



# THE ECONOMY & LETTERPRESS

**DON BLACK:**

...due to the state of the economy, we have noticed that there seems to be an increase in equipment available for purchase.

**DAVE CHURCHMAN:**

Barring a total economic collapse, I don't see any lessening of demand for our toys in the next couple of years.

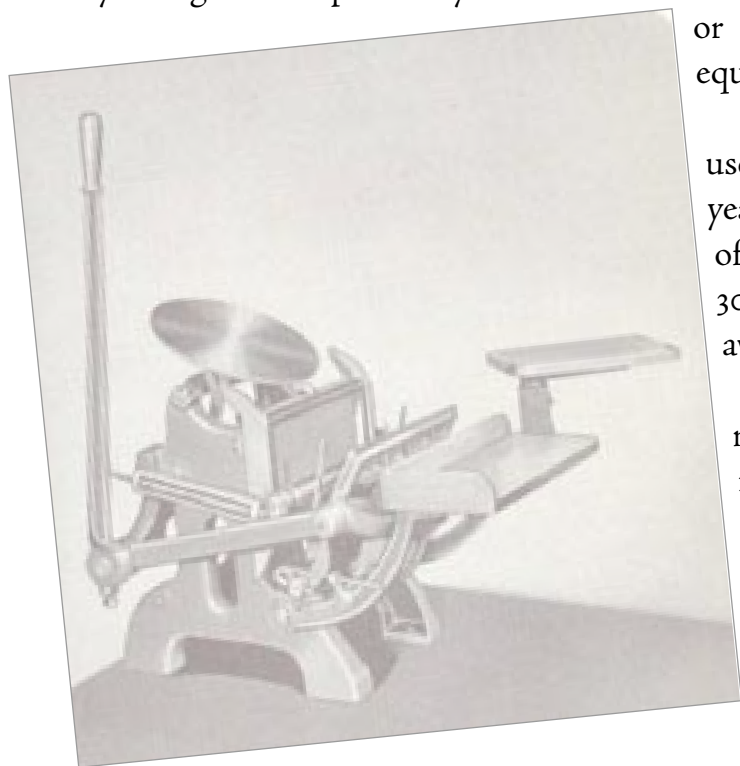
**JOHN BARRETT:**

So, how are "things" at Letterpress Things? Overall, not bad. Since last spring purchase opportunities picked up...

**MORE INSIDE**

## Don Black:

Having sold letterpress and hot metal equipment for the past 40 years and worked in the trade for more than 50 years I have seen many changes in the past five years.



We have seen a large increase in the interest from the Book Arts and Private Press people. Vandercooks, Pilots, Kelseys etc. that 25 years ago did not create a lot of interest are now widely sought after and prices have skyrocketed.

Quite noticeable in the past six months, due to the state of the economy we have noticed that there seems to be an increase in equipment available for purchase. There is not a day goes by that we do not have three or four calls or emails regarding surplus equipment for sale.

It is very difficult to predict what the used market will be like six months or a year from now. However being a gambler of sorts I would not hesitate to purchase 30 Vandercooks or 50 Pilots if they were available today.

Since my wife and I are in semi retirement, my son Craig and his wife Lynn run the business. I predict that while there may be a drop in sales for the next year or so that letterpress as far as APA members are concerned will be as good in 5 years as it is now and Don Black Linecasting will be here under my son's



directions to meet your needs.

In the past 40 years we have sold more than 200 Ludlows, thousands and thousands of Ludlow, Linotype, Monotype and Foundry fonts along with related items.

We have sold in excess of 50 Vandercooks, lots of Heidelberg Platens or similar presses to places as far away as Japan, also well in excess of 100 table top platen presses to customers as far away as Switzerland and France.

It has been a great experience as we have met some wonderful people, many who go back 40 years and are still loyal customers and friends who we look forward to doing business for many years in the future.

[WEB SITE](#) ■ [EMAIL](#)



**APA JOURNAL** is the unofficial publication of the Amalgamated Printers' Association – an organization composed of letterpress printing enthusiasts. The unofficial editor is Mike O'Connor P. O. Box 18117, Fountain Hills, Arizona 85269. Any and all comments

welcomed. The publication is published as the spirit moves the editor but a monthly schedule is hoped for. [Contact the editor.](#)

APA's web site:

[Amalgamated Printers' Association](#)

## Dave Churchman:

I don't see any slowing of demand for good used machinery in our field. Vandercooks (at least the #3, #4, UN-1, and SP-15 & 20) are eagerly sought by primarily younger printers, and the prices they bring leave me breathless. They now sell for the price of a high-end used car, regardless of mileage.

