

Crafts

The Limp Vellum Set

By Gerald Adams

■ I'll always look at books in a different way, now that I've had the chance to watch eleven people, each of whom has shelled out a hundred dollars, learn to bind books by a method that was big around Charlemagne's time, and has been pretty much ignored since. They call this limp vellum binding because the cover lacks a stiffening board. Hence, it is limp.

There was room for ten students in this double-session (morning and afternoon) class, but the Hand Bookbinders of California squeezed in an eleventh. Each was to spend part of six days in a small home basement bindery on Buena Vista Hill to learn this sophisticated branch of their craft (most of them prefer to think of their work as an art form).

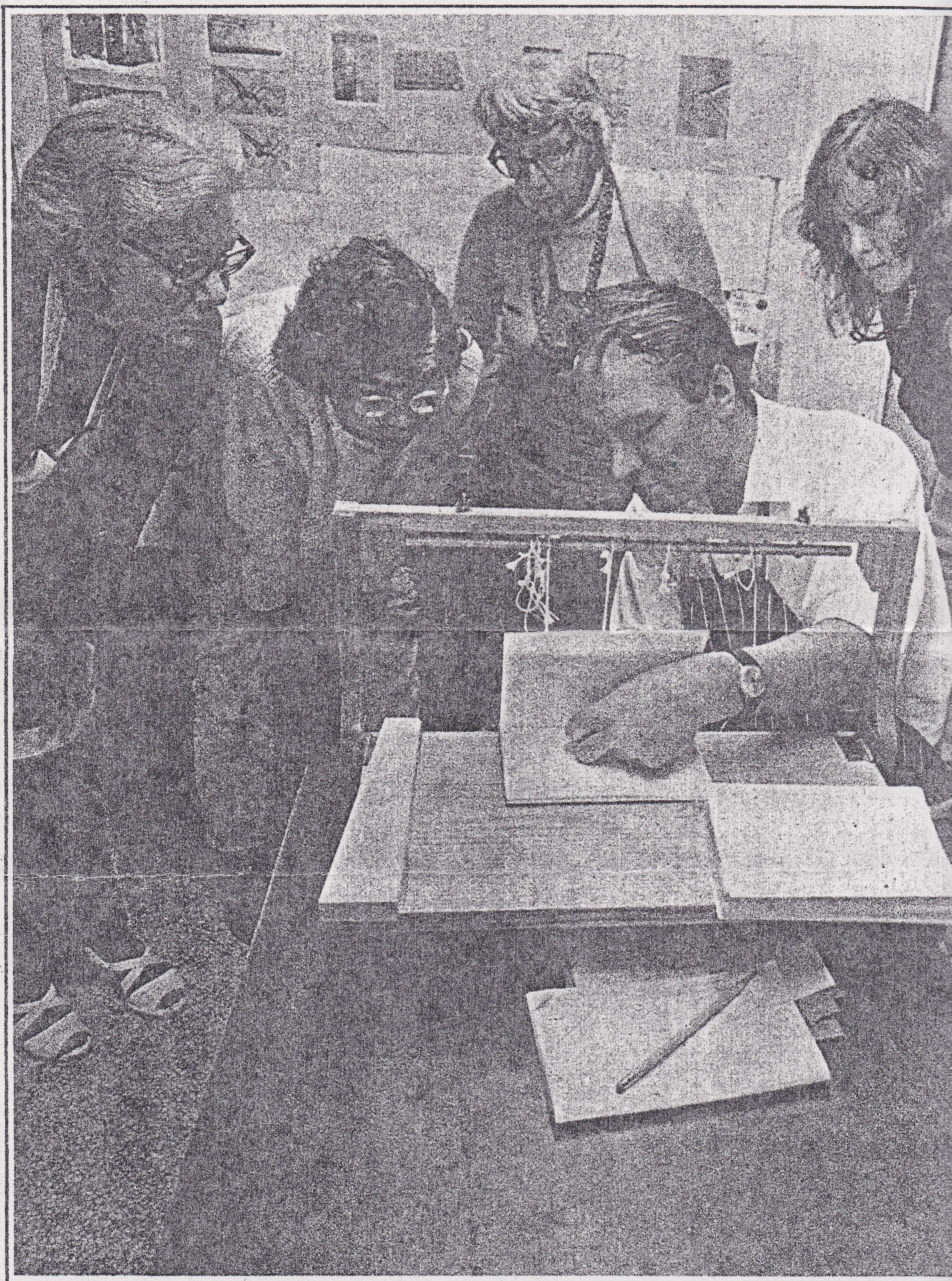
They bring their sewing tables — wooden trays rigged with vertical poles and holes that suggest the frame of a loom. Two make their living at binding books by hand or restoring them. One has done commercial book binding. Others work with rare, old books at libraries. Several bind books as a hobby.

