Idaho Center for the Book newsletter

*"...because people **read** t-shirts."*

Vol. 7/No. 1 • April 2000

"The Platen Press Printing in Idaho Issue"

Upcoming Biblio Events

March/April **75TH ANNIVERSARY**

Caxton Press in Caldwell, Idaho, celebrates its 75th anniversary as an independent Idaho publishing house. Telephone: (208) 459-7421; email: publish@caxtonprinters.com

April 8 **GRAND OPENING!**

The East Bonner County Library District will have the grand opening for its new Sandpoint building at 10 am. Four regional writers will celebrate National Library Week by reading from their works at the new library April 10, 7 pm. For more information call: (208) 263-6930

Traveling Exhibit **BOOKER'S DOZEN 2000**

Itinerary and hosts for the forthcoming hands-on traveling exhibit are:

July ..... Ada Community Library (Boise)
August .... Mountain Home Public Library
September .. East Bonner County Free Library (Sandpoint)

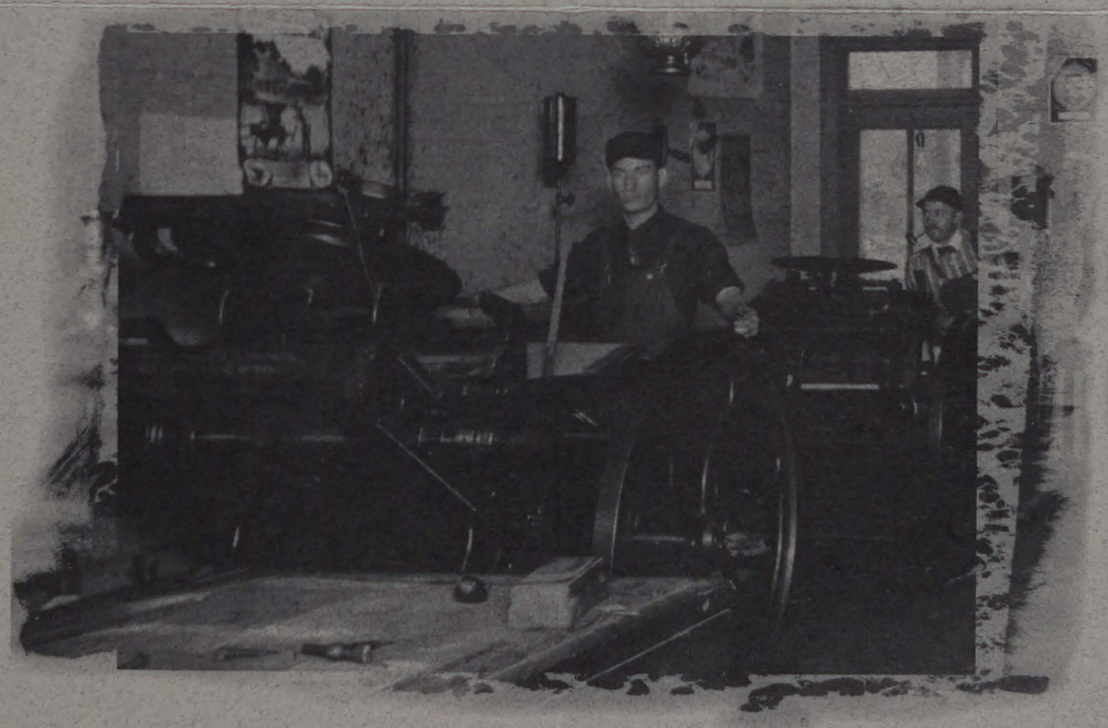
In this issue

Lasting Impressions

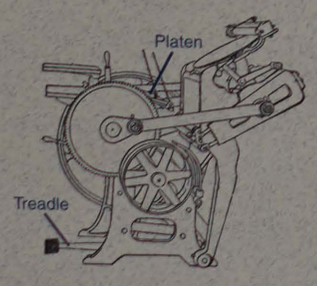
by Jann G. Marson, Jr.