The same can be said for tabletop platen presses (Pilots, Sigwalts, Goldings, et al) as they are likewise in constant demand by newly-minted graphic artists who want to get their hands on a 3-dimensional object after mind-numbing slogs in front of a CRT. Even the ubiquitous C&P floor model platens are making a slow comeback.

The Pilots still sell for several times the price of a nice 8x12 or 10x15 so the market is really upside down in that regard. But demand is picking up.

People (and institutions, like schools, etc.) seem to have the cash to put into these machines, so the "Laws of Supply & Demand" are definitely not abrogated by a crummy economy.

Barring a total economic collapse, I don't see any lessening of demand for our toys in

the next couple of years. The finite supply of machines is not being replaced; au contraire, there are fewer of them every year due to fire, flood, careless workmen, etc.

On the other side, our schools continue to flood the field of graphic design with bright and talented graduates, some of whom hanker for the old ways of doing things. So we have more folks interested in our supposedly dead craft every year... and fewer machines to slake their thirst for first class equipment and accoutrements—which is why the Vandercook and the Pilots are all selling for four figures--when you can find them.

There are very few dealers doing what Don, John and I are trying to do, which is to make a decent living and, at the same time, preserve for future generations the means of letterpress reproduction, be it type, presses, cutters, sticks or make-up rules. None of us will ever become millionaires doing this (I call it my "Get-Rich-Slow-Scheme!"), but personally, I can't think of anything I'd rather do—irrespective of the potential to make money.

Dealers and printers alike pretty well know what the hot items are in our trade. The dealers must compete with the users in order to keep a reasonable stock of saleable

equipment on hand. We can't call up a factory in Hoboken (or Nanking!) and order a dozen Pilot presses. It is a minor nightmare trying to keep the items most in demand in stock. I rely on online searches (generally a waste of time), Craig's List, AuctionZip, word-of-mouth and longstanding associations with both commercial and hobby printers to turn up enough good stuff to remain a player in this Scheme of mine.

In this crazy business, everything you throw away you're going to want someday—well, maybe not the magnesium cuts, as they can be recycled as very bright road flares!

At age 75, I don't think a lot about what the next 10 years will bring. If I had to make an uneducated guess, I'd say that—at some juncture—the Chinese (or Koreans, or Samoans, whoever) are going to wake up and make good working copies of both the cylinder proof presses and a small range of tabletop presses, like the Pilot. When that happens, the game will change—perhaps for the better for the end user, but probably not for the dealer...unless he's smart enough to get an exclusive dealership.

Whether or not this scenario takes place, there will always be a decent market for good used type and equipment. And with all of our young people being computer lit-



erate, the wonderful world of eBay can offer significant new venues for online sales. The one area that really concerns me is handset type. Who will make the type we lovingly set into poetry, political rants, book pages, blatantly pretentious and wholly unsubstantiated ad copy, business cards and wedding invites? Photopolymer does not fill the bill. Yes, it works and is relatively cheap, but

the quality is not as good as handset and the rhythmic construction of a form from a case (or cases) of handset type will become a lost art. That aspect, to me, is central to this great hobby—the creative glue that makes it all a joy. Running a press is dog’s work—it has to be done, but feel free to take over for me any time. Setting type and creating tasteful handset forms are

therapy—a chance to let the mind dwell on the process and turn ideas into true graphic artworks, to the exclusion of all the extraneous crap that clutters our lives. Sorry, but photopolymer doesn’t begin to deliver that aspect. So back to the question: where are we going to get the type to keep this thing glued together? I wish I knew...

EMAIL

THE ECONOMY & LETTERPRESS

## John Barrett:

The past six months or so have seen some incredible change in the economy. The housing market slump, bank bailouts, and the stock market dive... it’s enough to send a person into the basement to ink up and print money! So, how are “things” at Letterpress Things? Overall, not bad. Since last spring purchase opportunities picked up; lots of type, furniture, tools and a few presses. Right now there are three purchases in process, mostly type though.

On the sales side, not enough presses! Supplies for beginners and tabletop presses

are our most important focus—and that business has been excellent!

Traffic into the store during November thru January dropped somewhat. At first we thought it was due to the economy, but on review the weather on most of our open dates was miserable: snow, sleet/freezing rain or unbearable cold. Email and telephone sales made the difference. Since January we’ve had three record setting attendance days. With the weather changing toward spring we’re very optimistic about what lies ahead.

