HoustonChronicle.com

Houston Chronicle inside story

HoustonChronicle.com -- http://www.HoustonChronicle.com | Section: Local & State

Sept. 2, 2000, 11:16PM

Printing history museum here is one of a kind

By ALLAN TURNER

On a quiet day at Houston's Museum of Printing History you might happen upon a grizzled old printer lost in dewy-eyed reverie before a now-silent Linotype linecasting machine -- an 1890s device that for 70 years represented typesetting's highest technology.

On a busy day, you might marvel as a group of touring teens, bored high-tech hipsters, hold the rarest artifacts in their cotton-gloved hands or lift still-wet Bible pages from a replica of Johann Gutenberg's 15th century press and discover the magic of print.

Arrive just about anytime and you might find bookbinders, paper makers, perfectionist printers or print makers busily plying their trades in the museum's workshops or scholars perusing scores of rare books and periodicals in the library.

Houston's printing museum, which opened 18 years ago this month, is more than a collection of greasy machinery and worn type. It's a hall of surprises.

"There's not another one like us," boasted co-founder and executive director Don Piercy, 63. "There may be other museums or libraries that have more than we do. They may have more machines or more books. But when you put it all together -- machines that changed society, the books, the way printing has affected fine art. No museum or library can match us.

"We are unique in all the world."

While hundreds of American museums devote an odd corner to printing exhibits, often displaying dusty castoffs from defunct print shops, only about six exclusively are dedicated to the printing arts.

"Houston's is right at the top," said Mark Barbour, director of the International Printing Museum in Los Angeles. "Don Piercy has done a number of things that are exceptional within the world of printing museums. He's developed a significant collection of machinery, but he's also very strong in printed artifacts, the products of the press. His programing is very good, and his interactive tours go beyond just saying, `This is an old press.'

"His audience isn't just the printing industry. He's got a good cross-section of the community. Artists and others beyond the world of printing see the museum as part of their lives."

In addition to the crafts workshops, available to artists free of charge, the museum presents a monthly lecture series, maintains a gallery of fine-art printing and annually mounts a show and sale of a selected artist's work.

Under the direction of staff artist Charles Criner, the museum also uses its 170-year-old French lithographic presses to produce for sale quality prints by artists such as John Biggers and Edna Hibel.

Despite the museum's national reputation for excellence, it remains one of the city's best-kept museum secrets. Virtually no money is spent on advertising, and the few efforts at publicity are designed to attract school groups.

Each year, about 150 student groups tour the museum. Total attendance approaches 40,000.

Squeezed into exhibit halls in a nondescript office building on Clay Street just east of Waugh Drive are artifacts reflecting not only the vibrant printing culture of Houston and Texas but printing technology stretching back to antiquity.

Printing equipment includes an early 19th century hand press said to have belonged to Samuel Bangs, the state's first printer, who for a time produced a Galveston newspaper.

Also displayed are ancient Asian printing blocks, a mammoth 1850s newspaper press and a working replica of the revolutionary Gutenberg press that, with its moveable, reusable type, made cheap, mass-produced printed materials a reality.

Printed works on display include a copy of the world's oldest children's book, a 1582 French edition of *Aesop's Fables*; Juan Pablos' 1545 Aztec-Spanish dictionary, the first dictionary published in the Western hemisphere; and a 1582 Reims New Testament, the first sanctioned by the Catholic church.

Newspaper holdings date to London publications of the early 1700s, and trace the march of history from the American Revolution and Civil War through presidential assassinations and natural disasters to the present.

While only about 1,000 items of the museum's 20,000-plus artifacts are on view, plans for a new, larger building will be announced early next year. Still, the accessibility to visitors of what is on view is one of the things that distinguishes the Houston museum from its peers.

Visitors -- especially visiting students -- are allowed to hold ancient Chinese printing blocks, among the rarest items on display. They finger papyrus and flip through palm leaf books.

"For a time," Piercy said, "we allowed them to hold that first children's book, but we finally stopped the practice when we noticed a little deterioration. I suppose we did a little damage to the book through our ignorance."

Notably absent from the exhibits of historic cutting-edge technology are interactive computers found at many other museums. That's partly due to budget constraints, museum officials allowed. But at the printing museum, that apparent shortcoming has been transformed into a strength.

"If you want to interact," observed museum curator Sarah McNett, "you'll have to interact with human beings."

For students, the tour's climax often comes with a hands-on experience with the Gutenberg press.

Weighing 1,200 pounds, painstakingly crafted out of nine types of wood, the press is a duplicate of the one the German printer used to produce his famed Bible 5 1/2 centuries ago.

