

Idaho Center for the Book

newsletter

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

Upcoming Biblio Events

Booker's Dozen 2002 • Idaho Artist & Eccentric Book Exhibit

October David O. McKay Library, BYU-Idaho, Rexburg
November Marshall Public Library, Pocatello
December Idaho Center for the Book, Boise State University

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By Katherine Jones

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By Christine Holbert

This issue's memorial t-shirt is that worn by Idaho papermaker Tom Bennick (see photos below).

PULP FICTION

Photos and text by Katherine Jones

Juniper bark. Grass clippings. Horse manure, dandelions, junk mail. If this were a joke, the punchline would be that from these unlikely ingredients, Tom Bennick makes glorious handmade paper. (You can't tell by sniffing.)

Yucca. Camas. Potato stems, wheat straw, Russian olive leaf.

There are papermakers and then there are papermakers. What separates Bennick from the crowd is that his artistic dreams are made of stuff destined to be... to be... well, to be compost.

Carrots, barley, iris, oatmeal, daphne.

In what becomes a soup of pulp, he makes art. "I just sort of do it," he confesses. "It's sort of an intuitive way of adding and mixing and it comes out all right."

Tom Bennick is a former Mountain Home, Idaho speech, English, writing and drama teacher who lives, with his wife and two - or is it three? - cats, on the outskirts of Mountain Home. When he retired, five years ago, he started pattering around his, umm, shall we say "efficient" backyard studio in earnest. Since then, his insatiable bent for experimentation, his boundless enthusiasm and natural inclination toward teaching has earned him a reputation throughout the state. Perhaps you've seen him at fairs or workshops, a relentless crusader for his art, up to his elbows in pulp, turning casual observers into unwitting enthusiasts.

Four o'clock stems. Squash stems, kenaf, dandelions.

Don't be fooled into thinking this is just another objective narrative. I, too, have fallen prey to his contagious enthusiasm. When, as a fledgling papermaker, all I could figure out how to do was whiz recycled paper in a suffering blender - how ironic, I thought, that I could only make paper out of paper - Bennick showed me that the world was available to papermakers.

Granted, this world is inhabited by trial and error, by words like "cellulose," "couching" and "lignins," by stinky, rotting smells, a fair amount of patience and a map of only uncharted territories. But through my pulp-splattered eyes, Bennick helped me feel - rather than see - that beyond the pragmatic and the recipes lies the essence of papermaking. Which is what he lives and breathes.

In other words, I get hung up on what goes into my pulp - how much and how long and oh, dear, how will I know...? For Bennick, that's just a means to the end. Life starts with the paper.

I recently spent a day with Bennick. Today's project is thick, cotton sheaves sprinkled with daisy seeds, the symbolism of which occurs to me only much later. I'm more struck with how he holds the pulp, weighing the feel of it in his hand. "Remember," he writes, "when making paper, you need to relax, turn the mind off, and feel the soft water with floating fibers." Bennick pauses with his hand in the charged pulp - like an experienced chef just "knows" what is needed. A handful of this. A handful of that.

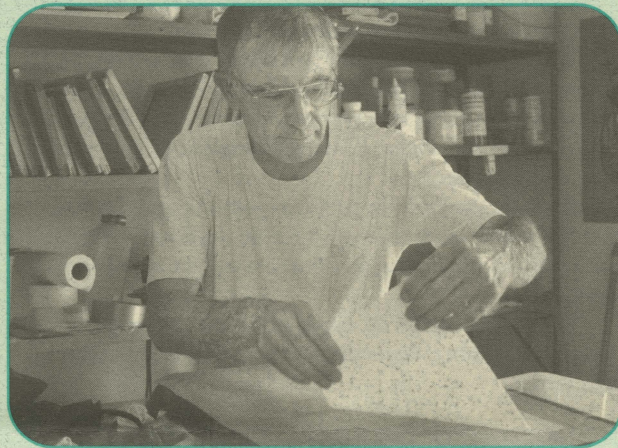
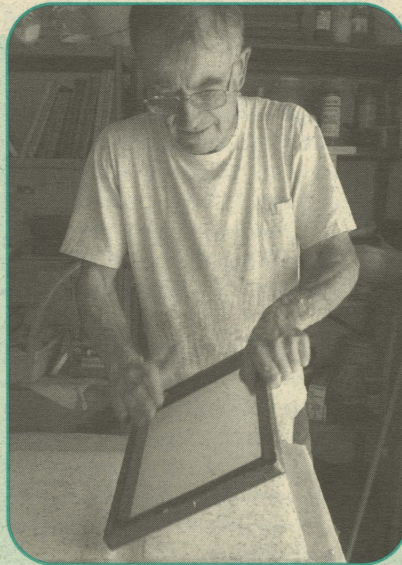
Ten experimental sheets of paper later - which is to say, pulp that ended up back in the vat - Bennick is satisfied with the proportions. Even then, he scoops up the "perfect" sheet and measures the pulp so he can recharge the bath consistently. It seems meticulous to me, and I am impressed with his thoroughness, but he assures me there is no threat of uniformity where handmade paper is concerned.

