Mr. Andreas Brown
"My Forty Years as Book Collector, Book Dealer, and Literateur"
Annual Winter Luncheon, Friends of the Malcolm A. Love Library, SDSU

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Introduction by Mr. Chuck Valvende, owner of San Diego’s Wahrenbrock’s Book House:

That was a very nice introduction, thank you [speaking of introduction by Ruth Brown, President]. But I must tell you that having one book seller introduce another book seller is a violation of many, many federal regulations. So, I would like this to remain very confidential between us here tonight.

[Laughter]

Mr. Andreas Brown, who will speak to you shortly on his life and business, is the proprietor, as you know, of the Gotham Book Mart which is frankly, in this country and possibly in the English speaking world, the literary mecca.

Andy is a local San Diego boy, and as such, has come back to his roots, to this great university and has been really a great benifactor to it and to the San Diego Historical Society, and to San Diego in general. And so, while not attempting to steal anymore thunder, please join with me in welcoming a very good friend, Mr. Andreas Brown.

Mr. Andreas Brown

Thank you very much Chuck and President Brown. I like the sound of that, President Brown. [Laughter] It is very nice to be here. After living twenty-three years in the middle of New York City, I suppose it is nice to be anywhere, where you can survive.
The topic that was suggested to me for this afternoon, the history of the Gotham Book Mart and its legendary founder, Frances Steloff, is a topic I could talk about for quite some time, but I will try to confine my recollections to a reasonable period of time so that perhaps we could have some questions at the end, if you have any.

To put everything in proper context, I think I will give you a little brief biographical background about myself, because it leads up to the subject of the Gotham Book Mart and how I got there. I was born in Coronado and spent my early years in La Jolla and San Diego. I graduated from Hoover High School and I attended San Diego State University for four years, graduating in 1955. For years I had dreamed of being a lawyer. My childhood heroes were Clarence Darrow and Eugene Debs and other such prominent people of the twentieth century. I was very idealistic when I was young. [Laughter] I was also fatally addicted to book collecting. From as early as I can remember, I attended every garage sale and estate sale in the greater area of San Diego. I grew up in Joe Hurwitz’s book shop, Wahrenbrock’s. I often made trips, whenever I could afford to, to Glen Dawson’s book shop in Los Angeles, to Jake Zeitlan’s famous red barn in the same city, and even occasionally to John Howell Books in San Francisco. I knew all of these people and they were very much a part of my early education. I had books stashed everywhere I could put them: boxes in the garage, in my closets, under my bed—a real bibliophile from the earliest days.
Upon graduation from San Diego State University, I received a scholarship to Stanford Law School; I went to Palo Alto and it was a great adventure for me. I love Stanford University, but I found out very quickly that I did not love the law. My basic problem, I think, was with my classmates. [This was] after the Korean War and prior to the Vietnam War, and a lot of them were considerably older than I was (I was just about the youngest member of my class at Stanford Law School), and many of them were accountants, business executives, doctors, professional people, and they didn't share my idealism about the law. So, I became rather quickly disenchanted. However, I remained there until my third year until I had an opportunity to go into the judge advocate's staff of the United States Army, which I did. And upon completing my military obligation, I was offered a teaching position here at San Diego State, in the speech department.

[As a student], I had spent some wonderful years in the speech department here, in the debate and public speaking program, under the legendary John Ackley, and so it was an offer I couldn't refuse. I came to San Diego State and I taught for three years. During those three years, I became very involved in doing additional, personal research in the area of contemporary American literature, which was an outgrowth of my interest in books. I received a very generous research grant from the University of Texas in their Humanities Research Center, which I accepted, and I stayed there for two years, finding myself in the midst of the most important collection of rare books and
manuscripts in modern American literature anywhere in the world. I had a wonderful time, to say the least. I remained there for two years, continuing my research in bibliography. This led to further independent research under Donald Gallup at Yale University [Who's Who in America: Donald Clifford Gallup is assis. prof. of Bibliography and Curator of the Collection of American Literature at Yale].

