



A day at Skyline Type Foundry

By BOVINA BUNRATTY

Nobody comes here by accident. Even the Jehovah's Witnesses can barely find it. From the Calhoun County town of Kampsville, Illinois (pop. 400), go six miles west on the state highway, and watch for what looks like some Conestoga wagon tracks heading off through the meadow on your left. This barely-a-road will take you into a stand of trees, down and up through the gravelly bed of Fox Creek (unless the water's up), around a bend lined with red cedars, and past a decrepit-looking bulldozer parked by the wellhouse. From there you can see the small

Miss Bunratty has long been a mysterious friend of the family and her insights into the foundry business are indeed informative.

but neatly renovated farmhouse occupied by AAPA/APA members Sky and Johanna Shipley. Drive on past it to a tan and forest-green metal building in the wooded bluffs overlooking the mighty Mississippi River. You're at Skyline Type Foundry—one of only a small handful of commercial operations worldwide that produce metal printing type.

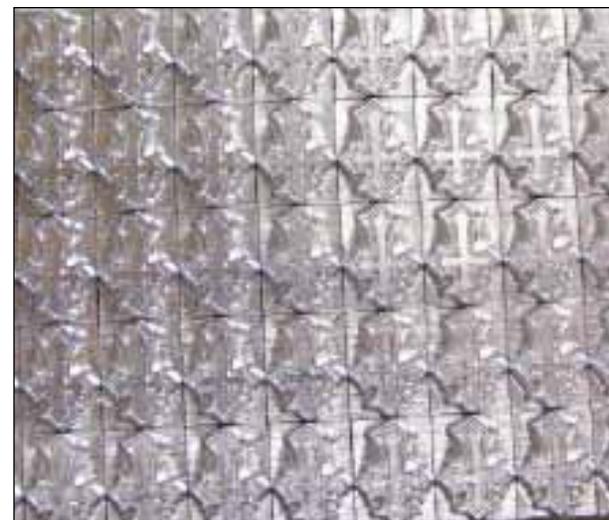
Don't mind the "watchdogs" Java and Gypsy. They'll give you a barksy welcome and then be your new best friends. Come on in, and take a trip back to the golden age of typefounding!

Sky's an early riser, and his day normally begins before dawn with a walk up to the foundry building to light the gas burner on the Monotype Thompson Type Caster that he'll use today. The hour or so that it takes for the melting pot to come up to temp (650°F) is just the right amount of time to have a quiet cup of coffee, tease Johanna as she drowsily wanders into the kitchen, and have breakfast for two. Then it's off to make type.

A few drops of oil are judiciously administered here and there to the Thompson, the molten alloy stirred and skimmed, the pump piston fluxed and inserted into the pot, and the machine run for several dozen cycles to warm up the mold. The matrix for the first character to be cast is clamped

in the mat holder. (A matrix is a planchet, or small brass tablet, into which a typographic character is punched. It's right-reading, so the type will be wrong-reading, so the image will again be right-reading.) A proof type is cast and carefully examined under magnification. The matrix must match up to the mold just right so when the type is composed and printed, every character will be precisely aligned on the baseline. Likewise the width of the body must be exact so the space between characters is visually optimum. With as many consecutive proof casts as it takes, these adjustments are perfected to a tolerance of 0.001". Finicky and laborious, it is. A casterman must be a patient, methodical detail-person. Once Sky is satisfied with the alignment, he engages the clutch on the Thompson and begins the production run of that character.

