



## An obsession becomes a valuable legacy

By Nancy McAllister

If you've ever been to a library, it's likely you've seen the impressive work of someone who saw the world a little differently—Melvil Dewey.

As a boy, Dewey showed his first of many quirky enthusiasms by hiring himself out as a farmhand and saving his pennies for the one thing he wanted more than anything else in the world—an unabridged dictionary. He was crazy about spelling, and once he'd saved enough money, he walked 10 miles to buy his prized possession. Later, Dewey became enamored with the idea of efficiency in learning. When he applied it to spelling, he began seeing superfluous letters in words. His own name, for example, he changed from Melville to Melvil. In college, he became obsessed with efficiently organizing the library and hatched a system of classification based on the decimal system that would take the world by storm. During his career there were times that Dewey said he was as welcome “as a thorn would be in a sore thumb.” But he continued his staunch support of popular education and libraries, even creating the discipline of library science.

Later in life, he opened a health resort for educators and librarians in Lake Placid, N.Y., and then tried to woo all winter sports enthusiasts there—not just athletes but spectators as well. It was an unusual move that brought ridicule and scorn to his doorstep. But his efforts paid off when he attracted the Winter Olympics—and business—to the area.

In the end, Dewey's quirks and obsessions are still with us: Top winter athletes and their fans still flock to Lake Placid, library science is offered at universities across the country, and one of the world's most useful classification systems is surviving the digital revolution just fine, thank you very much. Not bad for an odd man out.