Sometime last spring I watched a show on the local PBS station that showcased the Library of Congress and its rich research collections. While magicians Penn and Teller marveled at the prospect of working with Harry Houdini's very own books, a number of celebrity authors spoke excitedly about another kind of magic, the magic that somehow put unsuspecting researchers directly in touch with the very books they needed, although they didn't know they needed them at the time. I think it was the author of the Whole Earth Catalogue who described how certain books just seemed to call out to him from the stacks, and he praised the LC's open-stack policy for making this serendipitous process of discovery possible. Watching this show, one would think that the Library was proud of its efforts to foster creative research. The show, however, aired just about a week after Librarian of Congress James Billington cut off researchers' access to the stacks.

When I first learned of this decision, I had just returned home from a vacation, so I had missed the Washington Post's expose of thefts at the Library that led to the decision, and all the hoopla on the local news. But friends in touch with the situation assured me that the move was only temporary, and that, in time, the Librarian would relax his stand. Relieved that the situation did not seem to be as dire as I first expected, I decided to send a letter to the Librarian outlining what seemed to me to be important research-related considerations. The decision to close the stacks, I argued, may have solved some problems, but it raised other more serious ones, particularly for social historians. My thought was that if I presented the researcher's problems in a coherent fashion, pointing out that those who did history "from the bottom up" and who tried to document the everyday lives of everyday people would find it increasingly difficult to do their work, the Librarian would naturally agree that this was indeed a legitimate concern. I also thought that if I made some suggestions as to how security could be improved - since all of us know there was no security at all up to this point - that a real effort would be made to preserve access for researchers while still protecting collections. But of course, the Librarian never answered me, and it was weeks before one of his underlings sent me a form-letter reply.

By that time I had grown rather rabid on the subject, since closing the stacks directly affected my ability to do my job well. As a labor historian and the primary researcher for the Samuel Gompers Papers, a documentary editing project based at the University of Maryland, it is my job to research the life histories of rank and file labor leaders, and to provide details on local and national strikes, grass roots social organizations, and various national, state, and local agencies that are mentioned in the documents we publish. That means I might start with only a name like Jose Villa Lou, or an organization like the Topeka Rat Printers, or an episode like the Dayton Car strike, and it is up to me to provide significant details, dates, whatever is needed to flesh out the story.

Sometimes the search is easy, sometimes it's hard, and many times it seems impossible. And that's where stack access comes in handy. When I have exhausted all possible leads, and examined all the books that seem likely, sometimes the best thing to do is to check the indexes of remotely related volumes, or to go through the tables of contents of the many obscure journals the Library has collected over the years. I learned a long time ago that research is more an art than a science, and that the information I seek is rarely in the book I search for, but instead in the oddly-titled one shelved nearby. It's not a process that is easily explained or replicated, for I don't always have a good reason for picking up the books that I do. All I can tell you is that it worked for me, and that I used to be pretty good at it.

The powers-that-be contend that closing the stacks should not interfere with my ability to ferret out little known facts, for I can now search the shelf-list available on microfilm for pre-1966 books and the CD-ROM disk for post-1966 publications, and then request all the books on a given subject from LC staff. Seriously speaking this is just not practical for people like me who must meet strict publication deadlines in order to keep their grants. For example, there are well over 1,000 books on a
place like Philadelphia, any one of which might contain a reference I need. Or take the case of Jose Villa Lou, a Cuban activist not mentioned in mainstream sources and who I found by absolute chance as I browsed the stacks. To find the same information, it would mean ordering hundreds of books — on Cuba, on the Spanish American War, on imperialism, you name it — just to browse the index and then return them for shelving. Not a good use of my time, not a good use of the Library's time, and certainly not a good use of taxpayer money. Luckily I found Jose before March 31, 1992. I doubt very much that I would find him today.

When it became clear to me that the Library not only had no intention of addressing my concerns and was actively using the LC Gazette to promote a less than accurate view of the situation, I decided to appeal to higher authorities. I wrote numerous letters to professional organizations, to the Joint Committee on the Library, to various Congressmen I thought might be interested, but nothing happened. It was only when the Post published a piece in the "Sunday Outlook" section — and that after about three tries I think — that I got any response. And then that response was gratifying — Congressman Rose wanted to call hearings, researchers I had never met wanted to get involved, and even one well-placed library employee called me anonymously and urged me to take legal action. I was especially heartened by the many librarians who let me know they agreed with my position, for I have worked here for almost ten years and really did not want to burn all my bridges behind me. But even if the momentary publicity the Post piece got did encourage the Library finally to meet with a committee of historians, and even with me, ultimately nothing has happened. And, as far as I can tell, nothing will, unless the Library finds itself in the public eye again.

I wish I knew what the next step should be, I'm still writing letters, still working with a group of researchers, still complaining to anyone who will listen, but that's obviously not enough. It certainly might help if the people who have offered their private support for this issue could be more public, but that may be asking too much since jobs are concerned. Still, I think a concerted letter-writing effort, or maybe a petition to the Joint Committee might get some attention, not as much as a picket line, I know, but Congressman Rose will be chairman of the Joint Committee and in a position to help. I hope today we can make some plans for action, if only to keep the question alive. The people who are hurt most by the closed-stack decision are the "little" people — the independent researchers, public historians, library employees — and as individuals we don't have the prestige or the clout to impress the Librarian of Congress. But maybe working together we might attract "Eye Witness News" and get the process started again.

Speech delivered at the Library of Congress, November 2, 1992