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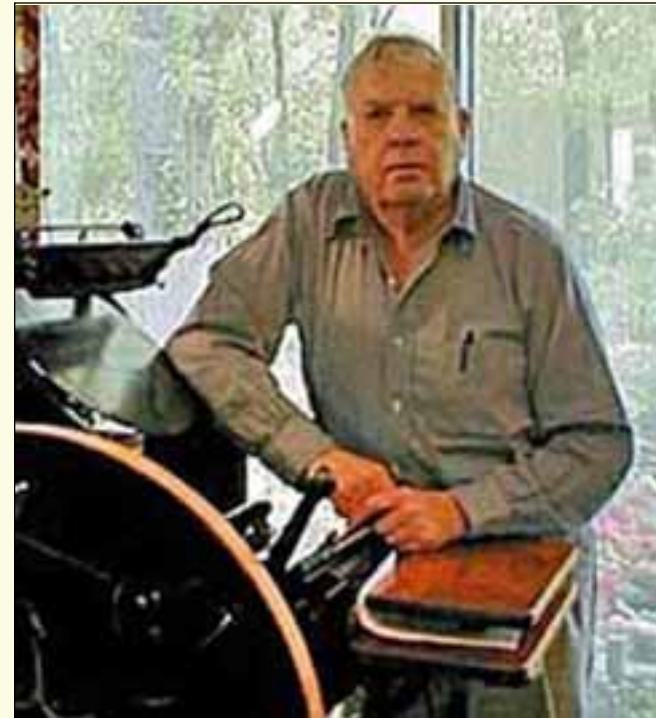
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# S.O.S.

STEPHEN O. SAXE

## *Inky fingers at a young age*

**BY STEPHEN O. SAXE** I was one of those boys who had a Swiftset rotary rubber type press as a boy, though I never got good results with it. I produced a class newspaper on the mimeograph machine in my father's office when I was in fourth grade. In college I was the drama editor of the daily newspaper, the Harvard Crimson, and then went on to get an M.F.A. in stage design at Yale. I designed soap operas on CBS and a couple of productions for the New York City Opera, including a production of Porgy and Bess with William Warfield. In 1966 I was in London to design a drama for British television, and then went to Ports-



Steven O. Saxe with his Pearl.

mouth to make measured drawings of HMS Victory for a Mme. Tussaud's production of "The Death of Lord Nelson."

After I left the scenic design field I worked for about eight years as a book designer for Harcourt Brace in New York.

I bought my first press – a Golding 8x10 map press – around 1965. I soon discovered that was the wrong press for anything but imprinting, and I quickly traded it in for a C&P Pilot. To learn to print I read all the books in the public library on printing that I could find. A knowledgeable friend, Martin Speckter, introduced me to Lillian and Parker Worley, and through them I decided to join APA. My bundle pieces were all done on the Pilot in those

days. I am indebted to APA for bringing me into contact with many other good friends. APA was, and remains, invaluable as a source of inspiration, equipment, and especially friendship and expertise of other printers. Martin Speckter's passion for collecting printing-related books and presses soon became my passion, too.

I helped assemble a collection of hand presses (now dispersed) at Bowne & Co., Stationers, at the South Street Seaport Museum. Also for Bowne, I edited A Specimen Book of Nineteenth-Century Printing Types, Borders, Ornaments, and Cuts. After several years of printing with the Pilot, I bought a nice Improved Pearl, which graced the living room of my New York apartment for a decade. It's the press that I still use for most of my



The work horse of the Saxe print shop, the Pearl press, complete with counter, fountain, safety curtain and brake.



printing for APA. That press was later joined by a foolscap folio Albion that I bought from a printing instructor in England. It was during this period in 1974 that Ben Lieberman got several printing enthusiasts together to start the American Printing History Association; I was on the founding board



Another corner of the shop, showing quarter cases of spacing, the Albion and Pilot presses. Framed above are broadside type specimens by Joseph Fry (1785) and William Caslon (1734.)

and served on it for over ten years.

