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Sunday, October 16, 1988

Hermit priest preserves the past

By Eric Jamieson

SUN DAPPLED patterns of broadleaf maples slip across the car as it glides silently down the narrow country drive. Tentacles of green reach out from forested borders, stretching into the shimmering fall heat heavy with the scent of evergreen.

At the end of the drive, a small, rough cedar house rises naturally from a tangled thicket rambling over the bank to its rear. A rough sentinel on a hill, the little dwelling sits high on a bench overlooking the Oyster River.

Solitude, in harmony with the melodic trill of birds and the faint sighings from the river below, invites peace, an enviable quality in a world which thrives on pandemonium.

As unlikely as it may appear, the austere dwelling which confronts me contains a professional book bindery and paper conservation lab in addition to being the domicile of Father Charles Brandt.

Brandt, a former air force navigator, graduate biologist from Cornell University and now the only book restorer in Western Canada who is at the same time a paper conservator, is far removed from the monastic halls of his more youthful days.

Ordained a hermit Catholic priest by Bishop Remi de Roo in 1966 — the first in almost 200 years — Brandt lives the contemplative life of a man truly devoted to God.

In fact, it was while living as a Benedictine oblate at St. Gregory's Abbey in Shawnee, Okla., that he was first introduced to bookbinding. "They had a bindery there and they said, 'If you want to make yourself useful you could start to work in the library.'"

"Well, the first thing I used was something called mystic tape for patching up books. Then they asked if I would like to work in the bindery. We did a lot of books that year. Mostly periodicals and a couple of theses.

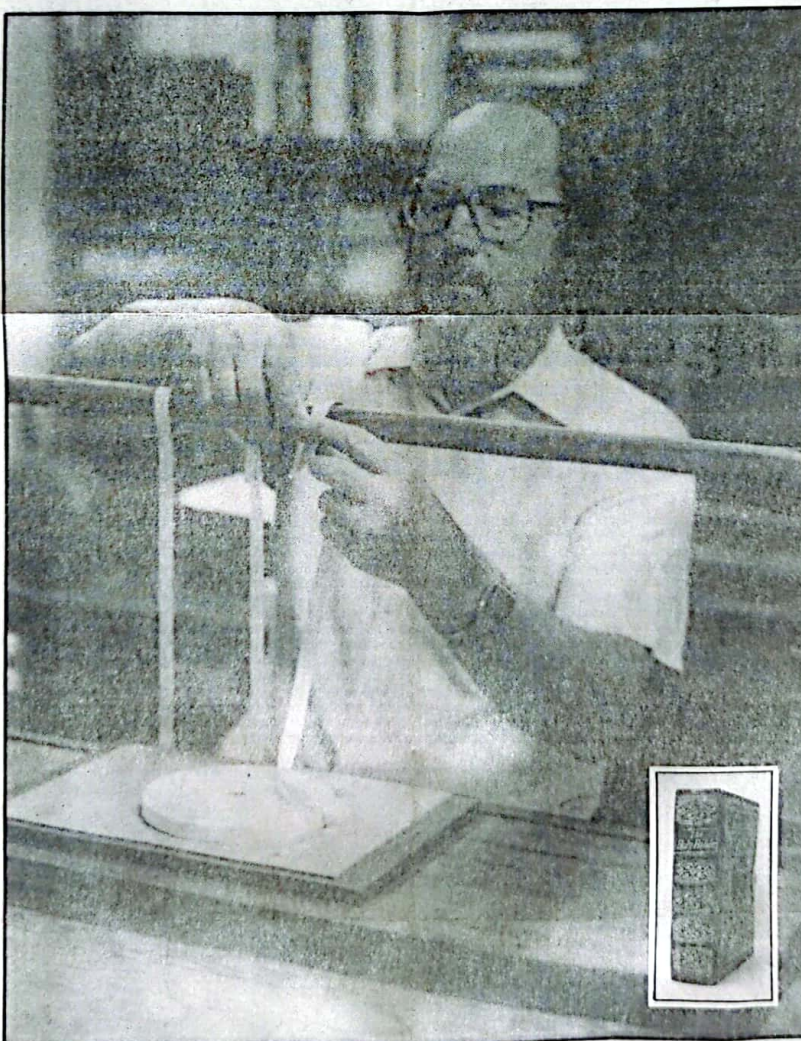
"Later, I entered the Cistercian Abbey of New Melleray in Dubuque, Iowa, where I was put in charge of the bindery. Then, while I was still attached to the abbey... I was still a monk of the abbey; but I wasn't solemnly professed... they gave me permission to come out and visit the hermits on the Tsolum River (Comox Valley). That was in March of 1965. I later joined them.

