



WAREHOUSE WORK

The pastoral tradition is no longer much with us, but for more than two thousand years city-dwellers took the rustic life of the lonely shepherd as a model of simple, dignified, and even “poetic” living. Perhaps few who read and enjoyed the works of Theocritus or Longus made much of an attempt to emulate that rustic way of life. Then again, the actual *work* associated with sheep-herding was never central to its appeal. Rather, it was the solitude and the rhapsodizing about gurgling brooks and rustling leaves (occasionally capped by an encounter with a nymph or a guileless and beautiful shepherdess).

As city life declined during the Dark Ages, so did the pastoral tradition—the realities of the countryside trumped the convention—though Christ the shepherd remained a popular icon. But when civilization re-asserted itself during the Renaissance, literary pastoralism also experienced a revival. Both Petrarch and Boccaccio sang the praises of the shepherd’s lowly life, and Sannazaro’s *Arcadia* (1502) was popular throughout the sixteenth century. (I’ve never been able to get through it). We come upon similar conceits in Sir Phillip Sydney’s all but unreadable *Arcadia* and Shakespeare’s far more engaging *As You Like It*, among many other examples.

During the Enlightenment a new perspective developed alongside the poetic fancies of pastoralism, focusing less on the rhapsodies and more on the *work* not only of shepherds but of other lowly folk. Skilled labor in *all* its forms was held up as an object of praise. This was a daring position to advance at a time when, among the aristocracy in France, it was *déclassé* to



engage in business of any kind. In the famous *Encyclopedia* Diderot and his cohorts celebrated the trades and published several volumes of dazzling engravings to illustrate the intricacies involved in such crafts as metal-working, glass-blowing, textile production, masonry, printing, leatherwork, husbandry, carpentry, fashion-design, baking, distilling, candlemaking, shipbuilding, saddlery, basket-making, brewing, and soap-making. Yet the thrust of such efforts was practical and moral rather than literary, for the most part. The dignity of honest work was at stake, not the romance of pondering life and love in the midst of a flock of sheep.

In his entry on craft Diderot himself gives us the following comments:

CRAFT. This name is given to any profession that requires the use of the hands, and is limited to a certain number of mechanical operations to produce the same piece of work, made over and over again. I do not know why people have a low opinion of what this word implies; for we depend on the crafts for all the necessary things of life. Anyone who has taken the trouble to visit casually the workshops will see in all places utility allied with the greatest evidence of intelligence: antiquity made gods of those who invented the crafts; the following centuries threw into the mud those who perfected the same work. I leave to those who have some principle of equity to judge if it is reason or prejudice that makes us look with such a disdainful eye on such indispensable men. The poet, the philosopher, the orator, the minister, the warrior, the hero would all be nude, and lack bread without this craftsman, the object of their cruel scorn.

Here Diderot identifies a number of professions that were considered dignified in his day—poet, minister, warrior. Lurking in the mist behind these exalted activities we may detect the tri-partate division of society—the sword, the plow, and the book—that anthropologists have traced back to the earliest days of Indo-European culture. The sword and the book are there, at any rate. Mitra and Varuna. Let's give a little credit to the plow as well, Diderot is saying. And not merely the farmer, but all those ingenious working people who contribute to our well-being.



In the early years of the twentieth century the English essayist G. K. Chesterton remarked, "... I genuinely regret that the shepherd is the only democratic calling that has ever been raised to the level of the heroic callings conceived by an aristocratic age. So far from objecting to the ideal shepherd, I wish there were an Ideal postman, and Ideal grocer, and an Ideal plumber."

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As I write these words I'm looking out my window at three young men who are shoving the severed limbs of my neighbor's beautiful white pine into a wood-chipper. Now *there* is an ideal occupation: arborist. And all day today I've been listening to the unfamiliar sounds of KQRS. The radio belongs to a handyman who's been pounding the decrepit tiles out of the shower-surround in the bathroom down the hall. The plan is to set new concrete wall-board in place, then redo the tiles and grout. It isn't a job I'd be comfortable taking on.

And how about warehouse work as a democratic ideal? I'm not much for nostalgia, but I occasionally feel a twang of it when I pass the loading dock of

a warehouse—any warehouse—and see the sign SHIPPING/RECEIVING hanging above the door. It's a job I did for more than twenty years, mostly on the receiving end.

If you haven't actually done it (and I doubt if you have), then you'd probably be hard-pressed to imagine how much fun warehouse work can be. Yet it's difficult to convey the virtues of such work in a few words. During my years as a warehouse worker, I would occasionally make the attempt to do so, at a family gathering or a cocktail party, though I met very few people who were able to listen for more than a few seconds to even a cursory description of what the process entails. My interlocutor's eyes would glaze over, or begin scouring the room to locate the punch-bowl or a newly-arrived guest, with a hasty exit in mind. At times I could almost see the thought surface, "Poor fellow... Such dolor, such tedium, such mindless effort!!! And yet, he *seems* fairly bright." And in all fairness, I have to admit that the world of freight bills and pallet jacks, two-wheelers and shrink wrap, bin locations and routing slips, is hardly glamorous.



