



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

A binding business, run by the book

By David Mehegan, Globe Staff, 1/29/2003

The old-world atmosphere of South Boston's 103-year-old Harcourt Bindery is almost overpowering, like the aroma of a Victorian garden. After you've been in the fourth-floor factory on Melcher Street for a few minutes, it wouldn't seem odd if company president Samuel B. Ellenport and his workers dressed in starched shirts and high collars. It would be an excellent set for a Merchant Ivory movie.

In Ellenport's antique-wood-paneled office, rows of brightly colored leather volumes fill glassed-in bookcases. An antique clock ticks patiently on the wall. There's not a desktop computer in sight. The bindery is filled with turn-of-the-century tools and hand-operated machines. It's the middle of a weekday, yet the only electric machine to be heard is the subdued hum of the glue mixer. Though anachronistic, the atmosphere does not seem affected.

In the world of handmade bookbindings in leather or cloth, tooled with gold, the line between classic and contemporary is hard to find. It's all based, says Ellenport, on "the economics of desire.

"People don't need leather-bound books, but they *want* them," he says. "We all want to reach for something that captures a bit of the past and creates something for the future."

Yet Harcourt, 59, is a survivor. The Fort Point Channel area was once a hub of printing and bookbinding; at one time, more than a dozen printers and bookbinders crowded the neighborhood. All but Harcourt - the largest commercial hand bookbindery in the country - are gone.

Bespectacled, bald, and red-bearded, the genial Ellenport put aside an academic career 33 years ago to spend his life binding books in Dutch cloth or Nigerian morocco leather, sometimes with hand-marbled endpapers and gold tooling. He has no regrets.

"It's like being married to your mistress," he says. "It's very pleasurable to produce something that not only feels good to make, but also gives people real satisfaction."

With only three electrified machines, Harcourt meets a small but steady demand: limited editions; "presentation" books (gifts for retirements or other special occasions) bound in hand-tooled leather; restorations of family heirloom books, such as Bibles; leather-bound boxes that look like books, designed to preserve fragile editions or documents.

In addition to individuals, Ellenport's customers include state and small-town offices that still keep paper records. Harcourt also offers consulting services for book preservation, rare editions of books, and bookbinder's tools and supplies, virtually all of them imported. There are only 11 employees, but the 10,000-square-foot bindery floor is crammed with supplies and tools of the trade: work tables, type cabinets, stored colored papers and metallic foil for lettering, ancient cutters, book presses, and numbering machines. Scattered here and there are sets of books with tattered covers, ready to be rebound, including editions of novels by Jane Austen and Charles Dickens that date back a century. In one area, Joseph Darensbourg and Floyd Master are making cloth book jackets, while in another corner David Kinghorn is applying gold tooling to a leather spine.

Ellenport grew up in Newark. He graduated from Amherst College and began to pursue a PhD in American history. While studying at Brown University in the late 1960s, he had a two-year teaching contract at Suffolk University, and he says, "I fell in love with Boston." Ambivalent about the PhD, he drove a cab for a while after leaving Suffolk, then got a job at Harcourt in 1970, at the time located on Harcourt Street near Copley Square, "to learn the leather work."

Somewhat unexpectedly, he loved it.

"I was working with my hands," he says, "bringing these wonderful books I had only seen in libraries back to life."

Eventually, with help from family and generous terms from the owner, Ellenport and his first wife, Emily, bought the business. Though he had been active in antiwar and leftist causes in his academic days, he was not averse to capitalism per se. "I decided I was not a counterculture person," Ellenport says. "I decided I would be a businessman." After he and his wife divorced, he bought out her share and became the sole owner. (He remarried in 1981).

"As a historian," he says, "I was interested in the history of bookbinding. I started a bookbinding school in 1973 [no longer in operation, though he still occasionally gives lessons and lectures] and brought European bookbinders here to lecture. I also became a collector of books on bookbinding, marbling, and decorative paper."

Harcourt is not large in absolute terms, and the small scale is key. Ellenport says Harcourt is competitive with automated binderies up to about 100 copies. In 1986, he moved to much larger quarters in South Boston.

One of the principal pleasures, Ellenport says, is hearing customers' stories, which sometimes resemble tales from "Antiques Roadshow." A man recently brought in a 1930 edition of Nathaniel Bowditch's "American Practical Navigator" for rebinding; it had belonged to his late father, a student in the 1930s at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy. The customer said his father had often told of how he had slept on deck when the USS Nantucket, the training ship, was in the sultry tropics, and had used the book as a pillow.

Ellenport cites peculiar jobs as well. There was the Texas client who collected first editions of classic mystery authors. In an ironic twist, he proposed to disguise them as works of great literature to fool burglars, so he ordered fine leather boxes, which look just like books, with classical literary titles. A first edition of Sue Grafton's "'A' is for Alibi" for example, would be hidden in a box with "Anna Karenina" on the spine.

As with the Bowditch, personal attachment to a particular book often has nothing to do with monetary value. The two most frequent individual restoration jobs, Ellenport says, are family Bibles and "The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book" by Fannie Farmer. "That part is very pleasurable, resurrecting a part of a family's history," he said. "To them, Grandmother's Fannie Farmer cookbook, with all the old cooking stains on it, means more than a book by Gutenberg."

One won't get rich in hand bookbinding, but Ellenport says he earns a good living. Antiquated state and town office record-keeping systems are his bread and butter, but he expects even those jobs will probably be fully computerized in the next 10 years. But there are untapped markets, he says: in supply sales, special projects for individuals, and presentation editions. He might even do some marketing; almost all Harcourt's business is by word-of-mouth.

In the long run, the greatest concern may be rent. Harcourt's lease with Boston Wharf Co. has a year left, and while the Big Dig has been going on, office gentrification has held off in the area. But when the highway is done and the economy revives, the pressure for office space within walking distance of downtown is likely to drive rents up painfully.

For now, though, it appears Harcourt Bindery might go on forever, exactly as it always has. Asked why he still uses a 125-year-old bookbinding machine, he seems to find it a strange question.

His answer: "Because there's no reason to replace it."

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