpected departure from the accepted dogma. The article was only a summary of the current status of the research in the field and I resolved to probe deeper. Since I read the piece just as I was ready to go to sleep I trusted my memory in the unreasonable belief that, should my memory fail, I could always access a computer database to retrieve the information when I needed it. I even recollect feeling very virtuous when, the very next morning, I entered the data into my files. At least I think I remember that.

Well the time has come when I needed it. So I turned to my trusty bibliographic database only to discover that there was no trace of the article I was looking for. What a blow! Had I just dreamed putting it in? Was this a consequence of the tribulations (about which more below) which had befallen me recently? Or was I being persecuted once more by inanimate, or may be I should say nearly animate programs? I have quite a history of this. A few years ago, in the early days of desk computers I had devised a bibliographic system for myself. That worked well for a while, but the computer had its own operating system, incompatible with DOS or even CPM (remember CPM?). When the computer died all I had left was a bunch of tapes with my data on it. Oh, I could go to a colleague who had an instrument of the same make, but that was across the campus and while useful in emergencies (writing a paper) was none too convenient for everyday use. So, egged on by graduate students and post docs, I bought a program, which seemed to me overpriced but at least was capable of very fast searches, and which would work with the lab's first PC. The important old references which were on the useless tapes got to be reentered little by little, new references were put in and the database grew to several thousand entries in no time at all. Problems developed when the company which had issued the database decided that they would no longer support it. On top of that I had found that entering new data in a useful format was a cumbersome and slow process. So I decided that the time had come to look for something better, more compliant to my bidding. The first program I tried worked nicely except for the fact that if a search got even slightly complex the whole thing slowed down as if embedded in molasses. Can you begin to see why I feel persecuted? I resolved not to give in but to spring instead for another, highly recommended bibliographic tool. The trouble there, it soon developed, was that it seemed to have been written specifically for librarians, who need to know all kinds of stuff that I had little use for. All I wanted was to do was to enter references easily, as they came along, and to find them fast when needed. I quickly got tired of the enormous menus which one had to wade through before anything could be committed to either computer or printer. So my quest for the right program continued. The next one I had a brush with did not get a real try because the Demo, which could be bought reasonably cheaply, was actually a time bomb, designed to stop working after a couple of weeks. A truly demonic Demo, no? At first I could not get the program to work and by the time I had surmounted that obstacle I had to leave on a trip and by the time I came back, my desk was piled up and by the time my desk was "clean" the program had expired. I finally did find a program I liked a lot. It popped up when I needed it, transferred things to my papers with relative ease, worked very fast. Contrary to one of the other companies who referred my queries about software with which to enter data to their board of directors from whom I never heard, this outfit very courteously wrote modules to supplement those they already had to convert the output of databases like Dialog, Medline etc., to the format I needed.

What happened next is that my old computer gave up the ghost. The hard disk finally died and took my database with it. Gone was the file to which I had committed my night dreams. The drive was so old that the guys in the electronics shop clucked over it, shook their heads and said that it could not be easily replaced. That did it. The computer was pretty slow compared to modern instruments and some of the tasks I asked it to do took forever to complete. So I got a fancy new clone which came with Windows

installed. I then discovered that my favorite program doesn't like to run under Windows (or should I say that Windows finds it below its dignity to run a program as puny as my preferred bibliographic software?). Of course I don't have to run Windows just because it is installed. However I also bought a modern word processor so I could take things upstairs to the office once in a while and have letters printed out on a fancy laser printer, something I have not been able to do up to now, without incurring the wrath of secretaries who, if they can help it, do not want to retype stuff written in a different format. So now I have a word processor which likes, nay, needs, Windows and a bibliographic system which likes DOS and it is not always easy to have them pass things back and forth between them. Hopefully I'll vanquish. Don't anyone tell me that's what I deserve for using DOS based machines. Trouble is, to come back to where I started from, I still can't find the paper. It is just not in my database, a fact perhaps not surprising since by now the database is not the original file, but one reconstructed from back up files after the hard disk died. Did I say I felt persecuted? I shouldn't really because all my misadventures are of my own doing. I probably did not back up the files which contained the needed information often enough to save the wanted data before the computer quit. I gamely tried the database that our library maintains, but I can't find the article there either. That's probably because it has some cute, supposedly eye catching, title. Why should scientific magazine articles have titles that are as sensational as those in pulp newspapers? Sure the titles are good for a smile, but they are also an impediment to finding what one needs. So the promised article will have to wait until I manage to find the data. I am reading back issues of the magazine now, which are scattered at home and at the lab, but several are missing. Our library, bless its good intentions and efficient staff, has already sent last year's issues of the magazine to the bindery, so I can't browse there. I'll have to look through a colleague's collection and hope that we don't have the same gaps. Problem is...I will be traveling next week and when I come back I'll have to clean my desk and ... well you get the picture. ■