Once, however, at a friend's wedding, I described my line of work to a stranger who was just finishing up a PhD on a minor aspect of one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. "Working with your hands? Working with books? Boy, that's something I would really enjoy," he said. I could tell he was serious. I think he understood.

At its best, warehouse work offers a marvelous blend of physical exertion, intellectual challenge, and sociability. A lot depends on the product being warehoused, I suppose. Managing an inventory of

spark plugs or party favors might get old fairly quickly. Groceries or even shoes would be better, I think.

I worked at a book distributor. The product itself was both interesting and ever-changing (unlike canned tuna fish and carbonated soda) and the product itself drew a wide range of interesting women and men through the warehouse doors, many of whom had recently completed a liberal arts education and were casting about for steady work while they figured out what they *really* wanted to do.

A company's management style also has an important role to play in any work environment, no doubt, and it's fair to say, I think, that the management style at the Bookmen, where I worked, was fairly laid-back.

In fact, in its day the Bookmen was an institution in the regional book world, and since its demise it's become a legend. Not long ago I was chatting with a senior editor of a prestigious local monthly magazine. When I mentioned that I'd worked for many years at Bookmen he replied, "I applied there—they wouldn't hire me." The bitterness and disappointment of the experience were still plainly to be seen on the man's face.

The building itself, which has recently been converted into lavish half-million dollar lofts, is actually two buildings standing side by side. In the early years we were located in the more narrow of the two, and even in that building there were other tenants on some of the upper floors. (There are even earlier days, in other buildings, but that was before my time.)

The adjoining building was occupied by a plumbing wholesaler. I can remember the Saturday morning we broke through the wall from one building to the other using jack-hammers to pound through the brick and plaster and chickenwire. Ever since that day the geography of the Bookmen included an "old" building and a "new" building, though with the passage of time this distinction was lost on a growing number of newer employees, who had known only a single unified space with a few odd openings in the walls.

Bookmen did draw an interesting crowd. Among the folks with whom I worked in the course of my long stint on the dock I can recall former bartenders,

horse trainers, lawyers, sommeliers, actors, installation artists, pyrotechnicians, dance drummers, Sumerian scholars, professional bicyclists, auto mechanics, professors, potters, and DJs. Colleagues went on from Bookmen to become X-ray technicians, journalists, lawyers, preachers, housewives, bookstore managers, buyers, and real estate agents. The turn-over was high, and a worker that had stuck around for a year was considered a veteran. Yet surprising as it may seem, one distinctive thing about the Bookmen was how many of the old-timers continued to hang around. In fact, when the Bookmen finally folded, nearly every one of the warehouse managers (as opposed to the office and executive personnel) was from the same generation of employees that had come on board in the mid- to late-seventies.

When I started in 1978, Bill Roth was my boss, and John Kudrle was Bill's boss. (You'll be running in to quite a few names in the pages that follow. I don't have the space—or the courage—for extended portraits. Just imagine: Valued colleague, maybe even a friend.) When Bill Mockler arrived a few months later, he started on the dock with me. Twenty years down the road Kudrle and Mockler were the head buyers, I was the manager of several departments on the first floor, and Roth was in charge of all the pickers and customer-contact upstairs. Meanwhile, Blair Shafer (who was described to me on my first-day tour of the place as "the hardest-working man in the warehouse") went from managing returns to heading the Target department, and later took over the newly-created Barnes and Noble fulfillment area. He ended up managing Bill Roth's area when Bill became our sales manager. Blair's assistant in charge of returns, Tom Daubensbeck, took over the Target responsibilities when Blair moved upstairs. Judy Goranson managed the shipping for many years, and was well-loved by all her people, and Louis Allgeyer, following a stint at returns, became an indispensable fixture on the children's floor.

It may have been a little disappointing for younger employees to see how firmly entrenched this "middle-management" cadre appeared to be. There was nowhere to advance to! And it's likely that the owners, Norton, Ned, and later Ned's son Brett, more than occasionally longed for a bit of fresh blood on the warehouse floor. I still see my old friends and colleagues Roth,

Mockler, Allgeyer, Daubensbeck, and Kudrle from time to time, and when I do, there is affection and also some sort of pleasure in knowing we've been through some of the same things together. Yet none of us, I think, has saved those T-shirts that were printed up and widely distributed in the warehouse back in our younger years with a slogan on the front:

JUST ANOTHER COLLEGE-EDUCATED
FLUNKY IN A DEAD END JOB

Bill Roth once remarked to me that among the departments the one I'd wound up with—receiving—was the best. Why? Because I had no contact with customers! On the other hand, I was also largely isolated from contact with the vaguely prestigious world of sales reps, free lunches, free books, movie tickets, author visits, book conventions, and all the rest of that. (Maybe Bill was just trying to make me feel good!) Unlike shipping, which bore the burden of daily shipping deadlines, workers in the receiving department could simply drop a less important order if a hotter one arrived. And unlike Target and returns, both of which were located in the basement, the receiving department was on a floor with high ceilings, large south-facing windows, and fresh air blowing in daily through the loading dock doors for many months of the year. Ah, that was nice.