Meanwhile, over in the fonting alley, Johanna has donned her apron and com-





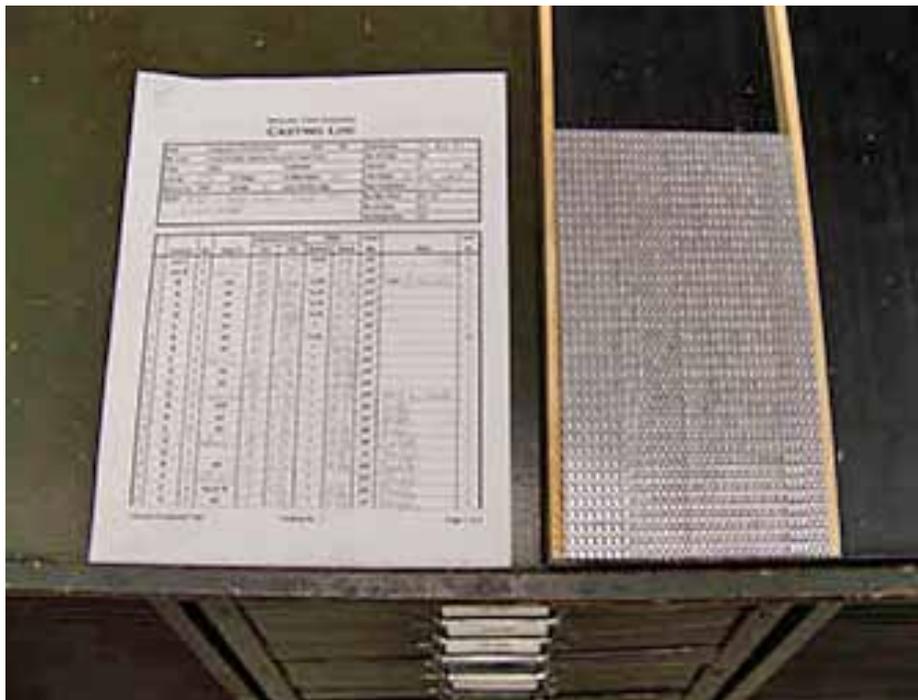
mond Glider saw. The type is laid out in galleys on the twelve-foot-long slanted working top. She starts at one end with a font box, and works down the line taking one line of type from each galley. A pair of blocks fills the extra space. A label is carefully applied to the box top, followed by a clear laminate, and the finished product is sealed with a mylar sleeve to hold it together. Finished fonts are neatly stored for sale in a row of surplus metal card-file cabinets.

Ready now to proceed to the next character, Sky consults his Casting Log. This is a 3-page chart he's prepared in advance that tabulates the alignment parameters and other casting information for every character in a font. Typically that's 72—caps, lowercase, points and figures—but can be many more if there are ligatures, font ornaments, alternates or other special characters. The Log also specifies which galley to put the type in for a given character, so each line of the font is automatically assembled during the casting process and ready for packing. The characters are not cast alphabetically, but in descending order of "set width". This enables a certain amount of efficiency, since some have the same width, and adjustments to the caster are minimized. On a good day 20 to 25 characters can be completed, each with its own separate alignment process and production run. The entire casting will

mences the process of packaging up the font casting that was completed last week. Yesterday she printed the labels and specimen cards in Skyline's pressroom. It's a neat and orderly printing office, with natural light from many windows, and containing eight antique hand-fed presses ranging in size from 2½" x4" to 14" x18" (all beautifully restored and operational). Heat is provided by an ornate antique parlor stove, also restored, that was obtained from the old newspaper shop bought out in a nearby Illinois ghost town.

First she calculates the size and quantity of wooden filler blocks necessary, and knocks them out in no time on the Ham-





building keeps the air flowing. Scrap type that goes into the melting pot often contains dirt and debris that causes stinky smoke. Air exchange can be a problem in the cold days of winter, when the fan must remain off most of the time so the temperature is tolerable for caster and casterman.

After a break for lunch, Johanna makes

consist of anywhere from 15 to 50 complete fonts, depending on anticipated popularity and other variables.

The foundry half of the building contains seven Thompson casters, three of which are operational, and a historic Nurnberger-Rettig pivotal caster. There's also a type dressing bench, a rare Rouse Type Mortising Machine, a Ludlow Super Surfacer (used for milling type to type-high if mats are nonstandard depth-of-drive), and a workbench. A row of card-file cabinets holds Skyline's crown jewels: the matrix library, containing some 2,700 different mat fonts. In summer the windows are all wide open, and an exhaust fan in the end of the

a trip to the Kampsville Post Office to get the mail and send off some orders. "Flat Rate Boxes are the best thing that ever happened," she mentions. "They can save our customers as much as 90% on postage, depending on the weight and distance."

