

Ralph and John Ocker Interview Log

Time Code Content

- 00:00:04 **Introduction.** Ralph Ocker and John Ocker, Ocker and Trapp Library Bindery, Inc. Interviewed June 3, 2017, at the Roslyn Hotel, Roslyn, New York. Interviewed by Jeanne Drewes, librarian.
- 00:00:32 **Career:** Ralph apprenticed as a bookbinder in 1948 at age 14 after working with a local bookbinder in Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany at age 12 and becoming fascinated with the work. Worked in industrial trade book binderies in Germany. Moved to the United States in 1955. John, Ralph's son, grew up in binderies and started working for his father as his first job.
- 00:02:43 **Business:** Started business in Emerson, New Jersey with Herbert Trapp in 1964, all work done by hand. They worked seven 15-hour days per week to build the business and afford automated equipment. For several years, the business doubled every year. John associates the smell of glue and buckram cloth with his childhood. John worked at bindery to pay for college. Ralph maintained his interest out of sheer stubbornness. Emphasis on customer service.
- 00:08:05 **Mentors:** Nora Ligorano from The Center for Book Arts was John's bookbinding instructor.
- 00:08:35 **Changes in Business over Time:** Started as hand bookbinders, to partial automation, to total automation with the Ultrabind machine. Early adopter of double-fan adhesive binding instead of oversewing. Sold business in 2006. Staff turnover caused great disruption to production.
- 00:12:12 **Technological Advances:** Used German double-fan adhesive binding machine, then upgraded to Ultrabind machine, purchasing the 8th or 9th machine made. Change from animal hide glue to Polyvinyl Acetate, faster drying time and less attractive to cockroaches!
- 00:14:47 **Industry Changes:** The market has changed and automation has also changed the business. The labor force has also changed, from 25% high school students working after school to an increasingly Latino workforce in the 1990s, a more stable workforce.
- 00:16:16 **Employees:** Earliest employees were typically local women returning to the workforce after having children. Increasingly relied on high school and college students, but they could be unreliable at exam time. Then found the immigrant workforce which brought its own challenges. Maximum employees 65, down to 50 through attrition in 2006. Millie Suter was an exceptional employee whose interest in bookbinding led her to additional study and she now has her own conservation business, O & T Suter Conservation. Shift in workforce from predominantly women to about 50% women with influx of Latino employees.

- 00:20:53 **Regrets:** John has some second thoughts about leaving bookbinding business. Ralph has no regrets. Ralph's wife sometimes felt that his business came first, his employees second, and then his family. He felt that might have been true, but necessary to feed his family.
- 00:22:48 **Building and Plant:** Grew from a garage to an addition to the garage, to a building to their specifications, including electrical drops, a lunch room, a good loading platform. 1000 square foot space to 6000 square feet within six years. Machinery from state of the art new machines to medieval looking equipment like traditional book presses.
- 00:26:07 **Employees:** John cites Kurt who made boxes and had a fuller life outside of work.
- 00:26:55 **Interesting Projects:** Ralph mentions encapsulation of \$10,000 bills for the Federal Reserve, brought to the bindery in an armored truck, guarded by armed employees. John mentions project for the St. Joseph Seminary, correspondence from various Popes with broken clay seals that were deacidified and encapsulated.
- 00:29:23 **Industry Changes:** Change from focus on craftsmanship in the hand bookbinding era to skills using technology as the processes became increasingly mechanized. John recounts complaining about the complicated process of delivering books to Rutgers Law Library because of multiple elevators quite distant from the loading dock, to which Ralph replied that he used to carry the books up the stairs.
- 00:31:23 **Technological Advances:** Ralph relied on John's older brother to manage technology, and felt it was time to sell the business once he passed away. Bridgeport National Bindery purchased the business; Ralph stayed on for one year to smooth the transition for customers. John mentions the use of technology for sales activities—PowerPoint presentations, for example, and their adoption of the ABLE system to capture spine label information for cover stamping.
- 00:37:39 **Roles:** Ralph started in his business performing bookbinding duties for the first five years. As they were able to hire talented bookbinders, Ralph had more managerial responsibilities, but still repaired the equipment after hours. Sales and customer service became his main focus.
- 00:38:51 **Interesting Projects:** Four-foot-tall book of plates for the Avery Library at Columbia University, hand bound and hand delivered. Cloth-covered book boxes were very popular. Developed phase box design with Carolyn Harris for Columbia University Libraries. Ralph personally measured books for boxes if a customer ordered at least 50.
- 00:46:13 **Advice to Next Generation:** If going into bookbinding, library binding is not a growing market; fine bookbinding never goes out of style. John: Follow your dreams and work hard at it.
- 00:47:29 **End of interview.**