Standing thirty feet from the open dock door, at the crest an almost imperceptible upward slope, you could look with pleasure down the length of the interior toward the accounting offices, the elevator, and the customer service department in its glass booth on the opposite corner of the building. Nearer at hand were the packers, most of whom had their backs to

you (later they were moved into the next building), and the back-order department, tucked behind a row of tall tables and shelves (which made it difficult to tell precisely what they were doing—if anything). On some afternoons thunderstorms would roll in from the west, and we would smell the dust rising from the asphalt parking lot as the first drops of rain hit. We would stand in the dock door, (the one that was behind a wall of plastic sheeting out of sight of the offices), as the lightning streaked across the sky and the rain came down. The water would stream across the parking lot and gather in large pools in the low spots along the railroad tracks.



My professional contact with the outside world in those days was largely limited to the North Loop truck drivers who brought in our freight. The same men showed up day after day, of course, and we got to know them quite well. We knew some of them by their nick-names—Froggy, Hammer, Cowboy, Herman the German, Red—but with most of them it was first names only. In the early years, before de-regulation, there were more carriers and therefore more drivers stopping by. I'm thinking of Admiral Merchants, Crouse Cartage, McCleans, Smith, Witte, Werner, Murphy, Neuendorf, Hyman, Freightmasters, PIE, Roadway, CFWY, Yellow, and K & R. A few of these lines are still around, though I wouldn't be able to tell you which.

In the early years the shipping department was on the fourth floor, and as a truck pulled up to the dock we would call up the carrier's name on the intercom, then wait by the elevator for the freight to descend. The UPS cart—part green, part orange— would come rolling down at around 3:30, piled high with boxes,

and when the truck arrived we'd toss the packages one by one into the back of it. Two decades later we were using that same long six-wheeled cart. The only difference was that by 3:30 the UPS driver had already been by several times to load a pallet or two of shrink-wrapped packages into his "straight job." During the holiday season UPS spotted a semi-trailer at one of our dock doors every night and we'd roll the pallets in ourselves as they accumulated on the dock.

In the course of chewing the fat after a freight delivery we'd learn about a driver's pheasant-hunting trip to South Dakota, his remodeling schemes for the rec room, the latest Teamsters meetings, the kids' homework assignments, the trips to Vegas, and the snowmobile accidents. Some of the drivers later became sales reps for their companies, or for other ones. Among the veterans were Larry Fyten (PIE); George Wohls (Halls); who owned several apartment buildings and was considered "rich" by his colleagues; Orville (Hyman) whose wife ran off with a dispatcher, catching him completely by surprise; Dennie (Smith) who had a glass eye and thought he was a really good softball player; Paul (K&R) who looked a lot like the lead-guitarist for a local band called the Groove Merchants; Roadway Bob; Lee (Yellow); and Clem (CFWY), who stopped in daily for many years simply to use the phone.

UPS and RPS also made twice-daily visits, though the personnel tended to change every few years, as a driver hurt his back and was fired or forced to quit. In Bookmen's final years we were blessed with two very fine and durable drivers, Steve (RPS) who often took time off to go kayaking in Central America, and Wayne (UPS.) I still see Wayne driving his brown truck when I'm in the old neighborhood, and we discuss how his retirement date is receding into the future at the same time that his pension plan is being sabotaged by the company.

One of the great pleasures of working in receiving was that you never knew what the day would bring. It might be a few pallets of the monthly releases from Bantam or Pinnacle or Warner. It might be the Silhouettes or the Harlequins, which came in three batches every month. Some of the most interesting titles came via UPS in small shipments. And in

August every year the huge Random House "dating" order arrived. It typically ran from twelve to sixteen pallets, and took more than a week to check in. (The "dating" order was the one you didn't have to pay for until after Christmas. The bill was post-dated, which encouraged you to order more.)

Our UPS deliveries ran upward of several hundred pieces daily, and it was a challenge to sort out the individual multi-box orders, many of which looked exactly alike except for small computer-generated markings on the labels. On a given day we might get four or five Warner shipments via UPS, some complete, others not, several of which were of the same number of cartons, so that it wasn't sufficient merely to separate the shipments by carton count. And if it happened that we got behind in the sorting process, the difficulty of catching up again increased exponentially as each day passed. After being closed for three days for inventory, we'd be deluged with six or seven hundred cartons, which took several days merely to sort—not to mention the added labor of checking them in.