"There's the excitement of never knowing how it's going to turn out," he says. And then we start. "One sheet after another. There's never two of them that will be alike."

For hours, he stands bent over the tub. He's wet up to his elbows; there's cotton fiber stuck to the hairs on his arms. He's in heaven. Patiently, rhythmically, he swooshes the mould and deckle through the pulp, holding it like a miracle to drain.

"Paper from bast fibers, and cellulose-growing plants result in a kind of art that has texture, free-flowing imagery, and an aroma that is distinctive," he writes. "Handmade paper cannot be controlled, it is a stream-of-consciousness sort of art. It is an art form of serendipity."

Because of limits of my blender, I have only ever been able to make paper in small quantities. I'm impressed that Bennick can crank out enough sheaves to make books, gifts, mailings to his friends. Mass produced, I think, in



comparison. And yet - I'm not getting it.

Bennick makes lots of paper because he likes to make paper. Loves to make paper. My fledgling sheets are a means to an end, but for Bennick, paper is all - and everything. "The potential for what you can do with paper is unlimited. Paper isn't just for writing. It isn't just for making paper airplanes." When Bennick gives you a piece of paper, it's a gift to the resident artist.

"The end product is my paper. That is my art," he says. "Someone else can do something else with it."

Being part of that process is symbiotic. "Paper represents connectedness," he says, a simple statement that belies the depth of the symbolism. Starting with seeds and sun, with rain, with people who harvest the trees and process the plants - the image of all the forces of nature working together toward a common goal is quintessential. "We all depend on each other in life," he says, and he's not just talking about paper.

Occasionally, I receive gifts in the mail that Bennick sends to batches of friends, usually in the spring or the winter equinox. One year it was "a little winter love in a dark corner." A poem, however fleeting, on a piece of paper, however fleeting, to hang in the winter snow and rain.

Last spring, it was a paper bell. A paper bell with no clapper.

I share these things because these things must be shared - as Bennick did - and because they are concrete examples of something I'm having a hard time putting into words. When I make paper, fingers turning to raisins in the pulp, I am in another world. A world transfixed in



time, where each piece of paper leads to the next one like the water dripping off the table onto my sandals. As no sound is needed for the little bell, no words are needed in this world.

And Bennick goes there all the time. "My message is the paper," he says again. A piece of paper. A simple piece of handmade paper....

He shows me an unbound Tibetan prayer book that he made, pages waiting for affirmations, koans, haiku or "just to leave blank...to wear away with time."

To wear away with time.... In an culture where instant gratification is expected, where possessing has become a de facto art form and consumerism our biggest pastime, to make one's goal a simple sheet of paper - nearly incomprehensible!

To make a sheet of paper as art for someone else to transform or to hang on a tree for the sun and wind and rain to make their marks - which means, essentially, to return to nothingness; to muck about in horse pastures to see what kind of paper one can make from manure or to make art †from castoff cellulose. This is revolutionary talk. Talk for hungry souls, not just for papermakers.

The wisdom Bennick speaks of is the wisdom of a hermit monk, that of ageless simplicity, acceptance and generosity. "I was reading a poem to students" about making his silent bell, said Bennick, uncomfortable at confessing the deep emotion that welled up as tears in his eyes. "Everybody has spirituality. This comes as close to religion and spirituality as anything."

Black cotton. Faded jeans. New jeans. Underwear.

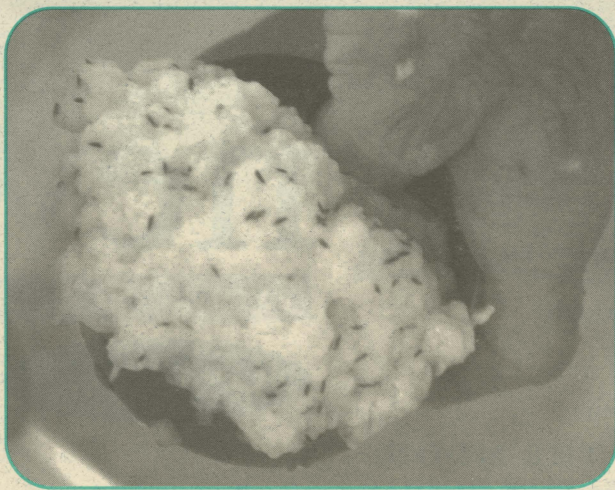
Ahem. The ingredients are changing. After years of using a beater made from a recycled engine and ingenuity, and more years of inventing a beater that ended up sort-of-working, Bennick acquired a Hollander beater two years ago, which can convert, for example, old clothing to their original cotton fiber.