At the conclusion of that work, I decided to come back to California and start my own business in the field of appraising rare books and manuscripts with an emphasis and a focus on contemporary American manuscripts and first editions in literature. I had as clients various institutions and private collectors, and the business was rather an immediate success. I had fascinating projects, ranging from the cataloging of John Updike's manuscripts for Harvard University, and I also did Governor Pat Brown's archives for the Bancroft Library, at Berkeley. Such projects were fascinating to me and I was very happy in the work that I had. It often took me to the east coast. And during those trips to New York City and other points in the east, I became very well acquainted with the Gotham Book Mart in New York City and its extraordinary founder, Frances Steloff. During a trip there, in 1967, she approached me, inviting me to lunch, which was an unusual thing for Frances Steloff to do. She never left her book store, as far as anyone knew. And she said, "I am going to make you an offer you can't refuse. I am going to be eighty this year and I'm starting to slow down, just a little. And a lot of my clients are worried
about the future of the Gotham Book Mart and perhaps I should be, too. So I'd like you to consider buying the Gotham Book Mart from me." Well this set me back. I wasn't prepared to even consider living in New York City and running a business. But I gave it a lot of thought and decided that this was just too much of a wonderful possible adventure, so I accepted her offer. I closed my business and I moved to New York in 1967. After a few months of negotiating, we managed to complete the sale and my work began. In order to explain what I was confronting at that point, I'd like to give you a little bit of a biographical background about Frances Steloff.

Frances was born in 1887, in Saratoga Springs, New York. She was the sixth child of fourteen children in a Russian immigrant family--she was the first child born in America. Her family was very, very poor. Her father was a Talmudic scholar, who was very dedicated to studying his holy books and doing a great deal of meditating; he was not, what you would call, a working man. But yet, he had a wife and many children, which meant they were very poor. Frances' mother died when she was three and a half. Her father immediately remarried and continued to have more children. Frances' father was a great lover of books, but they were so poor, the only books he had were his religious books and he kept them on a very high shelf in their small home where no one could reach them. Frances told the story, more than once, that if her father occasionally would drop one of these books, he would fall to his knees and kiss the book before he picked it up. As was traditional in these
families, immigrant families, only the boys were taught from the books. And each evening, her father would take the one lamp they had in their home and bring the boys over to the corner and he would sit and teach them from the books. And I think it's one of the great metaphors of Frances' life that the mother and the daughters would sit in the dark in the corner watching the father and the sons studying and discussing the books. This, I think, ingrained in Frances a great reverence and a fascination of the book from these earliest years of her childhood.

Her family, by necessity, took her from school when she was very young and set her out into the employment market in Saratoga Springs. Saratoga Springs was the watering hole of the rich, as many of you may know: the Vanderbilts and the Whitneys brought their thoroughbred horses to Saratoga Springs and they socialized and watched the races. Frances became known as "Fanny the Flower Girl" in Saratoga Springs. She sold little bouquets of flowers to the wealthy patrons who sat on the verandas of the great hotels of Saratoga Springs. She started doing this at the age of seven and she was a very enterprising young lady. She was quite successful, making a good deal of money that she brought home to help with the family and the children of the family particularly.

She was also given the responsibility of taking care of her younger brother. And he became very attached to Frances: she sort of became his surrogate mother, and as she would leave each morning to sell flowers, he would follow her down the road and she would have to shoo him back home. Well he became so
persistent as he grew older that eventually she decided that she would have to take him with her. Well he was quite small and he had curly golden locks and Frances said that if the sun would strike his head it would create sort of a halo around his head. He was a very attractive little boy, and she soon discovered that when she took him up on the verandas of the great hotels, he attracted so much attention that her sales increased substantially. [Laughter] So she devised a system of bribery and cajolery to get him to go every day. One day, a very wealthy couple on a porch, took a fancy to her brother and asked Frances if she thought there was any possibility that her family would allow them to adopt him. In those days, before the beginning of the twentieth century, it was not uncommon for poor families, with many children, to farm them out in a sort of informal adoption procedure. So her father was approached with this proposal and he said, "No, you can't have my son, but you can any one of my daughters." [Laughter] Well Frances picked up on this. She said, "Would this mean I could go back to school, and could I have a dress and shoes and things that I can't have now?" And they said, "Yes." So Frances, with great delight, and to escape her stepmother who was less than kind to her, went off to Boston with her new foster parents, who treated her very well for a period of time. Eventually, her foster mother became an alcoholic and began to abuse her. Frances took what little savings she had, in a piggy bank, and snuck out at night and went down to the dock, to the boat that would take her to New York City, in order to find her older sister who lived on the
outskirts of Harlem. The boat landed at the battery, at the foot of Harlem, the foot of Manhattan Island, and Frances, at the age of fifteen, walked the full length of Manhattan to Harlem to find her sister.

Eventually, she started finding small jobs, working her way up to a position of some importance in a large department store in Brooklyn. During the Christmas rush, they transferred her over to the book department because they needed extra help. And Frances had found a livelihood at last.