Indeed, the future for letterpress supplies and equipment is strong and expanding.

Interest in letterpress as a serious avoca-

tion continues to grow despite the current economic downturn. While unemployment is approaching double digits, still 90% of the country is employed. Many people are working, many earning decent wages with discretionary income to spend.

The lore and love of letterpress to those of us who participate in either the craft or the art of the process, whether for profit or pleasure, is second nature and we are equipped. But when an uninitiated gets the “itch” to “letterpress print” the quest begins... a press, some type, the basic tools, paper and ink. And then, oh my, a bigger press; more type or polymer plates; more furniture and other things; a stone, a cutter and so on.

Letterpress has certainly undergone a renaissance, evolving from the commercial arena to an individual past time.

Now growth and expansion





is good. But can the availability of equipment and supplies keep up? With equipment, probably not. New presses aren't being manufactured so the supply is finite. But more and more presses are finding their way out of basements, garages and back-areas of warehouses. And, presses of marginal quality, here-to-fore scrapped are doggedly cleaned and de-rusted, and missing or broken parts repaired. But how soon the overall "inventory" is tapped out, who knows.

With supplies, availability should keep up with demand. It's axiomatic that if there's a need for an item it'll be made. Presently suppliers like NA Graphics have an extensive inventory of new supplies. Others like Dave Churchman, Don Black, others and myself carry some new supplies as well as used items brought in from purchased shops. Plus, to meet demand some of us are having specific things manufactured for our own stores.

So, bottom line from our vantage point is that letterpress will stay strong and continue to expand. Twenty-five years ago, if you told me that every other Saturday in 2009 I'd be selling "letterpress things" to people who just wanted to print for the joy of it, I'd said you were nuts! Boy, have we come a long, long way!

[WEB SITE](#)  [EMAIL](#)



## Generous gift from Guy

Mike O'Connor, the Secretary-Treasurer of the APA, has been receiving dues from all the members, over the last few months. This is about one of the envelopes Mike received.

This particular envelope was from Guy Botterill.

Guy was given Tramp Printer status recently. In the envelope was a donation to the APA for \$500.

Those who know Guy, never know what to expect, but this was quite a surprise.

Guy is now 81 years young, and in the process of selling his type collection. I have written him a thank you letter. This is just some of the letter:

"As the new president of the APA, I just wanted to thank you for your generous donation.

"After all your good service to the organization, this was beyond the call. In these


tough times this will help the APA grow.

"I do miss seeing you at the Wazgoose's. Maybe if you're up to it, we can meet in Huntington, WV. It will be the Heritage Goose hosted by Austin Jones."

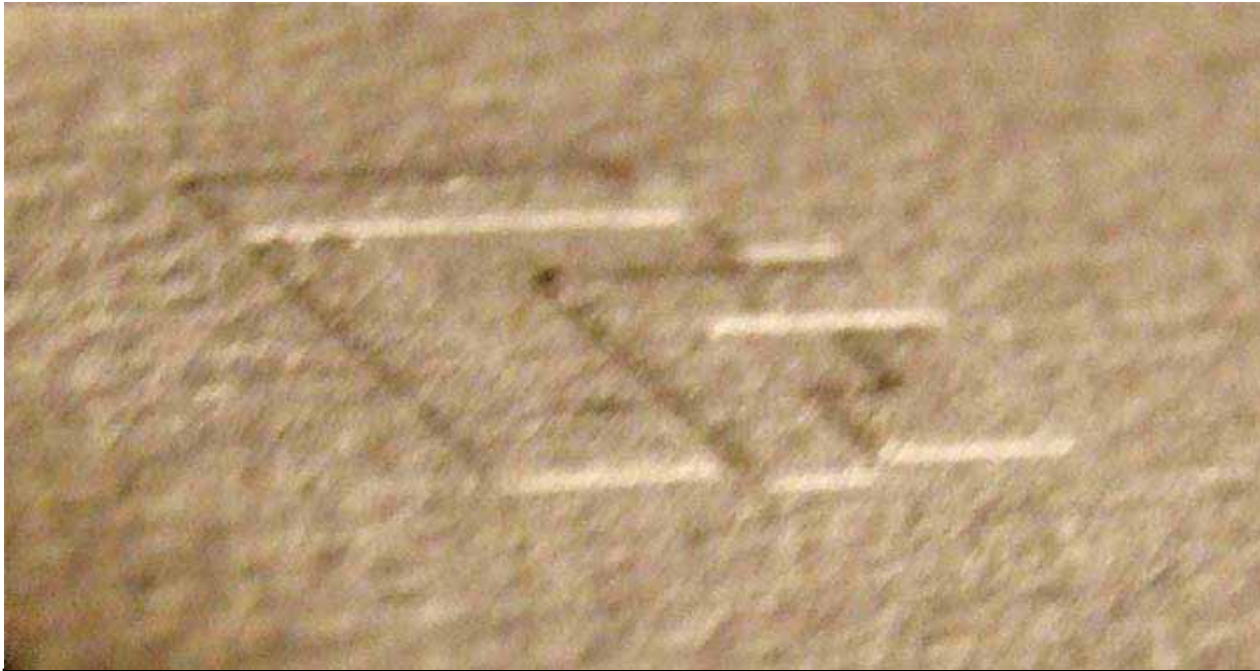
The shirt pocket filled with joke cards, the antics at the auctions, his "hey baby" and his famous type contest, were surely missed at recent Wayzgoose's. Who else can recite all the cities (and zip codes) of all the previous Wayzgoose events?

