Idaho Center for the Book

Upcoming Biblio Events

June

"Crimes de la Crème/Holland/Old Romance in the Kitchen Table, Soj Graces, Flower Honored (Or the Lovel, the Toppling of Oliver Williams) In or Giant(2048) Demon... & 18 additional titles books by Barbara Michelson"
Liberal Arts Building, Boise State University

June - August
Entries by individual Idaho bookmakers accepted by the Idaho Center for the Book for its juried, biannual traveling exhibition "Booker's Den" (2008). Send works SASE to the ICB, selections announced in October.

August - September
"Silver Living: Pan Mite Artists' Books" Bookworks inspired by an Idaho silver mine - its owners, history, and related artifacts. Sue Valley Center for the Arts, Hailey, ID

Practicing Timelessness:
The Biblio Laboris of Idaho Book Artist Jim Croft

by Jann G. Marson, Jr.

A mongst those living in the secluded locale known as Pokey Creek, nestled into the hillside approximately three miles north of Santa in northern Idaho, it is no secret that resident bookbinder and papermaker Jim Croft is an avid proponent of the handmade book. On his own land the aspen-haired, approximately six-foot tall man with a gracious, bearded smile and innocently mischievous laugh often cuts loose, singing at the top of his lungs, "I like big books," between virtuosic measures of trombone or washbuck bass. And so the enthusiastic Croft, along with the encouragement and support of his family, opens his home to students from around the world who gather to learn the ancient Biblio laboris of the medieval book. Students take part in one or more of Croft's "Oldways" workshops, be it to hand-fabricate one's own bookbinding tools or to engage with the centuries-old process of binding books in wooden boards with clasps forged from raw metal stock.

Beyond the mere novelty of bearing an "official" stamp of holiday cheer, Santa's international renown has been significantly contributed to by Croft's ever-expanding reputation for an organic but refined blending of materials and craftsmanship to achieve what he calls "a tried-and-true quality." Many become familiar with Croft's approach to the couple had previously made in the Western Red Cedar to be used for all kinds of wood-working projects, including boards for book covers, Croft also appreciated Douglas Fir, Grand Fir, and larch because of their splitting qualities and because they resisted decay. Having recently transitioned to using primarily wood from beech trees to make his book covers, Croft employs northern Idaho yew trees as "splines" that are dovetailed into the cover boards for additional strength. Much of Croft's wood comes from burn piles (before burning, of course) found at area mills and out in the woods. These mills produce large scale lumber and are prone to discard timbers exhibiting any signs of decay regardless of how minimally invasive. Croft, however, works on a much smaller scale and can work around any compromised sections of the tree making much more efficient use of the resource. He has established a niche in salvaging what the lumber mills will not take, and takes pride in "cleaning up after timber industry and development." In addition to salvaging wood, Croft also salvages yards of worn-out linen fire hose from the area's firefighting crews with which he makes incredibly smooth and uniform sheets of paper used for binding into his books.

At that time, Croft's major source of income came from planting trees in the Idaho panhandle region, and so he found himself traveling back and forth between the two states. The panhandle region boasts an incredible variety of coniferous species known for their timber including fir, larch, pine, and yew. Drawn to the area in large part by its Western Red Cedar to be used for all kinds of wood-working projects, including boards for book covers, Croft also appreciated Douglas Fir, Grand Fir, and larch because of their splitting qualities and because they resisted decay. Having recently transitioned to using primarily wood from beech trees to make his book covers, Croft employs northern Idaho yew trees as "splines" that are dovetailed into the cover boards for additional strength. Much of Croft's wood comes from burn piles (before burning, of course) found at area mills and out in the woods. These mills produce large scale lumber and are prone to discard timbers exhibiting any signs of decay regardless of how minimally invasive. Croft, however, works on a much smaller scale and can work around any compromised sections of the tree making much more efficient use of the resource. He has established a niche in salvaging what the lumber mills will not take, and takes pride in "cleaning up after timber industry and development." In addition to salvaging wood, Croft also salvages yards of worn-out linen fire hose from the area's firefighting crews with which he makes incredibly smooth and uniform sheets of paper used for binding into his books.

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planted apple trees, plums, berries, and other fruits. The Crofts used to collect rainwater for much of their water needs, but have since been able to make use of a natural well spring on the property, and generate eighty-percent of their electrical power from six small solar panels atop the main house. This freed them from dependence on municipal utilities, and negated any need for propane fuel, let alone grid power.

