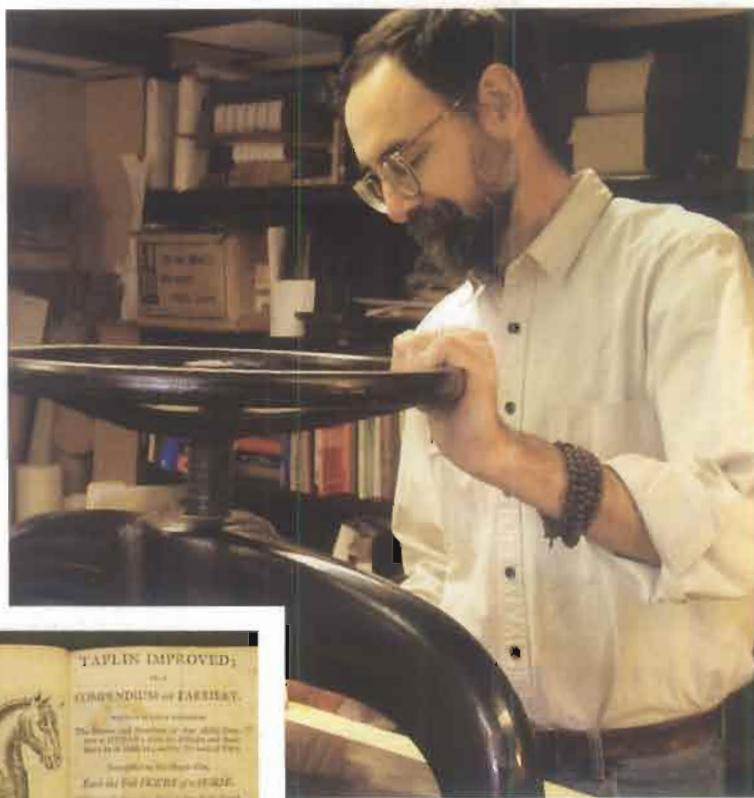


Page Turners

THE ART AND CRAFT OF BOOKBINDING IN INDIAN LAKE

BROKEN SPINES. TORN SKINS. AVULSIONS AND contusions. Worms. Bites. Fungus. The ravages of water and fire, the slow decay of time and the occasional violent insult have all taken their toll. The victims wait patiently in Jack Fitterer's workshop, where filtered sun and focused fluorescent light make the tall counters into an operating theater. Here, in a plain two-story house outside Indian Lake, damaged books are brought back to life. They get stitches and grafts, face-lifts and transplants. They may arrive in pieces, without jackets or covers, but Jack's painstaking fingers and three decades of craft make them whole again.

In this age of electronic media, in a time when even libraries are deaccessioning rare volumes for digital versions, old-fashioned reading matter may seem endangered. But downloads



Jack Fitterer in his workshop. Left: A 1792 guide to horse care, before and after repair. Photographs courtesy of Jack and Taff Fitterer (3)



a book so the spine can be repaired, stamped or hand-tooled. A wall rack has engraver's tools for embossing letters and designs into leather. Drawers with tiny compartments—a California job case, in typesetter's language—store lead and brass letters in different fonts and point sizes. There are rolls of supple calfskin in maroon, chocolate brown, black and forest green, plus handmade and rag paper in various weights and textures, from tissue to rigid stock. On the shelves are books, but not with their handsome backbones showing; these fine editions are wrapped in acid-free paper to protect them. This is a workshop, not a showroom, so preserving the projects is more important than displaying Jack's and his wife, Taff's, artistry.

The earliest volume they've mended is a 15th-century prayer book with minute channels chewed through the pages

and DVDs have no soul, and the experience of turning a real page can't be replicated on a gray screen. "The physical book contains much more than just 'content'—it contains the spirit of those who made and used it, and that can be sensed just by holding it in your hands," Jack says as he cradles a 1792 guide to horse care no bigger than his flat palm. This illustrated book was printed in London, with intricate fold-out engravings showing anatomy. Its repairs will require many of the antique mechanical devices in the shop.

An assortment of cast-iron presses are placed strategically, their circular cranks or long handles at the right height for bonding leather to covers, cutting stiff boards, and holding glued and sewn books together. A laying press, resembling a giant clamp with two wooden screws, lies ready to position

by generations of actual bookworms. "Wormholes get little patches of Japanese tissue," explains Jack. Repairs like this are visible, and he says, "Everything doesn't have to be pristinely restored. It's possible to over-restore things. Our goal is to keep a book's integrity but make it something a modern person can touch and even read."

Bookbinding is not as alien to the remote North Country as it may seem. Millions of Adirondack trees have ended up as paper since the Civil War—Finch, Pruyn & Company, of Glens Falls, still makes fine book paper. What was once the largest manufacturer of vellum for books, the Kinnear tannery, occupied a stretch of the Hudson River in Lake Luzerne in the late 19th century. Hotels and countless local businesses relied on stationery binders, shops in Glens Falls and other towns circling the mountains, where individual ledgers and daybooks were made to order right through the 1900s.

Now, what we see between two covers is manufactured elsewhere. Commercial bookbinding takes about three weeks from loose printed pages to finished products, requiring many different steps and some 20 high-speed machines to accomplish what one person could do alone, without automation or electricity, by folding, sewing, stacking, trimming, gluing and placing under steady pressure.