I hope this sharp dressed man attends another Goose soon. I will be sure to be the first to buy him a drink, (even though he doesn't need one!)

Thank you Guy and I know the membership thanks you as well.



**APA WAYZGOOSE & MIDWEST & GREAT NORTHERN PRINTERS FAIR**  
 Coming September 17-19, 2009  
 (Details coming)



# Embossing

## ON A SMALL PRESS

By JOHN HENRY

Embossing paper and cardstock is something which is easily done on a small press, but doesn't often show itself in the printed pieces we see in the monthly APA bundles. I recently demonstrated some simple procedures for embossing without heat on small

letterpress equipment during the Biennial Conference of the College Book Arts Association (January, 2009), and thought it might be good to share some of that with APA members in this forum.

The first technique is one which is described in good detail in "The Printer's Handbook," an instructive book by C.T.

Jacobi, and published by Chiswick Press in London in 1891. This is most likely the simplest method of all as it utilizes hand-cut hard paper "dies" and no need for a heated platen or any special equipment. I'll quote the entire paragraph from Jacobi's book at this point:

"An easy way to emboss.—Here is a field for ingenuity which will afford room for development. Very fine results can be obtained at little expense, and it will be a novelty, as very few printers have done such work. Take a piece of six-ply card with a smooth, white surface, just the size of the card you wish to emboss, and sketch the shape you desire with a pencil, cutting out the design in one piece with a sharp knife; then trim the edge of the inside piece so that it will play freely through the outside piece. Paste the outside or female die firmly on the back of a wood letter large enough to hold it, and the inside or male die very lightly to the same letter; then lock up the letter and put it on the press, remove your rollers, make a good hard tympan, and after thoroughly pasting the surface of the inside die, take an impression and hold the platen on the impression until the paste has time to dry. On opening the press the under die leaves the wood letter on which it was lightly held and



adheres to the tympan, leaving the outside die attached to the letter on the bed of the press. Then set the gauges, feed in the cards in the usual way, and proceed to emboss."

The photo to the right demonstrates this particular technique of embossing. The back of an old photoengraving or a photopolymer mounting base may be used rather than a wood type character, and modern spray or pressure-sensitive adhesives may be used for attachment to both surfaces. Multiple sheets of thinner board may be pasted together to get the proper thickness (.015"-.020"). Whatever stock is selected should provide a hard-surface if the edition is of any significant length. Hard, calendered press-board works quite well, and is readily available in the thickness required.

If a framer's mat board cutter is available, it will work well to make a beveled edge on the sides of both the outer and inner (counter) die. Of course this method can be used for both a debossed (depressed) or embossed (raised) panel on the sheet being processed. If debossed, the panel can be a good set-off for illustrations, or as a frame element on a title page or paper booklet cover.

A second method of embossing requires a commercially-made die, which can be



obtained from a photoengraving shop or your favorite photopolymer plate maker. The image area to be embossed must be a depressed area on the plate. The plate provider will use a positive to expose the photo-sensitive plate material. I'm not certain how best to communicate this to your plate provider, but assume most of them would know what to do if you asked for a die for embossing the image. A call to them in ad-

vance might be safest in order to avoid mistakes on both ends.

