

Saint Paul Highland Villager, March 12, 2008

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12, 2008

VILLAGE



Expert bookbinder Steve Prokop works in his shop as seen through his 19th-century guillotine paper cutter. PHOTOS BY ANNE BRANDRUD

Passion for preservation

When it comes to restoring old books, Steve Prokop has everything covered

BY BILL STIEGER

Steve Prokop has had a passion for old books for as far back as he can remember. "I loved the actual books as much as I did the stories that were in them," said the lifelong St. Paulite. "I've rummaged around in bookstores ever since I was a kid."

Many of the old books that Prokop has collected were in less-than-mint condition, and his desire to restore and preserve his book collection eventually led him to his avocation. After reading up on book restoration, Prokop began his apprenticeship. "I'm pretty much self-taught at book restoration," he said. "I've learned a lot on my own since I began in 1964."

Prokop, a semi-retired Hennepin County employment counselor, opened his book restoration shop, Bookbinding by Steve, in the basement of his Highland Park home in 2002. He has had no shortage of business ever since. "I advertise in the phone book and some newspapers," he said. "I have a website, too (www.specialbindings.com). But I find most of my customers through word-of-mouth."

Prokop's is an uncommon trade; he knows of only about half a dozen book restorers besides himself. "The Minnesota Historical Society keeps most of them busy," he said.

A large portion of the books he restores are family Bibles. "They're the books most families find valuable," he said. "Restoring family Bibles makes up about half of my business. The oldest one I restored was a Swedish Bible that dated back to 1727."

Vida Magnusson, with husband Norm in tow, arrived at Prokop's shop on a recent morning with a well-thumbed, leather-bound copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*. The book belonged to her late father, who had been a Lutheran missionary in Africa. Prokop carefully examined the tattered book, which was printed in London in 1926, remarking on the quality of its calfskin cover and its marbled endpapers. The inside book cover was filled with stampings from the various churches her father had visited. There were personal notes written into its pages, along with drawings of dugout canoes and straw-thatched huts.

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"This book has spent decades on three continents," Magnusson said. "It's about time we got it restored."

Prices for a Prokop's restoration work can run anywhere from \$50 to \$200, depending on the condition of the book and the time and material needed to repair it.

"Sometimes, I'll get books that the owner had previously tried to repair," Prokop said. "Some people will try to hold together an old book with duct tape or masking tape, which can be disastrous. Those bad attempts at repairs can make restoration more difficult and expensive. Heat and moisture are a book's natural enemies, but acids from non-archival tapes and glues can worsen the damage."

Prokop said the art of bookbinding and restoration consists of two parts: structural integrity and appearance. Structural integrity refers to the condition of the binding, and appearance refers to the book's cover, whether leather or cloth, stamped or embossed.

"The customer has a lot of choices in the restoration that can affect the price," he said.



Old, brittle glue must be removed from the spine of a book before a new cover is applied.

"They can choose various kinds of leather, leather imitations or book cloth. The most expensive restoration I've done cost the owner about \$1,800. It was a family prayer book from 1911. The book had a lot of water damage, and it took a lot of time to restore. The leather was hard to find a match for, but that book was an exception."

According to Prokop, much of the tedium in book restoration lies in removing the old glue that binds the cover. "You've got to make sure you get every last bit of glue out of there," he said. "The trick is to get it all without cutting the threads that hold the pages together. Then I redo the binding with acid-free glue and add a new backing."

In addition to book restoration, Prokop sells personalized wedding ceremony books and photo albums, and a custom line of journals and notebooks. He also can assist people who want to have their book published in short press runs.

"A while ago I was commissioned to restore some Ojibwa prayer books and hymnals from 1910," he said. "While I had the books apart, I reformatted them for printing and put together 100 hand-bound new editions. I take a lot of satisfaction from that kind of work."



Prokop has rolls of book cloth to choose from, including rayon, heavier buckram and Japanese raw silk.