

NOTES ON PROVE- NANCE; OR, TOM ROSS'S TOOTH

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PHOTOS BY DARREN JAMES

1 Massillion, Ohio. Pop. 31,325. Lost on my way to visit Mrs Georgia Ross, I stop in at a random haberdashery store downtown to ask directions. Discover that the woman behind the counter went to high school with Mrs Ross, possibly forty-five years ago. Mrs Ross's living room is white; white carpet, white couch. Awkward in not-so-clean work boots, I sit forward on my seat as we sip iced tea. Mrs Ross offers homemade cookies. There is a photograph of Tom Ross on a side table.

A narrow passage leads down to the basement. This was Tom's space: an 8 x 12 Chandler & Price platen press, a 26" cutter, boxes of yellowing envelopes, tied-up type, tackle boxes full of spacing. Dirt encrusts everything. We negotiate over the cutter, which will need to be lifted up and out the narrow staircase in parts. I buy the Kelsey Excelsior—a toy press—out of sentiment, not need. Most else, Mrs Ross is anxious to be rid of for free: the highly coveted 1923 *American Type Founders Specimen Book and Catalogue*; a glass-fronted eraser display case; a box of miscellanea: old-style quoins, promotional flyers for long-gone printing suppliers. She keeps an ink cabinet for a grandson, away at the time in the service, thinking he may or may not be interested.

There is more than one box of Megill gauge pins. The boxes are lovely, the pins, in my opinion, near useless. In one, I find a wadded-up tissue. Inside, a yellowed old molar, filled more than once, carefully wrapped up and stuffed away. Was he busy

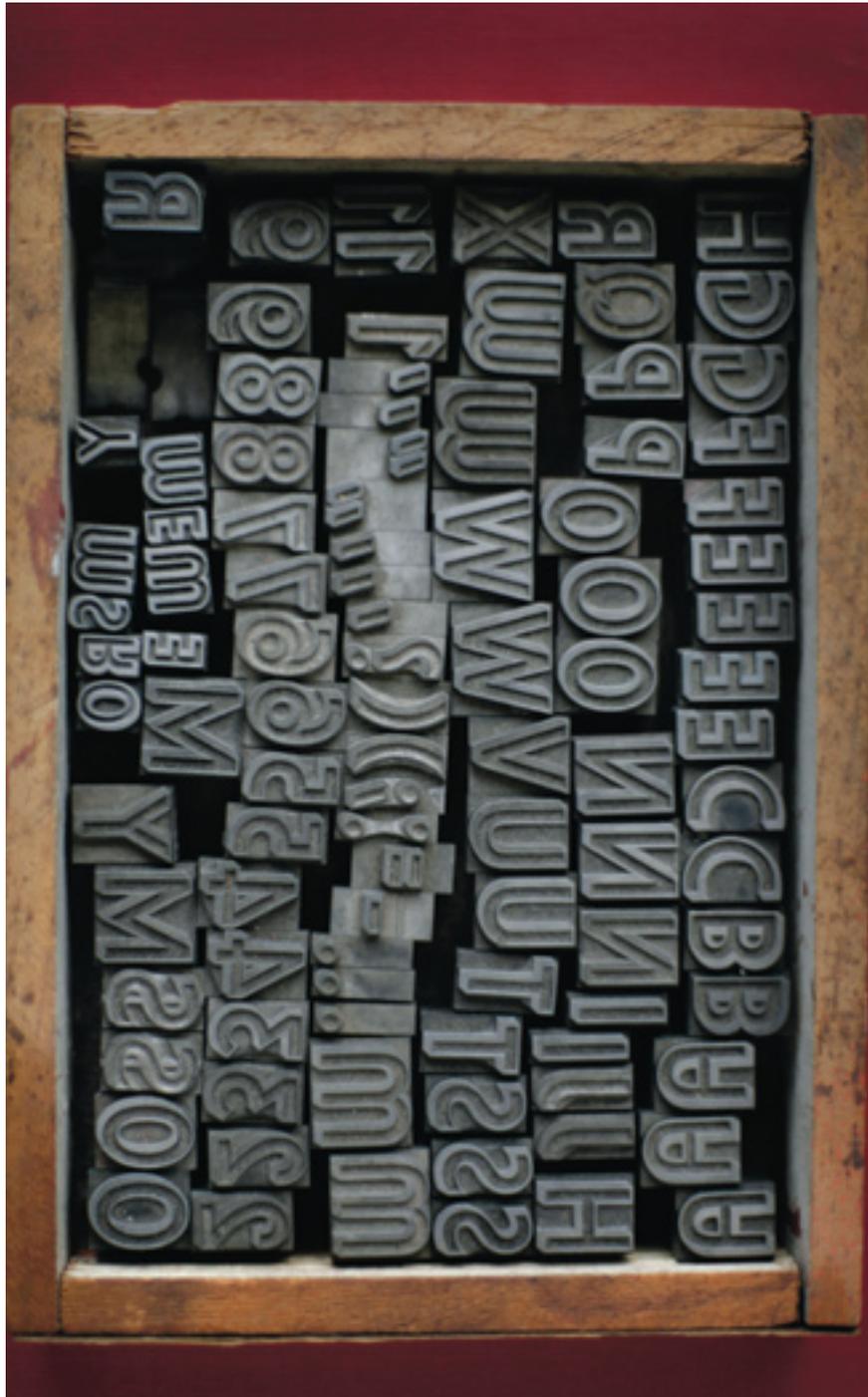
downstairs, printing on his own time after work, after dinner? The tooth, source of much bother, finally wrenches completely free, but Tom's downstairs, and a quick swill of coffee easily washes away the taste of blood in his mouth. No need to go upstairs. He wraps it up, stuffs it in a little blue box, gets back to the press.



