

Chapter 28: Notebooks

I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in a train.

Oscar Wilde

A diary means yes indeed.

Gertrude Stein

When I was a student at Collegiate School in the 1950s (see Chapter 3C.10), the school store sold small brown-covered notebooks – three inches by five – to be used to keep track of assignments given out in class. I don't think I ever had one (or if I did I never used it to record assignments), but they stayed in my memory. In 1983, at the age of 39, after I had moved to Truro and was preparing for my first open-ended trip abroad, I saw these on sale somewhere and bought one. The idea was that I would put this one notebook everything I needed to jot down – phone numbers, appointments, the names of hotels, when the train left, impromptu sketches of heraldic details, whatever. It would keep things simple because everything would be in one place. I gave this system a try on my trip to London, which started on April 1, 1983. That was Book 1.

It worked beautifully. There were no more loose scraps of paper. Not only was everything in one place, but that place was in my pocket. I kept a pen clipped in the notebook, so with one gesture I was ready to make or refer to a note on anything I needed. It worked so well that when I left London for Paris at the end of May, my notebook was full and I needed another. But I couldn't find another in the same format, so I had to use substitutes I found in local stationers, which were of course not measured in inches. That is why Book 2 (Paris) and Book 3 (Copenhagen, Stockholm, Washington) are not in the same format as the others.

I went to Washington directly from Europe to work with Joel Solkoff on marketing his book (see Chapter 25), and after that I went home to Truro. Since I was home and not traveling, I didn't start another book right away, and there is a hiatus in the series. But on September 11, 1984, I began using the system again, with notebooks in the original style beginning with Book 4. It worked just as well at home as on the road, and I have never since been without a little brown 3 x 5 pocket notebook. I never leave my house without carrying the current volume with me. As I write this almost 26 years later, in July 2010, I am into Volume 219. I plan to keep this system in place as long as I live.

I never have little scraps of paper to deal with – everything goes right in the book, either written there on the spot or pasted in later. Even airport luggage claims get pasted in (although I make sure there is nothing on the back of the page, in case I need to tear them out to claim my luggage). I don't get appointment cards at the doctor's – I write the

appointment on calendar page of the book. If someone gives me a business card I usually take it to be courteous, but if I need the number I write it in the book and toss the card (unless I put it in my Rolodex).¹ Sometimes I paste the card right into the book.

Litera scripta manet is really true for these notebooks.² I *could* put everything in a pocket memory device. But it would fail at some point, and data entry would not be easy. Here I just jot something down and there it stays. I keep these notebooks in wooden library charging trays from Highsmith, the library supply firm, meant to carry 3x5 library charging cards of the old-fashioned pre-barcode variety. I consult the old notebooks for something every day. What was the phone number of that hotel in Paris? Let me just look that up. When exactly did I work on the *Fribbis* project? When did I change my prescription dosage? Hold on, I'll check. And of course they have been very valuable for this autobiography project.



¹ Future researchers: Rolodex? See Chapter 15.C, note 12.

² Motto of the National Archives – meaning *the written word survives*.

After a few years it can get kind of hard to remember which notebook to look in. Here a random-access memory would be nice, but I only have the one in my brain. One way to keep the notebooks separate in my mind is the postage stamp on the cover. I started putting stamps on the covers with Book 5 – just for decoration at first, always with a king’s head. I have kept that up and now have a standard front label, with the number, a stamp, and usually a heraldic design from that king’s state symbolism – a medal, perhaps, or a badge or a motto – to fill the space around the stamp. My design inspiration was the enameled cigarette cases that used to be given as princely favors, or at dinners of smart regiments, with a picture of the king, some heraldic detail, and some writing. If I’m traveling abroad I try to use a king of, or at least historically related to, the country I’m going to. If I’m home and nothing much has changed from one book to the next, I’ll use stamps in the same series with the same image, but in different colors.

I also include on the front of every notebook a notice (repeated for foreign trips in the language of wherever I’ll be going), promising a reward for the book’s return. So far (2010) I’ve never lost one. The front label also lists the dates the notebook covers and the places I stayed, an erminespot badge (from my coat of arms – see Chapter 6.C), and a number showing which notebook this is within the calendar year.

I try to start a new book as close to January 1 as I can. Often, but not always, I will start a new book for a substantial trip, especially now that I gather pictures and mementos to paste inside (gluestick is my friend).³ I’m careful not to fill in on the cover the places I’m going to stay until I have actually stayed there, or the closing date of the trip or the book either, even on a well-planned trip, until the book is full or the trip is over. I have repeatedly found that if I write these things on the cover in advance, I end up having to change them – I come home early from the trip, or don’t get to a certain place. I see it now as tempting fate to write about the future as if it has already happened, and refuse (perhaps superstitiously) ever to fill these elements in until they’re history.

As I worked with this system I refined it and added features. I rule lines for a calendar in the middle pages – I usually have calendar space for about four months, and have occasionally ruled an extra page when a notebook lasted longer than that. I have a separate page for appointments coming after the ruled calendar, and when I change books I transfer them to the new one, along with other material still of current use. When I plan a trip away from home I fill in the calendar squares for those days in yellow highlighter, which sets off that block of time visually. Sometimes I hear people say “I can’t make an appointment now – I don’t have my datebook – call me on Monday.” I hate that – seize the day! – I always have my schedule right at hand. I paste inside the front cover of every volume a small printed calendar for the 12 months after the written calendar ends –

³ The best gluesticks are Uhu brand, and the best of those are the ones which go on in purple, so you know where you have glued, but when it dries the purple fades away.

I xerox this from the perpetual calendar page of the *World Almanac*. This allows me to see well over a year ahead from my starting date.

