



Volume 44 | Issue 1

Article 9

2001

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Recommended Citation

Tucker, Dennis C. (2001) "Bolivia Or Bust: Cila Memories," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2572-7478.1842>

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BOLIVIA OR BUST: CILA MEMORIES

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The first tentative talks about the possibility of a teaching mission to Bolivia began in June of 1998 at the annual conference of the Association of Christian Librarians. We had a semi-formal meeting to discuss the possibility at the 1999 annual conference—nearly a year before it would actually happen—at a meeting of the Commission for International Library Assistance (CILA), a ministry of the Association. The mission of CILA is to provide support for libraries in developing countries where there is a lack of formal training or financial resources. It does so by serving as an umbrella organization to coordinate requests and match them up with volunteers willing to spend some time abroad.

Depending on the situation, fluency in a foreign language may or may not be required. Volunteers cover their own travel expenses, while the local hosts are in charge of on-site accommodations. CILA covers direct expenses of the workshop, such as photocopying and materials.

CILA had received a request from the Bolivian Evangelical University in Santa Cruz for someone to teach basic library skills to untrained staff charged with running a library. Before going, we needed to translate the 350+ page *Librarian's Manual* into Spanish to teach this seminar. Of course, before others use it we will have it reviewed and add exercises and examples.

Though for a long time it seemed as if the day of our trip to Bolivia would never arrive, suddenly it was upon of us. Not being a morning person, I was afraid I might not be ready for my mid-morning flight, but even after packing until 1:30 a.m. the night before, I found myself wide awake by 4:30 a.m.—in plenty of time for a 10 a.m. flight!

My two colleagues, Georgi Bordner from Nyack College, New York and Doug Butler from Asbury College, Kentucky, had flown from their respective homes two days earlier, but since I was using airline miles to pay for my ticket, Sunday morning was the only flight I could get.

By five o'clock in the evening, I was winging my way to Miami—where I got to sit on the ground for another three hours. Fortunately, I have learned to sleep well on planes.

We left Miami about 11:30 p.m., flying right smack dab over central Cuba. I was intrigued to see that Cuba seemed to have only a few lights of the “old fashioned” variety—not the modern sodium ones we have grown used to—and those were widely scattered. The island seemed to contain only a few scattered villages, an impression that was confirmed on the trip home during the daylight hours.

After flying in pitch darkness over what I am told is the unspeakably beautiful Lake Titicaca, we landed in La Paz, Bolivia, just as the sky

began to turn grey. Outside my window I saw the black shadow of what looked like a jagged hill sticking

almost straight up from the horizon.

Those traveling only to La Paz deplaned while those of us continuing to Santa Cruz were kept aboard for an hour as safety inspectors combed the plane for any unclaimed carry-on baggage—a process that raised simultaneous feelings of safety and terror.

As dawn broke and the sky turned glorious shades of red and orange, the looming black hill turned into the breathtakingly beautiful peak of Illimani. According to *Funk & Wagnall's*, Illimani is part of the “Cordillera Oriental (or Real) range of the Andes Mountains. The snow line lies at about 4570 meters (about 15,000 ft) above sea level, and glaciers are found on the north face [the one I was looking at] at 4983 meters (16,350 ft). The mountain has four main peaks; the highest, Nevada Illimani, rising 6462 m (21,201 ft) above sea level, is a famous ascent for mountain climbers.”¹ The airport in La Paz, by the way, is at 13,000 feet above sea level, so maybe it's just as well that they didn't let us walk around. In any case, Illimani was literally

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brehtaking, and more of the snow-covered Andes came into view as we took off for Santa Cruz.

The Altiplano of Bolivia was the most desolate landscape I have seen in my life. The Altiplano is a “high plateau region, [of southwestern] Bolivia and [southern] Peru, in the Andes. It comprises a series of intermontane basins located at an altitude of about 3650 meters (about 12,000 feet) between the Eastern and Western cordilleras, or ranges, of the Andes.”² I didn’t see how it could support anything other than rocks, but according to *Funk and Wagnall’s*, “the Altiplano is a heavily populated region, even though it has a cold, dry, and windy climate. Potatoes and barley are grown, and llamas are raised. Lakes Titicaca and Poopo are located in the Altiplano.”³

Santa Cruz de la Sierra (meaning “Santa Cruz of the Mountains), so named for the nearby mountains, is often affectionately called “Santa Cruz de la Tierra” (meaning “Santa Cruz of the dirt”) by the locals because of the amount of dust that’s kicked up on a windy day.

