

Salem master printer restores history

By TOM HENDERSON
For The Oregonian

Many people have read the Declaration of Independence, but Lee Schrunk, an 89-year-old supposedly retired printer, knows it consists of almost 7,000 individual pieces of type. He held each one between his thumb and forefinger as he gently rebuilt the document — one letter at a time.

Add in the tiny strips of lead, copper and brass used to separate the words and the lines, and Schrunk said America's revolutionary manifesto weighs approximately 65 pounds.

Schrunk then hand-made sheets of paper to make faithful reproductions of the document.

"I wanted to make sure the paper was as close as possible to the parchment used in 1776," Schrunk said. "That authenticity is important to me."

He printed it exactly the way rebellious colonists did in 1776, by physically pressing ink to paper by swinging a metal arm.

"When they talked about 'freedom of the press' back then, they weren't just talking about the press the way we do today as it relates to journalists who report the news," Schrunk said. "The press was a very real, very hands-on, sort of thing. I want to respect that tradition."

Schrunk lives in west Salem near Oregon 99W, and the stairs to his basement lead directly to a world before computers or even copy machines. He allows visitors to join him there by appointment.

There's little in the private print shop to remind those visitors they remain in the 21st century. A time clock from early in the last century still holds a punch card and waits for printers' devils — apprentices — and their mentors to begin and end their shifts.

A candlestick phone looks like it may ring any moment with orders from the editor to tear down the front page. Wooden cabinets contain more pieces of metal type than even Schrunk can count, and vintage posters fill whatever wall space is not yet concealed by stacks of books and printing material.

"I've never been quite comfortable with the 21st century," Schrunk said. "My wife Joanne handles the computer, email and all the modern stuff. I like to stay down here and out of the way of those things."

Mostly, the space contains printing presses.

"I'm a printer at heart," said Schrunk. "A lot of people who are into letterpress printing these days think of themselves as artists. I'm not an artist. I'm a tradesman. Printing is a trade for me, a job, and a job I happen to love."

Schrunk worked in the state's printing services department from 1956 to 1992 — the last five of those years directing the department as Oregon's official state printer. Since retiring, he has collected some 150 table-top presses in addition to his seven larger floor presses.

The largest is a Washington-brand hand press dating to the 1860s. Washington presses, invented by Samuel Rust of New York, were the most popular iron hand presses in the United States from the 1820s through most of the 19th century. Schrunk's weighs between 3,000 and 4,000 pounds, and he had to use a car hoist to bring it, piece by piece, into the house for reassembly.

Schrunk became obsessed with printing when he attended Salem High School (now North Salem) in the late '40s and early '50s. He already mastered metal and wood shop in junior high when he heard the school had a print shop.

"So I knocked on the



Photos by Tom Henderson/For The Oregonian

Lee Schrunk's west Salem basement is a journey through the history of printing with dozens of presses large and small.



Schrunk examines a copy of the Declaration of Independence created on his 1860s Washington hand press. He made sure even the paper he used was authentic to what would have been used in 1776.

door," he said. "That was my introduction to the trade I love."

Meanwhile, in 1950, North Korea sent its troops across the 38th Parallel, igniting the Korean War. Schrunk was drafted and trained as paratrooper, but just as he was completing his training in 1953, North Korean and United Nations forces signed a ceasefire.

'OUT OF SORTS' IS AN EXPRESSION THAT COMES DIRECTLY FROM THE PRINT SHOP. IT ORIGINALLY MEANT A PRINTER WHO HAD RUN OUT OF TYPE.

"That saved a lot of lives, including mine," he said.

However, civilian life in Oregon proved difficult in the '50s. The state economy slumped into a depression, and many of Schrunk's friends turned toward Boeing's aircraft factory in Washington state for jobs.

With the help of a linotype operator at the Salem newspaper, Schrunk eventually found work at the state print shop.