In 1992 my wife and I moved from New York City to a house in White Plains, in the northern suburbs. With plenty of room for a print shop, I ac-

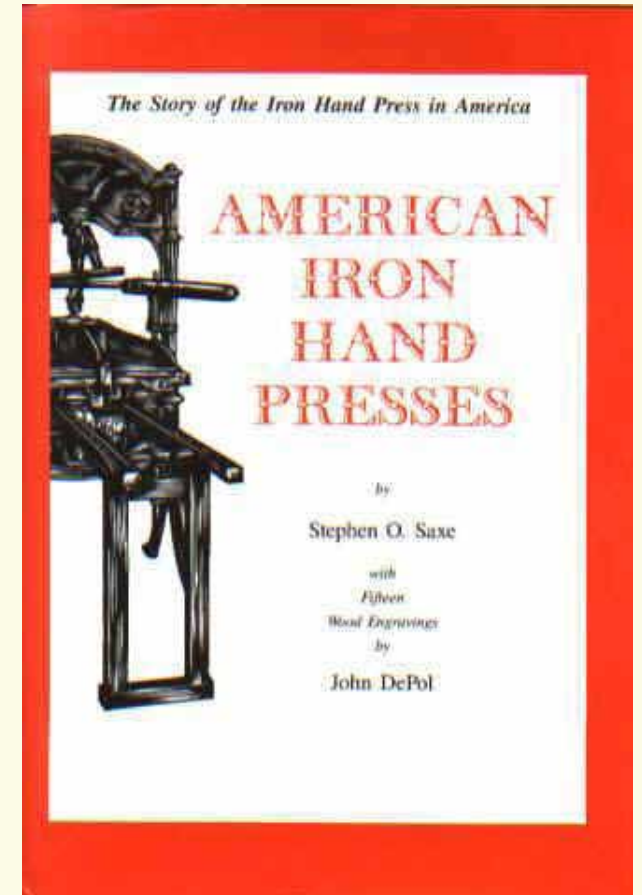
quired a nice Vandercook SP-15. All the while I've been collecting 19th-century type (about 500 fonts) and British and American printer' manuals and, especially, type specimen books. I now have a pretty good collection of American specimens from 1818 on: There are 238 specimens representing 48 different American type foundries. The British specimens include several from Vincent Figgins; the earliest is from 1815.

My interest in printing has inevitably led me into historical research. I researched and wrote articles on New York City type foundries before 1900, and on [Golding & Co.](#), were published in APHA's

journal, *Printing History*. For about five years I wrote, edited, designed, and even made the mechanicals for APHA's newsletter; in those days it was issued six times a year, and I got a

chance to write about all the printing-related subjects that interested me. In 1994 I revised Maurice Annenberg's [American Type Foundries](#) and their Catalogs for Oak Knoll.

My first book on my own, "[American Iron Hand Presses](#)," was illustrated with wood engravings by my friend John DePol and printed by Neil Shaver at his Yellow Barn Press. Oak Knoll



published a trade edition in hard and soft covers in 1992. This book, including the research, was a pleasure from beginning to end.

A major undertaking was my editing Richard-Gabriel Rummonds two-volume “Nineteenth-Century Printing Practices and the Iron Handpress,” an effort that lasted over eight years. When I agreed to do the editing, I knew that Gabriel was an absolutely meticulous worker, and I resolved to measure up to his standards. Manuscripts and corrections flew back and forth between Rummonds in Seattle and me in White Plains for many years, until the work was published by Oak Knoll in 2004. I am convinced that in future years this work will be recognized as a major contribution to the literature of printing history.

My latest book project has been editing, with Alastair Johnston, William E. Loy’s “[Nineteenth-Century American Designers and Engravers of Type](#)”.