2. When I remember my time fossicking for letterpress equipment in the Midwest, mostly, I remember being cold. In Indianapolis, on a Thanksgiving weekend one November, I visited Dave Churchman's warehouse, known as the Boutique de Junque. Dave's place is cold. A large wood stove heated a disappointingly narrow radius in one room; Dave's wife Charlene sat close to it. My memory is of a warren of rooms but it's possible that the Boutique de Junque might be a single span broken into smaller room-like spaces by towering walls of type cabinets and cases. It is the kind of place in which a GPS could come in handy.

I bought my font of Kingspor Bros Orplid here in 30 & 48 point. Designed by Hans Bohn in 1929, Orplid is a distinct display face with a 3D shadow, hardly an all-rounder. After employing it on a calling card for my friend Emily, I sent Dave a note with one of the cards. He wrote back that he was pleased to receive it as he had not previously believed it possible to use Orplid even halfway decently. He told me I'd proved him wrong.

3. Best you get down here ASAP, Roy Lang Jnr advised. Stone Printing Co. was the last printing plant in downtown Cleveland; on the sixth floor of a building on the west side,



down near the Flats. Most companies moved to the suburbs long ago, or, at the very least, out of the heart of downtown. Stone's was the last. Roy's guys were shifting an enormous four-colour offset press, but he'd noticed some bits and pieces about that he thought would be of interest, and the boss didn't mind me poking about. There was a miterer, used to cut mitred corners into cast rule for borders and forms. There was a room filled with cans of dried-out ink, and some abandoned powder-coated steel flat files. There was a complete illustrated *Webster's Dictionary* (second edition) with only its cover slightly adrift; a glass glue bottle with screw cap and spout; some cast-iron jogging wedges, perfect for weights; and a replacement blade for a Hammond Trim-O-Saw, a machine I didn't own but hoped I might one day.



