



Daytona Beach craftsman works by the book to restore history

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By **Jim Abbott**

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DAYTONA BEACH - It's only a few blocks from Paul Sawyer's workbench to the souvenir and T-shirt shops on North Atlantic Avenue, near the heart of the World's Most Famous Beach.

It's perhaps the last place in the world one might expect to find a skilled practitioner of the ancient art of handmade book-binding and restoration, work that Sawyer has done quietly - and expertly - in Volusia County for more than 30 years.

"Nearly everything I'm showing you is history," Sawyer said on a recent afternoon, talking in a rapid-fire pace in a Cockney accent that remains thick as printer's glue after three decades in Florida.

Indeed, a walk down the seven narrow steps to Sawyers' cramped, cluttered basement workshop is a form of time travel. It's more Dickens than Daytona.

Except for the utilitarian light bulbs above Sawyer's head and a heating element to assist in stamping gold-plated lettering, there's no electricity involved. It takes muscle to turn the heavy, steering-wheel-sized handle on the half-dozen or so antique binding presses. Steady fingers to sew pages together.

Patience.

"It's tedious," Sawyer said. "This is a tedious job, but you have to do it right."

Sawyer's skill and reputation are evident in the list of past projects on his website (sawyerbinder.com), most notably his selection as binder of the Queen of England's Silver Jubilee Coronation album, presented to Queen Elizabeth II in 1977 in Greenwich, London. He also worked for the British Ministry of Defense, House of Lords and Somerset House, among other institutions.

His first job in the United States was as a contractor for the Library of Congress to restore historical documents in St. Augustine in 1984. He still receives a steady amount of government work, ranging from binding Volusia County's budget books to preserving historic documents in Tallahassee.

"He's one of the few (conservators) in Florida and really the only one in Florida that I would have any truck with," said John Berryman, an Ormond Beach rare books dealer who has been in the business since 1985.

For restoration, Berryman said, "I use only three people in the country: Paul, a small outfit in Massachusetts and another group in rural Virginia. On the East Coast those are the only three worth their salt."

Sawyer's calling card is his knowledge of historic books and his ability to work in an appropriate style without unnecessary flourishes, Berryman said. Recently, Berryman commissioned Sawyer to restore "A description of East-Florida: with a Journal, kept by John Bartram of Philadelphia, botanist to His Majesty for the Floridas," originally published in 1769.

"He does quality work that's not gaudy," Berryman said. "It's more period correct, which is very, very important. So many bookbinders just think that it's a question of using bookbinding tools to create lots of design work. That's not really the way things were."

Another longtime client is Jeffrey Johnston, owner of E.O. Painter Printing Co., in DeLeon Springs.

"Paul is one of the finest craftsmen I know," Johnston said. "He's the last of the Mohicans, really, in that world - certainly in this area. We've done business together back and forth for 30 years."

Yet another testimonial comes from John Martino, the actor best known for his role as Paulie Gatto in the film classic "The Godfather." Martino, who lives in Daytona Beach, hired Sawyer to create covers for collectible Godfather scripts.

"I found him in the Yellow Pages," Martino said. "I couldn't believe it when I went to the basement, saw the stuff everywhere. The man is an actual genius at what he does. I've never seen anyone so meticulous about how he does lettering on a cover. Just so much talent."

Originally, Sawyer, 62, had wanted to channel that talent into lithography.

"But it was too loud," Sawyer said. "Those machine shops. It was deafening. So I eventually went to the binderies. It's nice and quiet."

At age 15, in 1970, he started an apprenticeship with the London guilds, where he was trained by experienced journeymen in closed shops. He also studied at the London College of Printing and Camberwell Art College, earning City And Guilds of London Institute certificates in basic and advanced bookbinding. By age 21, he was a master bookbinder.

The training nowadays - in the rare instances it does exist - is less rigorous, Sawyer said.

"To be truthful, guys with not so much knowledge are teaching the younger people," said Sawyer, who acquired some of his presses from printers who went out of business. "They start out and they go broke. You have to know the business. You have to know how to talk with people about what you do."

Sawyer's work isn't cheap: Cloth bindings for magazines or thesis papers start at \$65. Bibles, in full leather with silk end-sheets and ribbons cost \$160. Full leather bindings start at \$425.

He never intended to stay in Daytona Beach until he met his wife, Barbara, who was a beach concessionaire. They have been together 25 years, living in the 1930s Spanish-style house once owned by her mother.

"I don't like it here (Daytona), but Barbara does," Sawyer said. "I like colder weather. I like the seasons. I like places with more mountains, where you can hike."

Around him, shelves laden with first editions by everyone from Sir Isaac Newton (1728) to John Steinbeck's "East of Eden" (1952) offer evidence of Sawyer's biggest passion.

"I still like books," he said. "I'm old-school."