She expanded her activities in books, beginning to do small catalogs from her apartment, in Brooklyn heights, and eventually got jobs in some of the better book stores. And by 1919, she was working in a fairly good paying job in Brentanos Book Store. One day in December of 1919, while walking along West 45th Street toward Times Square where she was going to visit her sister who worked at the Hotel Aster, she saw a little sign in the window that said, "Shop for Rent." It was a little sort of cubby hole in the basement of an old brownstone. She went back to Brentanos and told her boyfriend that she had seen the sign and how excited she was. And he said, "You can't possibly do that. You are a woman." Which so infuriated her that she marched right back and rented the shop. [Laughter] On January the 1st of 1920, Frances opened the Gotham Book Mart. A little tiny shop just off Times Square on West 45th Street in the middle of the theatre district. It was an instant success and became a mecca for all of the writers and the artists of her time.
West 45th Street was also the center of the music publishing industry, and so many of the people in that business, as well, would frequent her shop. Two of her first customers, the story Frances told on her hundredth birthday to a New Yorker correspondent who came to interview her, was about two of her first customers. She said "Two of my first and most frequent visitors were George and Ira Gershwin who had a studio right on the block. They would work all morning composing songs and then they would stop into the shop on their way to lunch, and they would take things out of my hand and make me sit down while they sang their latest song and ask for my critical judgement."

[Laughter]

The shop was frequented by many other people of importance. Eugene O'Neill would come in frequently and Ina Claire, the famous actress of the day. In the dance field, the choreographer Ruth Saint Dennis, Martha Graham, many other people in the field of dance and theater came in as well. The shop began to gain a reputation for specializing in experimental literature and the avant-garde. Frances focused primarily on the literary magazines of the day, that were called little magazines, where many of the writers who were writing experimentally would first publish their work. And this, of course, drew more of them to her shop.

In 1923, it was announced that the building on West 45th Street was to be torn down, so Frances moved her shop to West 47th Street, where it still remains. Most of her customers followed her there, John Dos Passos, H. L. Mencken, Theodore
Dreiser, and many of the other writers of the day followed her to this street and the store continued to expand.

In 1923, she married David Moss, the friend who had advised her that she shouldn't open a book store because she was a woman. [Laughter] It meant a very rocky relationship, but they worked together in the store and the store prospered.

In 1925 and 1926, the store became very well known because of the people who were frequenting it more and more--Rudolph Valentino used to meet there with Natasha Rambova and H.L. Mencken came in with Dreiser one day--Frances tells the story that they had been drinking at lunch and decided to autograph all the books in the shop. [Laughter] She eventually was able to stop them but not before they reached the religious section in which they inscribed all of her bibles with best wishes from the author. [Laughter]

She began to receive orders and visits from writers overseas. T. S. Eliot, James Joyce began to order books from her frequently, Ezra Pound. The shop began to prosper more and more. She and David insisted on carrying the books that their customers demanded and this included a lot of books that were banned at the time. They had to carry James Joyce's *Ulysses* and in order to smuggle it into the country, they arranged for friends in Paris to disassemble the books and mail them by signature or gatherings and when they arrived in New York they would sew these back together. Frances ordered *Lady Chatterley's Lover* directly from D.H. Lawrence in Italy, arranging for customers to smuggle them in their luggage. Later, she was doing
the same thing with the writings of Henry Miller. This resulted in a good deal of problems with the authorities. There were threats, there were even arrests, there were trials and eventually it led to the Gotham Book Mart and Frances winning some landmark decisions in censorship, which played a major role later in allowing us to read what we want to read.

Eventually, Frances and David found they really couldn't get along and they were divorced in 1931. And the shop moved into a period of hard times with the Depression. Frances said that there were some days when not a single book was sold and she worried about the future of the store. By 1935, she and David, who had remained friends through their mutual interests in books, had decided to remarry, but unfortunately, David died tragically in a drowning accident while attempting to save some children in an undertow at the beach. But Frances persisted and managed to continue to survive throughout the Depression and moving into World War II.

