

## Book Ends

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During the early days of what was then known as the Far East Division, Business Manager, Teddy Yamamura, and Payroll Manager, Ito-san, presented their friend, Jimmy Ohmichi with his first-ever suit. Jimmy had an important interview for the position of Textbook Department Manager at “Marilando Daigaku,” and he was eager to make a good impression. This story was related to me decades later at a commencement reception by Teddy and Ito-san. Jimmy chuckled, “I still have that suit!”

Jimmy Ohmichi did indeed make quite an impression. Standing all of maybe 5'3" he could be both tenacious and charming. During the Viet Nam war Jimmy rose to the challenge. He excelled at getting “his” textbooks to “his” faculty and students by any means available, often cajoling faculty to carry boxes of books on helicopters and medical evacuation flights. Though I can't verify this actually happened, his reputation in the textbook biz was solid. I couldn't imagine how he ever pulled it off, but I was about to learn.

I joined the Far East Division in 1985 and started working as an accounting clerk for Teddy Yamamura in the Business Office at Yokota Air Base Japan. Not long after I was hired Jimmy suffered a debilitating stroke and was forced to retire. I was “loaned out” to the Textbook Department on a “temporary” basis. So began my nearly 30- year career in “textbooks”.

Computers were the new thing in the Business Office back in 1985 and I was on the wrong side of the learning curve. Thinking I'll never get this high- tech stuff, I eagerly packed up my pencils and coffee mug and headed down the street for the Book Department. When I got there, I recognized technology I was familiar with- two IBM Selectric typewriters, a Telex machine, and Jimmy's chicken-scratched, 12 column accounting ledger. Years later when we computerized the textbook operation this ledger was replaced by what would come to be known as the “God Screen”. Jimmy would have approved.

The daily routine was pretty straightforward, or so I thought. Area Directors prepared a schedule, hired faculty, and then called me with a textbook order. I thumbed through Jimmy's unwieldy, often illegible behemoth until I found the appropriate textbook transaction record. No books? Bang out a purchase order on IBM #1. Plenty of books? Type up an invoice on Selectric #2 and send those books packin'. Before going home for the evening, I would create a punch tape for the Telex machine to chew up. Each publisher order that day got one and the punch tapes for the big publishing outfits would grow quite lengthy, often snaking around office furniture and out into the warehouse. Tangled, mangled tapes meant punching the tape again... and again. Imagine my excitement when we upgraded that damned old telex to a brand -new fax machine. Yes, I said fax machine.

If I could predict the many things that could go wrong with an operation such as this, there were plenty of others I didn't see coming. That learning curve again. Here was the challenge- match faculty with country, teaching location, and textbook, then order those books from vendors half a world away and have them in education centers when students came in to register- about four weeks tops. If our texts actually made it onto a plane and not a boat we might get them in time to... wait! That's not the edition we ordered! With no time to send them back to the publisher and reorder I had to prevail upon the good graces of our faculty to read and prep a new edition with little or no notice. Most were understanding.

If eight- week terms and other logistical concerns weren't enough there were also volcanic eruptions, typhoons and earthquakes. On March 11, 2011 at 2:46 PM, I was sitting in a budget meeting when a 9.0 magnitude earthquake struck the Fukushima region of Japan. The quake lasted for 6 minutes and nearly 16,000 souls would perish. Ordered to evacuate the building, I headed back to my office to make sure everyone was out then exited through the textbook warehouse. The shelving fixtures rattled, and books fell to the floor. My fatalistic self imagined briefly this is how it ends- buried under a pile of textbooks, likely clutching the revised edition of "Japanese For Busy People." Thankfully, I escaped, shaken, not stirred. Joining the rest of the Asian Division staff outside, we all watched as our cars bounced up and down in the parking lot and trees bent nearly in half. Then things seemed to go horribly wrong.

Our publisher representatives in Tokyo were more than business associates, they were our friends. Over the course of a few days we learned all were safe. Since the trains weren't running the night of the quake our Prentice Hall rep walked the tracks the entire night arriving home after sunrise. Our Cengage rep slept on his office floor. Another rep's condo was shaken loose from its foundation.

Tokyo's Narita International airport shut down and flights were diverted to other airports and countries. A number of those flights ended up at Yokota where our Asian Division staff stepped up to volunteer. Members from our Distance Education office passed out food, water and blankets to confused, weary passengers while IT personnel set up an internet connection for them. The wife of one Textbook department staff member worked into the night as a translator and used her own money to buy diapers and other needed items. Since planes weren't going anywhere, neither were our textbooks. In a few days, the military would begin to voluntarily evacuate family members over radiation concerns.

A few years later technology finally conquered the Textbook Department. It didn't sneak up on us, we saw it coming. Textbooks were replaced with online materials and on July 31, 2015 the God Screen went dark. Over 70 years of textbook department operations experience and the best staff I have ever known walked out the warehouse door for the last time.

Now that I am retired, I often look back at my UMUC career with gratitude. I had some great bosses- Teddy Yamamura, Dr. Julian Jones, Dr. Paula Harbecke, Dr. Lorraine Suzuki, and Dr. Joseph Arden. As a former UMUC graduate I had some great instructors- Dr. Dennis Doolin, Dr. Jay Dobbin, and Yamada-san fondly come to mind. But most of all I've had the pleasure of working with the most wonderful faculty of "Gypsy Scholars" in the world... if not the most flexible. Sorry if your textbooks were late!