

What's on the 6th floor?

SFPL's San Francisco History Center / Book Arts & Special Collections Blog

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The Albion Press at the San Francisco Public Library



The Albion Press in place at the Library.

The [Albion Press](#) at the San Francisco Public Library stands at the entrance to the Book Arts and Special Collections room as an iconic reminder of the importance of the history of printing and its relevance to our reading lives.

The Albion is an early iron hand printing press, originally designed and manufactured in London by Richard Whittaker Cope in the early 1820's. Ours was manufactured in London by F. Ullmer in 1909. Albions continued to be manufactured until the 1930s. The crown finial is a recognizable feature of the Albion; ours, however, is missing. A newsworthy note is that the Harry F. Rochat Company in London has begun manufacturing the first "improved Albion" which they are calling the [Rochat Albion Press](#).

And, Steve Pratt, of Pratt Wagon & Press Works in Utah, can build working replicas of the Albion handpresses to order.

The Library acquired the press from Margaretta Mitchell. She and her husband, the late Frederick C. Mitchell [1933-1996], owned and worked the press for over forty years. In 1996 staff at the San Francisco Public Library began making inquiries about buying the press which was for sale. Various people worked on finding a way to make this happen-- from Alan Dietch who initially appraised it, to the library staff who initiated the contact with the Mitchells and ending with Lee Engdahl, the printer who literally moved the press to the library in March 1999. Marjorie Stern, members of The Roxburghe Club of San Francisco, The Friends of the San Francisco Public Library and Dennis Blegen & Phyllis L. Ehlert all contributed funds to make the purchase. The form that was in the press bed when we received it, along with a copy of the last piece being printed in the tympan, was a keepsake for the Roxburghe Club by Fred Mitchell and Dave Belch.



Andrew Hoyem and the Albion at M&H Type, circa 1990s.

Some more history: At some point the Mitchells stored their press with Andrew Hoyem at [M&H Type](#) at 460 Bryant Street. And because Hoyem's [Arion Press](#) moved to its current location at 1802 Hays Street in the Presidio in 2001, he was probably happy to have the Albion moved to its permanent location in Book Arts & Special Collections in early 1999.

Gretta Mitchell says this about the press:

"Frederick and I were involved in hand-press printing for many years. The press was purchased by us in London in June of 1959, the first purchase of our marriage. In fact, we were on our honeymoon! We set it up in California after it was shipped through the Panama Canal to us in Berkeley. The Albion moved with us from house to house and even to Lawrence, Kansas where we lived in the late 1960s for what turned out to be only a year. We called our imprint The Scrimshaw Press and produced invitations, keepsakes and my wood engravings. Frederick studied typesetting with Henry Evans when he was still printing in the back of his bookshop on Clement Street in San Francisco. We became part of a group of private press people who met at each other's houses to share information and socialize. Later in 1969 we founded The Scrimshaw Press, a trade book company, and continued to enjoy the Albion from time to time, producing things for friends. Gradually we had less and less time to print and for some years the press was used by a printer friend who published poetry."



Clifford Burke printing at the First San Francisco International Book Fair, December 1971, photo by Fletcher Manley.

That friend, in the early 1970's, was Clifford Burke. Burke, in town recently to receive the Oscar Lewis Award from the [Book Club of California](#), visited Book Arts and Special Collections on March 29, 2011 with his printer-friends Cameron Folsom and Cheryl Miller. He asked to see some books

from the Grabhorn collection and soon was reminiscing with us about his “good old days” in San Francisco. He mentioned using an Albion Press that belonged to Fred--and soon we all realized that the Library’s Albion was, indeed, the press Clifford had used in the early 1970s.



Clifford Burke at the Library, March 2011, photo by Andrea Grimes.



Clifford Burke, Cheryl Miller, Cameron Folsom at the Library, March 2011, photo by Andrea Grimes.

He printed two books on our Albion: [Lew Welch](#)’s *Redwood Haiku* (in our collection), a Pat Nolan book and a keepsake from the First Annual San Francisco International Book Fair in 1971 called *Books and the Senses*. We took photos to commemorate the day and discovery.



Lew Welch’s Haiku, from the library’s [Grabhorn](#) Collection.

Come up to Book Arts & Special Collections to see the Albion handpress for yourself.
<http://sfhcbasc.blogspot.com/2011/07/albion-press-at-san-francisco-public.html>