Loy wrote a series of articles for *Inland Printer* in 1898. For ten years I wanted to make these articles available to modern readers. We reprinted Loy’s



The workbench where type is set and forms made up. Type cases below. At the left, framed above the bench, are a leaf printed by Caxton (Canterbury Tales) and a snippet of Gutenberg (the Catholicon.)

articles and then added biographical information, several hundred scans of typefaces mentioned in the text, and an index of patents and typefaces.

In April 2010 I was asked to give the annual Hofer Lecture on Graphic Arts at Harvard’s Houghton Library. The

subject was “Turning Lead into Gold: Nineteenth-Century American Type Foundries and their Specimen Books.”

I’ve repeated that talk at Cooper Union, as part of a course on type design, and at Rutgers University and at the 2011 APA Wayzgoose in Lansing.

## LIVING OFF OF

# LETTERPRESS

BY JIM DAGGS

I sometimes wonder if it is healthy to have your hobby be the same as your occupation. When I started my apprenticeship in printing 43 years ago, letterpress was on the way out - making room for those fast little offsets we referred to as "water-bottle" presses.

My seasoned co-workers and mentors cautioned me about getting too caught up in letterpress - "offset is the way to go, don't waste your time on the old black iron," they drilled in to me. But it was too late. I started by learning to set type from California cases, and hand-feed a Chandler and Price platen . . . and I was hooked.

So, I began rounding up their letterpress discards as they made room for their whirring little water-bottle offsets. Those were the days when you could get enough letterpress stuff to outfit a small shop — just for hauling it away. Of course my father was a "saver" (now they're called hoarders) and I guess I picked up that trait from him and salvaged a lot of type and equipment over the years.

Dad also taught me to be industrious, so I began to put my little accumula-

tion of letterpress stuff to use — printing small jobs and saving my money. I dismantled, moved in, and re-erected a Model 15 Linotype in my little shop and started printing program booklets for all of the local organizations - turning it into an annual income.

My letterpress shop and after school job as a "devil" generated enough savings so I could buy a new car when I was a junior in high school (of course, that was in an era when \$2500 would buy you a new, little, modest American made car).

Now, 40 years later, I am still working on my apprenticeship, and still earning a living doing letterpress (and offset) as a business. And, believe it or not — there are times when it is the letterpress department of the business that buys the groceries and keeps the lights on at the shop.



The younger Mr. Daggs

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So, when I get people asking me if it is still possible to make money doing letterpress printing, I assure them that it is very possible, and add that it is a very honorable way to earn a living.

I only have to recall my old friend Glenn Luttrell in little Edinburg, Illinois who printed the last letterpress newspaper in his state (and the Midwest, for that matter), and did all of his job printing letterpress as well. His little paper made him an honest living, and after his paper was out, he kept his Kluge and Miehle Vertical busy cranking out profitable orders. In fact he could be found running off letterpress jobs just recently.

There are more profitable letterpress operations around the country, I'm sure — serving their owners, and proving that letterpress is a good and interesting way to earn your pay. Even attending the Michi-Gander Goose this summer in Lansing - and visiting Joe Warren's great letterpress shop. Joe has a great sideline doing numbering, perforating, die cutting, and imprinting for offset shops in his area. He, too, has a hobby that pays.

If and when I retire, I will still be at a press doing letterpress jobs for pay and for fun. And, if the politicians totally demolish Social Security . . . I'll keep the lights on by keepin' the presses clankin' away.



Jim Daggs



## Midwest & Great Northern

# Printers' Fair another success



Pat Leary sitting at the Intertype machine.

A fall-like weekend in southeast Iowa greeted a record 132 attendees (27 of these were APA members) at the 18th annual Midwest & Great Northern Printers' Fair held at Printers' Hall in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa during September 15, 16 and 17, 2011.

The Thursday, Friday and Saturday event also brought a good selection of vendors of all things letterpress, and a record number of vendor tables were rented — 34 total (the old record was 31 during the 2009 Wayzgoose/Great Northern).