After quickly clearing immigration and customs, I got to fight off the skycaps, who were all too eager to help me take my wheeled luggage to a vehicle that wasn’t there. Neither were Doug and Georgi. Speaking the language doesn’t help much when one has forgotten to bring along the phone number and doesn’t even know where he is going. So, I decided to do what one learns to do so well in Latin America—wait.

Ten minutes later, my wait paid off, as Doug and Georgi showed up with our missionary host, Meredythe Scheflen, in her SUV. Mery is a long-term missionary, having been in Santa Cruz with the World Gospel Mission for nearly fifty years. A few days later, after giving me a chance to get acquainted with Bolivian roads, Mery later asked me if I now understood why she drove an SUV, even though she would have preferred a “lady’s car.” Trust me, I did!

Mery’s house was our home for the next two weeks. As Vice Rector of the Bolivian Evangelical University (a position equivalent to that of Vice President for Academic Affairs at many institutions) and resident missionary, she lives on the university campus, which made things very convenient for us. In fact, we didn’t get *off* the campus until the weekend!

Since this was the only chance for library training that many of our students would have ever had, we knew that we had to give them the equivalent of a Master’s degree in library science in only a few days. Our original plan called for a ten-day workshop, later shortened to eight days due to travel arrangements. Our host librarian wanted us to condense it into four days so our students wouldn’t have to be away from their libraries for so long. We compromised and

decided to schedule the workshop Tuesday through Friday with the following Monday and Tuesday as optional days. So, we had to rearrange the basics into the first four days with some optional material, such as book repair and advanced cataloging practice during the following week.

After a short night, it was Tuesday and time to begin our seminar. Cristina Stumpf, our host librarian, had handled the registration and made arrangements so that everything was running smoothly. The only major snag was that due to postal delays, many of the invitations to the workshop did not reach the invitees until the last minute. The result was a constant flow of new people joining us over the next few days.

In total, we had about thirty people attend the seminar, with twenty-four being regular

enough attenders to receive a certificate of completion. We had both males and females, with slightly more women than men. Most of the group were employed in a library of one type or another with the majority being from academic libraries. Few of them had ever met each other previously. Some came from several hundred miles away.

We began the workshop with a few official words of welcome to the group from Mery in the name of the University. In her devotional, she reminded us of Ecclesiastes 12:12—“of making many books [there is] no end.” We librarians may have the best job security in the world!

I was first up for teaching, leading off with an introduction to the workshop series and chapters 1 and 2 of *The Librarian’s Manual*: “Getting Organized,” and “Library Administration.” Doug followed with a section on collection development.

For the next few days this was our basic pattern:

8:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.	Instructional session 1
10:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.	Refreshment break
10:45 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.	Instructional session 2
12:30 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.	Catered Lunch in the University dining room
2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.	Instructional session 3
4:00 p.m. – 4:15 p.m.	Refreshment break
4:15 p.m. – 5:45 p.m.	Instructional session 4
5:45 p.m.	Students scramble to catch the 6 p.m. bus to town

About 7 p.m. each evening, the three of us would head to the university dining hall to have our supper. Supper generally consisted of “empanadas” or something similar—one of a half-dozen different varieties of bread with cheese. Some were baked, some were fried, some were folded, some were rolled; but all were made of bread and cheese. If we wanted something a little heavier, we could have either of two main entrees accompanied (always) by rice, yucca, and fried plantains (bananas). Yucca, while slightly stringier,

tastes almost like potatoes. When it's deep fried, it's hard to distinguish from tater tots.

After dinner, we would retreat to our host's home and prepare our lessons for the next day, often quickly converting chapters of *The Librarian's Manual* to PowerPoint to make the presentation a little more interesting.

About 11 p.m. our indefatigable host would come home from her day of "rectoring." We'd have a light supper with her. One of my favorite dishes was a pudding-like dessert of "maracuyá" or passion fruit. On clear nights, it was awesome to go outside and look up at the Southern Cross, which I'd never seen before. Then we'd try to get a few hours' rest before 8:30 rolled around again—actually, the tropical birds started cooing and cawing about 5:30 a.m., but we quickly got used to it.

Our host was a constant example to us of Christian dedication and servitude. Somewhere in the neighborhood of her eighth decade (she never told us exactly), Mery's day would begin at about 7:15 each morning with both the phone and the doorbell ringing. Her love for her work, her colleagues, her fellow Christians, and the students, was a great lesson to us. Despite the constant hubbub about her and the unceasing clamor for her attention, she made each person she dealt with feel like the only person in the world that mattered. We may have gone to teach, but from Mery and our other new friends, we learned far more than we taught.