There was a large room that might have been partitioned once: desks and filing cabinets floated about unmoored. The filing cabinets were as valuable to me as recovered sunken treasure: file after file of promotional material for type foundries, ink companies, paper mills, machinery manufacturers and a manual for the Trim-O-Saw. I came to realise that Stone had acquired at least one other business over time: the W.H. Kull Co. of 1278 West 9th Street, and that Cleveland was rich with printing-supply houses with names like Art Roth and the venerable-sounding Caxton. Here were the paper records of an era of sales calls, of follow-up letters on embossed letterhead, of hand-signed Christmas cards. In a manual for the Universal Mono-Tabular Broach, the company writes that '... the installation of this equipment in your plant, we trust, will be

the beginning of a very pleasant business relationship between us. May it grow closer as the years pass.' Like an archaeologist or a thief, I took anything vaguely interesting.

This was what remained. The company would continue on, but none of this was required any more. These names typed onto envelopes: these people were dead. These labour-saving devices: machines long obsolete. In a desk drawer, I found a pair of reading glasses, ketchup packets and, neatly folded, the front page of the *Plain Dealer*, 12 September 2001: the twin towers of the World Trade Center in flames.

4. Harry D. Bubb, 7197 Valley View Road, Hudson, Ohio. It was once the pleasant lot of the hobby printer to produce his own custom stationery, and I am in possession of quite a few galleys of standing type in which names and addresses are set in metal type and tied securely with printer's string. Harry Bubb's is one. Bubb was a member of the Rowfant Club, a private, men's-only bibliophile club in Cleveland. Housed in the oldest continually occupied house in the city, the club is secretive about its activities. In 2000, a member of the club contacted me about a press and printing equipment in the basement. On my first visit, I entered through the back door into the kitchen. Staff were preparing lunch. In the basement, an ancient club member was typing catalogue records on a manual typewriter. In a far corner there was an 8 x 12 Chandler & Price Platen, a non-motorised Vandercook SP-15, a double steel type cabinet and a single wooden standing frame. It was all mine for the taking, bar the Vandercook and a complete run of Stephenson & Blake-cast Caslon. Thus began months of negotiations, which ended badly, but for two things: Harry Bubb's double-wide steel cabinet and the chance to see inside the house.

It was much as you'd imagine any grand Victorian house, all brocade and burnished wood, but with more books than you'd normally encounter and a stuffed woodchuck on the mantel. On second thoughts, perhaps the taxidermy shouldn't have been so unexpected, but it surprised me, as did the hundreds of candlesticks about the place. The woodchuck, stuffed in an attacking rampant position, is referred to by Rowfant members by its classical name—*Arctomys Monax*—and is the club's mascot and symbol. Every Rowfant member has his own candlestick and uses it to reserve his place at the dinner table.

Harry Bubb's address forme is set in a serif face; however, much of the type in his double cabinet is sans serif mid-century-style advertising faces: Venus Extended, Spartan Black, Hellenic Wide. There are a couple of cases of wood type and a font of 96 pt Century Schoolbook. There is a perpetual calendar, a two-colour Christmas border of holly leaves and berries and a font of arrows with sans serif numerals inside. In addition, there is a case of copper photoengravings, and small cuts featuring candlesticks. The engravings are of groups of men outside a handsome house, men on a picnic, and of



lavishly furnished nineteenth-century rooms. In one, there is a stuffed woodchuck on the mantel.

The shelves in the library at the Rowfant Club are filled with candlesticks topped with snuffers. Presumably, somewhere among them is Harry Bubb's, moved into the library when he died. He'd no longer be needing it to mark his place at the table.

5. For a brief moment in the nineteenth century, hand-setting type was a wildly popular sport; its most brilliant exponents—known as Swifts—were capable of amazing feats of speed and accuracy: on 19 February 1870, George Arensberg, 'The Velocipede', set 2064 ems of solid minion type in a single hour in an era in which 700 ems was considered average. This peculiar interlude was part unconscious celebration of the primacy of the human hand, part exuberant defiance in face of encroaching automation. It is perhaps the true mark of a craftsman that he values and is protective of his tools, and in the printing office, no other tool engenders this protective impulse so much as that held by the compositor towards his composing stick.