Thursday and Friday found many attendees putting ink on paper and helping with projects, and learning new skills on presses, typesetting and bindery. Students from Iowa Wesleyan College in Mt. Pleasant, and nearby University of Iowa, Iowa State University and other college print and book arts programs also made field trips to the Printers Fair.





Jim Daggs, feeding paper into the Babcock press to print the newspaper.

Visitors to the Fair watched (and some participated) as a special edition of *The Threshers Bee* newspaper was printed on the 1890 Babcock - driven by a live steam engine. And, folded on a 1900 Mentges folder - now driven by a live steam engine. A copy of the *Bee*, along with a "special insert" will be distributed in the November APA Big Bundle.

Saturday morning all hands were at work setting up for the ever-popular swap meet with vendors from Iowa, Minnesota, Michigan, Arkansas, Missouri, Wisconsin, South Dakota, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois and Ohio. Tables full of all things letterpress greeted all the buyers when the gates were opened up, and by mid-afternoon the tables were quite bare. Both buyers and sellers reported happy results.

Next June, Printers' Hall will be hosts to the APA's Io-wayzgoose, and it is anticipated that Printers' Hall will again host the Midwest & Great Northern in September, 2012.



Front page form of *The Threshers Bee*, an 8-page newspaper printed at Printers' Hall.





Rick Braun overlooking the Hickock Ruling Machine.



Bill Allan, Sky Shipley and Rick von Holdt



Bob Magill, Jenny Addison and Jenny's young friend.



To the left, Mel Arndt and Joe Warren man a sales table at the Printers' Fair. Above, metal "street" signs offered for sale by John Horn.

Article by Jim Daggs  
Photos by Barry Schrader



Is the current  
letterpress  
phenomenon a

# FAD?

Up until the 1950s and 60s, letterpress pretty much dominated the commercial printing scene. During those years offset was certainly making its impact but it wasn't difficult to find letterpress shops or even very large plants still doing printing via letterpress. The 70s changed all of that and you could pick up type and presses at rock bottom prices.

While most of the type and presses at that time went to scrap, I believe that it was the book art folks who picked up much of the slack in buying equipment and type. It seems as private press printers and hobby printers were settled in with type and stuff.



I confess to not being certain where this new interest in letterpress started but many credit it to Martha Stewart and her publicity on letterpress invitations some about 10 years ago. Of course the novelty of it all was the debossed effect. I'd be interested if anyone can offer any more insight into this.

Regardless, when it started and the need for some "punch" into letterpress pieces became the norm, it sent chills up my back. I'm old school and any kind of craftsman letterpress printer of my day spent a fair amount of time doing makeready on a project so it looked like offset printing. Back in the early days a printer who punched the type through was called many names—none of them complimentary.

That's not what "sells" now and you have to have some debossing in your letterpress printing.

The other thing that has really come on strong with the new letterpress printer is polymer plates.

I teach letterpress and I have adjusted to both in my classes and work with students on polymer and debossing, but I'm still old school in my print shop!

I've thought from the start that all of

this new era letterpress is a fad until the next new thing comes along. 10

I'm not sure how many of the newer studios have fared the past three years with the economic downturn. I don't have a feel if many went out of business or not. But from indications on sale of presses and the price of presses, there is no lack of interest in newbies getting into letterpress. I did contact Don Black and Dave Churchman (John Barrett was unable to reply in time) and they indicated that they can't keep a table top press or a Vandercook in stock and the prices seem to keep going up. A good indication for letterpress I would say (not if you're buying a press). This article is written to encourage comments from our members for a future issue of *APA Journal*. The questions I'd like comments on are:

- Is the current phase of commercial letterpress (cards, invites, etc.) a fad or have a long future?
- What and where is the future of letterpress?
- With polymer plates and few type foundries, what is the future of type?
- Will the old traditions disappear and if so, is that good or bad?

Send me an [email](#) with reply. Thanks.