Georgi and Doug covered cataloging and classification, catalog maintenance, and related topics. The group was especially interested in instruction in cataloging. One library told us, for example, that they had made the arbitrary decision to cut off the Dewey number after the third decimal place because students couldn't reshelve the books in the proper order if the number was any longer—whether or not such truncation was meaningful. When the same library later asked about keeping statistics on in-house use of materials, we suggested that maybe library staff should reshelve materials instead of the users, thus making it easier to train staff in using full Dewey numbers and in tracking in-house use. Many such tips on procedures that we have learned to take for granted seemed to fall on fertile ground.

When we asked the group who had heard of MARC, one hand out of approximately 25 went up—and that person had heard of it but didn't know what it was. I was able to teach a session on MARC formats with the emphasis on *why* MARC was important, rather than on the "how to". Later, during cataloging practice, Georgi got many questions about MARC tagging, showing that students had understood the concept and were eager to learn more.

We also had a 2-hour session on the basics of library

automation. Most of the libraries represented were only thinking about automation at some possible point in the future. One library had recently installed *Follett* and one had *Winnebago*. A couple of them had *Isis*, a free library automation program produced and distributed by UNESCO. For most of them, purchasing a library automation program is financially out of their reach, and when they automate, they will probably be using the free *Isis* program. A newer Windows-compatible version called *WinIsis* has recently been released.

All too quickly the week passed and it was Friday. On the weekend, our host librarian and her family took us

souvenir shopping and to a town in the mountains named Samaipata. Near Samaipata are the ruins of an Inca fortress on the order of Machu Picchu, but much smaller and less well preserved. It was not too difficult to imagine the ancient Incas defending the surrounding valleys from intruders while perched in their mountaintop retreat. The wind was so strong up on top that it literally knocked me off my feet!

On Monday and Tuesday, we conducted some of the more practical sessions: Circulation procedures,

bibliographic instruction, and reference collection development and the reference interview. While none of us would win an Oscar, we did get a round of applause for our role-playing during a simulated reference interview. Then we gave each of the students a reference question and had them role-play with one person being the librarian, one the patron, and the third an observer and evaluator of the interview.

Doubtless, the most popular session was the final session on Tuesday—book repair. The DEMCO book repair kits we took along were like gold to our students. Many of them had never seen such items—book wings, 4" transparent repair tape, and plastic covers for paperbacks. When we showed them 4" cloth mending tape, we thought they'd go crazy! Needless to say, these were very popular items when we gave them away as door prizes. They quickly turned book repair into the most fun part of the workshop. One student had brought an old book that we thought had no solution short of a complete rebinding. But she was bound-and-determined to salvage her favorite book and did an incredible job of putting the pieces back together.

Bolivia is almost like two separate countries, there being little communication between La Paz, Sucre, and other highland areas with Santa Cruz and the lowland areas. While there are library schools and library organizations in the highlands, this had been a one-of-a-kind opportunity for people in the lowlands to meet together for library training without major travel. La Paz is some 17 hours via ground

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(*BOLIVIA continued*)

transportation or a very expensive plane ticket away. (Note: We discovered that a well-paid librarian makes the equivalent of about \$150 U.S. per month.)

With all this in mind, we wanted to help our colleagues help themselves on future occasions when we wouldn't be around. A straw poll revealed that they had great interest in meeting together again. There had been several previous attempts to form a local or regional library organization—all unsuccessful. Our goal for now was to get them to commit to a timeframe for meeting again. After brief discussion, they agreed to meet again two months later. We helped them appoint a conference committee of three and were able to make initial contact with a potential speaker who can explain OCLC—another fact of library life that many of us take for granted but which was unheard of to them until we mentioned

it in the seminar.

Further, we were very excited to hear that the university is interested in starting a library training program, since there is nothing else available in the area. After meeting several times with university officials, we realized that the most feasible program would be a Master's level program in library science, which could draw students not only from Bolivia, but from nearby sections of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil. Unfortunately, there is no one available to start the program for them. Now, if we can just find a Spanish-speaking missionary with a Master's or Doctorate in Library Science and experience in planning and teaching a new curriculum, who is self-supporting and could make a three-year commitment to living in a tropical paradise....

Since our return home, our colleagues in Bolivia have informed us that they have begun organizing the

ABL—Association of Bolivian Librarians—whose membership so far consists of the attendees at the seminar.

Our hope is that our work may continue to serve as a solid foundation for our colleagues to build upon in the future.

1 *KIDS Funk & Wagnall's Encyclopedia Full Text*. <http://insite.palni.edu/WebZI>, May 29, 2000.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*