On the other hand, shipments would often roll off the trucks neatly stacked and shrink-wrapped. You could determine the "block" at a glance—that is, the number of books on a layer—and arrive at the carton count before the pallet-jack had come to a stop. Many mass-market shipments came in 14-blocks, Health Communications had long thin boxes well suited to a 10-block. Chimney blocks—hollow in the center—were popular, and seven-blocks were often used for large squarish boxes.

But there were also palletized orders containing boxes of many sizes and shapes piled wily-nilly and wrapped tightly to prevent them from collapsing. Bantam children's orders were the worst. You'd have to take them apart, stack them in piles on the floor, and count the boxes one by one. You might end up counting 704, though the freight bill said 705. So you started all over again.

Other drivers might be waiting in line to unload, and there was always the temptation, on busy days, to *presume* that everything was there and sign off on a shipment without counting it. I frequently reminded my staff on the dock that we were counting hundred-dollar bills, and the extra time required to "get it right" was always well-spent.

Once a given order had been counted and signed for, it was ready to be “received.” In other words, we had to determine if we’d gotten everything we’d been billed for. At the same time, we had to make sure we’d actually *ordered* the things that had been shipped to us. Publishers invariable combined several of our POs on their invoices, and they often combined more than one invoice in a shipment. Untangling this skein of ISBN numbers, PO numbers, and invoices was often a complicated enterprise. At the same time, just counting the books correctly was an operation fraught with potential for error. The task was so simple, and yet so monotonous, that the mind invariably tended to wander. In the end it was harder than weeding a Japanese moss-garden, and headphones were a genuine blessing. By distracting and occupying four or five levels of thought, this convenient contraption (called the Walkman in those days) left a slice of intelligence free that was just thick enough to perform the task at hand properly.

Once an order had been received, the formidable task remained of entering the information into our proprietary computer system, which had plenty of idiosyncrasies of its own to accommodate.

Once we’d determined precisely what we’d received and entered it into the system (the numbers went off in two entirely different directions: our inventory and financial systems were never properly integrated) the task remained of routing the books themselves to the correct departments.

It all may sound deadly dull, but it was a lot like doing an elaborate Chinese puzzle, and I found it very satisfying to bring the receiving count into line with the invoice count, see the dollar figures match up, make the necessary adjustments for ISBN changes, books sent in error, missing books, price changes, and various other curious anomalies, and then deliver the books to the departments that had ordered them.

The act of delivering the books to the various floors of the warehouse gave the receiving personnel the opportunity to move about and see what was going on in other parts of the building. Ah, freedom! After bringing a completed shipment up to the second floor, for example, I would more than occasionally stick my head through the door of the central office there to

chat with the buyer’s assistant who was positioned at a desk just on the other side—Ann Penaz or Jane Boers or Kate Gustaveson or Ardie Eckard, depending on the era. During those brief conversations I would invariably be torn by the thought that I’d left the elevator door open, which meant that no one else in the building could use it. Yet to close the door would undermine the *en passant* nature of the conversational exchanges. And if someone from another department did happen to call the elevator away once I’d closed the door I’d be left *in flagrante delicto*, stranded with my pallet jack on the wrong floor.

On the third floor there was always the likelihood of striking up a conversation with Louis Allgeyer or (if it happened to be after noon) with Jim Henderson, who was in charge of the remainder department. I would sometimes arrive in the basemen to find Mike Weiss (grizzled beard and Harley Davidson T-shirt) discussing boutique Napa Valley wines with his colleagues.

By the same token, people were often passing by the receiving department on one errand or another. During the daily garbage pick-up, for example, each floor sent someone down pushing a big blue 2-yard dumpster, and we’d all stand around as they were tipped one by one into the hopper on the back of the truck. Members of the stock department would show up periodically to see what was coming down the pipe for them, and the buyers would occasionally cruise through looking for titles they’d been waiting for. Rick Johnston of the computer department would stop by almost daily to discuss movies or to exchange CDs. Over the years he introduced me to Sun Volt, Charlie Haden’s Quartet West, Karin Allyson, Lucinda Williams, Jimmy Dale Gilmore, and Allison Krause, among many others.

I would occasionally bring in a waffle iron and we’d have a little breakfast get-together in the receiving area. The smell of toasting waffles would soon be circulating up the elevator shaft and off into every corner of the building. We would often invite Becky Petro, Mara Hoff, and the other members of the library division to join us on such occasions, but quite a few other visitors also just happened to drift by as well.

