

MEL KAVIN

Binder, Conservator, Patron of Book Arts

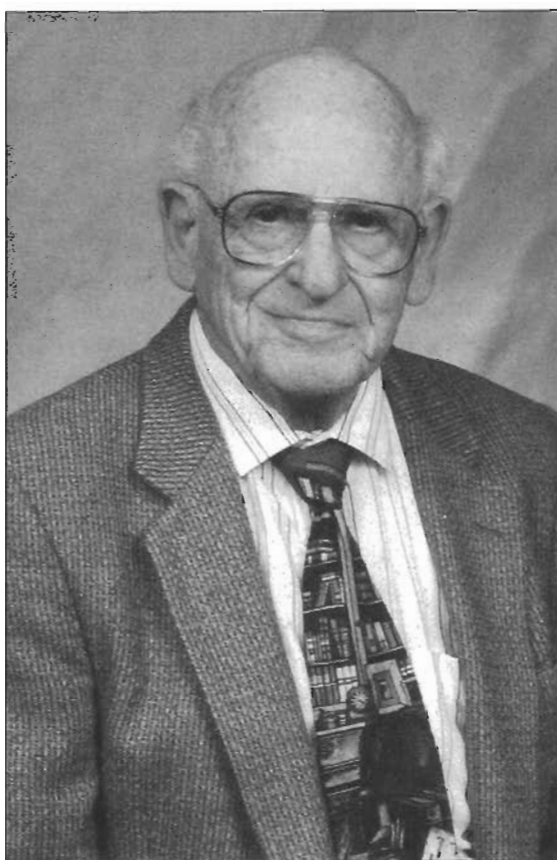
by George W. Cooke, Director
Oradell Public Library
Oradell, New Jersey

Mel Kavin likes nothing better than to usher guests through the great libraries and art collections in the Los Angeles area: the Getty Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum, the Huntington Library, the Norton Simon Museum, and the Los Angeles Public Library. He knows librarians and archivists in all these institutions and many more, because he has been binding their books and making their phase boxes for many years. Mel's stamina is legendary. He is a very early riser and on special occasions, as when entertaining a guest, he thinks nothing of tramping about museums, libraries, and public gardens from morning to night, upstairs and down, and then driving 30 or 40 miles to a fine restaurant and show for the evening. He discusses the book arts with animation as he speeds along the bewildering maze of freeways, familiar with every ramp, turn, and byway for hundreds of miles. Traveling with Mel for a day is a delightful, if exhausting, experience—and he is 81 years old! His children recently gave him a computer to use at home so he could slow down a little, but Mel continues to work the same hours, only now he surfs the net after he gets home at night.

EARLY YEARS IN CHICAGO

Mel is not really a native Californian, even though he has lived there for some 65 years. He was born in Chicago on September 3, 1916, to Russian immigrant parents. At sixteen years of age, unable to speak English and with no money, his

father got a job driving a milk wagon and eventually worked his way up to become a partner in a prosperous dairy business. Mel spent his first year of high school in Chicago before his father sold the business and moved to Los Angeles for his health, investing in a hotel



Mel Kavin

and apartment house. Mel helped with the bookkeeping. After high school, Mel attended Los Angeles City College for a year. It was there that he joined a literary club and met a pretty young art major named Phyllis Adams. They married in 1939. Phyllis was a wonderfully cre-

ative person who enriched Mel's life and helped him develop his artistic sensibilities. But before the beginning of their long and happy marriage of 52 years, Mel traveled north to the University of California at Berkeley, where he earned his degree in chemistry. Incidentally, he was also a member of the wrestling team. After graduating in 1940, he got a job as a dye chemist at Technicolor Motion Picture Corporation, testing and adjusting dyes for those wonderful new full-color movies that hypnotized audiences in the days before TV.

