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The plate, inked by rollers carrying a
metal or nylon plates which carry the reversed
image. The plate, inked by rollers carrying a
high viscosity ink, is pressed directly against the
appear the raised image. The plate, inked in the
recursed area hold the ink while the excess is scraped off by a
"doctor blade." When the plate cylinder comes into contact with the
paper, the paper’s absorbency draws the ink out of the
recessed area. Offset lithography uses the chemical reaction between
oil and water, where the medium viscosity oil-based
ink transferred in the flat image area when the plate is inked by
rollers. The image then offsets from the plate to an intermedia­
other surface, and then finally to paper. Letterpress, a relief
printing process, uses lead type, wood or linoleum cuts, and
metal or nylon plates which carry the reversed image. The plate, inked by rollers carrying a
high viscosity ink, is pressed directly against the
paper. Although each of these processes are use­
ful methods of printing, depending upon one’s
architects, letterpress printing is revered as the
most traditional style of printing because
Johann Gutenberg, inventor of European movable
letter type, printed letterpress circa 1450. Upon
driving further into printing’s past the under­
laying intricacies and complexities arise.
The oldest form of a letterpress is the
platen press. The platen is a flat surface that presses
the paper against the relief image, the face of
which must be at an even height. There are two
types of platen presses: the hand presses, and
the jobbing platen press. Both styles use the
same principle described above, both
have rather extensive histories, and both have had
much use in printing centuries of dozens of
many nations and states, including Idaho.
Platen presses have contributed greatly to the
foundation of Idaho publishing for more than
one hundred years. Their durable construction and
quality of impressions have given them validity and
longevity despite the dramatic technological advances that
have been made in the world of printing.

The platen press in its many forms (varying designs by dif­
ter manufacturers), has always been an effective means of
producing printed material, from newspapers to volumes of
books. However, as very late invention, almost always being hand fed, and usually require more extensive
multistep procedures, compared to other presses or methods
of printing. Nor is the platen press able to produce work at
high speeds. Offset processes, such as a modern newspaper press, can
produce thousands of copies per hour. The basic hand
press process, much like Johann Gutenberg’s press (which was a com­
trolled wine press), has been used for the printing of newspapers,
texts for books, or anything that required a large sheet of
paper and a large printing surface. The jobbing presses, due to its smaller size, were produced just for the printing of so­
called “job work,” calling cards, small posters, playbills,
brochures, envelopes, etcetera. These presses were not necessar­
ily limited to job work, and have also been used for
the printing of publication covers for books, booklets, and book
dust for case bound editions.
In Idaho, the platen press has long been used in almost all
printing plants, publishing houses, varnish presses, and by
household printers. Caxton Printers, Ltd., a publishing company
in Caldwell, Idaho, began as a small press known as the Gem
State Rural Publishing Company shortly after Idaho became a
state in 1890. This company produced an agricultural news­
letter, The Gem State Rural, aimed at helping local farmers.
Alber E. Gipson, the founder of Caxton Printers, was a
farmer in Colorado, and moved to Caldwell in hopes of start­ing
a publishing company and producing a newsletter that
was called “job work”; calling cards, small posters, playbills,
brochures, envelopes, etc. These men had no idea of what was to come. The
legacy of the platen press needs to be continued. In
spite of the commercial demands such as long runs, higher
speeds, lower production costs, and a
dismay of the commercial demands such as long runs, higher
speeds, lower production costs, and
were working busily building the foundry, known to become the
largest printing plant in the valley. Leon A. York (who had been printing and
publishing since 1883) and
Harry J. Syms formed the Syms­York Company in 1905. In
its early days, the company consisted of two small jobbing
presses, several cases of
case, and operated in a
Boise, Idaho basement by a staff of only three people.
By 1913 Syms-York had moved to a larger
space which included a sales office. Other
industries were booming in Boise as well, so
printers such as Albert E. Gipson became interested as
excellence in the Syms-York Company, was bound to prosper.
Most books that were printed and bound by
Syms-York were published by private parties who
paid for the printer’s services. A notable example in a
Pleasanton of the Sycamore Platen Press, the Syms­York Company had become affiliated with the
Beacon Litho Company which was the
beginning of the transition from letterpress to offset
lithography. Syms-York was purchased in the mid 1980s by
Sidney & Morris. Apart from long-lived printing companies which have shut
some have given up printing in general saw a
dramatic decrease in demand. By the early 1950s, the
printing industry was in a state of transition, and by the turn of the 20th century, Sidney & Morris purchased
Syms-York virtually eliminated the letterpress department, keeping only one letterpress to be used for
certification and limited work.
By 1995, Caxton Press had two large letterpress presses and
staff of up to eight employees. By 1929, ten presses had been
published by Caxton Presses and production doubled in 1930.
Company records that could tell us which presses were used on
in the press were destroyed in the fire of March 17, 1937. This fire crippled the firm and changed the presses.
Now, run by the fifth generation of the Gipson family, Caxton Printers continues to
produce many different styles of jobbing press presses
occasionally taking advantage or their versatility.
Dick Braese at the Idaho Historical Museum — operating the platen press manufactured in 1850.

