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Book TLC

Posted 2005-10-15

Bookbinders Give Life To New Works, Revive Old Ones

By Luanne Austin

Marion Newkirk has glue in his blood. It happened when he learned hand bookbinding in 1962 at R.R. Donnelley & Sons. He continued the craft for many years but, like many talented people, was eventually promoted to a supervisor's position.

After 30 years, he returned to his first love. He quit the corporate life and started his own bookbinding business.

"Once you get binding glue in your blood, you can't get rid of it," Newkirk said.

As one of the few hand bookbinders in the Valley, Newkirk, 63, has more work than one man can do. Since he opened the doors of Custom Hand Bookbinding in 1992, Newkirk has bound volumes and volumes of books, including hymnals, atlases, Bibles, family histories, dissertations, novels, county record books and church bulletins.

"Everything is done by hand," said Newkirk, whose business is in Dayton. "Everything is special."

Special is why people take their book projects to Newkirk. He's bound about 2,000 copies of "The Mennonite Hymnal" for Old Order churches because the book, about the size of a Gideon's New Testament, is too small to mass produce, he said. A few years ago he bound copies of "The George Washington Atlas," a collection of the first president's survey maps, in the color and texture of old parchments.

One of his first jobs was "History of the Milking Shorthorns in the U.S." by Otis L. Fisher — a book obviously of interest to a limited number of readers. Since then, he's also bound books for John L. Heatwole, including the historian's last book, "Chrisman's Boy Company."

Of Newkirk, Heatwole said, "He is one of the last old-time bookbinders left in the Valley."

As rare as they are in the United States, Newkirk is not the only commercial hand bookbinder in Rockingham County. Robin Newberry of Cross Keys set up shop — Novel Bookbinding — 10 years ago and, like Newkirk, stays busy at the craft full time without advertising.

Both Newkirk and Newberry have prestigious clients, such as the National Geographic Society and the Smithsonian Institute, respectively. And both restore old falling-apart books, such as family Bibles and antique classics, but Newberry spends more time at restoration than Newkirk.

"It's really a kick to give the books back to people and see them so happy," said Newberry, 49. "It's priceless to them."

When an aged edition of "The Rubiyat of Omar Khayyim" came into the shop, its cover was falling apart and pages were coming out. Newberry sewed the binding back together, attached new end leaves and glued it into a red leather cover. The title is stamped in gold and depressed so it doesn't rub against other books on the shelf.



Robin Newberry, owner of Novel Bookbinding, hand stitches a book at her Cross Keys studio. Newberry learned bookbinding from Alfred Moulder, who owned Townsend Book Bindery in New Market until a few years ago. She met Moulder when she brought him an old family Bible to be restored.

Photo by Pete Marovich

"Rubiyat" is one of a number of books she's restored for a family's library.

"Every time I see this woman she hands me an armful of books," she said.

Newberry learned bookbinding from Alfred Moulder, who owned Townsend Book Bindery in New Market until a few years ago. She met Moulder when she brought him an old family Bible to be restored.

"I walked into the shop and was immediately enthralled," said Newberry, whose education and former career was in health and wellness.

Walking into Newberry's shop is like stepping into an old-world bookbindery. The shop looks to be built of gray hewn stone, with huge windows looking out at the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Traditional hand bookbinding is in decline, though it is still more prevalent in Europe, according to Peter Verheyen, exhibitions chair of the U.S. Guild of Book Workers and conservator at the Syracuse University Library.

"One of the major contributors to that is economics, specifically, the market for traditional hand bookbinding is fairly discrete, and the U.S. is not as 'literate' a society as many others," Verheyen said. "What I mean by that is that books are not a significant a fixture in the lives of most and personal libraries are more something for the 'elite.' "

Another factor is that, unlike Europe, the United States have never regulated bookbinding as a trade with a codified formal apprenticeship and certification process. The only places Verheyen knows of that teach these traditional skills are the North Bennet Street School in Boston, a few book arts centers and academic programs, and private instruction.

As a skill, hand bookbinding is not dying out, but the growth is coming in the area of 'artist's books' and non-traditional book arts, said Verheyen. He has no idea how many people make a living at bookbinding, such as Newkirk and Newberry. Many who describe themselves as hand bookbinders have "real jobs" doing something else, he said.

Bookbinders are often employed by or service libraries. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 7,400 people were employed as skilled bookbinders (not including bindery workers) in 2002. The Department of Labor's Web site says it takes three to four years of apprenticeship to learn the craft well.

Unlike many of today's automated jobs, hand bookbinding is physical and tactile, involving such tasks as folding, beating, sewing, stamping, gluing, pressing, rolling, trimming, cutting, covering and pasting.

Newkirk made his own book press, which wraps and presses the covers onto the board, and turning machine, which turns the cover material over the edge of the cover. A fellow looking for a turning machine came to look at Newkirk's and was so impressed he ordered one for himself. Newkirk has sold about a half dozen of them, he said. The patent is pending.

Some of Newberry's machines were made by Alfred Moulder. One is a slant board that Newberry sets the unbound manuscripts on with the edge to be bound at the low end. A strip that secures the book's edge makes it easy to drill holes in the paper to run the stitches through.

After restoring a book, Newberry tells her customers, "Use it, don't just put it on a shelf."

Newkirk gives his restoration customers tips on book care.

"Leather book covers need the same type care as leather shoes," he said. "That's why old Bibles fall apart, because the covers aren't cared for."

Newkirk said using a leather conditioner lightly every couple of years keeps the natural oils from dissipating.

And he said, "Never use tape to hold a book together. If the cover is coming off, have it repaired."

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