

Printing on a Vandercook Press & Other Disillusionments

By JACOB L. WARNER

BORN of fairy tales and nourished by advertising, there is in us a belief that there is a gadget or a machine which will do perfectly the task we need or want to do. A whole industry is built on the amateur photographers' universal belief that if they could find the right camera they could take great pictures. Once the myth takes hold it is almost impossible for it to be dispelled. . . .

As a hobby printer I somehow became convinced that there were three presses on which one could produce flawless printing at the snap of a switch. (Or in one case, the turn of a crank.) These were the Heidelberg (windmill), the Vandercook Proof Press, and the Miehle Vertical. . . .

NO MAGIC MACHINES

It was something of a shock to me when Jim Meagher, in one of his perfectly (so far as I could tell) printed journals, complained that the designers of the Heidelberg had not seemed much interested in good ink distribution. If his journals were poorly printed, I could believe he didn't know what he was talking about, but one doesn't print like Meagher unless he knows something about presses and printing.

It is with great regret that I report that the Vandercook is not the magic machine that turns out perfect work at the flick of the crank. I am nearly certain of this—there is still one possible flaw in my reasoning. Naturally when we obtained a Vandercook, it was without any instruction book of any kind, and I have the feeling that there may be a knob, a lever or a screw somewhere that if pulled, pushed, or turned just the proper amount would immediately result in perfect copies falling off the cylinder. That's how hard it is to turn loose of the idea I had about the Vandercook. . . .

Curiously we know that if any of us had the magic machine of which we dream, we would tire of it almost at once. If it required no skill to print, it would be no more exciting than doing the laundry. This anomaly is common to many hobbies and other pursuits.

About seven and one-half years ago Leah (my wife) spotted a classified ad offering an SP-15 Vandercook for sale. Examination showed it to be what I suppose is the smallest-sized Vandercook—the bed is 15 inches wide and the overall length of press and feed table is about five and one-half feet.

GETS S-15 VANDERCOOK

The man who was selling it said that if he wanted to clean it up, he believed he could get \$500 for it, but he would sell it as it was for \$250. The rollers had completely melted and the roller material was all over the bed—a thorough mess. The roller material was polyurethane which I have learned liquidifies after four or five years. . . .

We bought the Vandercook, but I was daunted by the thought of trying to get it home. Aware that my friend Jim Walczak knows all kinds of things about moving heavy equipment and that he

knew how to disassemble a Vandercook, as much as they may be disassembled, I called him for advice, and to my surprise and happiness, he offered to help move it and even offered the services of his truck. It was actually easier than we thought it would be. . . .

Shortly after we got the press, the Segals happened to be visiting, and when I was showing Harold the press, he said that if he had one he would print his journal on it. Such a thought had not crossed my mind, but I immediately decided that I would not be outdubbed by Harold so I started trying to print my journal on it.

PRINTS MONTHLY NAPA JOURNAL

That is when I lost the notion that the press was a magical machine that produced perfectly without a skilled operator. My first attempts were a disaster—I still don't understand why or what happened. To my great surprise the Vandercook is much more sensitive to differential type wear than is the C&P. I still do not understand why that should be so, but I found myself replacing 10 times as many worn letters as I had been doing. Further, one could spend an hour picking worn type and then put the form on the press only to see that more and more of it required replacing. All in all I dare say the time for replacing type is greater than makeready time for the C&P.

Even now after some experience, it may require three hours of type replacement and messing around to get the form to print decently. And unfortunately "messing around" is a good description of what occurs in trying to get the press to print properly.

When I do makeready on the C&P I know what I'm doing and what to do next. The final result may be terrible but at least I have the feeling that I know what to do. On the Vandercook I'm replacing a letter here, planing there, putting on more ink, taking off ink, and in general just randomly messing around. After enough of this, usually the press produces fairly good results. But, at best, it leaves one feeling a mite frustrated.

EARLY PROBLEMS

For my first couple of journals I had the bewildering experience of the form now and then lightly touching the cylinder on its back path thus causing the next several sheets of paper to be lightly offset printed from the platen paper. It might go 200 sheets without this happening and then it would happen again. The only safe thing was to watch every sheet. The result looked exactly as if I had stacked the freshly-printed paper and had caused offset by excessive inking, and, in fact, the printing laureate judge for the St. Pete convention (NAPA) remarked that I should do slip sheeting to prevent such offset.

