

Digital Rivals, Economy Put Bookmakers in Bind

BY CARI TUNA

A longtime bookmaking hub, the Bay Area for years has been home to more than half a dozen small bookbinderies. But the weak economy and spread of digital publishing have left them worried about their companies and craft.

"The future for the binding industry is very dim," said Jim Martinelli, 54 years old, who owns Herring & Robinson Bookbinders in Brisbane with his brother, Joel.

Their core business of binding periodicals for university libraries, lawyers and doctors has declined as more publications become available online, sending the bindery's annual revenue down around 10% since the recession began, to \$207,000 in 2010.

The Bay Area's small-scale, or so-called trade, bookbinderies generally comprise two to 10 workers and offer a variety of services, from repairing family Bibles to binding books in batches of dozens or hundreds. (They typically leave printing pages, considered a separate trade, to printers.)

Many have specialties. Arnold's Bookbinding in South San Francisco is known for its custom boxes, many of which are used by companies to present their products. Pettingell Book Bindery, a two-person shop in Berkeley, specializes in fine bookbinding—especially high-quality work that is done without the aid of machines—while Emeryville's John DeMerritt Bookbinding, another two-person shop, caters to artists and galleries.

Small bookbinderies occupy a niche in the book world. They are larger than book artists, individuals who typically print and bind one book at a time, but smaller than large commercial bookbinderies, which often employ dozens of workers and bind thousands of books at a time with highly mechanized equipment.

Bob Berring, a University of California, Berkeley, law professor and book collector, said small bookbinderies serve an important role, making high-quality bindings for \$100 to \$200, compared with upscale book artists, who charge up to \$5,000 a book.

Data on the precise number of such shops in the Bay Area aren't available, though there are at least seven. Book-industry observers trace the concentration of bookbinding shops in part to the area's deep roots in publishing. Affluent Gold Rush-era residents were known to seek out fancy books as status symbols, and today, the region is home to many printers, small publishers and book collectors.

San Francisco "from the 19th century has been a center for fine printing and binding," said Lucy Rodgers Cohen, executive director of the San Francisco-based Book Club of California, a nonprofit group of collectors and scholars.

But in recent years, the recession and digitization of books have taken a toll. Nationwide, there were 6,100 bookbinders and 60,400 bindery workers in 2008, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which projected those numbers would drop by 12% and 20%, respectively, by 2018.

San Francisco's Cardoza-James Binding, dating to 1958, employs six full-time workers and three to four part-timers, down from around 75 employees in the 1990s, said owner Gabi Hanoun, 48. "We lost volumes to China, to Mexico, [and] technology hurt us," he said.

There are a few bright spots.

In April 2010, Cardoza-James found a new, somewhat ironic line of work: making cases for Apple Inc.'s iPad tablet. The cases, which resemble notebooks, are sold online by DODOcase of San Francisco for \$59.95. DODOcase since ordered more than 75,000 iPad cases and 3,000 for Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle from the bookbindery.

"Thank God...these iPad cases came at a perfect time," Mr. Hanoun said.

Tim James, who owns Taurus Bookbinding in San Francisco's Mission District, said requests to bind batches of personal books were rising, as the number of self-publishers grows. "This is something that's important to them...a physical memento," said Mr. James, who also runs a museum of bookbinding equipment.

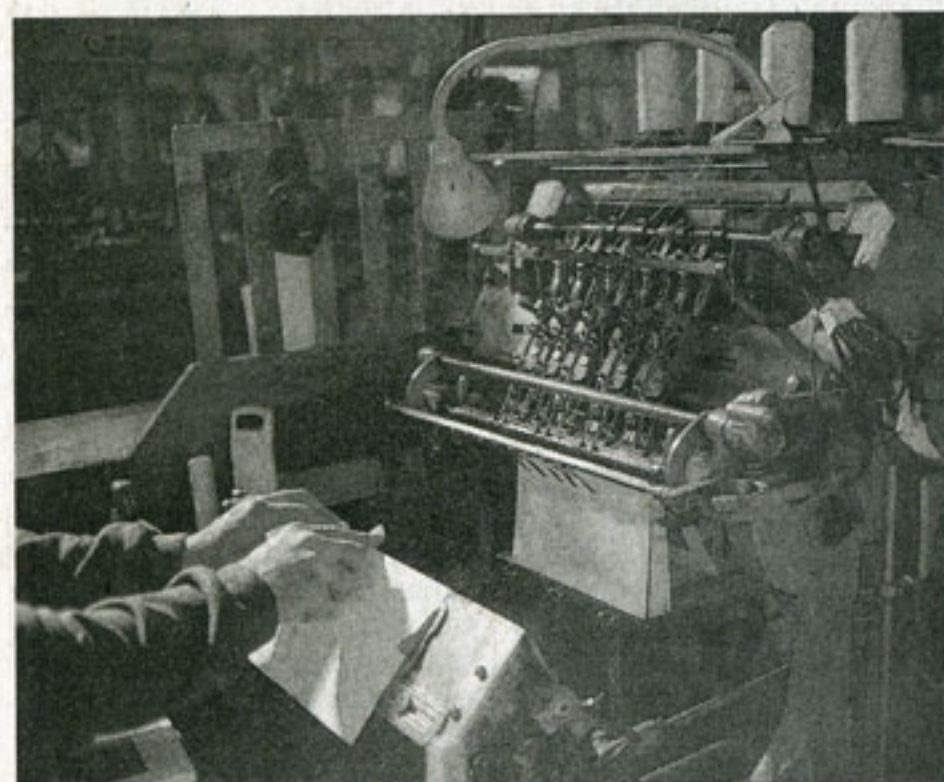
But such assignments haven't offset the overall decline in Taurus's annual revenue, which is down around 20% since the recession began to roughly \$500,000.