Printing is, by its most basic definition, the act of putting ink to paper. When described briefly the various printing processes may conceptually be construed as simple. Flexography, a relief printing process, is essentially a large rubber stamp (affixed to a cylinder) which is pressed directly against the paper after being inked by rollers with a low viscosity ink. Rotogravure, an intaglio process, has recessed portions of the plate cylinder that form the image. As the cylinder passes through a bath of a low viscosity ink the recessed areas hold the ink while the excess is scraped off by a "doctor blade." When the plate cylinder comes into contact with the paper, the paper's absorbancy draws the ink out of the recessed areas. Offset lithography uses the chemical reaction between oil and water to keep the medium viscosity, oil-based ink contained in the flat image area when the plate is inked by rollers. The image then offsets from the plate to an intermediate surface, and then finally to paper. Letterpress, also a relief printing process, uses lead type, wood or linoleum cuts, and metal or nylon plates which carry the reversed image. The plate, inked by rollers carrying a high viscosity ink, is pressed directly against the paper. Although each of these processes are useful methods of printing, depending upon one's aesthetics, letterpress printing is revered as the most traditional style of printing because Johann Gutenberg, inventor of European movable type, printed letterpress circa 1450. Upon delving further into printing's past the underlaying intricacies and complexities arise.

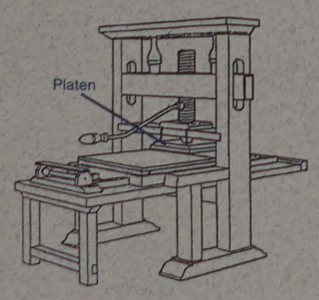
The oldest form of a letterpress is the platen press. The platen is a flat surface that presses the paper against the relief image, the face of which must be at an even height. There are two types of platen presses: the hand platen, and the jobbing platen press. Both styles use the same principle described above, both have rather extensive histories, and both have had much use in printing centuries of documents in many nations and states, including Idaho. Platen presses have contributed greatly to the foundation of Idaho publishing for more than one hundred years. Their durable construction and quality of impression have given them validity and longevity despite the dramatic technological advances that have been made in the world of printing.



Jobbing platen presses at Caxton Printers 1903. Photo courtesy Caxton Press.



Jobbing Platen Press



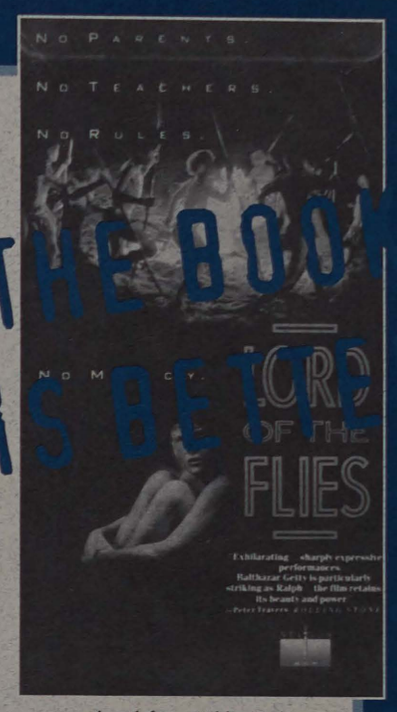
Hand Platen Press

The platen press in its many forms (varying designs by different manufacturers), has always been an effective means of producing printed matter, from newspapers to volumes of books. These presses, however, are very labor intensive, almost always being hand fed, and usually require more extensive makeready procedures, compared to other presses or methods of printing. Nor is the platen press able to produce work at high speeds. Offset presses, such as a modern newspaper press, can print up to thirty thousand printed pages per hour, whereas the average jobbing platen press can only produce approximately fifteen hundred sheets per hour. The basic hand platen press, much like Johann Gutenberg's press (which was a converted wine press), has been used for the printing of newspapers, text for books, or anything that required a large sheet of paper and a large printing surface. The jobbing platen press, due to its smaller size, was mostly used for the printing of so-called "job work"; calling cards, small posters, playbills, brochures, envelopes, etcetera. These presses were not necessarily restricted to job work, but have also been used for the printing of publication covers for plays, booklets, and book cloth for case bound editions.

In Idaho, the platen press has long been used in almost all printing plants, publishing houses, vanity presses, and by hobby printers. Caxton Printers, Ltd., a publishing company in Caldwell, Idaho, began as a small press known as the Gem State Rural Publishing Company shortly after Idaho became a state in 1890. This company produced an agricultural newsletter, The Gem State Rural, aimed at helping local farmers. Albert E. Gipson, the founder of Caxton Printers, was a farmer in Colorado, and moved to Caldwell in hopes of starting a publishing company and producing a newsletter that would aid farmers with crop, weather, and other vital information. In 1895, with a sack of worn type and a small jobbing platen press, he achieved this goal.