SPECIAL OCCASIONS

The Bookmen year, like the medieval calendar of saints-days, was punctuated by a number of special events. On the first spring day that the temperature reached 70° everyone got out at 3. Inventory was a three-day escape from routine. And for many years we had a hat contest on Halloween. The shippers, packers, stockers, and pickers would be hard at work for days (during their down-times, of course) devising creative headgear using posters, cardboard boxes, and whatever lay close at hand. (Bringing material from home was against the rules.) After the entries had been properly paraded around the floor three judges would confer and choose a winner. Many of the entries were take-offs on currently popular mass-market titles like *Flowers in the Attic* and *The Things They Carried*, and Wayne Dwyer, Elvis, and other personalities showed their faces every now and again. The most imaginative hat I can recall—or at any rate the most kinetic—was put together by Terry Sanborn of the shipping department. He rigged up a vacuum cleaner to a cardboard box, set it on “blow” and paraded around the room blowing plastic packing peanuts all over the room.

Our yearly Open House was held every year on the first Sunday in December, and it was as memorable for the employees as it was for the customers, though for different reasons. And the Christmas party was perhaps the only time when most Bookmen employees were gathered together in the same room at the same time. The meal consisted of Norton’s pesto, smoked salmon from Morey’s Fish House, corned beef and cole slaw left over from the Open House, and an assortment of other delicacies. Someone invariably made a speech—the best that I can remember were delivered by Dana Rhodes, Glenn Schmidt, John Dole, and Jim Henderson. Every employee was given a Dayton’s catalog from which to choose a gift, and there was heated controversy aroused by the question of whether the clock radio in my catalog measured up to the DVD player in your catalog, and why it was that so-and-so, who did almost *nothing* all day, got the catalog with the motorcycle in it.

BRIMAX

In the receiving department the unexpected arrival of a shipment of Brimax Books marked an entirely different type of special event. Brimax Books were cheap board books printed in China with titles like “1-2-3” “God Loves Me” and “Dogs and Cats.” They arrived in 20 or 40-foot containers and the pallets were invariably double-stacked. Because we didn’t have a fork-lift, this meant that we had to unload at least half of the books case by case. And more often than not, the flimsy plastic bands holding the pallets together had popped during the rough passage across the Pacific Ocean, and the entire trailer would be a chaos of loose books with the titles intermixed that would have to be unloaded and sorted one by one. Forty tons of books. It could take all afternoon.



Yet there is something almost fun about facing such a task, breathing in the paper-dust that’s collected in the trailer as the cases rub against one another during the long voyage across the Pacific, restacking the pallets and hauling them off one after the other. This is work. This is real. And when you’re done you feel like you’ve actually done something.

I myself was privy to relatively few of the after-hours social activities that went on around the building, but from time to time an organization would spring up that was hard to miss. A Brewers Guild developed for a few years on the third floor, spearheaded by Tom Vetter, Gil Wahl, and Amy Cohen. To be a genuine member, you had to be a home-brewer, though from time to time they'd bring in their latest batches and invite others up to the third floor for a late afternoon sampling party—an event that Ned, Norton, and Brett indulgently sanctioned. Tom Vetter was a sort of Encyclopedia Brown mechanical tinkerer, most famous for having fashioned a Barbie Doll that drank beer from a tiny plastic mug. Tom would bring this doll to each gathering. When Barbie raised her glass, however, holding it in both her hands, she invariably spilled all of the beer down her ample chest—an event that never failed to amuse the assembled crowd. Tom later developed a bungy-jumping Barbie Doll, and at gatherings on the first floor (which, as you may recall, had a very high ceiling), we'd all watch in mild amazement as she leapt from the rafters, bobbed up and down a few times, and then dangled lifelessly in the air at the end of her bungy chord.

Jan Leigh was also a vigorous presence on the third floor in those days. She was an actress, and several of us made the journey one evening to St. Paul to see her in a staging of Steven Sondheim's *Assassins*, in which she played a hysterical murderer brilliantly. Jan was also the moving force behind a theatrical performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* that we staged in the packing department one afternoon after work. Jan had cut the play to a twenty-minute length, and the production was filled with many unusual warehouse touches. For example, at one point the dead body of Julius Caesar was brought out from backstage lying lifeless on the green-and-orange UPS cart. The entire performance was taped, along with a number of interviews that capture quite a bit of the inventiveness and wit that was circulating around the building in those days. Big Jim Frame, who worked with me in receiving at the time, hosted a very stimulating party on his backyard deck after the show.

In an earlier era, the attempt was made to bring the collective insight of the warehouse together by means of a weekly lunchroom gathering called

Remnant Thoughts. The short-lived but lively group was organized by Bob Villani and Tim Danz, as I recall. We would meet in the lunchroom and discuss poems, or a short-story, or women's rights. Bill Mockler attended regularly, along with Chuck Viren, Gretchen Bratvolt, Linda Belmont, Rod Richards, and Ann Penaz.

