

Preserving printing's past

BY LINDA JOHNSON
Correspondent

When the members of the Book Arts Guild of Richmond Hill descend the stairs to the basement of the Vanderburgh House for their Friday night meetings, they could be stepping back 100 years in time.

Surrounded by antique printing presses and cabinets filled with thousands of individually cast type letters, they'll spend the next few hours printing the old-fashioned way — by hand.

"This is all part of a dead craft," Donn Purdy says, looking around the room at the artifacts he has spent more than a decade collecting. They include a 19th-century platen printing press and hundreds of cases of lead type.

The printing method used here is known as letterpress — a technique requiring raised letter surfaces.

"It died out in the 1950s and 60s," he explains. "But, for many centuries, it was the only method people had of printing."

While today, computers make it possible to set the shape and size of type for a whole document in seconds, here each letter must be individually selected, lined up one by one inside a wooden form or frame. And each line must go in backwards and upside down, to create a mirror image of the text.

"It does require a certain amount of patience," Purdy said. "But also creativity. Over the centuries, thousands of different typefaces were developed and it's the mark of a good printer to know how to combine those fonts for the best possible effect."

"But you get a lot of satisfaction when you see your work set in black and white."

Purdy, a retired human resources consultant, worked in the newspaper business for 45 years. His interest in antiquarian printing began as a hobby while he was at The Toronto Star. "I started acquiring things, a lot of them from major newspapers throwing out their old equipment."

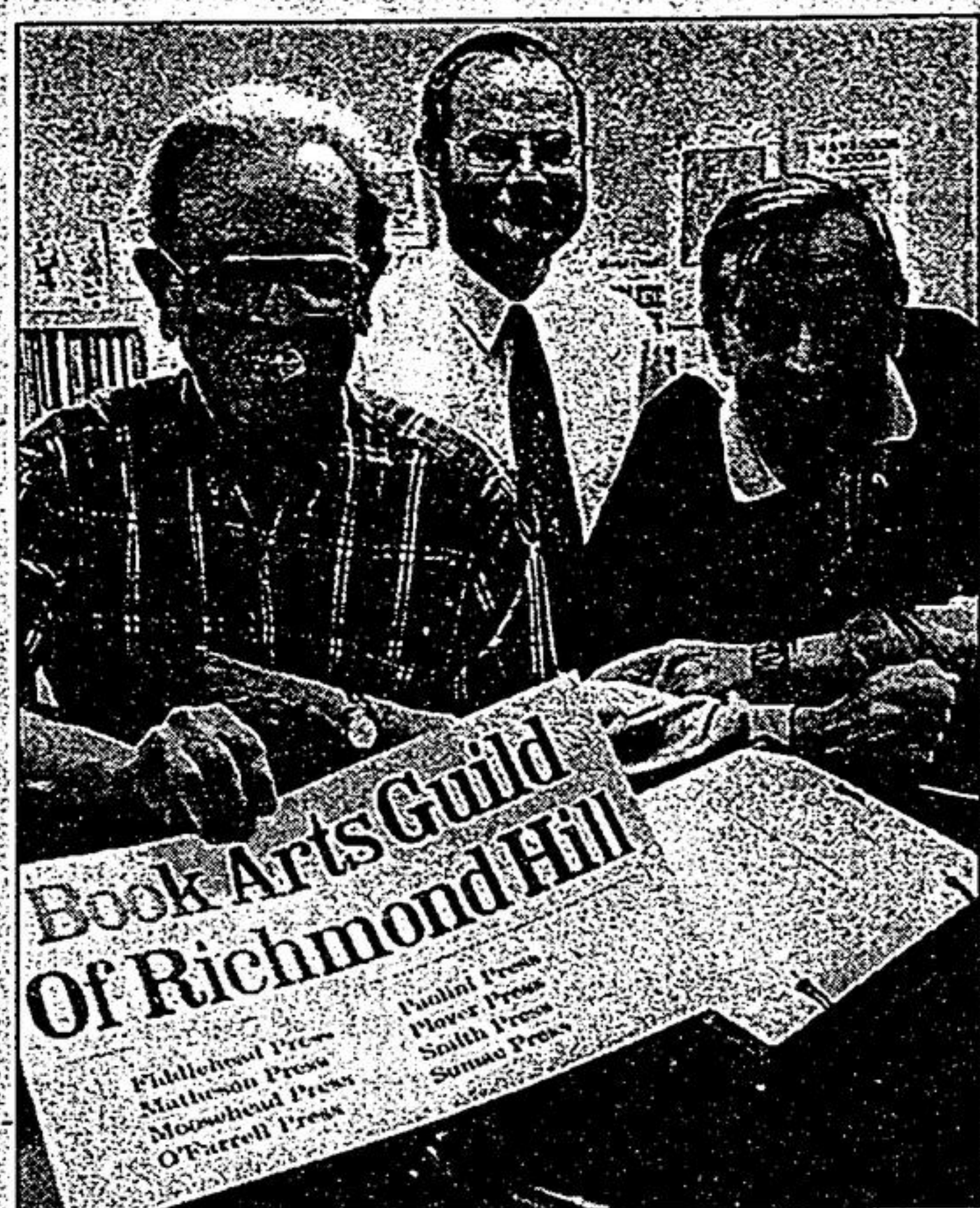
With his collection, he founded his own shop, the Fiddlehead Press, and, after a while, began giving lessons in hand-operated printing.

Two years ago, he and some of his students formed the Book Arts Guild, the only organization in Canada, according to Purdy, devoted to antiquarian printing.

One of their main productions is chap books, small pamphlet-like books whose subjects have ranged from poetry to the Alberta Badlands. But members can work on whatever they like, whether that's simple things such as tickets or business cards to the most ornate posters.

"It's a lot of fun," says retired electrical engineer Bill Smith, who creates his own woodcuts. Using thick sheets of linoleum attached to wood blocks, he can carve out an illustration in a few hours.

"When you look at typesetting, there's wonderful history behind it," he said. "In Germany, for instance, it wasn't until the 1930s that they stopped



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Donn Purdy (left), Greg Patterson and Stewart O'Farrell of the Book Arts Guild of Richmond Hill print books and posters the old-fashioned way, with a hand press.

producing books in what was called blackface, which looked like old English. But the Amish still use German Bibles, some of them going back a couple hundred years, very ornate and difficult to read," he said.

The guild's membership, now up to 10, includes several librarians, a retired army officer, a secretary, a teacher and a graphic artist. For some, it's strictly a hobby. But others, such as Greg Patterson, who creates web pages for the Richmond Hill Central Library, find it useful in their day-to-day jobs.

"The high-tech part of it, how you put letters on a page, is still very much based on the principles of letterpress," he said.

"But when you have computer programs that do everything for you, you really don't realize what's going on, in terms of the principles you should be applying."

With letterpress, though, Patterson says, you have to make all the decisions yourself.

"When you take these principles and apply them to the high technology stuff, then you gain a better understanding of how things should be and your work gets better," he said.

The guild shows its wares to the public once a year at Wayzgoose 2000, an annual exhibit at the Grimsby Public Art Gallery. This year, the one-day event, celebrating Johannes Gutenberg: The Man of the Millennium, attracted about 2,000 people.

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