One individual who has been keeping the legacy of letterpress alive, especially the platen press, is a master printer by the name of Dick Braese. Dick has had the honor of working with many of the halls of printing. Braese has been involved, in one way or another, with the printing industry almost his whole life, from the age of seven. Dick's father presented him with a small jobbing platen press, which was "an loot" from Braese's uncle who worked at the Meredith Iron Works. This machine, which casts primer's type out of molten metal, is a fascinating establishment in the home town of Everett, Massachusetts, to learn the art of printing. The printer taught Braese well, and by the age of nine, Dick was acquiring a couple of presses of his own. After high school, from 1947 to 1951, Braese completed his apprenticeship in letterpress and offset printing, and received his certificate in the graphic arts while attending a vocational school. The machinery on which Braese completed his apprenticeship, much like the majority of equipment during that time period, had very few safety features, in order to have to be more aware of themselves and their machinery to maintain possession of all digits and limbs.

Braese has witnessed many changes and historical events in the world of printing. After attending the vocational school, Braese joined the military and became part of the 582nd Repro Squad. This squad operated under the direction of the CIA and was responsible for the offset printing of sensitive government documents. Frequently, Braese and his troop would parachute to the heart of enemy territory, only to find small offset presses which had lightweight aluminum cylinders. Once on the ground, the troops would scavenge thousands of propaganda flyers urging the enemy to surrender, then fired them out, and rolled them into circles which fit into a bomb-shelf casing. With this step completed, the moxie was in the air once again, dropping the casings which held their flyers. When dropped, these casings would blow apart and spread the contents across the land.

In 1959, three years after completing his military duties, Braese moved to Boise, Idaho to be a substitute teacher. Unfortunately, there were not many opportunities for a graphics art instructor, except an offer from Boise High School to join their printing education department. Pay was minimal, and needing to support his family, Braese began working for the Sysco-Tork Company and eventually acquired a job as a plate man at the Treadle. Braese eventually became shop foreman for Sysco-Tork and held this position for six years.

During Braese's employment as foreman at Sysco-Tork, he was recruited by the Idaho Historical Museum to restore an 1850 platen press, which was once part of Idaho's Historical Society warehouse for many years. The interest was to build a permanent display of "vintage" printing methods. Parts of the press had disappeared during its storage, and it was essentially forgotten until the efforts of Braese and his two sons, Rick and John, turned this into a working piece of equipment.

This hand press, The Washington Hand Press, manufactured in 1850, was acquired from the Idaho World, a defines Idaho City newspaper. The museum exhibit was augmented when another press, a jobbing press manufactured in 1840 and said of manuscript's equipment, was donated to the museum by a Tacoma Valley minister. Braese values the souls of these presses, just as well as their historical implications.

While restoring the Washington Hand Press, I was sometimes wise away the old press. I was shocked at the sight and told him not to do so, that is "historical grave." By the late 1960s, after years of renovation, the exhibit was completed. It continues to come alive once a year for the "Museum Comes to Life," where the printing press and other museum exhibits are operated for visitors to witness in action. It is an impressive sight, especially increased later 1800s print shop attract considerable attention.

