

# The Utah Bookbindery

By Randy Silverman

**B**ookbinders have historically challenged the abnormally-long hours required to generate a profit within their craft. A general strike among London bookbinders in 1786, for example, was organized to reduce the workday from 14 to 12 hours and bring bookbinding into line with comparable trades. The strike's instigators received two years imprisonment for their activities, but their tenacity paid off. By the time their incarceration ended, most London binderies had generally conceded to working a 13-hour work day.

Today, according to Sally Grauer, Executive Director of the Library Binding Institute in Edina, Minnesota, American library binders typically work a five-day, 40-hour week with the option in some cases to work an additional half-day Saturday. Health benefits are common, but dental and retirement plans are nearly nonexistent. A library bindery that takes umbrage with these norms is Utah Bookbindery, a small independent library bindery located in Salt Lake City.

Established in 1952 by Glen Hancock and four partners, Utah Bookbindery is now owned in equal partnership by Hancock's three sons Don, Mark, and Kevin. Rumored to have been born in the bindery, President Mark Hancock handles public relations for the firm and, though a warm and friendly spokesman, is no stranger to hard work. Starting in the business full-time at the completion of high school, Hancock's normal work week in 1974 consisted of five 10-hour weekdays and five hours on Saturday. Influenced by a group study-exchange program sponsored by Rotary International that took him to the Netherlands for six weeks in 1991, Hancock found Dutch binders "very committed to their jobs, but equally fond of their free time." Working 32 hours per week on average and taking many more vacations than Americans, the experience

left him wondering just what the possibilities were back in Utah.

Hancock began analyzing the bindery's work flow, conducting time studies reminiscent of Frederick W. Taylor, the late 19th-century founder of Scientific Management. With their business firmly rooted in a cycle of reoccurring annual and semi-annual contracts with the largest libraries in the region, Hancock began to notice that the actual number of books in

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each shipment received from his customers could fluctuate as much as 30%-40% per week. He also discovered that "it was taking us 55 hours a week to get the work finished, whether we had 1,500 or 2,000 volumes in the shop. The explanation seemed to be that consciously or unconsciously, we were stretching out our tasks to fill the available time. The staff didn't want to have their wages cut, so they were 'dogging it' when things were slow. But when things got really busy, everybody kicked in and could still produce the work on time."

This information crystallized into a

management plan Hancock developed and set out for his brothers' consideration. "Bottom line," he reasoned, "we need to generate 'X' number of dollars per week to support the business. It really doesn't matter how long it takes, so let's just pay the staff for doing the work. If they can get the job done early, we'll call it a week!" A period of deliberation ensued with some reticence to changing an already-successful operation. But in time, the idea prevailed, and Hancock introduced the concept to the staff. "We'll begin our work week each Monday because most of our clients are on weekly schedules," Hancock told the line employees, "and estimate where each job needs to be in the binding process by the week's end. When that point is reached, whether it's Thursday afternoon or Friday morning, that signals the end of the week."

Human nature being what it is, this new concept was greeted with some resistance, and like any utopian vision, the plan needed distillation in reality's workshop. After all, if the system rewarded shortcuts and quality fell off, customer satisfaction would suffer. "So, we came up with a pay scale," explains Hancock, "that begins by paying people a fixed hourly rate for their time. In addition, we all share a weekly bonus pool that fluctuates in relation to a number of variables, including the actual profits realized for the week." In a bad week, this would translate into a slim paycheck, making the company's fortunes everyone's personal concern. On the other hand, if an employee missed a day of work, his wages were diverted into the bonus pool, rewarding everyone for taking up his slack. "What it really boils down to in practice," continues Hancock, "is that we experience peaks and valleys, but on the average, make as much as we did before in four rather than five days, and get a bonus during weeks of heavy work."

Along with this novel approach to managing its internal operation, Utah

## The Utah Bookbindery (Continued)

Bookbindery has carefully defined its niche within the library community it services. It does no edition binding for publishers, nor will it shortcut the customer by eliminating rounding and backing, despite industry trends and underpricing by competitors. The bindery focuses on a clearly-defined set of durable, well crafted products.

Maintaining a healthy profit margin in the face of steadily increasing material costs (especially noticeable in paper products such as endpapers and binders board this year) and increased competition from outside the state, Utah Bookbindery achieves its efficiency through team work. Honing their output to 400-500 books per day with a staff of twelve (half the number employed twenty years ago), the bindery picks up and delivers to each of its accounts every seven days, an unprecedented accomplishment within an industry that, again according to Sally Grauer, averages three-to-four week turnarounds nationally.

Batching large numbers of similar materials, Utah Bookbindery relies predominantly on four methods of leaf attachment. Machine oversewing, once the industry standard, is now seldom used except for large or heavy books with ample gutter margins that are printed on coated stock. Double-fan adhesive binding, relying on the long-term strength and flexibility of polyvinyl acetate adhesives, has come to dominate 80% of their workload during the past ten years. Recasing, a technique for retaining the book's original spine folds and sewing structure, requires a significant amount of hand work, as does the last process, sewing through the fold by hand. Both of these techniques do not readily lend themselves to mass production and slow down the efficiency of the line. In response to this problem, Hancock hires one or two part-time employees to work out of their homes in a scenario reminiscent

of parts assemblers within the Japanese auto industry. Paid on a piecework basis, this small cottage-industry maintains a flexible work schedule, returning the prepared text blocks to the bindery when they are ready for new covers.

Improvements in efficiency are also gained through technological advances, including the bindery's new Flesher System III automated stamping machine. "With the old system, we had to hand-feed each

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sheet of cloth into the stamper," recalls Hancock, "pretty well occupying one person's attention full-time. With the System III, we just pre-cut the cloth to size, stack it in the tray 100 sheets at a time, load the computer file with stamping information, and the stamper does the rest. It picks up the different sizes of cloth, stamps them horizontally or vertically in different font sizes, mixes foil colors, and justifies the type. We just stand back and give it room!" Improvements such as this, while requiring a serious investment in capital, help the small organization remain responsive to client demands.

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the brothers' premise that the staff and management are equal in many regards; and not surprisingly, it seems to work. Most of the employees have been with the firm for a long time, and their diverse bookbinding skills reflect the years of practice. "It's more of a family than an employer-employee relationship," notes Hancock. "In fact, lot of them *are* family! With management and ownership so visible, working on the line with staff employees every day, it's hard to imagine everyone *not* benefiting from the business's success." In this approach to management, it is not surprising that the rewards for hard work and efficiency include health, dental, retirement, and vacation benefits on top of the four-day work schedule. "I've talked with other employers about the way we do things, even a competitor who was interested in buying us out at one point," observes Hancock, "and they've all let me know they think we must be out of our minds!"

Maybe. But their staff is committed, and 1,500-2,000 pieces of work displaying Utah Bookbindery's distinctive logo are delivered up for inspection once a week. You needn't bother searching the want ads if this prospect sounds interesting, though. Hiring is handled on a word-of-mouth basis, and turnover is slight. Nor are their customers looking for greener pastures. "Their work is first rate and their service, superior," states Janet Thomas, Bindery Preparation Supervisor at the University of Utah's Marriott Library and a 20-year customer. Hancock is pleased to have earned this level of respect, but it doesn't turn his head. "My philosophy's always been, if you can't take care of the customer, you won't be in business long." By all accounts, libraries in the Mountain Plains Region in need of a good binder have no reason to fear. **GAJ**

<sup>1</sup> Ester Potter. "The London Bookbinding Trade: From Craft to Industry," *The Library*, sixth series, 15/4(Dec. 1993), p. 263.