The beater has shifted some of Bennick's energy from plants and native fibers, which can't take the rigorous beating of the Hollander and which are, truth be told, pretty squirrely to work with. But the principle of recycling remains the same, no matter what the fibers.

The machine is portable - watch for it - and it's fast. "I can start in the morning with a pair of pants. In the afternoon I can be making paper.... It's magic."

In honor of his new beater, Bennick took cotton contributions from friends, sent them through the beater and made covers for a project he called Fiber to Book. The





paper, pale pink with tantalizing strings of surprising colors, gives only a hint of the stories inside, which are contributors' explanations of their contribution. "I didn't expect the variety of fibers and emotions that were shared," he writes in the introduction. "The covers are truly a blending of the material with the emotional." As is all he does.

He explained in the cover letter, "The books are truly a work of my passion for paper. They are not perfect but then neither are nature or people."

Bullrush. Hemp. Raffia.

When Bennick finishes his work for the day, he gathers the leftover pulp in a ball, which he collects in a bag in his freezer - the leftover leftovers, if you will: Nothing goes to waste. "I keep all these," he says. "After three months or so, I blend them all together." Many of his projects are of these mixed fibers - a British term called "Badger." Bennick says, "It's a gift of my work to others."

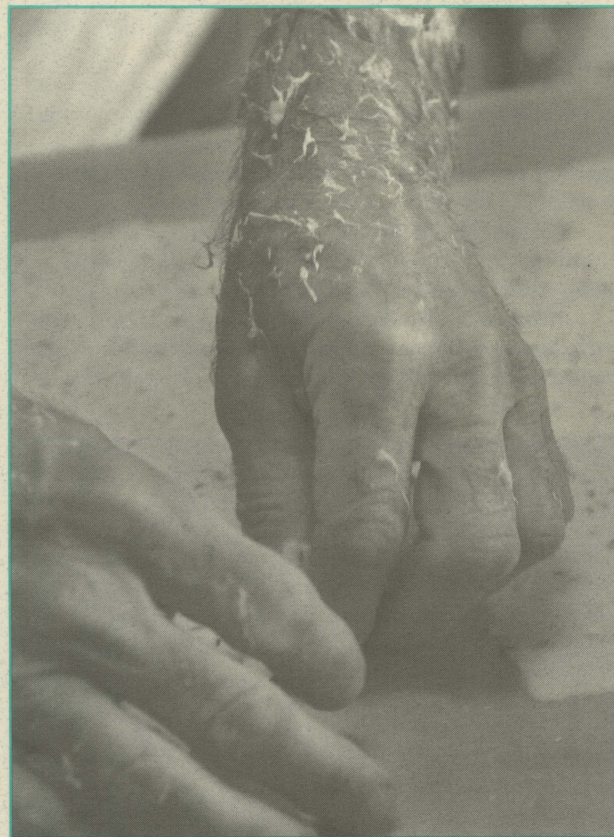
On this day, there was little to offer the Badger bag. I got to use the rest of Bennick's pulp, combining my leftover kenaf with the cotton and daisy seeds.

In papermaking instructions, Bennick writes that papermaking "is an intuitive, fateful, whimsical, muse-inspired piece of art. It is like a willow tree. I water, protect and nourish the willow in my backyard, but I have no control over the symmetry or hue of each leaf and branch. Every tree and bit of nature is an art form. The making of hand-made paper has its own bit of artistic flavor."

Bennick uses the word "magical" again. "The final product is...wonderful, and magical. It is magical because nature has been transformed into something more or something less than it was before."

And then I have to laugh. When I took my sheets of still-damp paper home to dry, I discovered that my drying system was not as efficient as Bennick's. For when I remembered to look a couple of days later, the daisy seeds had sprouted.

"Nature transformed into something more or less than it was before...."



A Recipe for Milkweed Pulp

by K. Jones

Find a stand of milkweed in the fall. Harvest (scattering seeds for next year), and cut the dry stalks into a length just short of the height of your plastic bucket. Fill the bucket with water, and cover with a weighted lid (so the stalks stay in the water). Soak until you get around to dealing with them. When they smell like a septic tank, they're ready, says Bennick - hence, it's best soak them outdoors.

For the same reason, strip the soaked fibers outdoors. Dry them, if you want to break up the process, so they'll keep. About 10 pounds of dry stalks will make one pound of dry fiber. When you're ready, boil the fibers with soda ash - about a soap scoop of ash to a pound of dry fibers.

