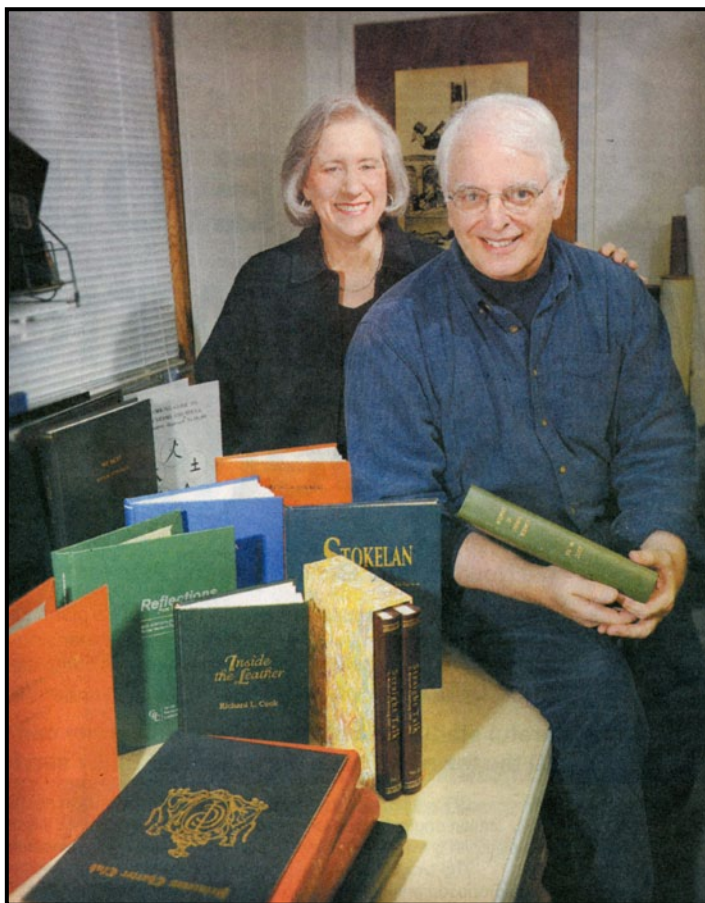


In the Age of Kindle, a Bookbinder Thrives



by Michele Alperin

Almost 30 years after buying a bookbindery (and more than a decade since computers starting challenging the primacy of print) George and Judie Shattuck have managed to make big profits out of small print jobs.

At a time when most newly minted texts exist only as 1s and 0s on a computer somewhere, it sometimes pays to be old fashioned. George and Judie Shattuck, owners of Smith-Shattuck Bookbinding, have nurtured a business that defies the evanescence of electronic words with a tangible product crafted by hand in their studio at 759 State Road in Princeton Township.

“When you walk into the shop, this is a place of permanence,” says Judie. “You’re feeling a book in your hand, holding it and knowing it’s going to last.

“That’s one thing we enjoy so much, that the work we do is going to last; it can’t be wiped away with the flick of a button.”

The Shattucks purchased their business in 1983 from Earl Smith, who had established it in 1952, when George decided to leave his job as a retail store manager and open his own business. He learned the fundamentals from Smith in a two-level space at 150 Witherspoon. When the Shattucks purchased the business in 1983, Smith dealt primarily in school theses for Princeton and Rutgers and also did binders for academic and scientific journals, which has declined considerably since the advent of the CD.

The Shattucks have made some changes in the business, in particular finding better materials and suppliers. A major concern of the Shattucks was that

they produce archival, acid-free work and use environmentally friendly materials. “When we originally bought the store, most of the gluing was done with hot animal glue,” says George. “If you have ever been to a place that uses it, you’ll never forget it.”

Unlike most of its State Road neighbors, the first thing you see when you enter Smith-Shattuck’s cozy space on Route 206 is not a computer monitor. The shop is stuffed with iron and steel machines that aid the bookbinding process, most dating back at least 60 years.