The composing stick, made up of bed, rail, knee and clamp, is a true extension of the human hand, allowing individual letters of type to be held in place and to measure as the compositor forms words, sentences, paragraphs. Nineteenth-century printing giant Theodore Low De Vinne, known for his advances in productivity and cost efficiency, conceded that 'Expert compositors own their own sticks and rules, and will use no other. They get used to their size, weight and feeling, and say that they can do more work with them than with other sticks and rules apparently as good.' This loyalty is in the pursuit of



craft, an implicit partnership between man and stick in service of the work.

Which is why it's so galling that none of my sticks have matching knees, or that the micrometer ('probably the greatest single advance in stick history') seems faulty, or that my favourite stick was inadvertently left behind in Cleveland. A good craftsman never lends nor blames her tools, but it's impossible for me not to look longingly at page 943 of the 1923 *ATF Specimen Book and Catalogue*, wishing I could order a stick brand-new.

Instead, I make do with a Rouse Standard Job Stick (serial number E5522.) The sound of type dropping into the stick is of rhythmic, small, quiet clicks; there is pleasure in spacing out a line evenly, thinking about the space between a final w and a beginning v. My hand reaches for a letter, feels for the nick, places it next to the letter that came before. My fingers know the difference between 10 and 12 point, the thickness of a brass as compared to a copper. The stick lies in my palm, my thumb resting on the lines as they grow. I am lucky in this instance to be right-handed; left-handed sticks being as elusive as unicorns. Sometimes, at this speed, I'll see something in my writing that I want to change. Printers call this 'writing in the stick'.

I have another favourite stick, though it remains ornamental. A Buckeye Stick, made by Chandler & Price and named after Ohio's state tree, it was a gift from Eric May when I first established Idlewild Press in Cleveland in 2000. (It sits on display next to Eric's old Ohio licence plate—LTRPRES.) Noel Riefel gave me my copy of Martin K. Speckter's *Disquisition on the Composing Stick* (The Typophiles, Inc., New York, 1971.) In it, Speckter writes that the relationship between a printer and his composing stick is 'an intimacy transcending that of almost any other graphic arts implement. The printer's press, no matter how small, is too large, too heavy, too ponderous to evoke personal sentiment. Pieces of type, although they may be admired for the beauty of their forms and the perfection with which they perform their intended functions, exist in too huge abundance to be loved; one may derive pleasure from the beach, but who can cherish each grain of sand?'