Another element I added when I was working was ruled pages for keeping my time records. As a lawyer I worked by the hour and was paid by increments of six minutes – 1/10 of an hour. So I set the stopwatch on my wristwatch when I started a task, stopped it when I finished it, and recorded the increments in the notebook, rounding up as instructed to the nearest tenth. If I hadn't done that, I would have lost track of time spent and ended up working for no pay. Each entry included the matter, the task, the hours, the cumulative hours that day, and the cumulative hours for the week, in separate ruled columns. A separate page recorded cumulative weekly hours, one column straight and one adjusted to exclude weeks I did not work at all (when traveling for example). That let me keep track of how I was doing toward my informal quota of hours billed, which in turn influenced how much new work I solicited or accepted. See Chapter 27B.3 for more about my hours quota. If I figured something out on a professional problem I made notes on the work pages, after the time records, and then made an entry for the time I spent figuring it out. When I was not traveling, the second half of the book (after the calendar pages in the center) was mostly reserved for work-related notes and time records.

- It was a great day when I began Book 209, the first one after my retirement, and no longer had to rule pages for time records.

I keep track of books I've read, movies and plays I've seen, quotes that impress me, records of medical expenses and charitable contributions (for the tax deductions), when I start or stop a given pill, and much more. If I have a business conversation or other important exchange, I jot down my notes and date it, and record figures relating to the project. If I'm trying to figure something out, or planning a writing or a letter, I lay out my ideas on a booklet page. I include pictures of the honored dead as they die, with a mourning border – in the current volume I have pages for Louis Auchincloss, Robert Byrd, Daniel Schorr and Harvey Pekar.⁴

Early on in this practice I noticed that Adam pasted evocative items into his journals – I do the same now in these notebooks. A particularly enjoyable lunch meeting I'd like to remember? I paste in a neck label from a beer bottle. An appealing heraldic design in a magazine, or a particularly powerful photo in a newspaper illustrating current events? Snip paste. (I set aside a spread in each book just for small seals and armorial designs I find in print – see tailpiece). Blocking out a future journey? I make a trial calendar page and work it out there. Do I need to keep particular records for some reason, for example blood pressure readings? In they go. When I travel, I carve up brochures so there is some visual record of whatever interested me – I also put in tickets from museums or

⁴ Future researchers – hit the books! I can't tell you everything!

notable events if I'd like to remember them, and make a table of addresses and opening times for museums and bookstores.⁵ I paste an icon of Lord Ganesha in the inside front cover of every volume (see Chapter 18.G).

I used to keep a diary at the back of each volume, but stopped doing that. Efforts to revive this practice have not been effective. No great loss – reading the non-travel diaries over for this memoir I find them very boring, records of who I spoke to, what I was working on, what movies I saw and what I thought of them, who died, emotional ups and downs – nothing very interesting at all. I still keep a daily diary when I'm traveling, though, so I can have a record of the trip – otherwise I find when it's over that I may not remember what I saw. While traveling I also have a foreign phrases page, and keep a page listing peak experiences. But even without a formal diary, these notebooks present a concentrated picture of my daily life.

I had a little panic when Vernon McMillan, the company that made the notebooks, discontinued them. What would I do now? I found a bookbinder and commissioned some samples to my specifications, but they did not work out well. The covers were either too stiff (as with Book 26), or not stiff enough, or something. Finally I found that Boorum & Pease offered essentially the same books I had been using, so I bought several hundred of them. At the rate I was using them at the time (1986) this would have been enough to last me about to age 84. That seemed sort of risky magically, as if I were measuring the thread of my life like one of the Furies, and when I finished the last book I would die.⁶ But I use fewer books a year now, and the books I have in stock should last me through a good long life. When I get down to the last few dozen, though, I will order a new supply. It doesn't pay to cut it too close.

The Boorum & Pease books didn't have rounded edges like the old Vernon McMillan books did, so when I prepare a new book I round off the edges with a knife. Making a new book is quite a production by now – round the edges, trim a label for the front, choose a stamp from the stock book I keep for this purpose (every so often I get more king's-head stamps at stamp shows), paste in a few blank papers so certain charts don't show through to the other side. I rule the lines for the calendar with a transparent ruler and a set of brush markers. I cut out the calendar and Ganesh icon for the inside front cover. It is like an oboe player making a new batch of reeds.

⁵ Some tickets printed as receipts on pressure-sensitive paper fade to white, although you can sometimes make out what they say by tilting them just right against the light. Now I write the information in ink on such receipts after pasting them in.)

⁶ Or like the clock in the song "My Grandfather's Clock," which "stopped short, never to go again, when the old man died." Too creepy. See <http://www.kididdles.com/lyrics/m018.html>.

Researchers into my life and times will find lots of interest in these notebooks up at Yale – if you can read my writing, they provide a key to what I was doing and thinking about, and a way to unravel my life. Indeed, they are responsible for this memoir. When I first heard about the Phillips Family Papers at Yale, I thought I would send these notebooks there (in their wooden trays, right) after I was gone. The idea of writing a fuller memoir to go with them followed from that. A key to the notebooks, with number, date, place, and stamp (identified by king, year, and Scott Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue number) will go up to Yale as a Supplement. I hope I am alert enough still to have a notebook going on the last day of my life.



Note

These notebooks are actually the second series. The first series were small leatherbound pocket diaries, usually blue but occasionally red, of a brand called Leathersmith, made in England. Most are for the specific year stamped in gold on the cover, but a few just say “Notes” on the cover. The dated books start in 1966 and the last one is for 1977, although one of the undated ones has entries for 1983. They were not as complete a system as the current series, and had nothing pasted in. But somehow I have managed not to lose them (*where* are my old passports?). I will send them up to Yale with the Supplements. Some future graduate student can use them for a dissertation.



Tailpiece:
page from
Book 209