To add to the mystery this has not happened a single time since the first few journals. There are

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Printing on a Vandercook (cont.)

two possible causes though neither seems very likely. On the front of the press there was a nut missing from a bolt that comes out near the crank — I found a nut that fit and put it on as well as I could which wasn't very well since the bolt turns, and there is no way to hold it other than taking the printing head apart to get to the bolt.

At the same time I abandoned the spider chase I was using for a heavier one, and it is just possible that the relatively weak chase was allowing the form to spring upward when locked up, and that this was enough to cause the form to touch the platen occasionally.

The clearance between the cylinder and type on the back path of the cylinder is very, very small. I guess I should experiment to find out if I could pin down the problem, but I tend to be pragmatic about printing. If I found that throwing salt over my shoulder would improve my printing, I would probably just do it and not worry too much about why it worked. My excuse for this is that I consider printing to be a black art beyond the ken of reason.

MAKEREADY DIFFICULT ON VANDERCOOK

The grippers that hold the paper are, of course, only on one side, and the paper simply wraps around the cylinder as the cylinder turns. Now and then I get a batch of paper such that the sheet springs loose from the cylinder too quickly and the bottom edge of the paper will hit the type form and a small black mark will be made near the bottom of the page. This may happen a hundred times in a row and not again during the press run. I can find no difference in the sheets that do this and the ones that do not. The grain runs the same way, and the paper appears identical to the sheets that cause no trouble.

There is no way of properly doing makeready on a Vandercook. It is virtually impossible to remove the platen paper to place makeready behind it. Replacing the packing of the platen is a 15-minute job at best and not to be undertaken for the purpose of makeready. So about all one can do is underlay the typeform. Here again the Vandercook exhibits a much greater sensitivity than the C&P. Putting a sheet of makeready tissue behind a portion of the type will make it look as if you had put a sheet of cardboard under it; it will punch into the platen paper. The thickest material that I've been able to use successfully is plastic wrap (Saran Wrap) and trying to do makeready with such a recalcitrant material is wearing on the nerves. It sticks together, folds, rolls up, and in general behaves abominably. Besides, one feels he must be doing something wrong, that makeready should not be necessary on a Vandercook.

'VANDY' IS SENSITIVE TO PLANING

The Vandercook is very sensitive to planing. One would suppose, since one is working on a horizontal bed that it would be easy to plane the type on the bed for once and all, but it may require several attempts before it is adequately flattened to print properly and I'm not one who taps his planer lightly . . . Further, type and spaces are more apt to work up on the Vandercook than on the C&P. Often at the end of a run I will find the furniture

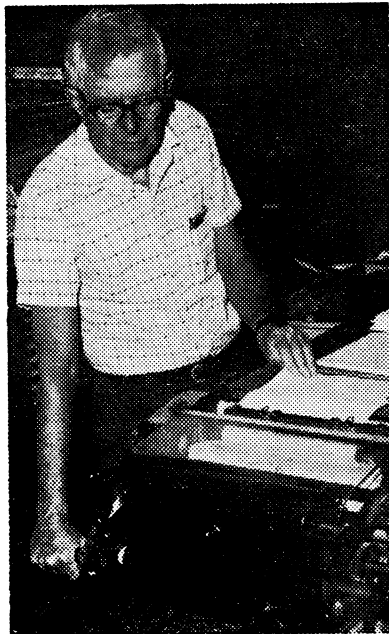


Photo by DAVID WARNER

★ Jake Warner of Greenbelt, Md., cranks his SP-15 Vandercook proof press as he prints another issue of *The Boxwooder* for the National Amateur Press Association bundle.

up at one end of the chase. There seems to be something about the different motion of the cylinder rolling over the form that requires a more careful lockup than with the platen press.

HAS SUPERB INKING

Ink distribution on the Vandercook is very good once the right amount of ink is on the rollers and some care about the horizontal distribution of ink has been taken. When the cylinder is at the feed-table end, the rollers are driven by an electrically-turned drum that is large enough to hold a good supply of ink so that one does not have to re-ink more often than every 75 to 100 impressions. An oscillating, steel ink cylinder riding on top of the rubber rollers helps horizontal distribution. It requires a bit of experience and judgement to get the right amount of ink to start with, and one can get an initially uneven horizontal distribution which will persist since there is no rotary motion as there is in the turning of the ink plate on the C&P. Also there is some sensitivity to roller pressure which, however, is very easy to adjust if one had some way of recognizing the correct pressure.

MORE UNIFORM IMPRESSION

To my surprise I noted recently that I had been printing my journals on the Vandercook for more than a year—I had thought a few months at most. So I got out my file of *Boxwooders* and compared the printing. I regret to say that I do not see that my printing on the Vandercook is any better than it is on the C&P. On each I sometimes do very well and sometimes very poorly, but am consistent on neither.

