



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

Vol. 14/No. 1 • April 2007

## Upcoming Biblio Events

### June

"Crème de la Crème/Hardcover/Old Romance/At the Kitchen Table, Say Grace, Please/ Immersed/Up the Lembi, the Trappings of Oliver Williams/Diamonds or Glass/Dwayne's Demons... & 18 additional artists' books by Barbara Michener"  
Liberal Arts Building, Boise State University

### June - August

Entries by individual Idaho bookmakers accepted by the Idaho Center for the Book for its juried, biennial, traveling exhibition "Booker's Dozen" (2008). Send works SASE to the ICB; selections announced in October.

### August - September

"Silver Lining: Pass Mine Artists' Books" Bookworks inspired by an Idaho silver mine - its owners, history, and related artifacts.  
Sun Valley Center for the Arts, Hailey, ID

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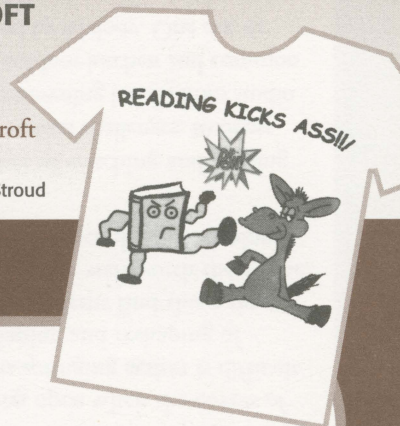
### PRACTICING TIMELESSNESS:

#### THE BIBLIO LABORIS OF IDAHO BOOK ARTIST JIM CROFT

by Jann G. Marson, Jr.

Photos by Jann Marson, Ralph Bartholdt, and Nara Croft

T-shirt graphic by Kimberly Stroud

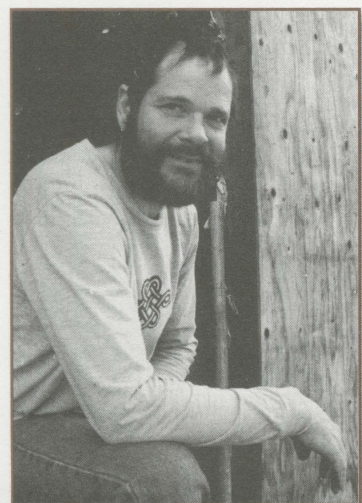


## Practicing Timelessness:

### The Biblio Laboris of Idaho Book Artist Jim Croft

by Jann G. Marson, Jr.

**A**MONGST THOSE LIVING in the seclusive locale known as Pokey Creek, nestled into the hillside approximately three miles north of Santa in northern Idaho, it is no secret that resident bookbinder and papermaker **Jim Croft** is an avid proponent of the handmade book.



Courtesy Nara Croft

On his own land the auburn-haired, approximately six-foot tall man with a gracious, bearded smile and innocently mischievous laugh often cuts loose, singing at the top of his lungs, "I like big books," between virtuosic measures of trombone or washtub bass. And so the enthusiastic Croft, along with the

encouragement and support of his family, opens his home each year to students from around the world who gather to learn the ancient *biblio laboris* of the medieval book. Students take part in one or more of Croft's "Oldways" workshops, be it to hand-fabricate one's own bookbinding tools or to engage with the centuries-old process of binding books in wooden boards with clasps forged from raw metal stock.

Beyond the mere novelty of bearing an "official" stamp of holiday cheer, Santa's international renown has been significantly contributed to by Croft's ever-expanding reputation for an organic but refined blending of materials and craftsmanship to achieve what he calls "a tried-and-true quality." Many become familiar with Croft's approach to the Gutenberg-era Gothic-style book in his courses and workshops at various art schools and foundations across the country. As well, Croft consorts, consults, and befriends many of the most experienced book arts practitioners, establishing himself as an authoritative source of information on medieval book structures, especially the replication of old materials and techniques. After visiting his "Gothic Bookmaking with Wooden Boards and Clasps" workshop in the summer of 2005, and having taken the course in the summer of 2006 to make a Gothic binding of my own, I resolved to acquaint readers of the *Idaho Center for the Book Newsletter* with the courses Jim Croft teaches as well as his philosophy and achievements.