In eight short years other industries were sprouting in young Caldwell, and job printing work became plentiful. Local businesses depended upon Gipson, as the only printer within a forty mile radius, to fulfill their printing needs. After selling the rights to *The Gem State Rural* magazine, Gipson switched direction in 1903 becoming a commercial printer, and renamed the company the Caxton Printers. The name was chosen in honor of William Caxton, famed as printer, bookmaker, translator, and gentleman. He was one of England's first printers in the fifteenth century. Between schedules for job work, Caxton Printers produced literary material as well. Early examples of this are three plays by the Portuguese immigrant Thome Luiz de Freitas, copyright 1903.

By 1915, Caxton had two large jobbing platen presses and a staff of eight employees. By 1929 , ten titles had been published by Caxton Printers and production doubled in 1930. Company records that could tell us which titles were printed on the platen presses were destroyed in the fire of March 17, 1937. This fire crippled the firm and mangled the presses. Now, run by the fifth generation of the Gipson family, Caxton possesses three different makes of jobbing platen presses occasionally taking advantage or their versatility.



— detail from Biblio T-shirt

Forty miles east of Caldwell, and two years after the Gem State Rural Publishing Company was reorganized as the Caxton Printers, two men were working busily building the foundation of what was to become the largest printing plant in the valley. Lem A. York (who had been printing and publishing since 1883) and Harry J. Syms founded the Syms-York Company in 1905. In its early days, the company consisted of two small jobbing platen presses, several cases of type, and was operated in a Boise, Idaho basement by a staff of only three people.

By 1913 Syms-York had moved to a larger space which included a sales office. Other industries were booming in Boise as well, so any printer as dedicated to excellence as the Syms-York Company, was bound to prosper. Most books that were printed and bound by Syms-York were published by private parties who paid for the printer's services. A notable example is *A Romance of the Sawtooth*, by "Ogal Alla," otherwise known as Fred G. Mock of Nampa, Idaho, which was published by Mock in 1917 but was printed and bound by Syms-York. It is the first known novel to have been published in Idaho.

In 1948 construction was completed on a twenty-five-thousand square foot building to house the Syms-York production plant. Its previous space was then used strictly as a sales office. The firm was a highly successful printing plant and had an entire battery of jobbing platen presses. However, in 1945 the Syms-York Company had become affiliated with the Beacon Litho Company which was the beginning of the transition from letterpress to offset lithography. Syms-York was purchased in the mid 1980s by Joslyn & Morris.

Apart from long-lived printing companies which have sheltered a few platen presses, letterpress printing in general saw a dramatic decrease in demand. By the early 1950s offset printing was gaining popularity, and by the mid 1960s most major printing companies and newspapers had made the transition from letterpress to offset lithography. Many jobs were lost, and much equipment was sent to the scrap yards as letterpress was being usurped as an industry standard to make room for the new school of printing technology.

A pressman once told me a story about the accomplished letterpress operators in a local shop making the less accomplished operators run the new offset presses. It was "punishment" because they felt offset was merely a trend and would soon fade. These men had no idea of what was to come. The letterpress department at Caxton has essentially been pushed aside to make room for the larger, faster offset presses. Joslyn & Morris' purchase of Syms-York virtually eliminated the letterpress department, leaving only one letterpress to be used for die-cutting and scoring.

Presently, platen presses may not be an industry standard, or even cost effective. However, there are individuals who feel that the legacy of the platen press needs to be continued. In spite of the commercial demands such as long runs, higher speeds, lower production costs, and mass production, "Platen

People" have taken the time to keep platen presses out of the scrap yard and in environments where they can be appreciated and looked upon with the admiration they have earned after years of making good impressions; for platen press work is now considered by some printers, designers, collectors of books and ephemera, and universities to be "fine art."

Dick Braese at the Idaho Historical Museum operating the Washington Hand Press Manufactured in 1850.

One individual who has been keeping the legacy of letterpress alive, especially the platen press, is a master printer by the name of Dick Braese. I have had the honor of working with him during public letterpress exhibitions. Braese has been involved, in one way or another, with the printing industry almost his entire life. In 1938, at the tender age of seven, Braese's father presented him with a small jobbing platen press, which was "on loan" from Braese's uncle who worked at the Merganthaler Linotype Corporation (manufacturer of the Linotype machine which casts printer's type out of molten lead). Braese approached a local printing establishment in his home town of Everrett, Massachusetts, to learn the art of printing. The printer taught Braese well, and by the age of nine Braese began his first paid employment in printing, his instructor hired him to produce job work. At this time, Braese was running a jobbing platen press which employs a foot pedal, or "treadle," to power the press. Braese eventually had to return his first press to his uncle, but by then had already acquired a couple of platen presses of his own. After high school, from 1947 to 1951, Braese completed his apprenticeship in letterpress and offset printing, and earned his teacher's certificate in the graphic arts while attending a vocational school. The machinery on which Braese completed his apprenticeship, much like the majority of equipment during that time period, had very few safety features, so operators had to be much more aware of themselves and their machinery to maintain possession of all digits and limbs.