For Jack, mastering that trade began with courses in design and printmaking at Livingston College—part of Rutgers University—in New Jersey, and workshops in calligraphy. His interest in printing and fine penmanship goes back to boyhood, when he studied letter charts from his father's high-school days and borrowed obscure guides to printing with hand presses from the local library. Combining these passions into a career took time. "When I was learning binding, there were no complete programs offering a book-arts education, as there were in Europe," he says. "I found ways to piece together my education by individual study and apprenticeships with those who worked in the field. By the 1970s the field was

close to dying out in America as the old-timers retired and died off—and a lot of their equipment was scrapped. With the revival in arts and crafts that occurred then, people became interested in book arts and it was saved from going over the brink.”

One key educator was Leonard Seastone, whose Tideline Press, on Long Island, creates exquisite artists' books in limited editions. Jack also worked for Peter Geraty, a master bookbinder and restorer in Massachusetts, who led Jack through simple to complex repairs over several years. Jack became comfortable applying gold leaf to spines and covers, setting individual letters without glancing down at the type case. He acquired the temperamental technique of swirling oil colors on a water-based medium to marbled endpapers. But the road to Indian Lake and a solid career as a book conservator involved some detours.

Jack, 54, and his wife, Taff Mace, 56, first came to the Adirondacks many years ago. Taff's grandmother was a guest at Curry's Cottages, in Blue Mountain Lake, during the Depression, and she made sure her children and grandchildren returned each summer. Finding work in the North Country was a goal as early as the mid-1970s, but there were simply no jobs.

So they admired the mountains from a distance. Jack was hired by a printing company in the Berkshires, where he learned how to shoot pages of pasted-up type with a stat camera, how to strip in negatives for offset printing, how to set type with a Compugraphic machine. It was all state-of-the-art technology, now nearly as obsolete as that used in the centuries-old atlases, journals, manuscripts, reports, histories and diaries he and Taff handle every day. These come from antiquarian book dealers, collectors and a few institutions, steady work that keeps the couple busy.

Projects arrive through the mail, treated with care at the Indian Lake post office. “The private market remains our greatest source of support. There is little money among libraries and institutions these days for book preservation except for those such as Harvard

and Yale with major collections—and their own staff,” Jack comments. The waiting time for a job is about four months, he says, a comfortable pace. There’s a standard price list, but each project is different, requiring a range of repairs and materials.

The Adirondack Museum, in Blue Mountain Lake, has a fine research library with thousands of books, pamphlets, maps and other ephemera. This collection sends projects to the Fitters from time to time, and last fall an 1879 history of Herkimer County was placed in the queue. It’s a large, formal book that has seen enough action to need serious attention. The hand-tooled leather spine has fallen off, the cloth covers show plenty of wear, and the corners are frayed to fuzz. But inside, the pages are in good, clean condition and joints are intact. This is an excellent candidate for restoration, and once rehabilitated it will be something museum library visitors can use. First, though, Jack assesses the damage. Corners will be treated with glue and placed in metal holders to stop deterioration. The elegant spine can be saved by rebacking, taking it apart and lifting up the leather using a bone folder, a slim tool with a fine edge. New leather will meet the original spine, and the whole process blends old and formerly fragile with new and strong.

The tiny book on horses needs more-involved paper conservation on its fold-out plates. There is no cover at all, no hint of what illustration may have appeared there. So Taff, an accomplished painter, will draw a horse in the style of the engravings, and this will be sent to a manufacturer to make a magnesium plate for embossing the cover (skillful work that, with Jack’s fixes, will fetch just \$361). In fact, making one-of-a-kind covers is a task they love. For a first edition of *Gone With the Wind* Jack created gold, red and orange flames on leather, evoking the burning of Atlanta. A collection of woodcuts by Max Weber received an abstract inlaid-leather design based on traditional African body-painting that echoes the prints inside. Some books

are not cut pages but an accordion that unfolds gracefully from cloth boxes decorated in an elegant hand.

Special edition covers and artful calligraphy, though once mainstays of Jack's work, are not the bread and butter now. Nineteenth-century books, from the days of early wood-pulp paper, are the most common restoration projects. That paper, often the product of Adirondack trees, does not last as long as early linen-rag stuff. And people have their own means of holding favorite reads together. Fixing clumsy but well-meaning repairs is a frequent task. Taff, shaking her head so a swath of her electric-blue-streaked hair flops over her face, offers this advice: "No tape! No Elmer's Glue! The things we have to deal with!"

They also have to deal with finding the basic repair materials in a marketplace that's dwindling. Mills that make fine paper are relics of the past, but because their products are scarce they charge modern—high—prices. Jack explains, "Leather for bookbinding is tanned to provide the special workability and longevity required. Tanneries that provided this have gone out of business, and those that remain continue to produce this sort of leather as much out of love and dedication as material gain, since there is relatively little call for genuine leather on books. Most of even the few books offered in 'leather' commercially are actually made of 'bonded leather.' It's the equivalent of a furniture maker using 'genuine particle board' instead of hardwood lumber."

Keeping current in an arcane trade and staying in touch with other professionals is vital. Jack is a member of the Guild of Book Workers, a hundred-year-old national organization for creators of limited editions and fine bindings as well as conservators. He and Taff go to a couple of antiquarian book fairs each year, and a Web site describing their services is in progress. Indian Lake, according to Jack, is "a bit remote from book activity—well, okay, from most activity—but the wilderness provides its own inspiration." 🍄