Cook (again, outdoors can handle the aroma best) until the fibers are slippery and slimy, when the fibers pull apart between your fingers.

Rinse well, bleach with a tiny amount of Clorox (aesthetically optional), rinse well again and dry.

To make pulp, beat bleached fibers with a hand beater or meat cleaver. It's like kneading dough - pound, turn, pound, turn. To test for readiness, place a bit of pulp into a jar of water and shake. If there are minimal clumps, it's time to make paper.

To make paper from prepared pulp on another day, pour pulp and water through a screen. Squeeze water out, place pulp in plastic bag and freeze until you're ready to use it.

You'll get roughly 30 sheets of 8"x10" paper per pound of dry fiber, depending on how thick you make your paper.



Milkweed Paper

A Poem by Tom Bennick

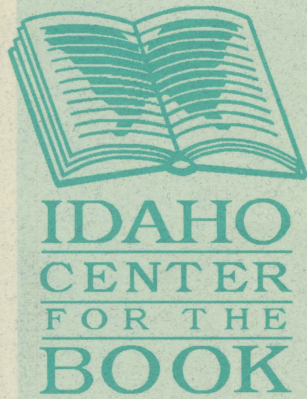
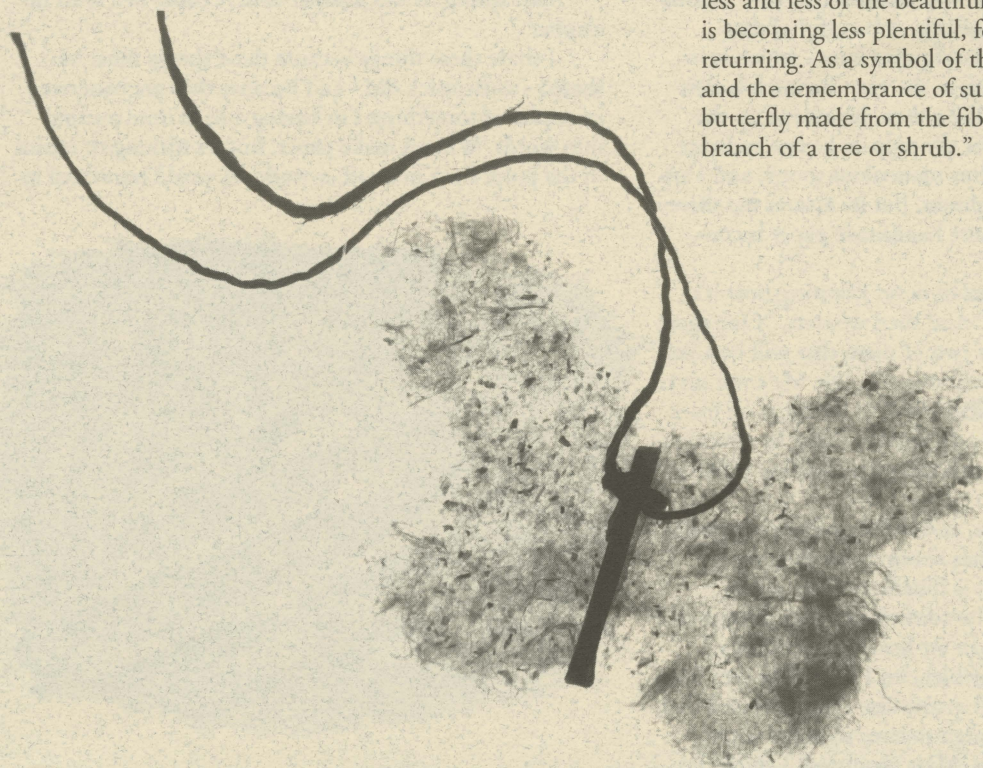
Directions #1
*Take
 this sheet
 of milkweed paper
 outdoors.
 Hold this sheet
 so the flaring
 sun washes over
 whiteness.
 Luster and mica
 like flash
 will make
 the milkweed glitter
 with a radiance.*

Directions #2
*Now hold this
 sheet up
 so the sun
 is framed.
 This time
 the milkweed
 will reveal
 an impossible
 tangle
 of nature
 and marrow
 of life
 transcending.*

Directions #3
*Focus
 on edges,
 wispy edges
 that flare
 and softly
 fade.
 These borders
 when felt
 between
 fingers
 shrivel
 in an enlightened
 void.*

"Every year when I gather milkweed for paper, I find less and less of the beautiful weed. Because milkweed is becoming less plentiful, fewer Monarchs are returning. As a symbol of the Monarchs returning and the remembrance of summer, please hang this butterfly made from the fiber of milkweed on the branch of a tree or shrub."

- Tom Bennick



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