During World War II, the struggle was acute because she had difficulty hiring anyone; most of the young men had gone off to war, and Frances literally became at times a one-man band. She would shovel the snow from the sidewalk, sweep the steps, wrap the packages, handle the register, do the bookkeeping, prepare the mail. They were long and difficult days and sometimes difficult nights, but she managed to keep the store going, in spite of all these difficulties. She acquired, over a period of time a whole new wave of prominent literary customers: Christopher Morley, William Carlos Williams, Thornton Wilder,
Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, and Alice B. Toklas came to visit when they came to America. Marianne Moore reminds me of an incident. I am not going to be able to tell many of the incidents I'd like to because there won't be time, but one day Mariann Moore, who was still around when I came in 1967, called the shop on a Saturday. She was having trouble with her plumbing. Her sink was stopped up and she wasn't able to get a plumber, so the Gotham Book Mart sent a couple of clerks down to the building to repair her plumbing, which we did. [Laughter] This kind of thing is not entirely unusual at the Gotham Book Mart.

Frances Steloff was a catalyst in many of the important figures of the literary avant-garde. For instance, she introduced Leon Edel the famous biographer to Edmond Wilson and instituted a life-long friendship between the two of them. When Edith Sitwell came to America (she and Frances had met before, and corresponded frequently when Frances would send her books), Edith said that one of her dreams was to meet Edgar Stravinsky. Well it just so happened that Stravinsky and his wife Vera were good friends of Frances' and she arranged an immediate introduction. Edith Sitwell and her brother were able to attend the Stravinsky concert at Carnegie Hall the very evening that the introduction was arranged.

Other interesting people that came to the shop—Frances gave a party for Jean Cocteau for the publications of one of his books, and Charlie Chaplin brought him to the party. When Henry Miller fled Europe in 1940, he came to Frances destitute and he said, "Frances I would like you to put a sign up in the shop."
The sign read "Henry Miller needs clothes, wood axe, a thermos, a small wagon, and money." [Laughter] Frances put the sign up with a large cardboard box below it and it soon filled up with all the required items and she sent them on to Henry Miller who was establishing himself in Big Sur. I asked Frances what the small wagon was for and she said, "Well, he would go down to the highway and buy his groceries and pick up his mail and he had to go up a long road, so he put things into the wagon and pulled it up. [Laughter] Somebody gave him a small children's wagon.

Georgia O'Keeffe came into the store about this period of time and told Frances that she looked very tired and she had been working entirely too hard, and she thought she needed a vacation. She persisted and convinced Frances that she should come for two weeks to New Mexico for relaxation. And during that trip, Frances met Frieda Lawrence and many of the people in the New Mexico literary community. It was one of the high points of her life.

Another incident, Frances told about, was one day reading an article in the paper mentioning that Marlene Dietrich had insured her legs for one million dollars, as a publicity stunt obviously. A few days later into the store came Noel Coward and Marlene Dietrich; they were looking for a book and they didn't ask for help. They went over to the theatre section and Marlene Dietrich unfolded the ladder and climbed up on this ladder trying to get this book off a high shelf. Frances came rushing over and immediately ordered her off the ladder and Noel Coward turned to her and said, "Do you realize who you are talking to?" And she
I said, "Yes, it's Marlene Dietrich, and I understand those legs are worth one million dollars and if she falls, I will be sued." [Laughter]

The motto at the Gotham Book Mart is "Wise Men Fish Here." And that sign hangs out over the front of the store and has been the motto of the store for years. And many wise and interesting people have come to the store to look for books and to meet friends and to visit with their friend Frances Steloff. In 1965, when the book, Wise Men Fish Here was published which was Frances' biography, she received publicity around the world and it had a considerable benefit to the shop's financial survival. In that same year she received the gold medal from the Academy of Arts and Letters for distinguish contribution to the arts. And 1967, when she turned eighty years old, is the point in her life when I enter the Gotham Book Mart.

As the new owner, I tried to bring a new vitality to the Gotham Book Mart, but it wasn't easy. Frances had been in control of the shop since it was founded in 1920, and such innovations as air conditioning, which I insisted upon, having been born and raised in California, did not meet with approval from her. Eventually she came to like it, but it was a struggle for me. [Laughter] The Gotham Book Mart had no art gallery, which had been a dream of Frances' for many years, so I put in a gallery on the second floor. We put in more telephones, we put in a larger staff and eventually it re-vitalized the store and Frances became pleased with the progress, but at first it was a struggle.
I began to specialize in literary archives and important authors' libraries in order to enhance the business and this led to some interesting associations. We quickly acquired the library of E.E. Cummings, Edmund Wilson's library, Carson McCullers' archives, and we handled the archives of S.J. Pearlman, Nathaniel West, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, Joyce Carol Oates and many others.

