



# THE BARD'S MUSEUM *IT'S NOT*

BY ADAM JARMAN



(Right) Charlie Palmer, standing on the far right, during 1950 dedication. (Far Right) Student using A & P Pilot hand press.



DON'T EXPECT VELVET ROPES. This museum isn't just for show.

The Shakespeare Press Museum, inconspicuously tucked down one of the campus's less-traveled corridors, is a collection of antique printing equipment that actively keeps alive the artful past of ink on paper.

Although managed by the Graphic Communication Department, it's a place without computers and state-of-the-art digital presses. Here, every letter of every word is hand selected, painstakingly placed and printed, much as it was in Gutenberg's time.

The museum is a repository for old – but not obsolete – equipment. It is a studio for students interested in antiquarian printing and a portal to a time when mass communication did not require electricity.

Museum faculty advisor Tom Goglio describes it as “a technical, cultural museum, a collection of industrial anthropology.” In keeping with Cal Poly's polytechnic commitment, he says, the museum links today's computerization with printing's manual ancestry. Many of today's methods, he explains, are “just glitzier applications of these old technologies.”

True, says Harvey Levenson, department head of the Graphic Communication Department, which is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year. “There is nothing more important for the students to understand than the industry's roots. It has evolved from the craft of yesteryear to the science of today.”

While most of the Graphic Communication Department's labs focus on the science of printing and publishing, the museum is about the craft. It contains dozens of pieces of Gold Rush-era equipment along with a vast holding of type

– individual letters cast in lead or carved out of wood.

Reflecting an international revival of printing as a handmade craft, the Friends of the Shakespeare Press Museum is a small but dedicated club that revels in the history of the presses. Through public tours, members share the historic importance of print and the technologies employed by our predecessors. In addition to their interpretive mission, the students and community groups use the presses to produce everything from holiday cards and invitations to small books. Sometimes the printing is done on paper made by hand right in the museum. “This is a working museum,” Goglio notes.

Students regularly use one of the museum's most legendary presses, which printed a San Francisco-area newspaper the day of the April 18, 1906, San Francisco earthquake and fire.

“It's the traditional way of doing things,” explains Carol Pan, student curator of the museum. She says work in the museum is about the process as much as the finished product. Toiling with and alongside equipment that has been in use for more than 100 years, she adds, is nothing short of amazing.

Much of the collection is extremely rare, points out **Mark Barbour (GrC '88)**, executive director and curator of the International Printing Museum near Los Angeles and a former student-curator of the Shakespeare Press Museum. Some pieces are among just three or four examples in the world, he says.

“From Gutenberg going forward, every major step in our civilization correlates to the advance of printing and communication,” Barbour says. “The Shakespeare Press Museum points to the importance of printing in our society.”

Nearly 20 years after he left Cal Poly, affection for the collection is still evident in his voice: “It's an absolutely fantastic gem.” □

## W H Y S H A K E S P E A R E ?

The museum began as a personal collection of presses amassed by Charlie Palmer, known to friends as “Shakespeare.” (Sorry, the Shakespeare Press Museum actually has nothing to do with the literary William.) Palmer was a former newspaperman who spent a great deal of time between the 1930s and 1960s collecting and restoring antique press machinery.

In the 1950s, Palmer began sending pieces to Cal Poly for permanent display. He died in 1964, and the museum officially opened on May 24, 1969 (See photo above.)

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