

*Urabec-
Hoffman
Paper Mill*

By Muir Dawson

THE STORY of the Urabec-Hoffman paper mill is an interesting one, and has not previously been told in its full and correct chronology. Now that John Urabec M.D. (1907-1992), and Richard Hoffman (1912-1989), Professor of Industrial Studies and Printing Management, are gone, it is time to put the facts together.

This is the story of two men in their fifties who set out to make paper by hand, an activity that should not be undertaken lightly by people of any age. Making paper by hand involves considerable physical labor, is a wet activity at times, requires a suitable place to work, a beater, a vat, moulds, felts, rags and pressing and drying equipment. Los Angeles in the 1960s was not the best place in the world to do all this, but this is the story of two men who collaborated to make a reality of their dreams which separately they could not have done it. Their aim was to make the best printing paper they could, not a variety of colors, weights or textures, but white, all rag paper of about 80 pound, with hand made texture and no use of chemicals. The bulk of their paper was white, but a small quantity of colorful blue paper was made from blue Brooks Brothers shirts.

Richard's experience with paper dated back to 1925, when he was in junior high school. It was an unsuccessful experiment, but was an indication of his interest. In 1961 began a five-year period of making paper at the lowest level possible, as an educational activity. Richard, by this time, was Professor of Industrial Studies at California State University Los Angeles. He equipped his classrooms with many graphic art processes to give his students in printing management first hand experience in such things as casting type, making of etchings, engravings, marbled paper, wood engraving, and the making of paper. "We used an electric drill with a two-foot rod on the end of which were welded two small cross pieces...much like the Osterizer kitchen beater. This was suspended into an oak whiskey barrel and after hours of running, we were able to get usable 'stuff' for forming sheets in our 9 x 12 inch homemade moulds."

their calculation "as long lasting" as paper made by the early paper makers which remains bright and strong after five hundred years. Paper making continued at Richard's house until 1988, about a year before Richard passed away. Their first watermark was a figure of an English Song Sparrow, but the one most used featured the letters UH in lower case italic joined letters. Special occasion watermarks were the Fust and Schoeffer shield for a meeting of the Los Angeles Club of Printing House Craftsman, a bucking bronco for the Westerners, a yuletide tree for the Urabec's Christmas cards and the bicentennial star and the dates 1776-1976 for a printing of the Declaration of Independence.

The most used of four moulds, according to Richard, was the 14" x 20". Margaret Urabec has a mould with an inside dimension of 13½" x 20 made by E. Amies, Maidstone. Another one, also in her possession, is a laid mould cut down from a larger one with an inside of deckle measurement of 12" x 13½".

In 1978, Richard estimated that he and John were making about 2000 sheets of paper a year by working thirty to forty half days together (and of course untold hours working separately). Making paper by hand was a challenge to these two men and a worthy goal in itself, but the real motivation behind all this hard work was to produce paper for printing. The printing, of course, was Richard's activity, but John learned to set type and took pleasure in assisting in the planning and production of many books, broadsides, invitations and keepsakes that were printed on Urabec-Hoffman paper. John's most ambitious printing project was in a short story of Thomas Hardy, "Old Mrs. Chundle." The colophon states "about fifty copies have been printed by Richard Hoffman and John Urabec on their all-rag paper..." The end papers are the blue paper mentioned previously. John had become interested in Thomas Hardy while in high school and went on to gather a fine collection of first editions which he eventually presented to the Occidental College Library.

What seemed like an impossible dream of making paper became a reality and enriched not only the lives of two men, out a wide circle of family and friends as well.

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16" x 18" in order to fit the vat.

John and Richard were fellow members of the Zamorano Club, and they had numerous occasions to discuss their mutually held ambitions of producing hand made paper. In the spring of 1968, Mel Kavin organized a series of speaking engagements in California for Henry Morris. This was his first visit to California and was the occasion for bringing about the collaboration between John Urabec and Richard Hoffman.

On August 12, 1968, Henry Morris spoke to a dinner meeting of the Rounce & Coffin Club. Later, the group went to the nearby campus of Cal State for a visit to Richard's Graphic Arts Department and a demonstration of the paper making operation Richard had developed. Richard invited John to attend as his guest, and it was at this time that John made his first sheet of paper. John told Richard that he had moulds, felts, a vat and rags, and a partnership developed that continued for close to twenty years. "Little did we realize what was ahead of us," says John in a tribute to Richard published in 1978. Many major problems had to be solved by trial and error and reading books. The two met regularly every Friday afternoon at Cal. State L.A. until Richard's retirement in 1978, when paper making continued at Richard's home in Van Nuys. In order to more fully develop their skills, they divided their labors. John worked in his garage to prepare the rags for beating. There was the boiling of the rags in an ancient wash tub, then cutting into two-inch squares. Richard was the vatman and John the coucher. Richard did the beating. The first pressing was done by using a hydraulic truck jack. John would take the damp sheets home for further pressing on a seven-foot bookbinder's standing press. The drying was done on a laundry rack.

This paper making collaboration between a book collector and a printer was bound to produce a printed piece as soon as they had made enough progress. This came February 25, 1971, when Richard printed a menu for John and Margaret for the annual meeting of the American Camellia Society. A note says, "This keepsake is the first use of paper made by hand by John Urabec and Richard Hoffman." The sheet shows uneven beating and after more than twenty years, there is some foxing, but John and Richard kept improving their skills. Year by year, their paper became more even textured, stronger, and according to

In 1966, Muir Dawson had an ambitious idea that he would try to make paper in a very minimum way. A few questions asked of Henry Morris resulted in several informative letters, pieces of mould screens, samples of half stuff and the loan of a small mould. With this as a model, Muir constructed a sturdy, usable laid mould about 8 x 12 inches, using printer's wood furniture for the frame.

At this time, Henry was working on the writing and printing of his book *Omnibus*, which was to include pictures and descriptions of how to build a small Hollander beater, known as a Law's beater after the enterprising Arthur Law, who had invented it. Henry sent Muir photocopies of this material with the idea that one could be built. Without a beater, one really can't make paper. Muir realized this was too much to undertake and turned the material over to Richard Hoffman in June of 1966. In the Industrial Studies Department of California State College, Richard's faculty were able to build the Law's beater by following the instructions. Later, the beater was improved by casting the bars as an integral part of the roller, rather than fastening them to a drum. Between 1966 and 1968, Richard and his students made paper from time to time, but that did not solve all the problems.

John's interest in paper came through book collecting. He had many books that were printed on hand made paper, and he wanted to know more about the subject. The next step was his purchase of Henry Morris's book, *Five On Paper*. At about that same time, he bought two wove moulds and deckles, 16" x 26", from a small lot purchased from the English firm of J. Barcham Green. The moulds were old and a bit battered and Muir Dawson had bought them as exhibit items, but John put them to use. In a letter to Muir on January 31, 1965, Henry Morris says, "Tell your customer (who wants to take up paper making) to think about it some more—this is more aggravating than being in business."

John continued to acquire items necessary for making paper even though he still didn't know how or when this would be possible. He was saving rags and cuttings from a shirt maker (which later turned out to be unuseable because there was silk content in the cuttings), found some felts (probably well worn army blankets), and bought a plastic tub for a vat. Later, he had to have a cabinet maker cut his moulds down to