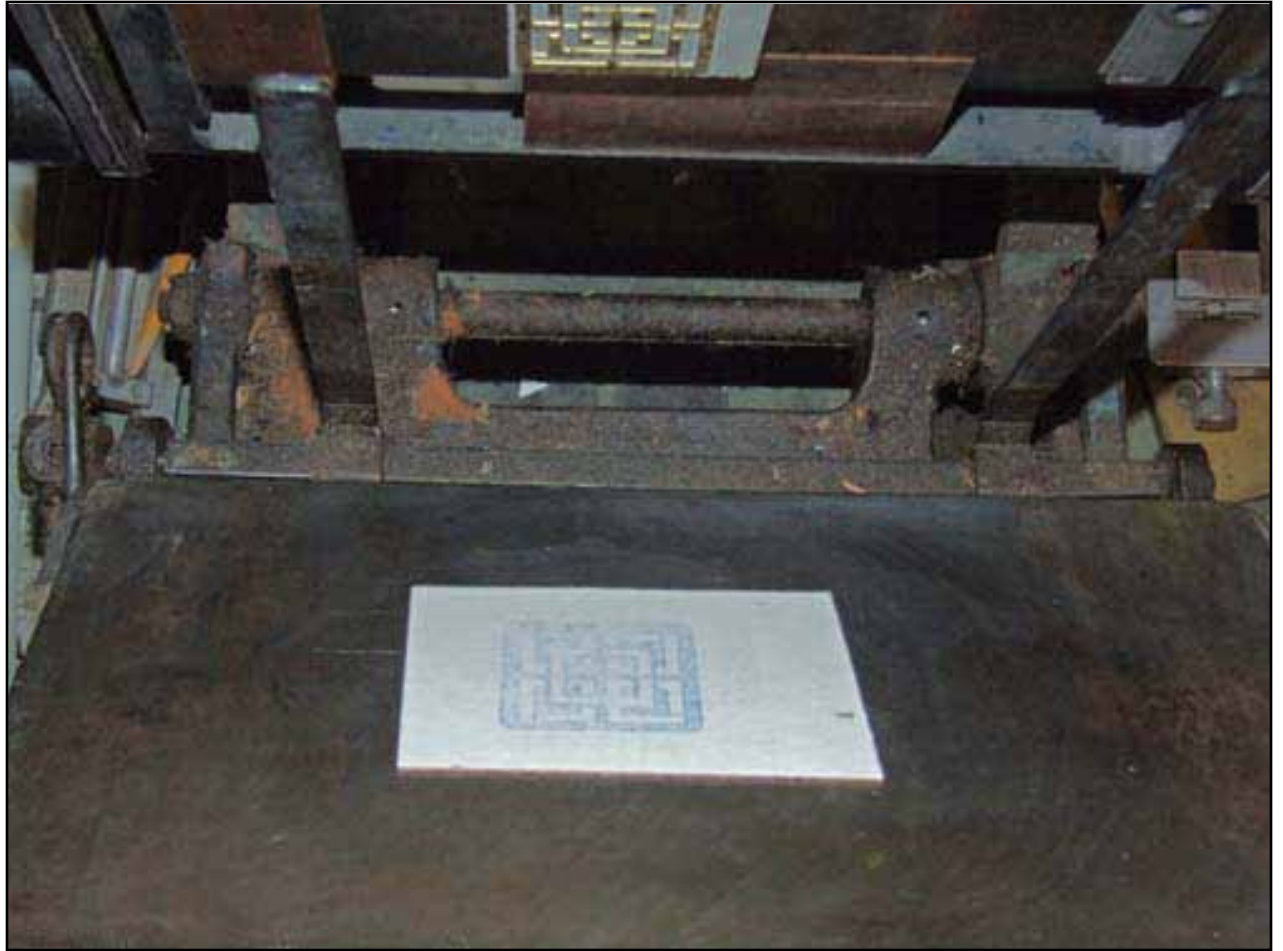
I can make the photopolymer plate in my own shop, using the KM73 plate material (usually used for intaglio work) obtained from [Boxcar Press](#).

This material has less relief (.020") than standard relief plates (.030"-.050"), and works well for this type of embossing. If the etched depth of the die is too great, the

paper can tear as it is being stretched between the die and the counter-die, and I have found I get better results with a die with image depth shallower than a normal photoengraving.