Clearly the impression on the Vandercook is more uniform over the sheet—the corners are not as heavily embossed—but the overall quality is no better. There is no doubt that the input effort on the Vandercook well exceeds that of a platen press. I am seldom able to do a press run, start to finish,

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Why Letterpress Printers Switched to Offset Printing!

By JOHN C. JACKSON

It was with interest that I read the letter from Mr. Shirk of Lebanon, Pennsylvania, in *Type & Press* a couple of issues back. His letter had to do with the makers of printing equipment deserting Letterpress for offset equipment and the so-called Mimeograph (proper name) work which we encounter daily.

While there's a lot of truth in what Mr. Shirk writes, his letter deserves some comment in the form of a rebuttal.

I'm a Letterpress printer; Model 6 Little Giant, Ludlow, Elrod, C&P, and cases and cases of type. All sold now that I've retired.

Also, I sold for ATF from about 1950 to 1967. So I encountered the shift from Letterpress to offset about 1955-57.

Usually the basic reason a company quits manufacturing something is because they can't sell it. Witness the large number of automobiles which have bitten the dust. And it was getting increasingly difficult to sell Letterpress equipment. A 3-A Morrison saw sold new, with all accessories, for \$1200 in 1955. A nuArc 30x40 vacuum frame cost \$395 or so. Empty type cases, no cabinet, sold new from Two Rivers, Wisconsin for about \$9 each;

Printing on a Vandercook (cont.)

on the Vandercook in less than three hours and sometimes it's more like four or five. Generally the makeready on the C&P is one to two hour's work, and the printing time is well under an hour. I estimate that, on the average, printing a journal on the Vandercook requires twice as much press time as printing it on the platen press.

On a platen press it is almost impossible to print a halftone (not a line cut) on the same sheet with type. The impression force required by the photo is simply too great for the type to print properly. If I were printing a halftone on a platen press with type, I would be forced to print them one at a time.

A cylinder press has the advantage that only a small area of the cylinder is pressed against the type at any time therefore such large forces are not needed. . . . I know I cannot print a photo and a page of text at the same time on my C&P platen press. . . .

It would be unfair to the Vandercook to fail to note that if one has a repro proof to make using enameled stock that one can just place the form on the press and turn the crank and take off a perfect proof most every time. It's the printing of a long run on book paper that is difficult.

The paper-feed mechanism on the Vandercook makes precise registration very easy. The paper position is easily adjusted by micrometer devices, and after a little experience, it is very easy to feed paper to the press.

In using the Vandercook one has the feeling that it is a fine machine, well-designed, well-made and dependable; a machine well suited to its task of making good reproduction proofs.

But it is not, alas, *the* magic machine.

Reprinted from *The Boxwooder* by the kind permission of Jake Warner

and 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 13" galleys were selling for \$1.25 each with quantity discounts.

But in addition to the difficulties encountered in selling Letterpress, there was the matter of composition, imposition and speed. The steam locomotive with its reciprocating drive gave way to the diesel rotary. Aircraft engines had reached their practical limits with 36 cylinders and went to first, prop jets and then to jets, (rotary compressors).

Thus it was with Letterpress. A heavy reciprocating bed had a maximum speed of 5500 i.p.h. Offset presses run 9000 i.p.h. and faster. In fact, the ATF Green Hornet 11 x 17 idled at 5500 and cruised at 21,000 i.p.h. It had a top speed of some 30,000 i.p.h. I once ran an eight-page Goss Cox-O-Type with a maximum speed of 2500 i.p.h.

These slower Letterpress speeds made it tough to compete with offset; and I also must confess we salesmen were out there "pushing" offset. A Kelly C sold for \$24,000; and a Chief sold for maybe \$18,000. The Kelly is an 18x24 and the "29" is a 23x29 inch.

Of course all this has a price. With offset, the printer is forever buying supplies and materials: wash-up solution, film, darkroom supplies; plates and chemicals; fountain etch, etc. The Letterpress owner can run until he gets ashamed of whatever he's using and then—and only then—would he buy new.

Offset printers can produce excellent printing. Nothing wrong with this process. What ruins it is that a man retires from selling shoes and decides to get a franchise and "Today I are a printer".

A Trick of the Trade

Make sure that the packing material on a platen press is cut the proper size to come within the roller trucks. If the press-boards or the tympan sheets extend to either side far enough to cover these tracks, they will act as bearers when the impression is on, faulty presswork will be the inevitable result.

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