"There were 150 tradesmen working on everything from typesetting to book binding to presswork — all that good ol' technology, you might say," he recalled. "They printed everything from forms to law books. I was in hog heaven. That was the start of something

I thoroughly enjoyed. I couldn't get enough of it."

Even now, as he approaches his 90th year, he remains restless. Schrunk continues to search for the next printing project. The American Revolution provides an endless source of inspiration. After his reproduction of the Declaration of Independence, he turned his eyes toward the individual signers.

About 10 years ago, Schrunk visited an antique store in Salem and discovered the equivalent of buried treasure for a printer fascinated by the declaration — six volumes from a nine-volume set providing detailed biographies of the men who signed the document.

The books were published in 1820, four years before Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both died on the 50th anniversary of the signing.

"I set about to see if I could find the other volumes," Schrunk said. "Even the ones I found had two or three missing pages here and there."

Then he struck gold. He discovered a set of unbound original pages from the books.

He spent several years restoring not only the words and illustrations but also binding the pages in leather and re-creating the gold-leaf titles and images. The nine volumes — amounting to 3,300 pages — are now fully restored.

Schrunk said he feels an obligation to history.

"Old history books normally get thrown out," he said. "I don't want to say this is the only set. You never want to say 'only,' but these books ought to be preserved somewhere."

Although the books are preserved, he said he doesn't know what will ultimately become of them or any of the things he has so carefully created, collected

and curated over the years. He has no will or other plan for his estate.

"When I die, I just trust that all these things will eventually find their way into the hands of people who will appreciate them as I did," said Schrunk. "That's how most of these things found their way to me."

However, he plans one specific bequest — his almost 70 years of accumulated printing expertise.

For 20 years, students from Chemeketa Community College came to his house to learn at the press treadle of the master. Instructor Christine Linder wanted her advanced students to have more hands-on experience.

Times change, Linder retired, and now Chemeketa students no longer visit. However, Schrunk may lead a master class at the Independence Heritage Museum in Polk County for aspiring printers' devils who want to learn how to restore old presses.

Natascha Adams, the director of the heritage museum, noted a summer master class could come on the heels of the revitalized museum celebrating its grand reopening in late April.

"Museums are a place for discovery and learning," Adams said. "The idea of having Lee Schrunk teach master classes on printing press restoration at the heritage museum is thrilling. At the heritage museum, we believe in telling the stories of our community that have gone untold. What better

way to tell that story than to restore a machine which was specifically built to disseminate information?"

Brian Hodge, executive director of The Printing Museum in Houston, Texas, said preserving letterpress is important because it's becoming a lost art. "There's an amazing amount of ritual and practice involved in doing it," he said.

In fact, Hodge said, that's why printing experts like Schrunk are increasingly important. Printing is traditionally a trade passed along from master to apprentice. It wasn't widely taught in schools for fear of trade secrets being exposed and threatening printers' livelihoods.

"It's difficult for generations today to pick up an in-depth knowledge of printing," said Hodge. "There's very little information written down on how to use these presses or even troubleshoot problems."

The decline and possible demise of letterpress should concern everyone, he said, not just a few printing enthusiasts with a seemingly arcane hobby.

"We lose a process of an art created by hand," Hodge said. "There's something to be said for doing something by hand. If we lose letterpress to technological advances and time, we lose one more artform, one more practice, where people can actually touch something."

Schrunk feels a bit out of sorts at the moment.

"Out of sorts" is an expression that comes directly from the print shop. It originally meant a printer who had run out of type.

In Schrunk's case, he's run out of projects. His most recent, an 1850 Columbian platen press restored to working order over the course of eight months, wrapped up in January.

Another one will inevitably come along. Whether it's bringing a printing press or historical document back to life, he'll be tinkering again and building words out of metal.

"When I finished working on that last press, after my assignment was up but my adrenaline was still going, I knew I was going to have to find something new," he said. "I always have to find something new, especially if it's something old."

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