FROM SAILOR TO BOOKBINDER

But there was a war on and Mel was patriotic. He decided to enlist in the navy, only to be rejected because of poor eyesight. A year later, the navy drafted him, although his eyesight had not improved. He was sent to study electronics in Chicago, in Monterey, California, and at Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. It took all of his meager pay to support his wife and two children, so for amusement he spent his free time at the naval craft centers. He enjoyed working with leather, but it never occurred to him that leather could be used to bind books, or that he was about to become a bookbinder. Instead, he began to dream about opening a commercial crafts center where he would sell materials and offer courses and workshop space. Mel wrote about his idea to Lou Pieter, a friend from his Boy

Scout days. Lou had just been discharged from the army and was ready for a new adventure, so they began to plan.

APPRENTICESHIP IN LEATHERCRAFTS

After completing his navy service, Mel went back to work at Technicolor. In their free time, the two friends began taking classes in a small leathercraft studio with a couple named Berland. Mr. Berland had been apprenticed as a bookbinder in Russia and he taught them bookbinding. Mel showed one of his leather-bound books to Meyer Fisher, his former college roommate, who had become a bookstore manager. Meyer started sending paper-bound law books to Mel for binding and also introduced him to the librarian at the Law School of the University of Southern California. USC was his first library customer and is still a customer. Another friend, Tom Daly, a professional student who studied in four different colleges in the area and worked in all their libraries, began to recommend Mel as a binder. His new career was born. After forty years, these colleges are still customers.

EASING INTO BINDING

In 1947, Mel left his job at Technicolor and got a job at the R.J. Lindquist Company, manufacturer of electronic equipment for the medical profession. Mr. Lindquist wrote a book on electrotherapy in 1948, and asked Mel and Lou to bind 1,000 copies, their first edition job. Mr. Lindquist agreed to let Mel work half-days in order to spend more time with his bindery business. He also advanced money to buy some equipment. Forty-five years later, Mr. Lindquist wrote another book and brought it to Mel for binding.

Mel and Lou launched their new company in 1948. Another of Mel's friends, who was an attorney, invented the company's name by combining the "Ka" from Kavin and "ter" from Pieter, to create Kater-



*Kater - Crafts Bookbinders
Pico Rivera, California*

Crafts. Bookbinding soon came to take all of their time, and their original idea of teaching other crafts never came to fruition.

Mel began to collect and study books on bookbinding soon after he developed his interest in the subject. Collecting books became an important part of his life, and today he has an extensive library of works on all aspects of binding, papermaking, typography, conservation, and the graphic arts, as well as a special collection of some 400 miniature books.

GROWING PAINS

Kater-Crafts started on a very modest scale, and there were several moves to rented spaces in the early years. When he was at last ready to build his own plant, Mel studied the map to pick a central location that would be convenient for customers and workers alike. What he finally found was an empty lot at 4860 Gregg Road, in what is now Pico Rivera, a pleasant city of 56,000 located about twelve miles east of Los Angeles. Gregg Road was then just a rutted dirt track with knee-deep mud in wet weather. Piles of manure from the stable next door attracted clouds of horseflies. But Mel had a vision, and mud, manure,

and horseflies were only minor obstacles along the way. He got a three-month option to buy the land, but couldn't raise the purchase price. The night before the option was to expire, with another interested buyer in the wings, Mel offered \$5,000 for a six-month extension. Having gambled on gaining a few months to find financial backing, Mel began an urgent search. His bank was willing to loan him money on his accounts receivable, at a steep 20% interest. Mel's accountant warned him that if he tied up his business with this kind of financing, it would be difficult to earn enough to pay off the loan. The accountant was right! It was difficult, but Mel purchased the land and started construction. The new building, Kater-Crafts' permanent home, was finished in 1965. The bindery occupies 25,000 square feet, has 75 employees, and is equipped with the latest equipment. Mel bought out his partner in 1985 and today he and his three children own and operate the business. They share the responsibility of running the business. All have happy memories of their father as a kind and concerned parent who also taught them bookbinding and conservation.