"We're battling against the Kindle," said Mr. James, 58. But "bookbinders have had a 1,500-year run. So if we don't make it through the next 100 years, that's better than the floppy disk."

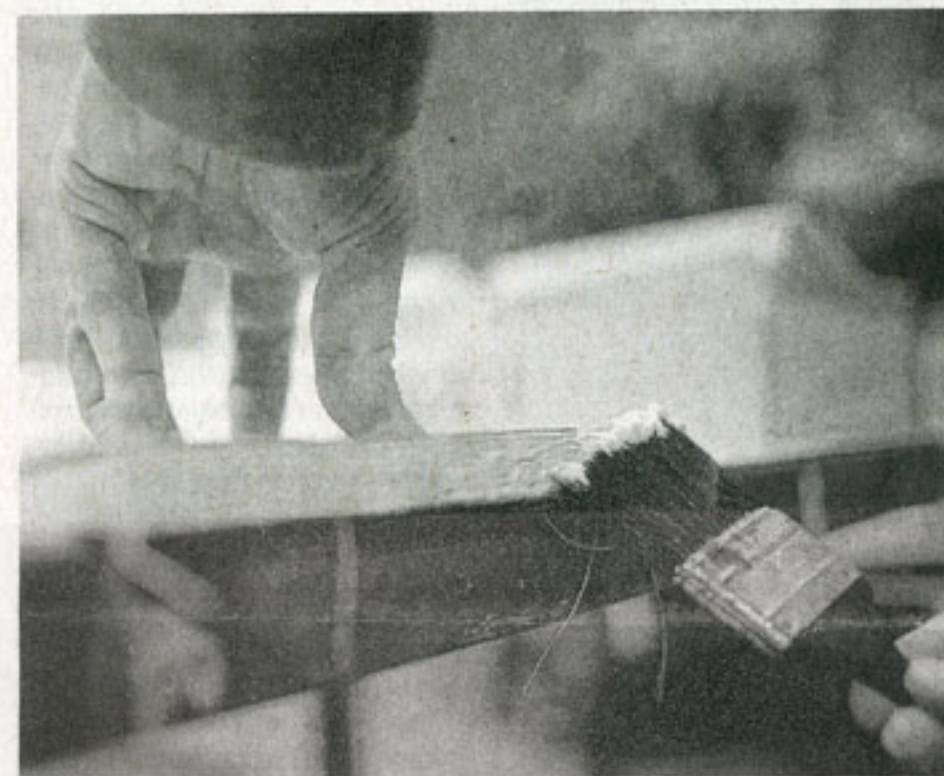


Ariel Zambelich for The Wall Street Journal (6)

The Craft of Bookbinding—Taurus Bookbinding owner Tim James applies glue to end pages that will be attached to the book's inner pages, foreground.