The longest surviving group that I was a part of, however, was a nameless Bookmen writer's group. We would meet once a month at the Bassett Creek Saloon to discuss a story or poem that one of the members had written. The discussions were preceded every month by at least an hour of humorous repartee based on curious phrases we would spot on the menu. The Bassett Creek Cod came in for unusually rough treatment. Once the serious discussions finally got underway, they almost invariably consisted of ripping apart the month's offering, regardless of who had submitted it. Either the details were irrelevant, or there were too many details. Either the events were incomprehensible, or too obvious to be described in such great detail. By the end of the evening the scope of discussion had broadened, and we found ourselves considering such issues as whether communism had ever done *anyone* any good. (One of our members, Jim Henderson, was a self-proclaimed Red—under the influence of his wife Athena, I suspect, a very nice woman who had spent some time in a Greek prison.) Another favorite topic was whether the martial art of Akido could be considered “peaceful,” (one of our members, Chuck Viren, was working his way through its various levels of rank.) Along with Jim and Chuck, the group consisted of Rod Richards, Rick Johnston, Brett Laidlaw, Gil Wahl, and John Steininger. Steininger dropped out after a while and Gil was finally expelled after failing for many months to come up with even a single submission.

Brett Laidlaw was undoubtedly the star of the group, insofar as he had studied with Annie Dillard and also had a novel coming out soon from Farrar-Straus-Giroux.

The group eventually fell apart, but we revived it a year or so later when Brett, who had quit the Bookmen, published his book, won a prize, gone on a promotional tour, and taught English in China, stopped by to say hi to his old friends. When we'd

all agreed to start meeting again, his comment was, “You’ve rescued me from the wilderness.”

Yet there can be little doubt that the most durable of all Bookmen institutions was the lunch-hour touch football game. The first games that I participated in took place before 1980, when we were still in the *old* building, and the teams were huge—six or seven on a side, including a number of old-timers I hardly knew. We would all pile into a few cars and head out Highway 55 to Harrison field a mile or two away. An hour or more later we’d come straggling back to the building, aching and bruised, and stand around discussing the great interceptions we’d almost made, and how so-and-so hadn’t counted to “three-football” before rushing in on that critical third down.

As the years went by there were many revivals of lunch-hour football as new-comers joined the staff who seemed willing and able to throw and catch the ball. Jim Henderson was the most avid participant of all, and he was a part of virtually every game that I can recall. Jim’s enthusiasm was so great, in fact, that he carried a set of orange cones in his car, and he would go out early before every game to chalk the field. Mild-mannered to the point of lethargy at work, he would spring to life on the playing field, where he was an accurate passer and deceptively fast while running routes. Other regulars during the early years included Rod Richards, Chuck Viren, and John Dole. In later years the cadre of devoted players included Guy Neske, our controller Paul Sykora (who lived for sports and later became controller for the Minnesota North Stars hockey team), Bill Kaufmann (who had been a cornerback at St. John’s) and skinny Mike Ryan. During one unfortunate phase we allowed a few women to join us—they didn’t take the game seriously, however, and ended up undermining the group’s competitive élan.

It was only in the last few years that Jim and I found it impossible to generate enthusiasm for a game among the younger employees. Something had happened to the youth of America. They’d become sissies and wimps. Or maybe it was just that they didn’t want to hang around with a couple of strange, washed-up forty-something warehouse workers who had never really grown up.

REMAINDER SALES

Then there were the remainder sales. Our remainder department was a bust, when considered in terms of revenue per square foot. But Norton liked to sticker remainders. And the sales brought customers into the warehouse that we might not otherwise see. Besides, remainders were cheap, and fun. We’d often receive large cardboard shrouds full of books that were pristine except for a little red or black dot on the edge identifying them as a “remainder.” Most of the material was commonplace, and some of it was dreadful. One shipment contained an entire pallet of Merv Griffin’s biography, which was no bargain even at fifty cents a book. But there were almost invariably a few gems scattered here and there—art books, cookbooks, poetry, fiction—that could be had for \$2.98 or less, rather than the \$22.95 list price. (The 40% employees discount brought things down even further.) Julia Childs’ French cookbooks, first editions of John Berryman and little novels by Milan Kundera and Peter Handke and Julian Barnes. We’d occasionally get pallets of Penguin classics that would be marked at \$1.98 apiece.