From 1978 to 1992, Braese worked as branch manager and sales representative for Heidelberg, a printing press manufacturer. This job required extensive traveling which took Braese from shop to shop in an attempt to sell the presses and products of his employer. While conducting these visits Braese noticed that many shops had old equipment, including many presses,rating idle and collecting dust. Braese urged the shop owners to donate these items to the State, and receive a tax write-off in the process. Braese then gained access to National personnel and equipment to assist in the rigging and transport of the unused printing equipment. After this equipment was moved to the Old Idaho Penitentiary, now a tourist destination spot, Braese began work on setting up a small print shop in a room near the Old Penitentiary laundry facilities. Among other items, there is one present press in this exhibit, the "Original Heidelberg," which was manufactured in 1950 to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the same press manufactured in 1850. This exhibit also opened a year for the Penitentiary's one-dollar admission day, when the public could stroll through the "Gold Nugget" print shop and observe the fully operational equipment of printing past which represent the devotion of five Idaho printers.

Throughout his life, Dick Braese has been involved in, and dedicated to the printing trade. He has taken great strides to preserve this equipment, as well as many other items of letterpress machinery that future Idahoans can observe and appreciate. His knowledge and experience have been exceptional, and will continue to be a valuable asset to those interested in historical printing techniques.

While Dick Braese has kept the presses ready for printing through physical demonstration in Southwest Idaho, the interest in these old presses is high. Other Idahoans are keeping presses operational throughout much of the United States. John Hern, owner and founder of Hern Iron Works in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, is in the process of making cast iron treadles for jobbing presses. As previously explained, the treadle is a lever which, when pumped by the foot of the operator, sends the press into motion. Hern's management's interest in printing is not whimsical, or just a flight of fancy; Butch, Hern Iron Works' production manager, recently noted, "John Hern likes letterpress printing because he thinks it is class.

However, Hern is not one who merely appreciates the aesthetics or the creative aspect of letterpress printing. In fact, he has been involved in its printing since he was a boy, his introduction to letterpress coming from a small rubber stamp rotary press. Shortly thereafter, Hern acquired a small jobbing press press. Hern found he enjoyed the art of letterpress printing and took advantage of its accessibility.

At the age of twelve John Hern began casting iron. He worked in the trade at seventeen, and now has over twenty-five years of casting experience.

Currently, Hern owns over one hundred presses, including a couple of Chandler & Price presses, an "Original Heidelberg," similar to the one on display at the Old Idaho Penitentiary, and his first press was from when he was a child. Hern's effort is not limited only to presses and equipment. He is concerned as well with producing from such presses. Hern states, "I am an avid reader, and the book is still the fastest and best way to get information."

While production of other cast iron pieces such as presses, boilers, grates, and manhole covers, the casting of treadles began as a personal venture for Hern but soon grew. "Our Works" advertisements can be found in many printing equipment publications, as well as on the Internet. Orders for treadles come in at least once a week from all over the country, with many asking for the casting of treadles to be classified as "job work," as opposed to "babies." Despite the exceedingly lengthy production process, treadles only take approximately two to four weeks to produce and ship out. As pressmen prices decrease, so do their presses and accessories. "With age, and extensive use can take their toll on cast iron, causing it to fracture. This is in turn causes the demand for treadles to be high, and the supply very limited. Di can offer find someone, like Hern, or find an origi­ nal treadle from a damaged or recently restored presses. The latter is very difficult because most people like versa­tility and would be hard pressed to give up their treadle, even if their press is currently powered by an electric motor. If there is a need for an item, Hern Iron Works will, or can, according to John Hern.

These brief historical sketches of printing and publishing companies who embodied the spirit of letterpress printing, combined with the profiles of these two individuals who are dedicated to the practice and preservation of historical printing techniques, show the tremendous impact of the presses on publishing in Idaho. Certainly, times have changed, and progress is inevitable. However, the efforts of and works produced by these companies and individuals are especially appro­ priate in the state which gave birth to platen printing in the Pacific Northwest with the arrival of a Ramo model No. 14 platen press at the Lapwai Mission in 1839. The Lapwai Mission Press, under the direction of Reverend Henry Harmon Spalding, produced the first books not only in the Pacific Northwest, but more precisely in the "wilderness" that would become Territorial Idaho and ultimately, the State of Idaho.