

# Old tools and 59 years of skill bring treasured books back to life

BY KIRK BOXLEITNER  
KBOX@PTLEADER.COM

This summer saw Port Ludlow’s David Myhre mark 59 years in the bookbinding business.

Myhre runs his own business, Duckabush Book Bindery, out of his home, and has been doing business in Jefferson County since 1978, although the business is still named after his previous home in the Duckabush Valley.

“I moved house in 2000,” said Myhre, who started his hand-bookbinding apprenticeship in 1967, at a trade bindery in Seattle. “But I started my own business in an old logging cookhouse that was built in 1915. To this day, many of my clients say that I work in a museum. It smells old,” he inhaled, savoring the scent of aged paper that permeates his work studio, a short walk from his house near Port Ludlow.

Myhre served two consecutive four-year apprenticeships in Seattle, before he tired of working under what he considered “sweatshop” conditions, and moved out of the big city to start his own business in

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DAVID MYHRE  
OWNER, DUCKABUSH BOOK BINDERY

more rural environs.

But Myhre nonetheless believes the bookbinding trade was probably always in his blood, as a hands-on builder since childhood, much like his father and grandfather.

“I enjoyed making models as a kid, and paying attention to precise details,” said Myhre, who acknowledged that apprenticing as part of a union also precluded him from selective service.

While his father



David Myhre demonstrates the Gane Bros. gooseneck hot-stamping machine in his bookbinding studio in Port Ludlow. *Leader photos by Kirk Boxleitner*

worked as a machine operator, Myhre found that the prospect of “setting up and feeding a machine didn’t appeal to me,” whereas the work of bookbinding by hand has offered Myhre unique experiences and opportunities with each job.

Myhre likes learning, so getting to read the books he binds is always a treat, and he doesn’t like turning down a challenge.

“I like brainstorming ideas, and figuring out how to fit everything together,” said Myhre, who has to factor in considerations ranging from the mechanical to the chemical, in how he assembles his materials.

For years, binding legal documents was Myhre’s bread and butter, with an unexpected peak emerging during the “dot-com boom” of the 1990s, but the 21st century saw that business largely dry up, as most of those customers went exclusively digital.

Duckabush Book Bindery remains in business, even as Myhre and his wife, whom he met on Bainbridge Island more than 50 years ago, have kept active with other work as well, which has included a former landscaping stint and a current run of yoga for her, and a 1983-to-2000 stint of fire service for him.

Myhre credited a 2011 article in the Seattle Times with



Myhre’s metal typefaces date back a century or more.

bolstering another aspect of his bookbinding business that’s become one of his most reliable staples to this day, which is restoring family Bibles.

Myhre estimated that he’s been contacted to restore thousands of Bibles since then, whose value to their owners owes almost entirely to their families’ ties to those books.

“These were Bibles that their ancestors wrote in, that their great-grandparents wrote parts of their families’ histories in,” Myhre said. “Any monetary value they might hold is secondary at best. I love to see people’s reactions when I present them with their restored books. I make sure everyone leaves my shop with a smile.”

In case anyone might have

a Bible or any other aged book that they hold out hope of having restored, Myhre warned against storing it in a plastic bag, since that can promote mold growth.

“Also store it at a consistent temperature, out of direct sunlight,” Myhre said. “Ultraviolet rays will wreck old leather, and varying hot and cold temperatures, especially with fluctuations in the air’s moisture levels, will shorten the life of both leather and paper.”

Even as Myhre lamented how improper bookbinding often employs incorrect adhesives, whose “glue turns to powder,” he also acknowledged that such errors “help keep me in business.”

Myhre added, “Most modern

books are basically paperbacks with hardcovers put on them. Proper processes have been left behind by economics. I learned standards of hand-bookbinding that were set back in the 1700s, from hard-assed Scandinavians who never compromised on anything.”

Myhre’s historic restorations include a series of reference volumes on birds from the early to mid-20th century, a 1913 set of Encyclopedia Britannica volumes, and one of the first dictionaries by Samuel Johnson in the 1750s, but he’s also currently binding together a series of Seattle Symphony programs into a set of volumes.

Myhre not only shares many of his customers’ affinity for old things, but also relies on an antique inventory he’s collected over the years and decades, including cabinets filled with metal typefaces dating back a century or more, that he’s bought online and through auctions.

“I do work with an engraver, who can turn camera-ready artwork into printable images,” Myhre said. “But most of my equipment predates the 1900s. They don’t even make my stamping machine anymore.”

Myhre grew effusive as he reflected on how often he’s been able to share his enthusiasm for such time-honored practices with fellow “nerds” for bookbinding, both among his customers and his peers in the profession.

“We’re all nerdy people,” Myhre laughed. “When people have a passion for something, they can’t help but get excited about it, which is an admirable quality. People care enough about these old books to come into my shop and pay me to fix them. They could just buy new books, since most of them are cheap enough, and it’d be more practical, but these specific books are personal to them.”

He added, “Sometimes, people say, ‘I bet you know everything about bookbinding,’ but that’s not true. I talk constantly with other bookbinders. I don’t need to feel right, or to think I know everything. I’m fascinated to see and hear about other people’s work, because I want to learn from them, to do the best job that I can do.”



Myhre considers this 1913 set of Encyclopedia Britannica volumes to be among “the biggest and most interesting projects that I have worked on.” *Photo by David Myhre*

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