Their conversations soon reveal something about their prejudices and values. Their finest hour, professionally, was in Florence, after the 1966 floods, which required bookbinding expertise to restore its muddled treasures. Their concept of a book's lifetime is a millennium; their nirvana, eternity. And glue, to them, is a profanity.

Commercial binderies use glue, you see. Hand binders sew and lace.

The classroom for this experience is obviously a workshop. Hanging on pegboard walls of the basement studio are rulers, saws, hammer, mallets, tooling discs, calipers, hack saw blades, squares, surgeon's scalpels.

These are, for the most part, cobbler's



limp vellum, you understand.

A few minutes after nine, Christopher Clarkson arrives. The man the binders are paying a hundred dollars to instruct them is a consultant to the rare book section of the Library of Congress and a foremost authority in limp vellum binding.

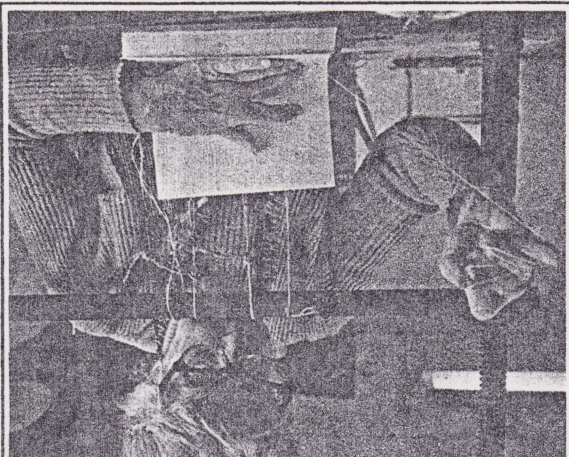
Clarkson is a stocky, balding barrel-chested fellow, wearing a tieless Viyella shirt and a tropical gray suit, rumpled from

Sheffield antiques. He has a nasal accent he ascribes to his "Not your BBC accent."

Clarkson established his global reputation in Florida among the most adept restorers of volumes. It was there he learned the technique that the local

While cleaning and

ere among the oldest, in limp vellum. Students dummy replicas make. It is an education together. this," he says, turning my volume, "you're not t." He throws the book ard. Picking it up, he pages. "See? No damage. he explains, are pretty ges being stamped out



and glued to the binding. In hand binding, cords are laced onto the boards covering the book. You can see the outlines of the cords under the pasted-down inside cover. Inside the cover, at both top and bottom, you can see silken threads forming what is called the head band.

In the limp vellum binding, pages will be individually sewn with unbleached linen thread to goatskin thongs. The thongs, intertwined for added strength, will be laced through the cover.

Clarkson begins the classes by showing a film he has made to demonstrate the process.

The students tend to look intellectual. Most wear glasses, are casually dressed in a way that suggests they are wholly unconcerned about fashion.

As they busy themselves, piercing folded sheets of white bond paper with a needle and linen thread one day or paring down the width of leather thongs another, I ask them why they are here.

Keiko Keyes is a slightly built woman, fragile in appearance. A restorer of prints, she often must take apart the volumes in which they appear, so wants to learn more about binding. (Ms. Keyes is also a published writer on the subject of Japanese prints.)

One lean young man with curly hair and glasses is a bookkeeper by trade. Nicholas Frankovich has been binding books for several years and eventually hopes to make it his full-time occupation.

To Nancy Zinn, an antiquarian in the rare book section of the University of California Medical Center library, "Every-thing I learn here is a contribution to my expertise." In effect, this helps her to know what kind of repair a weakened, fragile book requires.