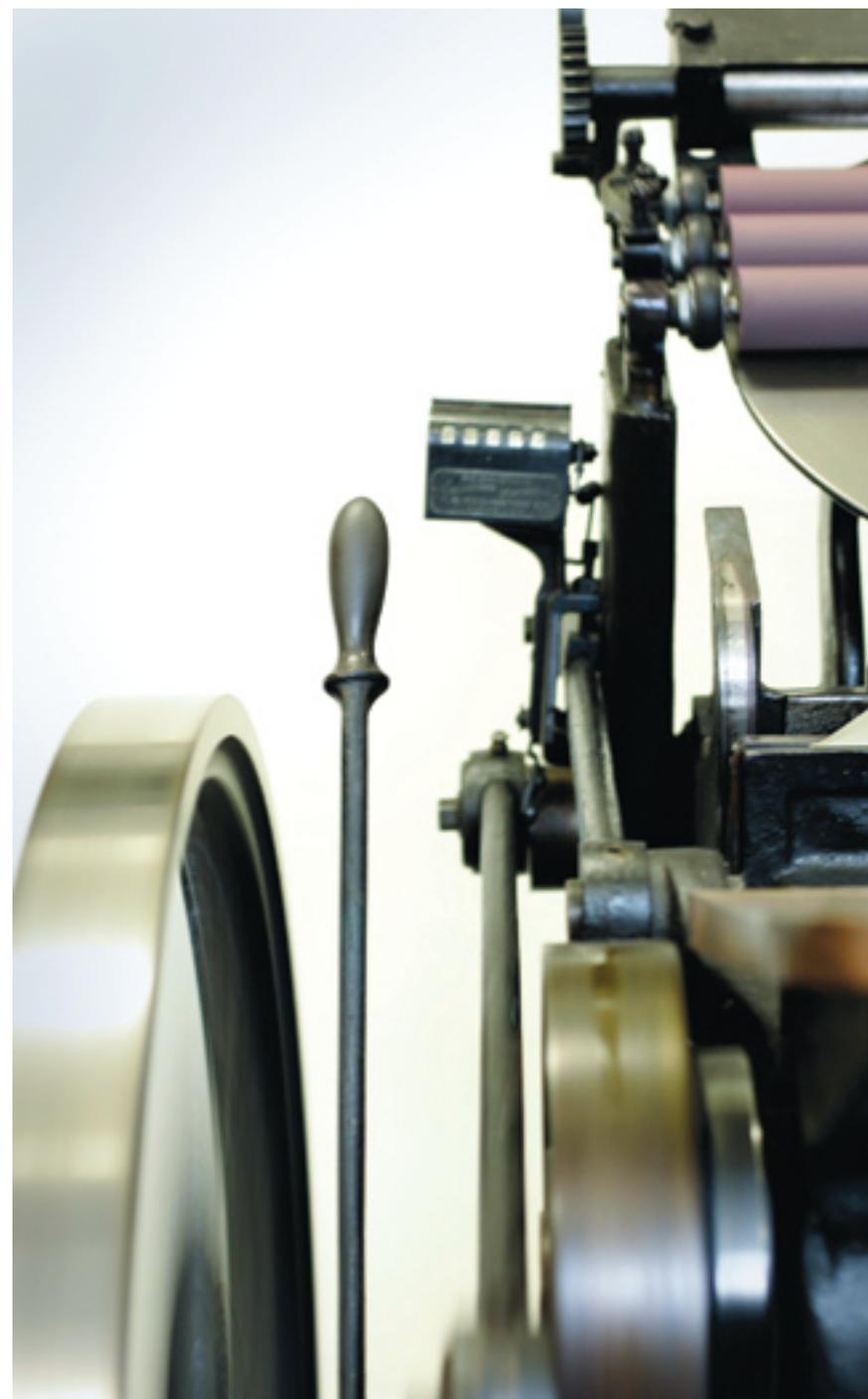
6. Sometime soon after it came into my possession, I asked Fritz Klinke to check the Vandercook archives for my press's original-owner record. An SP-15, serial no. 27441, it was shipped on 9 February 1968 to the Evangel Press in Nappanee, Indiana. The Vandercook was always a proof press, and presses of this era were used primarily to produce camera-ready art for offset. As such, they're not usually as bashed around as production presses and allow the small press printer to produce precise, albeit slow, work. My copy of the original index card notes optional equipment shipped with the machine: Type 'A' Form Rollers; Power Ink Distribution and Automatic Washup; Special .968' Bed with Galley Thickness Bed Plate; Curved Plastic Cover for Inking System; Steel

Paper Cabinet; and a Positive Lockup Bar. The press was inspected by J. Hlavin and stamped with his name.



I bought the press from Asa Peavy, my friend and one-time boss in San Francisco. He was either upgrading to a table-top Albion and a German-built Asburn, or throwing in the towel, I can't remember which. He is a talented, though ambivalent, printer. I arranged to ship the press to Cleveland, Ohio, by road, not realising at the time that it would pass right by its original home in Nappanee, a tiny town in northern Indiana, about halfway between Chicago and Cleveland. Later, I'd ship it by rail to Los Angeles and by freighter to Melbourne, Australia. The Evangel Press still exists and, as the name suggests, prints Christian texts for the Evangelical, Wesleyan and Anabaptist traditions.