In the course of these remarks it may have become clear that aside from the stimulating work, the extra-curricular activities, and the great deals on books, it was the camaraderie that made working at the Bookmen so gratifying. I realize that this is not a pastoral virtue, but it was nonetheless real, and I think I ought to mention it. Over the years I had the pleasure of working with a number of great people, many of whom I’ve already mentioned. Rod Richards was my stalwart assistant for many years, and I learned a lot

about music and literature from him. He introduced me to Los Lobos, for example, and also spoke highly of the Surrealists, though it took me quite a while to check them out. Rod later got married, had a son, ran a small-press book warehouse in St. Paul called Bookslinger, moved to Arizona, moved back, and the last I heard, had become a Unitarian minister.

Among other co-workers who passed through the receiving department were Mark Lageson, who had a fairly firm grasp of Hegel, though he later renounced that idealist to become a Christian. (Mark went to law school, now practices sporadically—mostly pro bono—and spends much of his time raising his four children.) Guy Neske was in receiving for many years, and we sometimes partied together. He now works for American Express, does triathlons, and reads French novels. James Lindbloom was a jazz enthusiast with a heavy leaning toward what we used to call “fee jazz,” and he may have had the world’s biggest collection of bootleg Sun Ra recordings. I am eternally in his debt for reviving my moribund interest in Pharaoh Sanders. His aunt had once been married to soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy, and he would occasionally bring in a *New Yorker* with a poem that his mother, Nancy Willard, had written about him, or a children’s book she’d dedicated to him and a girl-friend that he’d broken up with after the book went to press.

Brooding Anne Penaz brought an edgy artiness to the daily grind of processing books; John Steininger always had something interesting to report about a current enthusiasm, be it Pre-Raphaelite painting or Alexander Dumas. One summer he, Louis Allgeyer, and I made a trip to Slim Buttes and the Short Pine Hills out in western South Dakota. We drove out grassy ranch roads, camped in pastures, and woke up surrounded by curious cows who ran off skittishly the minute the wind shook the tent.

The artistic proclivities of our personnel were made evident on those occasions when the third floor staff would host an after-hours art show. From bowling-ball sculptures to naked Jesuses, from Goth metalwork to amateur photography, the shows were full of interest—though I suppose that wasn’t really the point. It was at one of those after-hours events that I first read some of the work of Kate DiCamillo.

She’d framed one of her very short stories and hung it on the endcap of the Young Adult aisle.

Occasionally authors that had *already* become famous dropped by the warehouse as part of their promotional tour. Joseph Heller, Annie Liebowitz, Margaret Atwood, James Salter, Bill Moyers, and Rosilyn Carter were perhaps among the most notable. On one occasion it was rumored that Isaac Singer might make it down. He was in town at the time, but he never showed up. And it was also rumored that George Harrison would come in to sign copies of *I, Me, Mine...*

THE FORMERLY BOOKMEN GROUP

Near the end of my stint at Bookmen I was involved with a few colleagues in a series of after-hours gatherings that developed into a distinctive group. Though many of the participants had long been friends, I became involved as a result of a coincidence. A woman that worked on the fifth floor, Dimitria Phill, had left her job to pursue a career as a food writer. I agreed to be the subject of one of her first mini-profiles. She wrote a piece about my habit of making pizzas on the grill, and a few weeks later she did a piece about another employee, Lisa Legge, who had grown up on a farm in Iowa. One day Lisa, whom I hardly knew at the time, suggested to me that we have a pizza-grilling party at her house. “I’ll be the hostess, you invite the guests,” was her plan. Well, why not? (Just the other day, Lisa said something that surprised me. “You were my first friend at Bookmen.” That’s a nice thing to say about anybody.)

We gathered a few days later in the front yard of her house in South Minneapolis. It had a big front porch, the yard was surrounded by a picket fence (as I recall), and Lisa and her husband Craig had strung a chain of plastic Chinese lanterns through the branches of the overhanging trees. Lots of people came, though I don’t really have time to introduce you to them all. The pizza was pretty good, and everyone talked long into the night.

Later gatherings were held during the summer months, and though the personnel was never quite the same, eventually a cadre of party-pals developed that included Lisa, Annie Klessig, Guy Neske, Maria

Bianchi, Carol Jackson, Rick Johnston, and Richard Stegal. Some of those early parties developed a mythic aura with the passage of time, becoming known as “the one where James wore a dress,” “the one where Guy got Cable,” “the one where Maria’s bed broke,” and “the one where Annie’s couch caught on fire.” Talk often drifted from work-related gossip and travel tales to the latest concerts and films, and wine and finger-food were invariably central to an evening’s progress. Birthdays were celebrated sporadically, and every so often I would deliver an interminable slide-show of a recent trip to Burgundy or Spain. Though I was not the oldest member of the group, I was definitely the most un-cool, and I quickly developed a reputation as “the one who goes home early.”