"When I got there, imagine my surprise when I learned that I had to earn a living. It wasn't like a big community where everyone worked together. So I thought, I'll set up a bindery.

"The monks in Lafayette, Oregon, gave me some equipment and I operated from this little hermitage you're in right now, only it was on the Tsolum then. Later, with Bishop Remi de Roo's permission, each hermit sought a hermitage of his own on the Island. I moved mine to the Oyster River. That was in 1969."

With three decades of paper conservation experience under his belt, Brandt, who now concentrates on works of art on paper, archival material and books, lists among his most important projects, the restoration of an \$80,000 Emily Carr oil on paper and the conservation of a set of Audubon prints worth \$1.5 million.

"I did the Audubon prints while I was employed with the Canadian Conservation Institute, which is part of the National Museums of Canada." A report from that institute stated that "Brandt has the ability to cover all areas of paper conservation, including artistic prints and drawings, archival material and bound volumes."



Eric Jamieson photos

Brandt preparing sewing frame for work on Bowron Bible. Inset: fully restored Bible.

"I did a lot of archival work after that when I was Chief Conservator for the Manitoba government. I set up their paper conservation lab in Winnipeg."

Now receiving most of his work from the special collections in addition to the public, Brandt is in the process of restoring an historic family Bible.

Not just any Bible: the large, gilt, leather bound, brass clasped book once belonged to the Bowron family of Bowron Lakes fame. The Bowron Bible is now the property of the provincial government and has been on display in Barkerville. But it has seen better days. The sheepskin leather, missing in parts, is dry and fragile, especially along the hinge and spine, and there's evidence of insect infestation.

The births and deaths of the Bowron family have been written neatly by gen-

erations of loving hands. The first is that of John Bowron, an overlander of 1862, who crossed a continent hungry for the elusive yellow metal that stirred a fever in many but made millionaires of few.

From postmaster to mining recorder to government agent to gold commissioner, 44 years of administrative servitude earned him the gratitude of a government and a lake in named in his honor.

His Bible lies before me. Stripped of its cover, its signatures (groups of pages bound as one), neatly stacked, have already been washed and treated in a large stainless steel sink built for this purpose. "When washing the pages," Brandt explains, "you have to be careful to check that the inks are stable. The hand written pages must be treated in a different manner."

"After washing, the paper is treated with a magnesium bicarbonate solution which de-acidifies it. Acid, Brandt adds, is one of paper's worst enemies. Changing the paper's pH from an acid state to an alkaline one extends its life.

The signatures are then spread on drying racks before being sandwiched between thick sheets of felt to flatten and dry them. While the paper is drying, Brandt prepares the sewing frame with linen tape used to sew the signatures together. His hands move quietly and efficiently over the simple wooden frame, little changed since its first appearance in the 12th Century.

With similar efficiency, new life will also be breathed into the faded leather cover. Mending worn parts, the Bible will be rebeked, a hollow back added and the original leather back replaced. New boards will also be fitted.

The restored Bible, tightly bound, glossy and smelling pleasantly of leather dressing, a mixture of lanolin and neatfoot oil, bears no relation to the dry, deteriorating book of a few days previous.

As I watch this master craftsman at work in his modern lab, gently easing a few hard years from the Bible, pushing it reluctantly forward across the gulf of time, I cannot help but imagine the traditions that have gone before — the candle flickering shadows of medieval monks bent to their tasks dance across the walls of my mind.

"Monasteries have been centres of culture and crafts right back to medieval times," Brandt says. "William Morris, the leader of the arts and crafts movement of the late 19th Century, believed that because medieval society was free of the industrial tyranny that so infects our lives today, the people, especially religious people, were free to create, do good works, good printing and good binding. Morris's intent was to make every craftsman an artist and every artist a craftsman."

"For myself," Brandt adds, "I'm interested in conservation on three levels. First and most important is the restoration of the spirit; my own and others. That's why I practice Christian meditation and teach this tradition to others. Next comes the conservation of the written record and works of art which flow from human spirit, and then, helping to preserve and restore the world around us such as the Tsolum River and Strathcona Park."

It's with this in mind that Brandt, hermit priest, craftsman and sometimes artist, gives new life to the books and paper that mark the passage of time, the milestones of civilization.



Handwritten pages record family births, marriages