For the Croft family, life in Idaho made possible a continuation of their Oregon aspirations and a more complete departure from the world of modern convenience. Enconced in their own forest, they could practice what Croft had witnessed in his travels, having observed how people "made the items they needed for everyday living." So they built in Idaho. In addition to the main house with attached bookbinding and tool-making workshops, Croft has outfitted the property with a small but cozy, lofted guest house, two outbuildings, a number of tool/storage sheds, as well as a structure that shelters firewood and houses the root cellar for the storage of dry goods. Much of the lumber that Croft used to build these features came from much larger, obsolete structures that he volunteered to help owners remove. Among these was the old Potlatch mill building and the 1898 log hotel in Santa. The solidity of Croft's home and outbuildings is a direct reflection of his material resourcefulness.

The metal roofing on Croft's home, manufactured in 1927 for the Potlatch mill and salvaged in 1984, is approximately ten times as thick as metal roofing currently produced. Croft considers himself to be as much a woodworker as a bookbinder, and therefore has no trouble with tasks such as cutting the old Santa hotel, restored and battered from years of logger-boot traffic, and resurfacing that wood with hand planes to reinstall it as his kitchen hardwood floor.

To suggest that Croft lives a life of relative isolation—perhaps because they do not initially realize that.

"Interesting solutions." In this way Croft is not entirely dissimilar to the atmosphere created by diligent, dedicated and talented folk-art students present, nor is it due to a studio outfitted with an overwhelming array of bookbinding paraphernalia—tons of cast iron devices or superstar display of kiosks, racks and shelving holding commercial papers, leathers, threads and adhesives. In fact, the studio is modest, intimate. Croft insists there is no need for a massive collection of equipment because Gothic books can be bound almost anywhere and the handwork to be done can be achieved with the tools at hand. As for materials, many can be found in the surrounding environs. Instead, the art is one due to meeting Croft, in his home, surrounded by his life works, works built on a historical tradition of craft. The man's spirit permeates the place and the artwork he has produced; as well, it inspires his students.

In 2005, Pokey Creek students found that each step of the boardmaking process provided unexpected challenges. Yoko and Miko from Japan, Brändön from Ashland, Oregon, Velma from New York, and Chris from North Carolina found that making metal clasps was not as simple as they had imagined. In fact, a Pokey Creek workshop provides the raw metal stock, typically flat sheets of brass with a thickness of approximately forty thousandths of an inch. This is then cut according to the student's design, joined using various methods, and heat treated to a relative flatness. Rough edges are cleaned up using files, sand paper, and steel wool before they are drilled for rivets. Rivets are formed using brass ochreconum pins, hardened into place, followed by the proper sizing of the hasps that actually serve to close the book. The hasps must be bent into a hinge at one end and a minute hook at the other to release, or spring open when the covers of the book are compressed. This springing action is designed to achieve, requiring much shaping and reshaping of every piece involved. All-in-all, students find this a time-consuming and exacting process, but well worth their time, when they are finally able to experience the functioning, finished product.

Frequently, as a by-product of watching and helping each other work through each of these various challenges, students develop camaraderie apparent even in the tranquil setting of Croft's workshop, when they gather in the outdoor kitchen and common areas for delicious meals prepared by Meldy. One can sit with fellow binders in the forested picnic area, or later enjoy an adventurous walk down the trail to Croft's pond and paper stamping mill, while gazing at stars and admiring the peacefulness of the green-shadowed, northern Idaho forest in which Croft's Oldways is situated. At the end of the day, students retire to rustic lodgings in a lofted guest house and a tree house built entirely from the Crofts' homegrown logs. After a challenging but rewarding day, they may drift off to dreams, suspended in nature, surrounded by sounds of the forest and by warm breezes carrying the scent of tomorrow's boards, cedar and pine.

For complete immersion in Croft's philosophy and approach, however, there is no substitute for the courses at Pokey Creek. This coming summer, Croft will be offering two courses in Idaho: the nine-day "Wooden Board and Clasp Intensive," and the fifteen-day "Oldways of making books from raw materials." The latter includes time for making your own bookbinding tools such as bonefolders (used for purposes like folding paper or working leather onto the spine of a book); preparing and sharpening flax thread using stock harvested from the Crofts' property (with the expert guidance of Melody); making paper to be bound into the books—also all leading up to five days of wooden board and clasp work. The advantages of taking courses at Pokey Creek, though not entirely unlike the kind one might find elsewhere, is that Croft teaches across the country, lie primarily in that