Tom Ingmire, a city planner, pursues calligraphy as a hobby. His interest in bookbinding has grown from that.

When Dorothy Parish was a child, she used to take apart books simply to see how they were put together. Today, a gray-haired, motherly looking woman, she hand binds books largely because of the same fascination. She may buy a book from one of the Bay Area's printers of rare books, the Allen Press, for example, and do the binding herself, usually in Morocco leather.

"A good book should use Morocco," she says.

"Not vellum?"

"No. Vellum expands and contracts with moisture, so it warps and pulls out of shape."

That is when the vellum is mounted on a board, but not when the limp bound method is used.

Two of the men are here for wholly professional reasons. One, a darkly hand-

continued

Crafts *continued*

some fellow in his early twenties named Bob Futernick, learned commercial binding in a family-owned local establishment. He now has a bindery of his own at home, and wants to specialize in the restoration of paper and leather bindings.

The other is Robert Lucas, a tall, gray-haired olive-skinned man with prominent cheek bones and deep-sunk eyes, whose East Bay bindery restores works for antique book dealers as well as the Bancroft Library and Strybing Arboretum.

Most of Lucas' work is in restoration. "About two percent is incunabula (meaning before 1500), sixty percent eighteenth century and the remainder in nineteenth and twentieth century books."

By learning this older technique, he hopes to expand in the area of works prior to the printing press — the incunabula.

In any case, hand book binding in whatever form pays well, but not lavishly. Lucas says fifteen dollars an hour is about tops for pay. One can perform this detailed work for up to five hours a day, assuming there is sufficient demand.

To the consumer, on the other hand, a hand bound book, whether new or restored, would cost a hundred dollars and up.

Another professional here is a woman with a gray Dutch bob and twinkling eyes: Stella Patri, a seventyish grandmother, in whose basement bindery the classes are taking place, is also a veteran of the mammoth post-flood restoration work in Florence. Most of her work tends to be in the repair and restoration of books prior to the nineteenth century, and in teaching.

Ms. Patri wants to learn the limp vellum process as much for intellectual reasons as any. "Just because this hasn't been done since medieval times."

A thin, tall blonde woman named Sue Wilson is learning this process prior to opening a bindery of her own in Santa Cruz County. For her personal use she likes to bind books with sentimental meanings.

"Like a family Bible?"

comes from the lips of a pretty young woman with long brown hair. Eleanor Finger explains that she just ruined a whole folio when her needle ripped a slit rather than a small hole through several sheets of paper which she is sewing to leather thongs.

A social worker, Mrs. Finger binds books for a hobby. "I bind books I like." The last one she worked on for her own pleasure was Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley.

Barbara Land, a brunette in a salt-and-pepper tweed dress, just likes the sensation of sewing strength into a book. She's a librarian at the Helen Crocker Russell Library at the Strybing Arboretum. At home, she happens to be rebind- ing a Bible — but a 1620 King James edition.

I've heard enough acerbic references here to pvs's (polyvinyl adhesive) and glue to be surprised when Ms. Patri brings in a pot of paste.

Aha! You people do use adhesive. Not really, it turns out. It's just for putting on a piece of Irish linen which fits over the spine of the book.

Besides, they use just a smidgen of paste, says Ms. Patri, who makes the adhesive seem like a gourmet concoction. It's made of wheat starch which comes from Japan. And it is cooked for half an hour, during which she stirs it continually so it does not burn.

Friday and Saturday are the big days for the limp vellum binding students. The vellum itself is prepared, then laced onto the stacks of bond paper which they have so carefully sewn, thonged and then head-banded with crowns of thread that look like so many costume pieces for Cleopatra of the Nile.

The group seems almost reverent as they gather around instructor Clarkson, who will show them how to bend the stiff goatskin.

"Remember," he cautions them as he presses a crease with an ivory blade, "you're not folding, you're molding its fibers." He urges each to feel the mold.

By eight o'clock Saturday evening, the classes have ended. Each student has made two small dummy books as demonstrations of head banding and two ordinary sized dummy books with vellum bindings.

The books open easily. Pages lie flat. If I were to pull them off shelves by their tops, the head bands