Under the guidance of museum staffers, students are allowed to print a facsimile page of the Bible, although, unlike Gutenberg, the young printers use a special vegetable-based ink that will not permanently stain their clothes.

Afterward, they can scrutinize the museum's fine-art reproduction of the 15th century Bible.

Much of the museum's philosophy stems from Piercy's experiences in his boyhood home of Salina, Kan.

"When I was 12 years old in the sixth grade, I had a teacher who took us to a little local art museum," Piercy, the son of an Air Force photographer, recalled. "The person who gave our class a tour did it in such a way -- she let us hold things and touch things -- that, all of a sudden, history came alive for me.

"Up until that time, history had been one of the dullest subjects in school. I saw no reason for it. I wasn't concerned about anything that happened the day before yesterday. I was looking to the future, not the past. But her approach, her easy way of talking and her great explanations, her letting us hold prints that were 400 or 500 years old. That impressed all of us. It stayed with me for the rest of my life."

After high school -- his family lived in Shreveport, La., by that time -- Piercy moved to Houston to study photography at the University of Houston, the nearest college offering a photography major.

Ultimately, he became production supervisor of UH's audio-visual center.

Later he worked for a company that produced catalogues, then, in the 1970s, became executive director of Printing Industries of the Gulf Coast, a Houston printing trades group.

During that time, Piercy and his wife, Nancy, began collecting rare books and periodicals, especially those that had "changed the world."

In 1979, Piercy and other Houston printing officials began laying the groundwork for the city's first printing museum, using their collections as the foundation.

The late Raoul Beasley of The Beasley Co. contributed his impressive collection of printing equipment. Vernon P. Hearn of Hearn Lithographing Inc., and Printing Industries of the Gulf Coast provided financial backing.

Though housed in the trade group's building, the museum was, from the outset, an independent, nonprofit corporation.

The museum's mission was as simple as it was profound: "to illustrate the inseparable relationship between the printer and a responsible press, a knowledgeable society and freedom throughout the world."

"Why here in Houston?" Piercy said. "Those of us who put it all together didn't even consider that the Houston area had the first press west of the Mississippi, that it was the home to Gail Borden Jr. (Texas patriot printer, Galveston surveyor and the inventor of condensed milk). We didn't think about that. What we did think about was how to turn kids on to the study of history. And, in the process, show them how important the process of printing was and demonstrate how fine art prints are made."

In an age in which a page of type can be set with a few strokes on a computer keyboard, the museum

seeks to impress on visitors the art of printing in the pre-electronic era.

Until machines that could cast an entire line of type became available in the 1890s, each letter had to be set by hand. In the case of newspapers and books, such an undertaking could entail the positioning of millions of letters.

After a printing job was completed, type was cleaned and sorted for reuse. Often the print was smaller than that used in the classified ad sections of modern newspapers.

"There's one thing that working with metal type did that working with computer type doesn't do," Piercy said, "and that is it develops a certain amount of discipline. ... It was a very romantic thing for those involved in it. It had a distinct sound. It had a smell.

"All that is past. Linotype stopped making linecasting machines and even the parts for them in the early 1970s. There are still quite a few people around who used to do it. Once we had an old Linotype operator just gazing at our machine. Big old tears were rolling down his cheeks."

Printers, Piercy noted, often were editors and publishers as well.

"There were quite a few very famous people in the United States who were printers -- Paul Revere, the Wright brothers, Thomas Edison, Stephen F. Austin," Piercy said. "What happened in the late 1700s and 1800s was that if the family didn't have enough money to send children to high school or college, they would apprentice them to a printer.

"If the printer was producing medical books the child, working from age 7 or 8 to 21, would probably ultimately be able to hang up a shingle as a doctor or surgeon. Editors, teachers, every type of businessman -- whatever type of books a printer was producing likely would be the field his apprentice would enter."

The museum's exhibits include dozens of famous newspapers. Among their editors were Benjamin Franklin, Borden and John Peter Zenger, the colonial New York printer whose trial for allegedly libeling a British official proved a signal victory for freedom of the press.

"The newspapers provide a whole new perspective on history," Piercy said, noting that the day-to-day immediacy provides a vibrancy often lost in book-length recountings.

Headlines document the most sensational events of their age: the Alamo's fall, commencement of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's assassination, the vanishing of Amelia Earhart, John F. Kennedy's assassination, man's first moon walk.

"Do you know which issues the kids relate to the most?" Piercy asked. "The Challenger space shuttle explosion. They remember that and it truly touched their lives. And the death of Bonnie and Clyde. They always remark on how ugly they were.

"They had seen the movie."