The first customer to give George a large order, 27 years ago, was an artist who wanted wrap-around portfolios for a series of drawings. As with many of the varied projects that have made their way to his doorstep since 1983, this project was a bit of a challenge — creating what amounted to a soft book cover, with red, white, and blue ribbon ties on either end that had to be somehow tucked into the cloth-covered board. “I had never done this before,” George says. “It was like building a wheel for the first time.”

In the process George not only created a satisfied customer, he convinced himself that he

was on the right path in his new venture. “This was the first order that said to me — I can make a business of this,” he says.

In the late 1980s as computers were coming to the fore, however, Shattuck did ponder whether perhaps bookbinding was going the way of all things, as computers might render books a relic. “That’s when people began telling me, ‘When everyone gets their own computers, no one will have books anymore,’” George says.

But instead of putting a crimp in his style, the digital revolution has actually been helpful to his business. “It allowed people to process information that they couldn’t before, save it, and format it,” says George.

“So it’s much easier for people to create work now than it was in, say, 1988. With desktop publishing, people are creating family histories and their little novels, and they are looking for a small-scale binder like us.”

Later, with the proliferation of Internet use, computers helped in a different way, as new customers were able to find the Shattucks. Much of their work on binding doctoral dissertations and senior theses, which still forms the largest part of



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Permanence: *Almost 30 years after buying a bookbindery – and more than a decade since computers started challenging the primacy of print – George and Judie Shattuck have managed to make big profits out of small print jobs. Thanks to desktop printing, there’s no shortage of new books.*

their business, now comes from all over the world. Because their work is custom, the Shattucks have no trouble doing “A4 bindings,” which use European-size paper that is slightly thinner and taller than our typical 8.5-by-11-inch pages. Smith-Shattuck is even recommended by European schools, for example, Trinity College in Dublin.

Often students will turn to the Shattucks, even if there is another bindery nearby, because of the fast turnaround. The company usually turns out work in one week, compared to the six promised by other binders. The Shattucks employ a part-timer who works 20-30 hours a week; and during thesis season, either that person will work more or they will hire a second person.

Another big change in the Shattucks’ business was inspired by their daughter, Cyndi, who three years ago started an archiving business that often feeds work to her parents. “She has become our New York City broker; peddling our services in Manhattan,” says George, only

half joking.

Cyndi’s first love is photography, her major at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. She worked for the Wall Street Journal as senior graphics editor for the online edition, but after 9/11 the 24-hour, on-call schedule got to her, and she decided to open her own studio. She found that sometimes, when she would photograph people in their homes, they would question her about how to handle old photos. Someone might say, for example, “My mother just died, and I have all these photo albums; I want to share everything I have with my five children. What shall I do?”

As the daughter of entrepreneurs, Cyndi saw an unmet need. “She decided there was a business there, and she went more heavily into that than the photography,” says George. “She takes people’s papers and photographs and digitizes them, and we make books for them.”

Through their daughter they have bound books of family heirlooms and histories. She has

also fed them cookbooks that pull together family recipes for an occasion, like a marriage. For these cookbooks, their daughter might do the graphics, texts, and layouts, and the Shattucks create the loose-leaf pages of the cookbook. A book titled “Heirloom Family Cookbook” in the Shattucks’ workshop, created for a wedding, included wallpaper that belonged to the bride’s grandmother on the inside of the front and back covers.

The Shattucks’ work is quite varied, sometimes corporate, often personal, and sometimes plain unique. “We never know what type of work people will ask us for,” says George. “That’s what makes the business interesting — you’re not stocking a shelf; someone is calling you with an idea they have or with something they’ve done.”

Judie adds, “Every day people ask us for different things and we say yes or no based on whether we can make them or not. We’re reinventing our product two or three times a year, as the customer base needs it.”

One time, for example, the Shattucks were asked to make game boards, which they were able to do because a game board is just a folded piece of binder board.

They also help people create retirement books. They produced 12 sets of “Straight Talk” for C. Michael Armstrong, who was retiring as CEO at AT&T, each set with fancy end sheets and slipcases.

One advantage of custom bookbinding is that the Shattucks can make any size book. George recalls work years ago for PSE&G, which needed 30 by 36-inch map holders for its table-sized plate maps. The binder boards themselves were three to four pounds, and George had to figure out a way to cover them.