Braese has witnessed many changes and historical events in the world of printing. After attending the vocational school, Braese joined the military and became part of the 582nd repro Squad. This squad operated under the direction of the CIA and was responsible for the offset printing of sensitive government documents. Frequently, Braese and his troop would parachute down to the battlefield with small offset presses which had lightweight aluminum cylinders. Once on the ground, the troop printed thousands of war propaganda flyers urging the enemy to surrender, then fanned them out, and rolled them into circles which fit into a bombshell casing. With this step completed, the troop was in the air once again, dropping the casings which held their flyers. When dropped, these shells would blow apart and spread the contents across the land.

In 1959, three years after completing his military duties, Braese moved to Boise, Idaho to be a substitute teacher. Unfortunately, there were not many opportunities for a graphic arts instructor, except an offer Braese received from Boise High School in their printing education department. Pay was minimal, and needing to support his family, Braese began working for the Syms-York Company once again at the helm of a letterpress. Braese eventually became shop foreman for Syms-York and held this position for several years.

During Braese's employment as foreman at Syms-York, he was recruited by the Idaho Historical Museum to restore an old hand platen press that had been kept in an Idaho Historical Society warehouse for many years. The intent was to build a permanent display of "antique" printing methods. Parts of the press had disappeared during its storage, and it was essentially forgotten until the efforts of Brease and his two sons, Rick and John, returned the press to working condition. This hand platen press, The Washington Hand Press, manufactured in 1850, was acquired from the *Idaho World*, a defunct Idaho City newspaper. The museum exhibit was augmented when another press, a jobbing platen press manufactured in 1840 and void of manufacturer's emblems, was donated to the museum by a Treasure Valley minister. Brease values the souls of these platen presses, as well as their historical implications. "While restoring the Washington Hand Press, I saw one of my sons wiping away the old grease. I was shocked at the sight and told him not to do so, that is historic grease!" By the late 1960s, after years of restoration, the exhibit was completed. It continues to come alive once a year for the "Museum Comes to Life," where the printing and other museum exhibits are operated for visitors to witness them in action. It is an impressive sight; the recreated, late 1800s print shop attracts considerable attention.

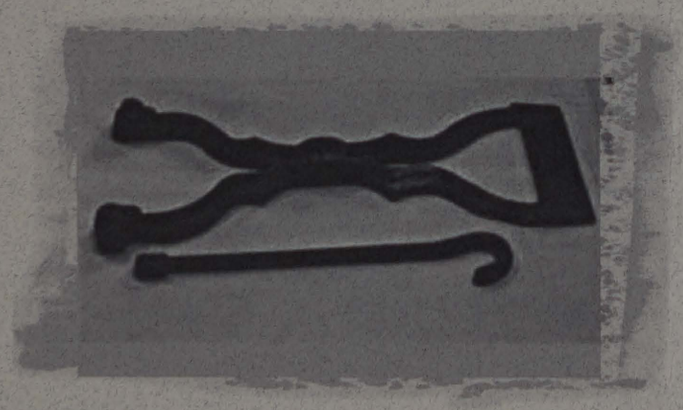
From 1978 to 1992, Braese worked as branch manager and sales representative for Heidelberg, a printing press manufacturer. This job required extensive travelling which took Braese from shop to shop in an attempt to sell the presses and products of his employer. While conducting these visits Braese noticed that many shops had old equipment, including many platen presses, sitting idle and collecting dust. Braese urged the shop owners to donate these items to the State, and receive a tax write-off in the process.

Braese was then given access to National Guard personnel and equipment to assist in the rigging and transport of the unused printing equipment. After this equipment was moved to the Old Idaho Penitentiary, now a tourist destination spot, Braese began work on setting up a small print shop in a room near the Old Penitentiary laundry facilities. Among other items, there is one platen press in this exhibit, the "Original Heidelberg," which was manufactured in 1950 to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the same press manufactured in 1850. This exhibit is also operated once a year for the Penitentiary one-dollar admission day, when the public can stroll through the "Gold Nugget" print shop and observe the fully operational equipment of printing's past which represent the donations of five Idaho printers.

Throughout his life, Dick Braese has been involved in, and dedicated to the printing trade. He has taken great strides to preserve this equipment, as well as many other items of letterpress miscellanea that future Idahoans can observe and appreciate. His knowledge and experience have been, and will continue to be a valuable asset to those interested in historical printing techniques.