Croft was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, and attended college in Guam and, subsequently, Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, where he finished his BA in History. As a young man traveling abroad in 1970, he has described himself as having been "magically infected" by two primary aspects of European material culture - in his words, "permanence and durability." In England, Croft discovered the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, a work illuminated in the seventh century and, according to the British Library, rebound in an eighth-century adornment of "jewels and precious metals." Croft's interest, at the time, in the calligraphic magnificence of the *Lindisfarne's* "carpet pages" led to a relationship with ancient books that would lead him to quest, as he phrases it, in "the pursuit of recreating the great books of the European wooden-board era." Though enamored with the book's intricately designed pages, it became evident that what was most intriguing to Croft was the structural facticity of the binding itself. During his month-long succession of

daily visits to the *Lindisfarne*, lessons of old masters were whispered into his youthful ear. Structure and materials showed themselves to be the true sources of inspiration for the Idaho bookmaker.

In 1972, a year after expatriate Croft had returned to the United States, he relocated from Kansas City to Eagle Creek, Oregon. There, he made friends, lived in a small cabin, and lived a rustic lifestyle. It was at Eagle Creek where Croft met his wife Melody. After the birth of their first daughter, Liana, the Crofts began looking for a larger place of their own. The couple had aspirations that would lead to what Croft calls "a life of general self-sufficiency" in which all the accoutrements of daily life come from what can be "grown, found in nature, or salvaged."

At that time, Croft's major source of income came from planting trees in the Idaho panhandle region, and so he found himself traveling back and forth between the two states. The panhandle region boasts an incredible variety of coniferous species known for their timber including fir, larch, pine, and yew. Drawn to the area in large part by the Western Red Cedar to be used for all kinds of wood-working projects, including boards for book covers, Croft also appreciated Douglas Fir, Grand Fir, and larch because of their splitting qualities and because they resisted decay. Having recently transitioned to using primarily wood from beech trees to make his book covers, Croft employs northern Idaho yew trees as "splines" that are dovetailed into the cover boards for additional strength. Much of

Croft's wood comes from burn piles (before burning, of course) found at area mills and out in the woods. These mills produce large scale lumber and are prone to discard timbers exhibiting any signs of decay regardless of how minimally invasive. Croft, however, works on a much smaller scale and can work around any compromised sections of the tree making much more efficient use of the resource. He has established a niche in salvaging what the lumber mills will not use, and takes pride in "cleaning up after timber industry and development." In addition to salvaging wood, Croft also salvages yards of worn-out linen fire hose from the area's firefighting crews with which he makes incredibly smooth and uniform sheets of paper used for binding into his books.

As his familiarity with the panhandle region grew, so did Croft's desire for settling on his own piece of land, and in Idaho land was cheap. In 1976 he and his family bought approximately five acres, which have now been increased to about thirty-two. So, too, Croft's family grew: five years after the birth of his first daughter, his second daughter, Nara, was born. Five years later, son Geo arrived. The Crofts built a community with friends and fellow tree planters who also purchased land in the immediate vicinity. This became the place where the Croft family could sustain both life and livelihood, a place where they could attempt to embrace the self-sufficiency they had envisioned. They have been able to grow herbs, lettuce, and berries in their fenced garden area. They also



Croft's house near Santa, Idaho; Pokey Creek Class of 2005; Chiseling boards, 2005

MAY NARA

planted apple trees, plums, berries, and other fruits. The Crofts used to collect rainwater for much of their water needs, but have since been able to make use of a natural well spring on the property, and generate eighty-percent of their electrical power from six small solar panels atop the main house. This freed them from dependence on municipal utilities, and negated any need for propane fuel, let alone grid power.

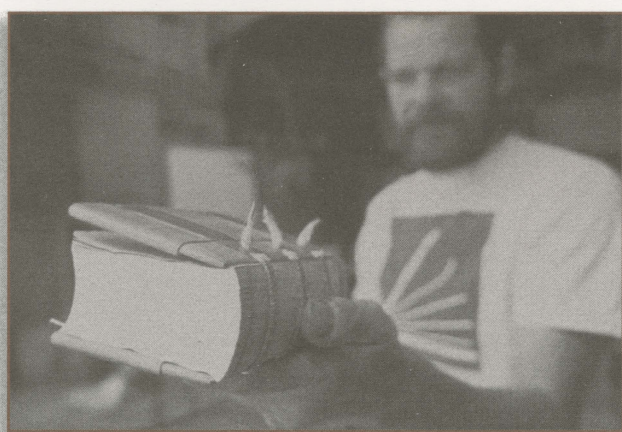
For the Croft family, life in Idaho made possible a continuation of their Oregon aspirations and a more complete departure from the world of modern convenience. Ensnared in their own forest, they could practice what Croft had witnessed in his travels, having observed how people “made the items they needed for everyday living.” So they built in Idaho. In addition to the main house with attached bookbinding and tool-making workshops, Croft has outfitted the property with a small but cozy, lofted guest house, two outhouses, a number of tool/storage sheds, as well as a structure that shelters firewood and houses the root cellar for the storage of dry goods. Much of the lumber that Croft used to build these features came from much larger, obsolete structures that he volunteered to help owners remove. Among these was the old Potlatch mill building and the 1898 log hotel in Santa. The solidity of Croft’s home and outbuildings is a direct reflection of his material resourcefulness. The metal roofing on Croft’s home, manufactured in 1927 for the Potlatch mill and salvaged in 1984, is approximately ten times as thick as metal roofing currently produced. Croft considers himself to be as much a woodworker as a bookbinder, and therefore has no trouble with tasks such as taking the floor from the old Santa hotel, scarred and battered from years of logger-boot traffic, and resurfacing that wood with hand planes to reinstall it as his kitchen hardwood floor.



