

OBITUARIES

Stella Patri, Doyenne of S.F. Bookbinders

By Eric Brazil
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Stella Nicole Patri, who became an icon among American bookbinders and manuscript restorers during a career she began when she was in her 60s, is dead at age 104.

Mrs. Patri's eventful and adventurous life touched on three centuries, from her birth in 1896 in Montreal, Canada, to her death March 31 at the Sonoma home of her son Remo Patri.

"She was the grand dame of bookbinding and an incredible friend," said Johanna Goldschmid, a bookbinder and rare book specialist, "She was a great inspiration. No superlatives could reach how wonderful Stella was."

Among the honors accorded her was San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown's declaration of Nov. 1, 1996, as "Stella Nicole Patri Day".

Mrs. Patri was a survivor of the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, and before embarking on her life's work had been a wife and mother, an expert milliner, a welder, a bookseller and a committed social activist.

The Hand Bookbinders of California, of which she was a founding member, lavished tributes



Stella Patri, 104, was a survivor of the 1906 earthquake.

on Mrs. Patri on her 100th birthday and called her "a model of a persistent spirit."

Bookbinder Margaret Johnson said her old friend was "energetic and independent. In her 90s she was still moving her furniture around."

At age 90, she traveled alone to Japan to see the cherry blossoms.

"She was a delight — and she certainly spoke her mind," Johnson said.

Mrs. Patri's son Tito recalled that his grandmother used to say "If Stella were to drown, we'd look for her upstream."

Mrs. Patri, a lifelong pacifist, was forced to resign as president of the PTA at her sons' school for lobbying merchants to display anti-war posters during World War II. Her response was to become a

journeyman welder on Liberty ships in Sausalito. She later worked for the American Red Cross, helping returning soldiers reconnect with their families.

It was while working at Newbegins and Paul Elder San Francisco bookstores after her divorce from art school founder Giacomo Patri that Mrs. Patri became interested in the physical structure of books. In 1962, she sailed for Rome to study the restoration of antique documents at the Instituto di Patologia dei Libri, which became the foundation of her professional career. She also studied bookbinding in London and fancy book finishing in Paris.

When the Arno River flooded Florence, Italy, in 1966, soaking whole libraries of valuable ancient documents in mud and slime, Mrs. Patri, who spoke Italian, was among the "mud angel" volunteers who repaired and restored the damaged books. She later became an instructor for other volunteers.

"When she came back, she was an inspired icon in bookbinding for many years," Goldschmid said.

In her 70s, Mrs. Patri enrolled in high school night classes in chemistry in order to keep up with technical progress in paper conservation. She became the acknowledged expert in paper repair in the Bay Area. Her clients included the San Francisco Public Library and the University of California Medical Center Library, where she worked on the restora-

tion of medieval medical textbooks, including illuminated Latin manuscripts.

At age 95, she traveled again to Japan with her son Piero to see the cherry blossoms one last time.

Even late in life, when she had to use a wheelchair, Mrs. Patri was a lively presence in North Beach, particularly at Cafe Greco, among old friends. "The Golden Age — that's a lot of baloney," she told an interviewer on her 100th birthday, "... the spirit will, but the body won't. ... My advice is not to get old. It's no fun and it doesn't pay."

Mrs. Patri's honors included the Oscar Lewis Award from the Book Club of California for outstanding contributions to her profession and from Women's Achievement Vision and Excellence.

Mrs. Patri is survived by her sons Piero and Remo, both architects, and Tito, a landscape architect, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

Plans for a celebration of her life are pending.

Mrs. Patri's family requests that donations in her name be made to American Indian and AIDS causes and to the United Farm Workers, all of which she supported during her life.

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