THE CHILDREN REMEMBER

Rick, the oldest son, says he bound his first book at the age of six and started working in the plant on weekends when he was 14. After graduating from Cal State, Long Beach, he came back to the business. Rick recalls how his father astonished other binders by inviting them to come and tour Kater-Crafts. In the old days, most binders were secretive and would not share information or let a competitor visit their plants. Mel welcomed every competitor and answered all their questions, demonstrating how his systems worked and inviting them to improve their own methods by imitating his, and many did. Mel helped found an association of California bookbinders for the sharing of technical information. Rick vividly recalls a busload of Japanese binders strolling through the plant, taking notes. Rick sees his father's enthusiasm as his finest quality and readily admits that his father has pushed his children into plant modernization at a pace faster than they would have preferred.

CONSERVATION BECOMES A CONCERN

The disastrous flood in Florence, Italy in 1969 increased Mel's awareness of the need for conservation, and he soon developed a conservation department at Kater-Crafts. He went to workshops on paper treatment and learned from the best in the field. Mel successfully split paper sheets 25 or 30 years ago, when few people had heard of it, and he experimented with chemicals to remove foxing. His extensive training in chemistry and conservation saved him from the traps others fell into, such as over-oiling of leather bindings and damaging paper with harsh chemical treatments. Mel's second son, Bruce, worked in the bindery while going to school. After graduating from Cal

State, Long Beach, he started an import business of his own, but ultimately returned to Kater-Crafts in 1979. Bruce claims his father pressed him into conservation based on his analysis of Bruce's special abilities and the bindery's needs. Mel and Bruce attend workshops together to learn the latest conservation methods and techniques. Mel developed his own sturdy phase boxes with magnetic closures that are now used by the Getty Library. While serving



*In the old days,
most binders were secretive
and would not share
information or let a
competitor visit their plants.*

*Mel welcomed every
competitor...*



as president of the Library Binding Institute, Mel wrote an article on deacidification methods, with particular reference to vapor-phase deacidification (September 1981 issue of *The Library Scene*). Dick Smith visited the bindery and Mel arranged for him to lecture on Wei-To at the Los Angeles County Museum. Today Bruce, among other duties, supervises five people working in the conservation department.

Judy remembers playing with her father's binding tools as a child. Mel taught her handbinding and restoration. She inherited her mother's artistic talents and has been involved with film production design as well as book design. She has beautifully redesigned the company's conference room and library.

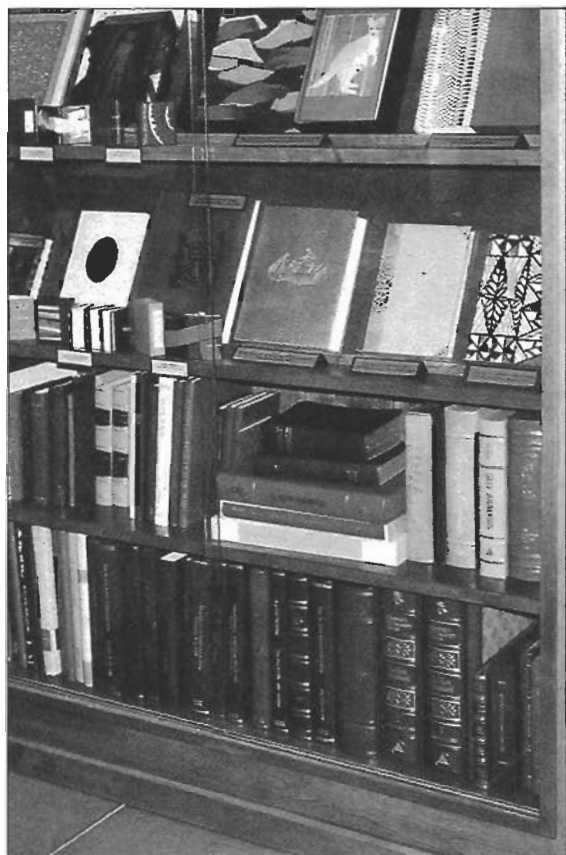
Mel also coaxed her into learning computers. After overcoming her initial reluctance, Judy quickly took to computers and currently devotes most of her day to Kater-Crafts computer operations. Judy says her father's strongest attribute is his sense of integrity and honesty. He taught her always to do her very best and he has been unfailing in his strong support whenever she has encountered problems in life.