The Shattucks also see some self-published work, mostly slim books of poetry, often for

distribution to friends and family members. Novels are very unusual, although they may get one written by someone’s mother.

Family is definitely a strong theme. One recent item will eventually be a six-volume family history. The first volume comprises the letters of Eugen Staffel in the original German and translated into English. Sometimes the Shattucks get brief histories of a people’s lives and also family genealogies.

Recently the Shattucks have seen a slight influx in people who are compiling personal E-mails. For example, people who have just gotten engaged may consolidate the E-mails they have saved for years. Sometimes, says Judie, their work requires them to be very discrete.

Until the Internet the Shattucks did not really do any advertising. “People found us,” says George. And as more businesses opened in the Princeton area, more people found the little bookbinding company, for corporate and legal work. The company does a lot of presentation work for architects and creates the closing binders, once a deal is settled, to hold all the relevant legal documents.

The Shattucks have also had continuing business from the Chemical Heritage Foundation; creating books based on the oral histories of chemists for the foundation’s library. Their largest order was for 700 bound copies, with 30 in fancy leather cases, of an interview with Masao Horiba, who designed the technology for measuring auto emissions in postwar Japan. This was some 15 years before people in the United States showed any interest. The books were written in Japanese, with an English translation.

Sensitive to the fact that Japanese students would appreciate careful packing, George says, “It occurred to me on an exist-

The Shattucks have seen some growth in compilations of personal emails



Old Iron: You might crank out your book on an Intel-powered PC, but George Shattuck will use some 19th century equipment to turn it into a hardcover book that will last several lifetimes.



Hand Work: *Judie Shattuck puts some finishing touches on a spine. The Shattucks have produced all of U.S. 1's bound volumes since 1984.*

tential level that, dealing with Japanese students, how you pack the books is as important as the books themselves." He wanted the packing to convey the sense that the books were manufactured by someone who cared about the project.

Judie grew up in Jersey City.

Her father was a dry cleaner, who also did his own tailoring, a skill he taught himself. Her mother was a bookkeeper. When Judie was a little girl, she had an antique store, and later she worked in one of her father's dry cleaning stores.

Judie has always had an in-

From Old Machines, The Artful Process Of Bookbinding

The process of binding a book is more complex than those of us who hold books every day might expect. Most details of the process Smith-Shattuck follows are specified in the national bookbinding code developed by the Library Binding Institute.

To sew together the pages of a book, George uses his oversewing machine, built around 1934. He sews the pages in groups, close to the inside margin, starting with the first group. Each subsequent group of pages is attached with half the stitches overlapping those securing the previous group of pages, and the others in a slightly different place. The result of this step is a "text block" with a secure, permanent, and strong binding.

The threads are then cut and the book's spine is rounded by a belt-driven rounder that uses a rocking motion to apply gentle pressure to create a slightly curved spine. To secure the threads, the spine is backed. The Shattucks' rounder

was made by the Leipzig manufacturer Karl Krause, whose company had nearly 500 employees making 3,300 machines per year by 1891.

Reflecting the Shattucks' concern with archival quality, they use end sheets of acid-free, alkaline paper. The cambric fabric (a lightweight plain weave cotton) is laid around the back spine of the book to provide extra support where the book gets the most wear, along the front and back creases.

Next, hanging by its spine, the book is pressed in a vise that creates "shoulders" on either side of the spine. The purpose of these shoulders is to disperse the pressure inside the book that the built-up stitches exert, which can make a book's spine concave and press the pages into a point at the book's front. "By rounding, you disperse the pressure over a wider area, and the book maintains its shape," says George. "And it makes it more readable because you can open it more fully."

To prepare for the next step, which involves actually covering the book, George cuts the binder board that forms the substance of the book's front and back covers, with only the swiftest glance at the ruler next to a huge cutting blade. The binder board, made from 90 to

95 percent consumer paper waste, is rigid and dense, as it is formed from compressed layers of pulp. George then sets the text block on the book cover, with the binder boards on either side, and assembles the pieces, with a cambric backing to provide extra strength at the creases of the front and back cover. He also sets an inlay strip to keep the spine from sticking to the cover.