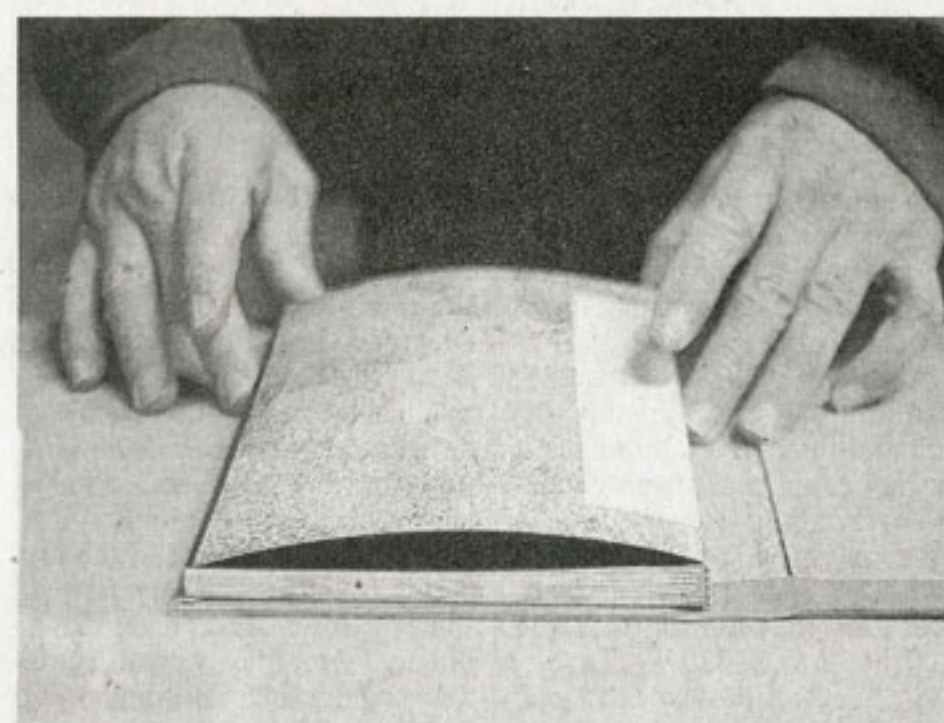
A special sewing machine is used to bind the pages.



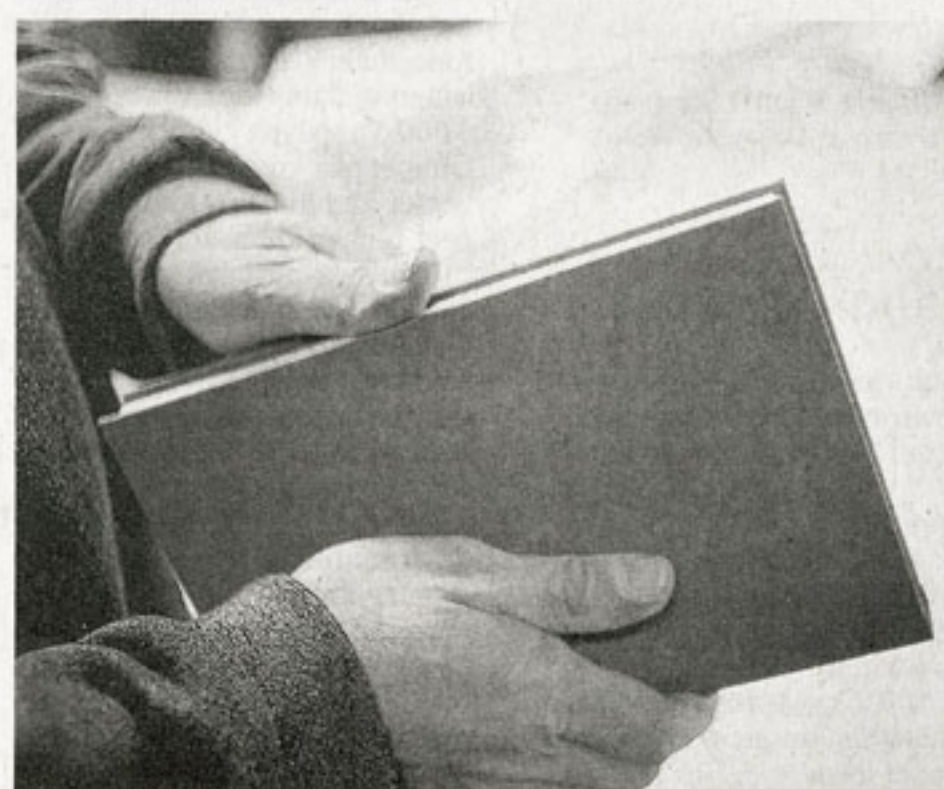
Glue is applied to the spine of the book before the cover is attached.



To create a book cover, book board is cut into pieces, before being covered by book cloth.



Mr. James uses glue to attach the book's cover to its pages.



A finished book

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ONLINE TODAY: See a video about Bay Area bookbinders at WSJ.com/SF.