REGIONAL MSA/MAS EVENTS

- ✓ March 11/12 '93: AZ SEM Meeting. AZ State Univ. Robert Robertson: (602)9658618.
- ✓ March 16 '93: NYSEM Meeting. Columbia Univ. Joan W. Witkin: (212)305-3453.
- ✓ March 19 '93: Midwest SEM & Chicago-Electronic Material Chapter of ASM Joint Meeting "Practical Aspects of SEM-EDX": Motorola Galvin Center, Schaumburg, IL: Anita Brandes: (708)205-2525.
- ✓ March 25/27 '93: TX SEM Meeting. Corpus Christi, TX.
- ✓ May 12/14 '93: SEEMS & AL SEM Joint Meeting. Birmingham, AL. Charles Humphrey: (404)639-3306.
- ✓ May 21 '93: Central States EMS Spring Meeting: Sangamon State Univ., Springfield, IL. Nada Chang: (217)787-7743.

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COMING EVENTS

(***): Contact Microscopy Today for further information.

✓ March 22/26, 29/April 2, '92: **Practical Aspects of Scanning Electron Microscopy** (Univ. of MD Short Course). College Park, MD. Tim Maugel: (301)405-6898.

✓ April 4/8 '93: **8th Oxford Conference on Microscopy of Semiconducting Materials** (Royal Microscopy Society) Oxford, UK (***)

✓ April 18/23 '93: **EM Spring School** (Royal Microscopy Society) Manchester, UK (***)

✓ April 21/23 '93: **SCANNING '93 Conference** Orlando FL, Mary Sullivan (201)818-1010

✓ April 23/23 '93: **2nd Annual Cal State Univ EM Colloquium**. Hayward, CA/San Leandro Marina Inn. Nancy Smith: (510) 881-3527.

MAJOR ANALYTICAL INSTRUMENTATION CENTER (Univ of Florida). May 3/5 '93:

✓ **Transmission Electron Microscopy**
 ✓ **Practical Surface & Thin Film Analysis**
 ✓ **Scanning Delectron Microscopy**
 Gainesville, FL. (904)392-6985.

✓ May 5/7 '93: **1st International Symposium on Computerized Data Standards: Databases, Data Interchange, and Information Systems**. Atlanta, GA. Dorothy Savini: (215)299-5413.

✓ May 8/13 '93: **Food Structure Annual Meeting**. Chicago, IL. Dr. Ohm Johari: (708) 529-6677.

✓ May 9/13 '93: **EMAS '93**. Rimini, Italy (***)

✓ May 17/19 '93: **Computer Assisted Image Analysis and Measurement** (NC State Univ. Short Course) Raleigh, NC: (919)515-2261.

✓ May 17/19 '93: **TEM Specimen Preparation School** (Gatan R&D). Pleasanton, CA. Reza Alami: (510)463-0200.

✓ June 2/4 '93: **Trends in Cell and Molecular Biology - 18th Annual Meeting**. George Washington Univ., Washington, DC. Fred Lightfoot: (202)994-2881.

✓ June 6/10 '93: **Molecular Microspectroscopy** (9th Annual short course & workshop). Miami Univ., Oxford, OH. (513)529-2873.

✓ June 9/11 '93: **15th Symposium on Applied Surface Analysis**. Case Western Reserve Univ, Cleveland OH. Jeffrey I Eldridge (216)433-6074.

LEHIGH UNIV COURSES:

✓ June 14/18 '93: **Basic Course**.
 ✓ June 21/25 '93: **Advanced Courses**.
 ✓ June 21/24 '93: **Analytical EM..**
 ✓ June 24/25 '93: **Thin Specimen Prep**.
 Info: Prof. Joe Goldstein: Tel.: (215)758-5133

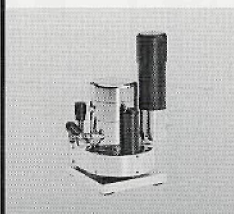
✓ July 11/16 '93: **Microbeam Analysis Annual Meeting**. Los Angeles, CA. Jack Worral, MAS '93, PO Box 1014, Monrovia, CA 91017-1014.

✓ July 17/22 '93: **13th Annual Congress on Electron Microscopy**. Paris (***)

✓ July 31/Aug 1 '93: **A Practical Experience In Cryofixation and Freeze-Substitution**. (MSA Pre-Meeting Workshop) Miami Univ, Oxford, OH. A. Allenspach: (513)529-3100.

✓ August 1/6 '93: **MSA Meeting**. Cincinnati, OH. MSA Business Office: (508)540-7639.

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