Since 1972, Boise State University's Western Writers Series (WWS) has published 116 fifty-two-page booklets that provide brief critical introductions to the lives and works of authors whose books have made a significant contribution to the literature of the American West. At the invitation of the editor of Scholarly Publishing, James H. Maguire, I wrote a thumbnail history of the WWS, "Publishing on a Whim and Shoe-string," which appeared in the January 1991 issue of the journal. That historical sketch focused on the travails and triumphs of two editors and a business manager who had to raise book sales to cover printing costs, or even part of such a press. What you are about to read is a chronicle of greater interest to friends of the Idaho Center for the Boise State's Wayne Chatterton--asked James W. Lee, editor of the Caxton Printers, Limerick Press, Red North Review (conclusions)

A Book's A Dozen

ICB's Travelling Exhibit

Four of fourteen Idaho books profiled, with exhibit itinerary

... because people read t-shirts.

VOL. 3, NO. 1
April 1996

UPCOMING EVENTS:

May 2-25
James Castle Exhibition
-Books and prints at J. Crist
461 W. Main, Boise, ID 83702
Telephone 208.336.2671

May 7-17
Books by Boise Public School Children
—at the Idaho Center for the Book

May-July
Summer Courses
-American Academy of Bookbinding
POB 1590, Telluride, CO 81435
Telephone 970.728.3886

July 1-6
Turning the Page
-Every two years for international book arts competition and October exhibition
Honeymoon Printmakers
1111 Victoria St., Honolulu, HI 96814
Telephone 808.536.5507

August 27-30
Sun Valley Writers' Conference
-P.O. Box 957, Ketchum, ID 83340
Telephone 208.726.6670

A DIFFICULT DREAM

James H. Maguire

Our story begins in 1970, when Boise State's Wayne Chatterton--asked James W. Lee, editor of the Steck-Vaughn Southwest Writers Series, whether he would consider giving him an assignment to write a study for the series. "Sorry," Jim wrote back; "but we're ending the series." He suggested, however, that Wayne get an assignment by starting his own series. And, after gaining my consent to serve as its co-editor, that's just what Wayne did—with start-up funds from Steck-Vaughn. Now all we needed was a printer and something to print. When we put the job out for bids, Caxton's submitted the best bid and was awarded the printing contract for the first five titles. We solved the problem of what to print by writing the first two booklets ourselves and by soliciting others from members of the Western Literature Association.

Our first year of publication, 1972, rumbled around; and before the end of the year we had our first five titles in print, and we were satisfied that we had managed to create what we had aimed for—a virtual continuation of the Steck-Vaughn and Minnesota series. However, there was a distinctive touch that the booklets in the two earlier series didn't have: cover illustrations. Most of the illustrations were drawings by Arny Skov, a professor in Boise State's Art Department; if the subject of the booklet had happened to be an artist as well as a writer, we used a drawing by the subject. For the ink on each cover, we chose the color that seemed most appropriate to the cover illustration.

For the next four or five years, we didn't think much about the look of the booklets. Each year, we published five new titles; each year, we asked that the type style, the paper stock, and the cover stock be identical to that used for the earlier titles so that we could maintain a uniformity of appearance. Then, slowly but surely, events began to force changes in the appearance of the booklets. After the first five years, Caxton's could no longer find cover stock identical to that used by Steck-Vaughn, so we picked what came closest. We chose a style recommended by Dick Pead. The paper stock we selected didn't seem identical to Steck-Vaughn's. Now all we needed was a printer and something to print. When we put the job out for bids, Caxton's submitted the best bid and was awarded the printing contract for the first five titles. We solved the problem of what to print by writing the first two booklets ourselves and by soliciting others from members of the Western Literature Association.

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From teaching in 1983, but he had continued to serve the WWS in a general advisory capacity. Although twenty-three years younger than Wayne, I wanted to work on other publishing projects. Unfortunately, Wayne died in 1983, only a year before the Department of English hired co-editor John P. "Sean" O'Grady.

