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PAPER IS FRAGILE

Father Brandt's fight to save treasures of the printed page

By RUSS PARADICE

Warning: this article is in a self-destruct mode. Or rather the paper it's written on is.

Attacked by the forces of light, humidity and heat, and containing the seeds of its own destruction in the form of the acid-catalyzing agents embedded within its fibres, this page is already on the road to ruin. (But then what do you want for 45 cents?)

Father Charles Brandt has made a profession out of trying to slow up the inevitable deterioration of paper documents, books, photographs and works of art on paper.

A professional paper and book conservator, Brandt has placed his healing hands on an \$80,000 Emily Carr print and, in his most fulfilling job to date, given the full conservation treatment to Volume One in the four-volume set of ornithologist John James Audobon's world-famous Birds of America folio.

Approximately 134 of the four-volume sets, first published in 1826, are known to still exist. The value of such a set was pegged at \$1½ million at a Sotheby auction in the early 1980s.

Though still a Catholic priest, Brandt lives as a hermit monk on a secluded property on the banks of the Oyster River. He has added a paper conservation lab on to his hermitage.

For the eighth time in his life, Brandt will soon be heading off to Victoria to instruct a comprehensive two-week course, entitled Curatorial Care of Paper, at the University of Victoria. Archivists, librarians and museum workers from all over Canada will be attending the session, including two archivists from the Diefenbaker Centre in Saskatoon and a curator from the Dalhousie University Art Gallery.

"The real purpose of this course is not to train these people how to preserve their documents," Brandt says. "It's to sensitize them to curatorial care of paper. We call it preventative conservation. So that means they have to understand what paper is, what it's made

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of, when it was first made, what causes it to break down and what you can do to slow down that deterioration."

Brandt's students will learn that paper is particularly sensitive to direct light and heat, and that relative humidity must also be controlled. For example, a museum can double the life expectancy of its paper artifacts simply by lowering the temperature of the conservation area by 10 degrees Celsius.

"The only way you could stop the deterioration process is if you put your paper and books into a deep freeze in total darkness. But then you couldn't ever use them or see them, so what good would that be."

Brandt's love affair with paper conservation dates back to his childhood days when he was a boy scout. Having already racked up several merit badges in other skill areas, Brandt set out to get one for book binding.

"So I took my boy scout manual apart and rebound it. I didn't really understand how a book functioned before that. But when I did that project I learned what holds a book together and, really, I found it quite fascinating."

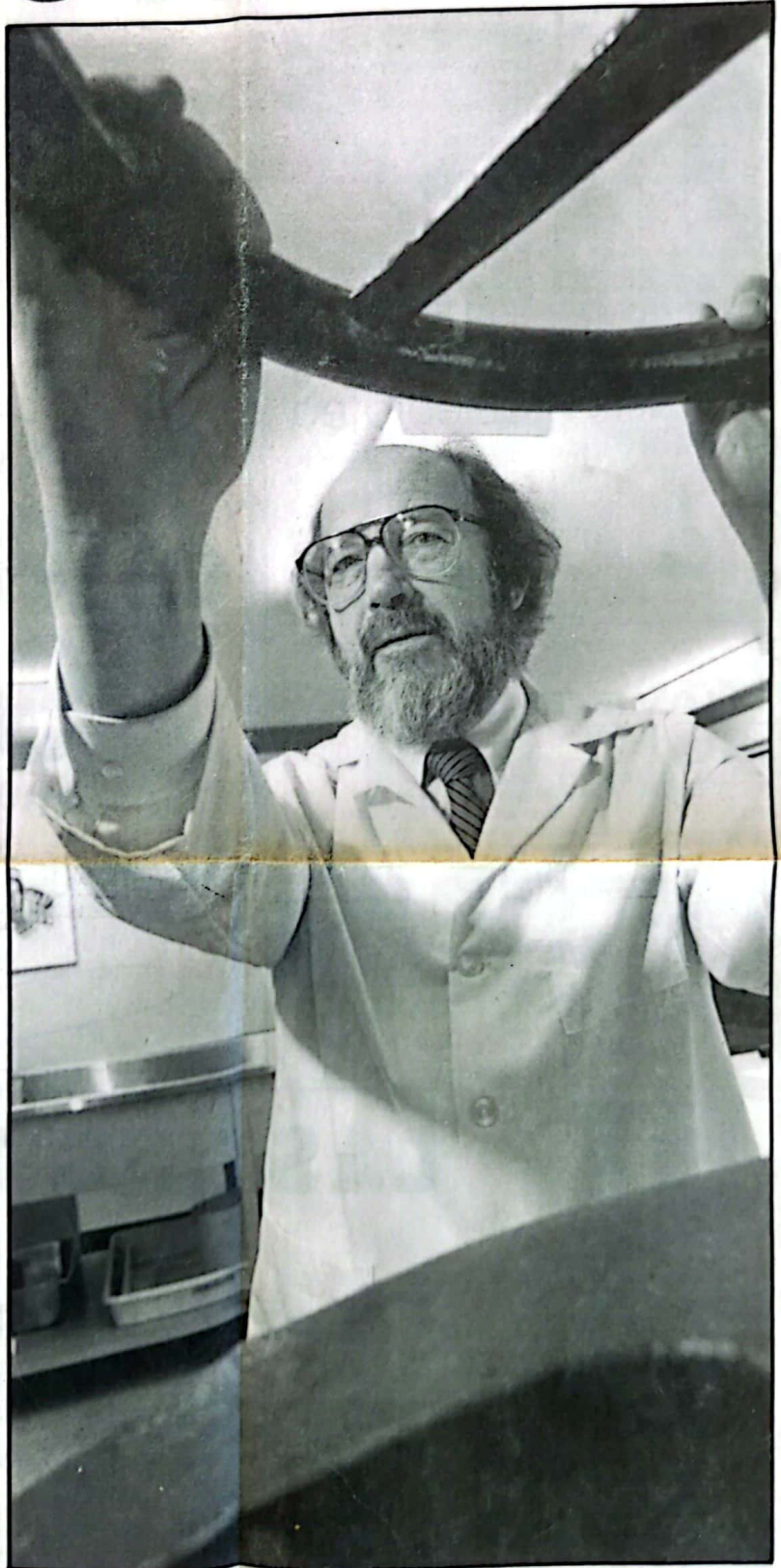
Although originally an Anglican priest, Brandt always felt attracted to the Catholic Church and eventually spent a year studying that faith at a Benedictine Monastery in Oklahoma where, it so happens, there was a book bindery. He picked up the basics of his craft there and over the next two decades he honed it to a fine skill at both European and North American centres.

In Canada, his resume includes a five-year stint as a paper/book conservator employed by the Canadian Conservation Institute, a governmental body, in Moncton, New Brunswick. He was later hired by the Manitoba government to set up a state-of-the-art conservation lab, valued at close to \$1 million, in Winnipeg.

Brandt truly loves his profession, partly because it fits in very well with his contemplative life, one that's devoted to meditation, prayer and study.

"Book binding itself is a very pleasing type of profession. It's a very soothing, contemplative type of work. There's not a lot of hustle and bustle, and it's not hi-tech.

"It's the kind of work that the monks in the Middle Ages did at the big Benedictine monasteries, which were sort of centres of culture, calligraphy and binding. So it fits in very well with the life that I lead."



Fr. Charles Brandt turns the heavy wheel of a press in his home lab