Today the usual material for a book cover is a poly-cotton blend known as buckram. It is nonmetallic-dyed and has a water-based clear finish to prevent colors from bleeding onto page edges. The next step — the hot foil stamping that sets words and logos onto the cover — has the feel of old-fashioned printing. The "fonts" are movable type set by hand into the stamper. In a bow to more modern technology, George has added an electronic piece to one of the stampers to ensure that the heat is even. For the Shattucks, learning to do bookbinding was mostly hands-on. "You learn the basics and just keep improving on them," says Judie. "That's the way you do bookbinding — the way you do any other art; and we consider it an art, not a craft." — **Michele Alperin**

George, who grew up in South Orange, was exposed to the retail world from a young age through both of his parents. His father had his own business selling wholesale dresses in the garment district. His mother, Jane Engel, was a successful retailer whose name became a household word in the 1930s and 1940s.

Engel's father, George's grandfather, had had an artificial flower business that went bust with the rise of the refrigerator, and by 1929, the family was in dire shape. George's mother ditched her job as a secretary, which did not pay enough to support her family, and started selling dresses from wholesalers in the garment district at a price point below the New York department stores. Because the family had an apartment lease in a New York hotel, they couldn't be thrown out, despite the influx of groups of female customers and the delivery of merchandise. Eventually, says George, the business got out of hand, and in 1930 his mother was able to rent space in an art deco building on Madison and set up the first of many Jane Engel Shops. The business did very well and became a small department store. "It brought in many departments, unknown to department stores at the time, for example, maternity and furs," says George. Her stores were also the first to use split tags, which enabled merchandisers to track style, size, and color. Eventually there were 75 to 100 Jane Engel shops. "She was reputed in the early 1950s to be the largest dress buyer, because she was sending dresses out to all these franchisees," he recalls.

But by 1955 that flagship store was bankrupt, although the franchises survived, and the family moved to South Orange. George graduated from Fairleigh-Dickinson University with a bachelor's degree in economics and earned 30 credits toward an MBA. He joined the executive training program at

Bamberger's, where he stayed through 1972. He left as group merchandise manager for the Menlo Park store, where he managed 31 departments, including small appliances, stereos, cameras, sporting goods, luggage, house wares, and vacuums. For the next decade he worked for Channel Home Centers, managing stores throughout New Jersey.

George then decided he wanted to work for himself and was looking for a hardware store. But he couldn't find the right match. "What I wanted to get involved in, I didn't have the capital for," he says. So in 1983 he decided to purchase Earl Smith's bookbinding business on Witherspoon Street.

At first, he wondered whether

he had made the wrong choice, but within three or four weeks he had made the adjustment. "It took a little while to realize that it was either this or go back to work for someone else," he says, half joking, but admits that today he loves his work.

Judie says her husband is well-suited for the hands-on demands of bookbinding. "He was always handy in the house," she says. "He built things, put up wallpaper, painted, and built a wall in the basement."

The couple divides the work between them, with George doing most of the physical labor. Judie does some of the hand gluing and she pulls type for the stamping. Although both do customer service, it is primarily her area.

George notes that the large companies that do bookbinding are not really competitors. "A large company does not want to take on somebody who needs four books and someone who is not going to be a repeat customer," he says. "The large library binding companies want a large truckload of books backing in each week to be repaired or recovered."

Furthermore, large binderies generally have a 30 to 60-day turnaround, whereas the Shattucks promise a week.

Cost for a thesis runs from \$28 with minimal stamping and up to \$60 or \$70 with stamping and a leather cover. And of course there are quantity discounts. "Prices vary according to the covering, amount of

stamping, size, and quantity," says Judie, who handles more of the customer service work.

Having met when they worked together at Bamberger's, the Shattucks (who will be married 42 years in February), are very comfortable sharing the business. "That's how we fell in love and that's what we like doing better than being apart," says Judie. "You work together the same way you stay together in a marriage: respecting each other, helping each other, and looking out for each other."

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