Sky has piled up quite a bit of experience in packing and shipping type. "We had a couple of spectacular disasters in the early years," he says with a wry grin, "but trial-and-error teaches the best methods, and now customers use descriptives like 'bomb-proof' for our packages. The most important thing is to immobilize the type within the box, so it can't thrash around during shipment and destroy itself and the box."



STF ships type anywhere in the world, and has enjoyed orders from Sweden, England, Belgium, Australia and other countries.

Skyline Type Foundry started in 2003 when Sky had the opportunity to acquire the equipment of the former Perfection Type Foundry, St. Paul, Minnesota, from the late Jerry F. Killie (known to many in the letterpress community for his infamously long telephone calls), and began fooling around with it. One thing led to another, and the operation rapidly took on a life of its own. A very vigorous one. "I now have much more demand than I can fill," he comments. "Not a bad problem to have!"

One of the ongoing challenges to overcome is the age and condition of the machinery. Most of it is seriously worn out, and requires major repairs in order to be properly functional. One Thompson has been torn down and completely overhauled, now looking and running like a brand new caster just out of the crate. Sky's proud of it, and justifiably so. Other machines are in line for this treatment as time permits.

After taking care of some other routine tasks around the foundry and office, Johanna throttles back a little and takes time for a round of her favorite computer game as the afternoon sun wanes. Sky never slows down at the caster ("everybody knows he's totally obsessed" Jo allows, rolling her eyes)

though he does admit that a wee bit of a certain golden sparkling beverage helps him find his second wind about this time of day.

The ever-vigilant watchdogs have awakened from their all-day duty of sleeping sprawled out in the most inconvenient spots possible, and are growing restless. It's *road trip* time! Sky opens the shop door and they blast off like a double-barreled cannon for their afternoon ramble. He follows, hoping they won't go AWOL today, and enjoys a 20-minute fresh-air break.

Finished with packing up the type, Johanna checks the "Pack," "Print," and "Prep" racks behind the fonting top for the Casting Logs of the next projects in line. Finding a new border awaiting label printing, she goes to the galley rack and locates the galleys where this casting is stored, pulls out the overrun type, and carries it to the marble imposing stone in the pressroom, where she begins assembling the label form. This will be finished and locked up today; ready for printing tomorrow on the 8x12 Chandler & Price press. Johanna's day winds down, and she heads for the house to relax with a book before supper.

After ten hours at the caster, Sky admits that he's beginning to run out of steam. It's full dark now after a good productive day. Finish up the run, turn off the Thompson's gas burner and cooling system, pull the