During my last few years on the loading dock, I was put in charge of a few more departments, including shipping, packing, and customer care, and the daily routine got even more entertaining. My staff more than doubled, and building maintenance also fell under my purview. It was my good fortune to have knowledgeable, able workers already in place at various parts of the building, including Jim

Lavigne, Clark Gould, Judy Nelson, and Richard Stegal. Richard was a master at dealing with “walk-in” customers. He is also the only person I’ve ever met who could read books of poetry, one after another, from cover to cover. I saw him do it many times!

The backorder department was one of the trickier positions to fill. We had many public library accounts with complicated summer reading programs and we were also deeply involved with regional distributions for the Barnes and Noble chain. The processes for accumulating back-orders, cutting POs, binning and allocating incoming stock, generating pick-lists, and actually picking the orders, could be almost Byzantine in its complexity.

Yet precisely because of its relative complexity, it was a position that many employees aspired to. The work was varied and perhaps even interesting, and the position enjoyed a degree of autonomy, due both to its relative complexity and also to its location, off in an isolated corner of the building beyond the loading dock. Among the many stellar workers who filled that post over the years I ought to single out Mary Beth Freeman, who was an able worker and a sunny presence on the floor, day in and day out. She became a good friend and also a part of our occasional after-hours colloquies. In fact, she and her husband Glenn hosted several memorable events in the backyard of their house in Northeast Minneapolis, from which point you could watch Fourth of July fireworks going off downtown.

My life at Bookmen definitely improved when John Steininger, whom I’ve already mentioned several times, agreed to come over and lend a hand in the receiving department. This gave me greater freedom to attend to things in other parts of the building. It was also a great boon to me that John had for many years done all sorts of building maintenance. He alone knew where the re-set buttons were on the freight elevators, for example, and he initiated me into the methods of reviving our largest elevator by applying pressure to the contacts in the motor shaft in the rooftop penthouse with two eight-foot two-by-fours. The sparks would fly and the noise was horrendous, though the technique worked. (Considered in retrospect, I doubt whether it was a sensible thing to do.)

Because the elevators were old, the repairmen we

brought in from time to time to fix them would often underscore how difficult it was to find replacements for the contacts that kept them running. I followed a few friendly leads and eventually found suppliers that would make both the copper and the carbon parts of these contacts, and I ordered what I considered to be a ten-year supply. Within a few years the repairmen were asking me where I'd gotten the contacts and offering to buy them from *me*.

Among the other responsibilities that went with building maintenance were to patrol the parking lot for unwanted cars, realign the elevator doors when they went off-track, hire and fire janitorial services, deal with requests from the fire marshal to see that the fire doors and fire extinguishers worked, arrange leases for the postage and copying machines, and so on. In my role as shipping manager I was responsible for negotiating freight rates with the various truck lines and also for keeping large quantities of various cardboard boxes on hand. As our one-time receptionist Meleah Maynard (now a successful free-lance writer) once put it, "It's simple. If something comes up, call John."

But don't get me wrong. During its heyday the Bookmen had a staff of well over a hundred people, and there were plenty of things going on in the building about which I knew absolutely nothing. In its final years meeting after meeting was held up on the second floor at which the newly-christened Leadership Team (CFO, HR, Controller, IT, etc) plotted strategies to wrest the firm from the fate that Gordon's, Pacific Pipeline, and other mid-sized wholesalers in other parts of the country had already met with. All of that stuff was way over my head. What I'm talking about here is work. Warehouse work. I'm merely trying to suggest how varied and interesting it can sometimes be. And I hardly need to add that there were more than a few dull moments along the way, too. Often during the month of January, for example, which tended to be slow, we would spend hours opening box sets of Beverly Cleary and Choose Your Own Adventure titles. After removing and sorting the books, we would see who was better at tossing the empty boxes into a dumpster positioned half-way across the room.

In the spring of 2002 the Bookmen closed its doors. Ingram, the world's largest book wholesaler, had bought it, and Ingram had no need for our warehouse operations. All they were interested in was developing relations with a few of our corporate accounts.

The doors closed in May. During the summer months the returns drifted back from our customers. By early September this accumulated inventory had been sent back to the publishers and the building was empty.

Many local publishers (the one-book-wonders, we affectionately called them) lamented Bookmen's demise, because it had offered them a convenient channel of distribution to the major chains. Local independent booksellers also shed a tear, though they had never bought much from us, preferring to order from bigger wholesalers who had more extensive inventories. Teachers and librarians also felt the loss.

But the Bookmen had always been more than just a business, both to the Twin Cities book community and to the men who owned it—Norton Stillman, Ned Waldman, and Ned's son Brett. These three men believed, and continue to believe, in the community of books and the creative spirit associated with it. This belief was widely recognized and appreciated, I think, by the local literary community, and I, for one, can testify to the impact it had on the many individuals who drifted through the Bookmen's workplace on their way to other, perhaps more stimulating, careers.



Ned Waldman, Lisa Legge, Norton Stillman, and Brett Waldman