*Treehouse student lodgings*

Both durability and permanence, so important to Croft’s ideas about “the way people lived centuries ago,” suggest temporal qualities, the first being tied to processes of construction and the second to an implicit lastingness. Put simply, Croft was intent on a merging of art and life. His notion is not entirely dissimilar to the *gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art” ideal held by Arts and Crafts, then subsequently Art Nouveau practitioners, in the late nineteenth century. The influences of these two “schools” carried well into twentieth century aesthetic movements.

Croft, himself, often makes reference to similarities between his ideas that coalesced in 1971 about crafting “quality books from the ground up,” and those of famed paper scholar Dard Hunter whose proclaimed vision fifty years earlier had been to create the “book harmonious,” a book made entirely “by the hand of one man.” But Croft does not rely on a decorative embellishment or a contemporaneous revival of an ancient yet not entirely distant craft. Croft’s bookworks exemplify the exquisite material selection and patient, intuitive assemblage necessary to painstakingly reconstruct the processes by which fifteenth-century bookbinders would have prepared and assembled their materials. No ulterior motives seem to exist in Croft’s work. There is only an honest sense of humility evidenced by the way he allows for intuition to come from without – a capacity to let the materials



*Jim Croft with boards laced onto book  
(Photo Ralph Bartholdt, courtesy Jim Croft)*

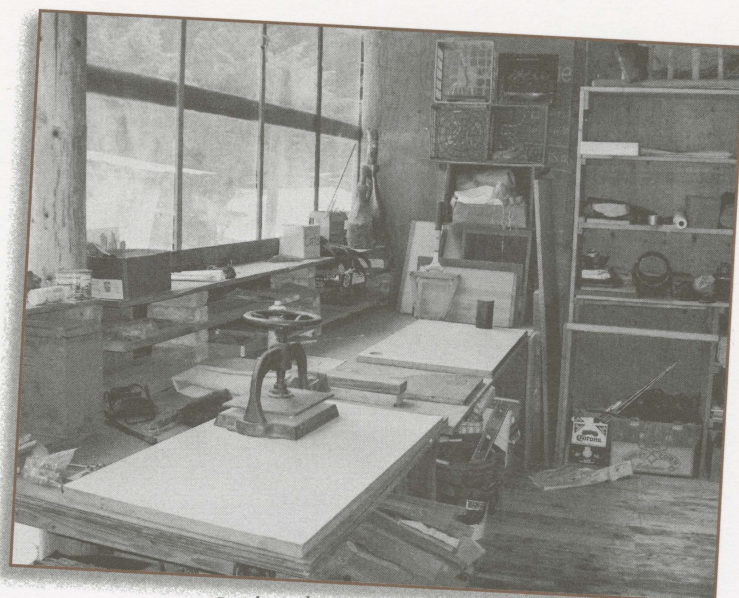
dictate their own form, while heeding the lessons of masters spoken through the physicality of their works. This is not merely a “technique that transcends time,” as some have said, but rather an adaptation of the haptic skills one has acquired in close connection with the world while absorbed in the timelessness of building a work of art.

To suggest that Croft lives a life of relative seclusion would be wrong. He is by nature a social being and is passionate about sharing his experiences with others. Croft embarked on a 12,000-mile adventure in the winter of 2006–2007 to spread the bookbinding knowledge he has acquired and the enjoyment that he derives from such an activity. But while on the road, he was not intent to be just another workshop instructor. Croft constantly looks to nurture his own bibliophilic and cultural interests.

Regardless of whether his students are learning Gothic binding techniques for the first time or are already accomplished binders, they often achieve quite different results with the same technique. Croft feels it remarkable that the books come out very different even though many of the students are using the same materials, and he sees this phenomenon as an opportunity to learn from his students. Also, those who choose to use unusual materials or design intricately shaped metal clasps – perhaps because they do not initially realize the challenges that these elements can create – require that he empathize with their way of thinking to come up with what he calls “interesting solutions.” In this way Croft is simultaneously master and pupil. Further still, he is always looking to explore crafts other than those he teaches. This last fall, while teaching in North Carolina, Croft took a weeklong class in blacksmithing only then to participate in two additional days of intensive one-on-one instruction, each with a different blacksmith.