While Dick Brease has kept the platen press accessible through public demonstration in Southwestern Idaho, another Idahoan is keeping platen presses operational throughout much of the United States. John Hern, owner and founder of Hern Iron Works in Coeur d' Alene, Idaho, is in the process of making cast iron treadles for jobbing platen presses. As previously mentioned, the treadle is a lever which, when pumped by the foot of the operator, sends the press into motion. Hern and his staff of pattern makers and metal workers have taken treadles from old presses and re-manufactured them to original factory specifications. The company casts several different models of treadles for the Chandler & Price line of platen presses, and is currently working on a pattern for the "Pearl" platen press.

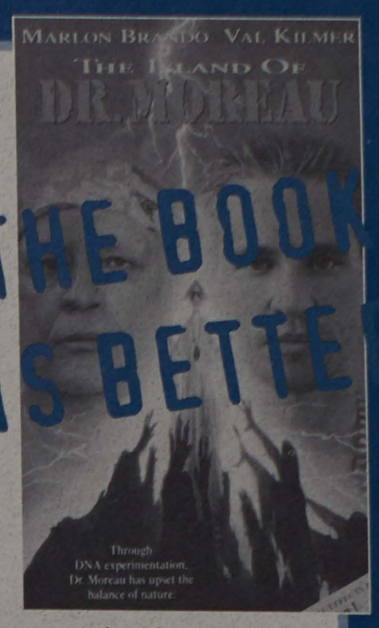
Hern's interest in printing is not whimsical, or just a flight of fancy. Butch, Hern Iron Works' production manager, recently noted, "John Hern likes letterpress printing because he thinks it has class." However, Hern is not one who merely appreciates the aesthetics or the creative outlet of letterpress printing. In fact, he has been involved in printing since he was a boy, his introduction being a small rubber stamp rotary press. Shortly thereafter, Hern acquired a small jobbing platen press, found he enjoyed the art of letterpress printing, and took advantage of its accessibility. At the age of twelve John Hern began casting iron. He was employed in the trade at seventeen, and now has over twenty-five years of casting experience.



Treadle for a jobbing platen press manufactured by Hern Iron Works. Photo courtesy Hern Iron Works.

Presently, Hern owns several platen presses including a couple of Chandler & Price platens, an "Original Heidelberg" similar to the one on display at the Old Idaho Penitentiary, and his first platen press from when he was a child. Hern's interest is not limited only to platen presses and equipment. He is concerned as well with productions from such presses. He confesses, "I am an avid reader, and the book is still the fastest and best way to get information."

Amidst production of other cast iron pieces such as sprockets, boiler grates, and manhole covers, the casting of treadles began as a personal venture for Hern but soon grew. Hern Iron Works' advertisements can be found in many printing equipment classifieds, as well as on the Internet. Orders for treadles come in at least once a week from all over the country, necessitating the casting of treadles to be classified as "job work," as opposed to "hobby." Despite the seemingly lengthy production process, treadles only take approximately two to four weeks to produce and ship out. As platen presses become scarce, so do their parts and accessories. War, age, and extensive use can take their toll on cast iron, causing it to fracture. This in turn causes the demand for treadles to be high, and the supply very limited. One can either find someone like Hern, or find an original treadle from a damaged or recently motorized platen press. The latter can be quite difficult because most people like versatility and would be hard pressed to give up their treadle, even if their press is currently powered by an electric motor. If there is a need for an item, Hern Iron Works will cast it, at least according to John Hern.



— detail from Biblio T-shirt by Jocelyn robertson

These brief historical sketches of printing and publishing companies who embodied the spirit of letterpress printing, combined with the profiles of these two individuals who are dedicated to the practice and preservation of historical printing techniques, show the tremendous impact of the platen press on publishing in Idaho. Certainly, times have changed, and progress is inevitable. However, the efforts of and works produced by these companies and individuals are especially appropriate in the state which gave birth to platen printing in the Pacific Northwest with the arrival of a Ramage model No. 14 platen press at the Lapwai Mission in 1839. The Lapwai Mission Press, under the direction of Reverend Henry Harmon Spalding, produced the first books not only in the Pacific Northwest, but more precisely in the "wilderness" that would become Territorial Idaho and ultimately, the State of Idaho.

Newsletter Intern Editor: Jann Marson

The Idaho Center for the Book is pleased to announce the publication of six hand-sewn facsimile books by Idaho self-taught artist/bookmaker James Castle. The six books, and the booklet James Castle & the Book, are contained in Castle's preferred archival storage unit, the (designer) gunnysack.

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