In the following example, the female die is simply a commercially-available thin metal plate which has been die-cut or laser cut with an image designed for crafters to emboss sheets of paper by rubbing the paper into the recesses in the plate. These plates are readily available in crafting stores, and make good simple dies for playing with the techniques. The female die is mounted to be type-high as though printing the image, and a counter-die made with hot melt adhesive as follows:

After positioning the plate on the base and in the chase, apply a piece of chip board or mat-board directly to the platen larger than the area to be embossed. This may be applied with pressure-sensitive adhesive or spray adhesive. A “proof” can be taken by inking the plate and cycling the press, or using carbon paper to impress an image on the surface of the board, providing an image which can be used in positioning the hot melt in the image areas. A piece of kitchen plastic wrap is placed between the die and the hot melt on the board, and the platen is closed, forcing the warm adhesive into all the detail of the die. This can be done in a



multi-stage process if the image area is too large to fill with hot-melt in a single pressing (as the old saw goes, “you must strike while the die is hot”) In this case the die is cold and the hot-melt must be hot or at least warm enough to be conformable.

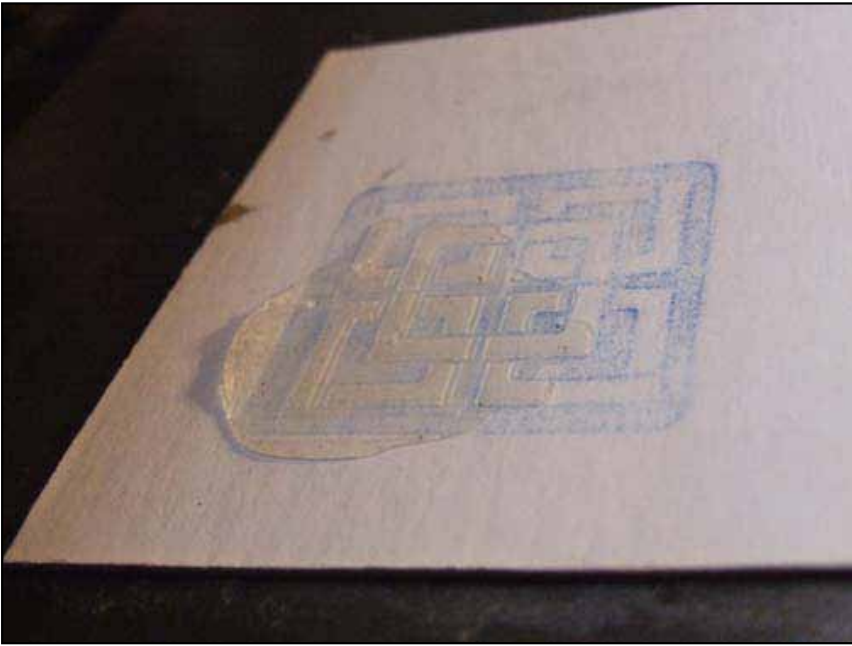
This formed counter-die (see photo next page) is trimmed close to the image, and the excess hot-melt removed. It is possible to cut away image areas not desired at this time, if

there are elements of the image not required.

After the counter-die is sufficiently cooled, a tympan sheet can be put into place and gauge pins placed for proper sheet register. The tympan sheet may be cut away around the area to be embossed in order to retain the crispness of the image edges.

Since the counter-die was produced by interaction of the die itself, it is already aligned in register with the die, and the edi-





stocks since then with very good results. This eliminates the smell and longer curing times required with the body putty. There are other compounds used in the bindery industry which require mixing of powder with volatile solvents, but this is a smelly process as well. Of course, if your die is heated, the hot melt idea is futile as the counter-die will not have the firmness required if it is heated to

Of course, if you have a heated bed in your press, much finer results can be obtained, and the embossing will be significantly crisper as the paper is basically “ironed” into shape by the metal die. But don’t be hesitant to try embossing with an unheated platen press and these simple procedures. An embossed panel or image can do much to make a piece of printing really “pop” and become something quite extraordinary.

If you have questions, please feel free to [contact me](#) regarding the techniques and procedures I used in the process described in this brief article.

tion may be run without further adjustment.

There are various grades of hot-melt sticks available. It is important to find sticks which are not tacky, but melt and cool to a hard surface. Some of the commercial hot melt sticks have a good deal of stickiness even after cooling, and these will give you headaches when running. If there is a bit of stickiness, a dusting with starch or baby powder will help the sheets to release from the counter-die after embossing. The standard inexpensive sticks readily available for craft use are best.

In the past I have used automobile body putty for producing counter-dies with great success, but the hot-melt idea came to me and I have used it on a variety of paper

the point of melting. I have found, with any method of producing a counter-die, that there is a definite limit to the fineness of line one can ‘hold’ when producing an embossed image without heat. Start out with some simple embossed panels of various shapes, and gradually test out what thickness of line or (in the case of type) size of font you can emboss well.