Among those fortunate enough to experience Croft’s tree-to-book techniques have been participants in his workshops held at schools such as the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina; Hollander’s School of Book and Paper Arts in Ann Arbor, Michigan; John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina; the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa; Broyles Art Center in Atlanta, Georgia; Southwest School of Art and Craft in San Antonio, Texas; and other institutions throughout Austin and Dallas. Croft usually offers two course topics, basing his choice primarily on what the supporting group or institution requests. He will teach either the workshop on “Gothic Bookmaking with Wooden Boards and Clasps,” or a primer in “Toolmaking and Sharpening.” More often than not, Croft will create work of his own while teaching others. This year, for instance, he produced a thirty-five pound Gothic-style book at Penland that was, in turn, donated to the school as a community journal.

For complete immersion in Croft’s philosophy and approach, however, there is no substitute for the courses at Pokey Creek. This coming summer, Croft will be offering two courses in Idaho: the nine-day “Wooden Board and Clasp Intensive,” and the fifteen-day “Oldways of making books from raw materials.” The latter includes time for making your own bookbinding tools such as bonefolders (used for purposes like folding paper or working leather onto the spine of a book); preparing and spinning flax thread using stock harvested from the Croft property (with the expert guidance of Melody); making paper to be bound into the books – all leading up to five days of wooden board and clasp work. The advantages of taking courses at Pokey Creek, though not entirely unlike those Croft teaches across the country, lie primarily in that



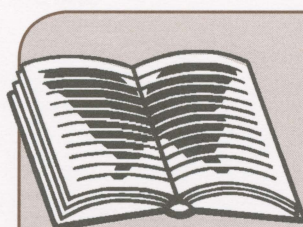
*Inside studio*

Croft’s life and philosophy is manifested in his approach, materials, and facilities.

Upon entering Croft’s Idaho workshop, one is immediately awestruck. This response is not due to the atmosphere created by diligent, dedicated and talented fellow students present, nor is it due to a studio outfitted with an overwhelming array of bookbinding paraphernalia—tons of cast iron devices or superstore displays of kiosks, racks and shelving holding commercial papers, leathers, threads and adhesives. In fact, the studio is modest, intimate. Croft insists there is no need for a massive collection of equipment because Gothic books can be bound almost anywhere and the handwork to be done can be achieved with tools made by the hand. As for materials, many can be found in the surrounding environs. Instead, the amaze that fills one is due to meeting Croft, in his home, surrounded by his life works, works built on a historical tradition of craft. The man’s spirit permeates the place and the artwork he has produced; as well, it inspires his students.

In 2005, Pokey Creek students found that each step of the bookmaking process provided unexpected challenges. Yoyo and Miko from Japan, Brândon from Ashland, Oregon, Velma from New York, and Chris from North Carolina found that making metal clasps was not as simple as they had imagined. For this part of the workshop Croft provides the raw metal stock, typically flat sheets of brass with a thickness of approximately forty thousandths of an inch. This is then cut according to the student’s design using tin snips and then pounded to return it to a relative flatness. Rough edges are cleaned up using files, sand paper, and steel wool before they are drilled for rivets. Rivets are formed using brass escutcheon pins, hand-hammered into place, followed by the proper sizing of the hasps that actually serve to close the book. The hasps must be bent into a hinge at one end and a minute hook at the other to release, or spring open when the covers of the book are compressed. This springing action is difficult to achieve, requiring much shaping and reshaping of every piece involved. All-in-all, students find this a time-consuming and exacting process, but well worth their time, when they are finally able to experience the functioning, finished product.

Frequently, as a by-product of watching and helping each other work through these various challenges, students develop camaraderie apparent on evening breaks from studio work, when they gather in the outdoor kitchen and common areas for delicious meals prepared by Melody. One can sit with fellow binders in the forested picnic area, or later enjoy an adventurous walk down the trail to Croft’s pond and paper stamping mill, while gazing at stars and absorbing the peacefulness of the green-shadowed, northern Idaho forest in which Croft’s Oldways is situated. At the end of the day students retire to rustic lodgings in a lofted guest house and a tree house built extending from and amongst four tall pines. There, after a challenging but rewarding day, they may drift off to dreams, suspended in nature, surrounded by sounds of the forest and by warm breezes carrying the scent of tomorrow’s boards, cedar and pine.



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