When I bought my Chandler & Price 10 x 15 New Series Platen for \$500 from Roy Lang Snr it was coated in grime: the good, greasy kind. With almost no rust, its ink disk shiny and unpitted, it took hours of scrubbing with a toothbrush to reveal the name Chandler & Price on the plate between the roller frames, longer still before I could read the serial number engraved onto the bed. No. C68046, built in 1925 no more than a mile from my studio at West 72nd and St Clair. The press still has its ink fountain and counter, and a Kimble motor, most likely original to the press. There was a tympan sheet still held tight under the bails, imprinted with the name and address of a local print shop. Curious, I look up the name in the yellow pages: it still exists. When I call, the man answering says, yes, the press had belonged to his father. He was neither surprised or



interested in my call. I cut the address from the tympan, stored it safely, then lost it. I don't remember the name.

Uncrated, the Chandler & Price weighs 500 kilos. The Nicholas Building, also built in 1925, has a relatively small goods lift accessible off Flinders Lane. The lift is rated to 680 kilos. Arriving early on the day of the move, we find the lane blocked by a truck sucking out waste oil from the Kentucky Fried Chicken shop. The smell is nauseating; overpowering. I say to Darren, one of my moving blokes, boy, that must be the worst job ever, and he says, no, it's not. You plug it in and go get a coffee and the paper.

Peter Horne, the boss, assures me that there won't be much buggerisation, and there isn't, until the last crate of the day. It makes it into the lift with a little clearance either side and Darren squeezed in front. This is our mistake. Darren is not a small man, perhaps 150 kilos. Perhaps had it not been the last crate of the day, I might have made the calculation in time, but didn't. It's subtle; a sudden jerk, then halt. Nothing. The grills are opened, slammed shut, the lever tried again. Nothing. The lift is broken: 500 kilos of press and 150 kilos of person inside.

7. In the 1920s, nearly a quarter of all commercial printing in the United States was done in New York. Businesses that had previously congregated in lower Manhattan moved north to be closer to the newly opened Holland Tunnel, dominating Hudson and Varick streets. The typesetters and photoengravers moved further north still, into the Flatiron District. In the 1990s, evidence of this population was still visible in signage painted on upper-level windowpanes, and small cards beside buzzers. It was as if progress at street level happened at a much faster rate than that happening on the upper floors. Looking up, it might be 1925; straight ahead, most definitely 1996.

Esquire Photoengraving was at 4 West 22nd Street. The building's lobby was unremarkable, the lift standard Otis-built. But when it opened onto the third floor, you were in a different world, one that had shrunk to a few rooms, now strangely empty. I was shy, and new to printing, and never got to know any of the three elderly men who worked there, or what exactly they did. I'd drop off art to be made into type-high magnesium plates, and would come back days, maybe a week later to pick up the completed items. At the time, I knew I was seeing something rare. I wished I had the courage to ask if I could take photographs, but didn't. Instead, I took a friend with me one time so that she could see it for herself, and so I'd have a witness, if I ever needed to corroborate my memory.

The rooms, at least the ones I saw, bare but for a table in the front room around which the men sat, and a proof press out the back. I remember it being dark inside; the space might have been illuminated by bare bulbs. The plates, when delivered, were wrapped in newspaper; the proofs were sloppy and smudged. But it was the walls that



were remarkable: completely papered, *découpage*-style, with girlie pictures, none all that recent. Time, and cheap paper, had faded many but they weren't mute: cartoon-style speech bubbles were carefully cut out and glued to the images so that the girls were talking to each other, to the three old guys, to us. I wish I could remember what they were saying, but even at the time, most of it was incomprehensible to anyone without thirty years tenure in the place: all in-jokes and innuendo. What remains in memory is a work of art, a smutty monument to friendship, and a hell of a lot of free time on the job. Sometime in the mid-2000's, I went back to see if Esquire was still there. It was a hairdressing salon. The lift opened onto a bright, shiny space, all mirrors and polished floors. Esquire Photoengraving was gone.