MEL AS IMPRESARIO

In 1972, Mel and Phyllis made their first trip to Europe. It was a vacation adventure that not incidentally included calling on all the distinguished hand binders Mel had ever heard of, including Bernard Middleton, Philip Smith, Roger Powell, and Sydney Cockerell. Mel also came to know Peter Waters and Don Etherington and their work. Mel asked Philip Smith if he would do a lecture tour in the U.S. and he agreed. In 1978, Mel arranged a series of workshops for Bernard Middleton, and in 1982, a lecture series for Tini Miura. This was Mel the impresario, adding to his workload the not inconsiderable headaches of arranging national lecture tours. Rick says that his dad also advanced the money to make the national tours possible.

Mel arranged workshops at Kater-Crafts for more than a dozen famous binders and book artists, including Jim Brockman, Tony Cains, Betsy Eldridge, Deborah Evetts, Sün Evrard, Don Glaister, Bernard Middleton (3 times), Tini Miura (3 times), Ole Olsen, Philip Smith, Hugo Peller (twice), and Griselda Warr. He also sponsored a marbling workshop with Don Guyot and a fore-edge painting workshop with Martin Frost. This was his way of promoting excellence in binding, and he welcomed any bookbinder from California or elsewhere who wished to attend. In this sense, he

Continued on page 10



Fine bindings from world renown binders

finally realized his original dream of establishing a center for the teaching of crafts. Mel's large collection of leather-working tools, hand presses and other equipment, and his extensive inventory of fine leathers and papers made Kater-Crafts the ideal place for hands-on workshops.

COMPUTERS IN BINDERIES

Kater-Crafts is a full service bindery with many universities and renowned libraries as customers. The staff is carefully trained, proud of their skills, and enthusiastic about their work. Mel takes great pride in the ABLE System computer-guided bindery processes. Each item to be bound is bar coded and tracked through the 41 or so steps of binding by a central computer with data input at local stations by the staff as the work progresses. Kater-Crafts is one of only twelve binderies in the

country to own an Ultra-bind automatic double-fan, adhesive binding machine. The company also owns three electronic embossing machines. ABLE reads data from computer disks supplied by library customers and sends it to one of the embossing machines, which automatically stamps the desired spine information on the cover material. Mel invented a unique rope cap cutter, just one of many ideas he has introduced to make binding easier and more efficient. In addition to binding with the traditional cloth, leather, and nonwoven materials, Kater-Crafts is performing an increasing amount of polyester lamination of paperbacks, attaching the paper cover to boards and regluing and reinforcing the book block. Whatever

method of binding the customer wants, a great deal of experience is required to understand and apply exactly the right techniques. Constant quality control is paramount at Kater-Crafts.

NEW PLANS AND PROJECTS

Last year Mel traveled to Australia and this year he is planning a trip to Italy. He has binders to meet and plants to study. Since the death of his wife six years ago, he travels alone. His conversation is peppered with references to Phyllis, whom he misses very much, but he has his eyes firmly fixed on the future. In 1994, he published a lavishly designed miniature book, *You CAN Judge a Book by Its Cover*, with text by Bernard Middleton. Tini Miura designed the spectacular goatskin cover with five color onlays, as well as a Japanese cloth-covered

clamshell case with rounded leather back and leather spine label. Subsequently, Mel commissioned 33 internationally known designer binders to bind a copy of this book, each with a highly imaginative and sumptuous leather binding of their own creation. His major project of the moment has been to publish a full-color catalog of these bindings. This book will have a color photo-



Miniature books from Mel's Collection

graph of each binder at work and will be accompanied by a capsule biography. There will also be a picture of each binding, followed by a description of it as written by the binder. The book will provide biographical information on the artists and display their highly imaginative and varied bindings. Once his current publishing project is put to bed, Mel Kavlin is likely to embark upon some other ambitious and unexpected challenge. ■

This article is the personal opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the policy of the Library Binding Institute or its members.