

Jane Alexiadis: Restoration of a family Bible

By Jane Alexiadis Correspondent San Jose Mercury News

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Q I have a regally appointed Bible, published in 1873 by the American Publishing Co. of New York. It contains both Old and New Testaments, along with some 600 engravings. The book is 13 by 10 by 4 inches, with water stains on some, but not all, of the pages. The cover is detached, and masking tape was once used to hold it together.

I'm more interested in restoring this Bible than in having it appraised. My father left it to my son, and I'd like to have it restored before my son passes it on to my now 3-month-old grandson. Any information you have would be appreciated.

A I'm one of those people who believe that books make a home. I've dragged cartons of them across country and shipped even more. In general, books are affordable, sturdy and easy to pack. Books run the gamut from rare first editions to the board books we teathed on. Many are cherished parts of one's family heritage.

Historically, if a home could afford only one book, that was a Bible. Family events such as births, deaths, weddings and christenings were recorded by hand inside the covers; notes, locks of hair, and flowers were pressed between the pages. Bibles stand as tangible symbols of family and faith.

So, though a Bible could have been printed centuries ago, it often has very little monetary value. Many were inexpensive to begin with, and sunlight, damp, insects and regular reading may have damaged bindings, covers and pages. Usually restoring a Bible in order to sell it does not make monetary sense, but restoring a family Bible for future generations is a fine idea.

I visited Klaus Rotzscher, owner of Berkeley's Pettingell Book Bindery, for his insights. His shop has the Old World feel of a museum. Many of his tools date back well over a century and are irreplaceable.

Rotzscher is a German university-trained master bookbinder who has worked at the craft for four decades. His hand bindings are custom, unique and should last for generations.

Rotzscher explained that 22 distinct steps are involved in binding a book. When restoring a binding, he always attempts to work with what is left of the old binding and to maintain the integrity and aesthetic of the book's original appearance.

He preserves as much of the cover as possible, determines what approach will be right for the book, and works with the owner to choose boards, end papers, covers, spines, stitching styles and ornamentation.

He offers a vast selections of paper, cloth and leather, as well as a collection of more than 50 printing fonts. As a master craftsman, he has the insight, experience and understanding of books that make possible the painstaking process of breathing life back into an heirloom.

Rotzscher shared some tips for protecting your books:

- The weakest point of a book is where the cover meets the spine.

- So as not to stress the spine, when you read a heavy book, always open it to the center pages, and then back or forward to the one you want to read.
- Don't pull books off shelves by the spine.
- Keep books away from dampness or excessive sunlight.
- Protect leather bindings by occasionally wiping on shoe polish or leather preservative.

The craft of hand printing and bookbinding has not changed much since Gutenberg published his moveable-type Bible in the mid-15th century. While computers, offset printing and massive presses have changed the printing industry, it is nice to know that careful, custom handwork is still available.

Jane Alexiadis is a personal-property appraiser. Send questions, a brief description and measurements to worth@janealexiadis.com.

Resources on bookbinding and restoration

Pettingell Book Bindery in Berkeley, www.petingellbookbindery.com

San Francisco Center for the Book, www.sfcbook.org

American Bookbinders Museum in San Francisco, www.bookbindersmuseum.org

North Bennet Street School in Boston, www.nbss.edu