

How I came to know Jim Epps and Jim Heagy.

By William Francis Ahearn January 24 2006

My grandfather was a letterpress printer. In the early nineteen sixties I became a journeyman lithographer in Hartford, Connecticut. I started a small print shop and bought a 1250 Multigraph offset press and a C&P job press with a Kluge feeder for numbering forms, short run business cards and the like. My Grandfather was very proud to have a printing grandson and came to visit occasionally from Massachusetts just to visit my shop and talk letterpress. He taught me a lot.

In 1967 my career took an odd change of direction and I went to work as Art Director for the AT Howard Co of Boston. The Howards invented the first American WEB printing press. It was constructed of odd pipes and gears in a Rube Goldberg style but it would print fast if not wonderful images on rolls of newsprint. It was designed specifically to print "Bills Of Lading" using rubber plates for the burgeoning railroad industry. In the mid 1800s the Howard's made a fortune with it. The press was still in their warehouse when I left the company in 1969. Jim Heagy would have loved it.

Later my career as a Graphic Designer took me to California's Silicon Valley. After 10 years I joined the San Jose Printers Guild. When I asked if there was someone who might have a Vandercook #4 for sale, another member of the Guild told me that he knew there was a guy named Jim Epps who hung around Jim Heagy's Warehouse at Hunter's Point buying type and equipment for his planned superlative retirement letterpress printing shop, who might have press for sale.

So with great excitement I went out to Jim Heagy's letterpress warehouse. JIM HEAGY was a rather nonchalant character. He was prepared to just accept offers for the letterpress stuff that he had just laying about in great abundance. If you forced him to name a price you always paid more. He also was quick to offer printing equipment advice, the depth of his knowledge seemed bottomless. However when it came to his inventory he was not willing to empower your laziness by telling you anything specific. He would give you a clue and then you had to hunt. To hunt was worse than window shopping. There were all kinds of fabulous printing items spread out in two or three buildings. Some of it in real bad shape and some were treasures to behold, things that you couldn't pass up like a perfect complete 96 point hand-carved cherry-wood Egyptian-style type font for \$40.

I asked Heagy if he had any Vandercook equipment he then showed me an "orange" #4 press that was completely covered with a fine patina of rust. I thanked him and said I was specifically looking for a chase and he replied that I should try looking in the back of the next building on the third aisle down, so I did. When I got there another guy plowing through the stuff had the chase in his hand. So I struck up a conversation. Eventually the guy kindly gave me the chase, then offered sound advice not only about what to buy but also what to offer Heagy for what

I wanted. I thanked him and introduced myself. "Nice to meet you." he replied, "My name is Jim Epps." This meeting began a comradeship that lasted six years until Jim Epps died. Jim indeed had a loft in Berkeley where he collected printing equipment. He had plans for a print shop but his full time job as a wine label printer in Napa kept him very busy. I finally harrassed him into teaching me to print on his Vandercook #4 on his days off and weekends. From that day forward we were printing pals. While I new him this was all that I know that got printed in his Berkeley shop: The Black Thumb Press.

Jim Epps was a Vietnam veteran. He was very active in the Vets organizations and had something to do with their newsletter. His health was poor resulting from smoking, other chemical reactions and from addictions he suffered as a Captain (I believe) in Vietnam.

His rasping cough was debilitating. The clean-up chemicals for the Vandercook press were intolerable for him. As his health failed we printed less and less, and visited more frequently. Occasionally we visited Jim Heagy's warehouse in search of some item Jim Epps had to have. It was always a day trip. We would begin by having lunch in a bistro in Berkeley the name of which I have forgotten but the place was special. Jim was nuts for BLTs and he always had one with some soup.

The Heagy warehouse at Hunter's Point was a trek for Jim. We would cross the Bay Bridge and find our way to the run down industrial park. Jim Heagy was a character. He had the nose cones of rockets standing on each side of his desk. He was always ready to make a deal and he was always fair. He remembered people and never failed to say hello to me and call me by name. He often had a booth at the letterpress White Elephant Sale at Fort Mason. He and George Kane (of Santa Cruz) an antiquarian book dealer who taught letterpress at UCSC and Heagy would have great printing remembrance conversations. Jim Epps and I would go to that sale just to see what these two were up to.

When Jim Epps died I inherited his Vandercook #4 and most of his printing book collection. And whatever type I could carry away before someone else got it. His sons cleaned the place out in a flash and what they couldn't sell they sold for junk. Except for the Vandercook related items I didn't have the space or the inclination to make Jim's equipment passion mine.

Later when I moved to the East Coast Jim Heagy bought back from me some of the type he had sold to Jim Epps and again he was very fair.

Now I reside in Virginia Beach, and I still have Jim's Vandercook #4, the type and other items that make up my small but quality letterpress printshop. Besides printing letterpress I have become quite a successful fine arts photographer.