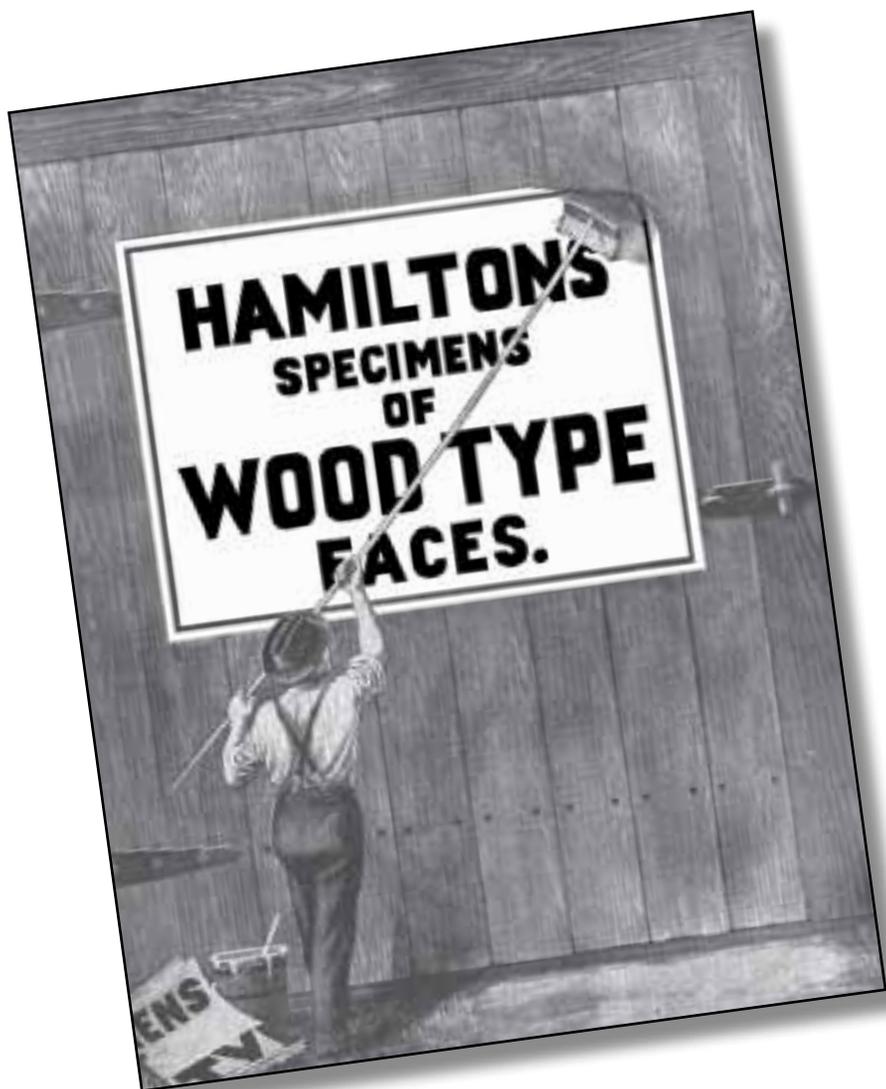


pump piston and take it outside for a good wire-brushing. Rouse the dogs and close up the building.

"I was born for this," he says quietly, smiling and turning to stroll down to the house for a late supper.

Email Sky.

Horn reprints 1906 Hamilton's wood type specimen book



John Horn was destroying his 1906 copy of "Hamiltons' Specimens of Wood Type Faces" (17th edition) as he used it to identify some of the wood type in his collection. The paper was very brittle. He considered buying a large format scanner and scanning a copy to a disk. However, when visiting with Rich Hopkins he mentioned the idea to him and Rich's Pioneer Press (commercial print establishment owned by Rich) reprinting the specimen. John reported that Rich was interested and jumped at the project idea.

After some discussion, the two found that Rich's copy of the specimen book was the most complete so Rich's copy was used to scan.

"I have to give most of the credit for this project to Rich Hopkins and his crew at the Pioneer Press," Horn said. He further stated, "Rich put in a lot of extra time in scanning and cleaning up the scans and the printing and binding are impeccable." In fact Horn stated that he thought the reproduction looks better than the original! Horn emphasized that the book



would not have been published had it not been for Rich and his crew. 7

Rich was asked to describe the production of the book and here are his comments:

"I'll try to be brief and not get bogged down in infinite technical detail. We did the scanning on a Micro-Tec 11x17 scanner and all scans were done at 600 dpi. We did a lot of experimenting with the scanner's settings to assure that we got the best original image and that means that on the pages with one huge letter and virtually no type, we scanned to one goal, where if the page was full of tiny type, we scanned to an altogether different goal. We scanned to grayscale PSD (Photoshop Document) files, not to jpg or tiff.

"All pages were reviewed in Photoshop and retouched as necessary. The goal with the scanner was to minimize Photoshop intervention, but it still was necessary on every page. The covers were an extensive assembly from bits and pieces of various scans of the book covers available to us, all assembled into one piece via Photoshop. The spine was fabricated from pieces because (1) no book on hand had a spine which was intact, and (2) the book thickness was greater on the reprint than on the original.

"The book was assembled in Adobe InDesign, which enables direct importing of PSD files and the option of opening and editing if needed from InDesign.

"Printing was done on a Hamada B452 press which is a 14x20 format. We were able to print two pages up on this press. This is a 4-color press but we opted to use it primarily because of its better inking capabilities, and we don't have a "digital" one-color press to this size.

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