The Gotham was an exciting place to be in those days with its unique clientel. Frequent customers were J.D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, John Updike, Ezra Pound on occasion, Anais Nin, Robert Lowe [Lowell?], Max Ernst, Alfred Kazin, Woody Allen, Jacqueline Onassis, W.H. Auden, Noble prize winners Samuel Beckett and Saul Bellow.

I think I will take a moment and tell a story about Saul Bellow. He asked me if I would appraise his manuscripts; he was considering selling them or donating them to an institution. This eventually led me to Chicago where he lives, and I spent a few days at his apartment cataloging and appraising things he had in storage there. And one afternoon, we discovered in the closet a large box of all the communications that Saul Bellow had received in congratulations on receiving the Noble Prize. He and I sat on the floor reading these out loud to each other, with his caustic remarks about some of the comments people make, people that he never heard of in his entire career who were sending him congratulations in a way that would reflect that they were close and personal friends. And it was amusing to hear this Noble Prize winner revealing some of his innermost thoughts about some
of these prominent people. Later we drove down to the University of Chicago campus and at that time I was doing a lot of reading on Abraham Lincoln, which was and still is a subject of great fascination to me. And I mentioned a few comments about Lincoln and his various visits to Chicago and I was astonished at Saul Bellow's expertise on Lincoln. Here I was steeped in reading for six months and I felt like sort of an instant expert, and Bellow's recall of fine details of Lincoln's life and obscure events in Lincoln's life was astonishing to me. I guess I shouldn't be astonished, Saul Bellow is an extraordinary man, but still I was very, very impressed. Experiences such as that were and still are the important part of my life at the Gotham Book Mart.

Frances began to receive more and more honors in her golden years. The governor of New York gave her the Governor's Award for outstanding contribution to the arts and in the course of making the presentation he made the following statement: "If America were to adopt the Japanese idea of identifying national treasures, the Gotham Book Mart would have to be numbered among ours." Frances liked that very much and often quoted that to people. She received an honorary doctorate from Skidmore College in her home town. And in 1967 a very fine documentary film was made about Frances's life at the Gotham Book Mart. It was later nominated for the Academy Award. On Frances's one-hundredth birthday, in 1987, she was honored around the world with letters and tributes from an amazing array of people including Mrs. Vincent Astor, Helen Hayes, Katharine Hepburn, Clara Boothe Luce,
President Reagan, the New York Governor, the New York Senator. Her Congressman and the Mayor of New York City attended her birthday party at the shop’s gallery and she received the key to Saratoga Springs, which amused Frances greatly. She said, "Just imagine, Fanny the Flower Girl has an honorary doctorate at Skidmore College in Saratoga and now the key to the city. What would my father say?" [Laughter]

Throughout these years, from 1980 through 1989, Frances had been fighting a long and difficult legal battle to save our building. I won’t go into the details because it is too complex, but after nine years of struggle and tremendous expense, she won the battle and saved the bookstore’s building, and secured our future. In April of 1989, two months after she won that battle, she died at the age of a hundred and one, in the eighty-first year of her career as a book seller. I think eighty-one years of selling books is probably a record in the [inaudible--possibly: Steloff fan club file]. [Laughter]

Tributes to Frances upon her death were, again, worldwide in newspapers in London, Paris, Rome, and Los Angeles. The New York Times, not only gave her a major tribute obituary, but they ran an editorial on the editorial page about her contributions to American culture. Five hundred people attended the memorial tribute for Frances in the New York Public Library and it was indeed an inspiring event.

It’s been a fascinating twenty-three years for me, and I am happy to have this opportunity to share some of these highlights with you. Between the events and the highspots and
the notable people, there were many, many years of book selling-
hard work, which is the part I think I like the best, and which I
am happy to share with you. If you have any questions, I will be
happy to try to answer them.

SIDE B

Andreas Brown answering a question not recorded:

She was a terrible task master. If I wanted to paint a
section of the book shelves a certain shade of blue I had to have
it approved ahead of time or anticipate repainting it. If we
wanted to move anything to a new location, we had to get approval
from Frances. She sold me the store, but at the time she sold me
the store she said, "It’s very important that you know you are
not the owner, you are only the caretaker of the store."

[Laughter] She made that point very, very quickly and she stuck
to it. As the years went by, she mellowed, and as she saw that
the store was going to be alright and would survive my
administration, she backed down a little bit. But she had a
paycheck deposited to her account the week before she died—she
remained active with the store right until the very end.

Question from the audience: What happened to the Tennessee
Williams’ manuscript?

Andreas Brown: What Dr. Kenney is asking me about relates to
some research I was doing when I was still on the faculty at San