The series Sean joins is a series that Wayne and I tried to keep uniform until the 1980s. But looking at the 116 titles on my bookshelves, I can tell from the different color tones and textures of the covers that uniformity was something we only managed to approximate. None of our readers—nor even any of our eye-cynical reviewers—even complained about those slight shifts of color and type style. Maybe none of them ever noticed; and if they did, I doubt that it mattered much to any of them.

Why, then, were we so determined to achieve uniformity? We thought that it would give our series more of a professional look. When readers violated the old adage and judged our books by their covers, they would see stability, recognizability, uniformity—qualities that would inspire confidence and would encourage them to buy more titles in the series. I suppose it gave us a straw to cling to, too: if we made a bad choice of a manuscript to publish, at least the finished product would look respectable.

While that even studied old scholarly journals such as PMLA and American Literature have abandoned the old look of uniformity, our impossible dream still holds sway. Readers like some variety. We are still trying to achieve a uniform look, and we still find it a difficult—if not an impossible—dream.
DEEPLY ROOTED

The Gipson family has watched their company grow from a business that was ridiculed for its rural western location, to one that has won international acclaim. Today, The Caxton Printers, Ltd., is going strong. L. H. James Herrick, Jr., has been the company's executive director for twenty-seven years, and the Gipson family is evident in the present leadership. The office is a testament to the great work of the Caxton printers.

Through hard times, fire, and war, L. H. James Herrick, Jr.'s dream of book publishing has never diminished. His philosophy still permeates the business. He says, "I believe in the value of the book, whether it be a collection of keys, the hour of the presses, and the white, thumb, and clank of the binder. Books are a part of us and will continue to be a primary article of merchandise to be produced as cheaply as possible and to be sold like bacon or pack­ ing of cereal over the counter. If there is anything that is truly worth while in this mad jumble we call the twentieth century, it should be books. After almost 100 years on Idaho's soil, Caxton is firmly rooted, deeply rooted, and in the American Red Cross with the Three Hundred Thirty-Fourth Division in France.

Harry Gipson decided his life to printing the works of now-famous poets such as Robert Lowell. He established Limberlost Press, a small chap­ book by Williams in 1944 entitled The Wedge, under his Cummington imprint. The book included a poem titled "A Sort of Song," which contained a line that became the inspirational decum for a generation of poets a few years later: "No ideas but in things." In his final presentation, Duncan wanders around his presses, demonstrating how they worked and answering questions from a handful of folk who showed up for the lecture. He shows a cup of wine, his white mane combed back behind his ears and long over his collar. He preferred non­ electrical presses, he told me, platen presses that operated with a sewing machine­ like treadle. He didn’t like his work to be dependent upon any power other than the power of his mind.

I learned later, listening to a taped interview with Duncan, that even the few copies he’d printed of Williams’ The Wedge had to be remanded in New York bookstores because they didn’t sell. At the time, Duncan was broke and living in Upstate New York in a house without heat. The thought of these numerous little volumes being dug out of dust and dusted in remnant bins at the conclusion of World War II is a sad vision of contemporary poetry. Passed over, picked over, Williams drove his "Wedge" into the "tangle-wedge" with Duncan’s help, despite the lack of an immediate audience’s approval. That determination—by Duncan even more than the good Dr. Williams—gives me hope. The collaboration of poet and publisher earned the book—and Williams’ voice—a place in time.

The love of letterpress composition is not simply a nostalgic love for the way things used to be printed. It’s a respect for a process that deserves a renaissance. Although labor intensive, the collaborative effort of poet and publisher is the process of preserving the language of the tribe," as Ezra Pound said.

Working full-time jobs in addition to publishing Limberlost books, my wife Rosemary and I made it go to print books a year until we were forced to discontinue in 2001. We had some honor sales in poetry that include Douglas’ Two Dishes for the Savory Foodie, Spy Spirit drums by Gino Sky, Blue Ink - The Tall Young Man, Out on a Fresh Coast, and A Voice in Montana. Carpel Bones by Margarita Arceo, The Carteuse of Jack Kerouac by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and The Twilight Never Ends by Alan Minskoff, were handpicked by John Haines, with chapbooks in the works by Sherman Alexie and Michael Teske.

Deeply rooted, and firmly rooted, in the language of the tribe.