

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Salem Printing Industry

Harrison Company

O. H. 339

PAUL RITCHIE

Interviewed

by

Donald Bennett

on

November 24, 1974

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Salem Printing Industry

INTERVIEWEE: PAUL RITCHIE

INTERVIEWER: Donald Bennett

SUBJECT: Printing Equipment, Innovations, Paper

DATE: November 24, 1974

B: This interview is between Paul Ritchie of Harrison Company in Salem and Don Bennett of the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the printing industry in Salem on November 24, 1974.

Mr. Ritchie, what is your background for the printing business that you are in?

R: Well, I sort of learned the printing trade in Alliance. I worked there for two years. Then I came to Salem and I worked here for three or four years. Then I came to the Harrison Company in 1920 and I have been here ever since.

B: How long did you work here before you took the business over?

R: I took the business over in 1956. So from 1920 to 1956 I worked for Harrison. I bought the place in 1956.

B: What have been your types of occupations as a printer?

R: I started out as a pressman, but now I do almost everything. I operate the cutters, and set type.

B: Could you explain or go into detail a little bit about each one of these types of skills and trades?

R: Well, a pressman runs the presses. He makes them ready and runs them. When I started at Harrison Company there weren't any automatic presses. They were all hand presses. I used to set them up and have the girls run them. They would run probably from five hundred to five

- thousand. We had three presses and that would keep the girls going, and then I would set one up and run it myself.
- B: Harrison Company has the distinction of being the second oldest laboring printing company in America. Do you still have any of the early labels or any other early materials?
- R: Just recently we found some old catalogs that they used to print and send out. They printed mostly doctor's labels. That's when doctors used to furnish your medicine; they would buy the labels and label them.
- B: These labels, has there been any change in the way they were made since the earlier times?
- R: Yes, much. They used to set them up all by hand. They make a plate of them. When you print them offset, you make a plate and that's the way they're printed.
- B: What is the difference today of your new modern presses and your old offset press?
- R: Well, the new are much better. They don't have to fool with them so much. Before they had to watch the water and everything on them. Today you put them in the press and they run themselves, like a letterpress.
- B: You said something about taking a picture and so forth. What's the difference between this and the way it was earlier?
- R: Well, I don't know much about how it was done earlier. The way they make it now is they take a picture and they make the plate from your picture.
- B: The labels are your main business, what are your other types of printing?
- R: We do all types of commercial work; letterheads, envelopes, booklets, and things like that.
- B: Have you had any unusual orders for printing labels or commercial jobs that you can remember?
- R: We had some very tough ones, I remember that. I just can't remember what they were. For years we printed labels for the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company. We would get orders from them for as high as four and five million. When we were printing them out on the old type presses they were all done by hand. We would run thirty-five or forty labels, put them on seat, and we'd run that many on the seats. We'd get an order and that

would keep us going for three months before we would get it all done. We get it off now in three or four days.

B: Do you send any of your labels overseas?

R: We print a few meat labels that go to Hawaii. That's the only ones that I know of that go overseas.

B: How many labels do you make up for each of your customers?

R: Well, they'll run from five thousand to five million. We had an order just recently for over several million labels.

B: These jobs involving millions and millions of labels, does it require that much work today as opposed to the old days?

R: I'd say, in making labels today, you could get out, maybe, two days work where before it would take two weeks, maybe longer. They were cutting labels by hand then, now we have an automatic cutter. You set it and then you press your buttons and the cutter comes off to the exact size and that's the way you cut them. Before, you would bring it out by hand and press your lever and cut a few at a time. We get ten times the production off of this new cutter than we did the old ones.

B: Has Harrison Company made any innovations or changes in the label industry in the past or present?

R: No, I don't think we have. We're hardly big enough for that.

B: How big is your company?

R: Well, we just have fourteen employees.

B: Of these fourteen employees, are some journeymen printers?

R: We have three journeymen printers.

B: Could you explain to me just what is a journeyman printer?

R: Well, you learn your trade. To start with it takes about five years to learn the printing trade working just normal time. When you put in your five years then you are considered a journeyman printer.

B: What does it involve when you are able to call yourself a journeyman printer? What does it mean?

R: It means you served your time, five years.

B: But what skills did you take up?

R: Well, whatever you took up. If you took up pressman, you are a journeyman pressman. If you took up type-setting, you're a journeyman compositor.

B: You mentioned a typesetter. How much type or photography is done by hand today?

R: Very little. We do it all by a machine. You take a picture and make your plate.

B: In your business what is the average period of employment for your workers? How long do they normally work for you?

R: Well, we've had one up there for ten years. He's been there almost ever since I took over. And we have another one that's been there for three years. We've got one that just started recently.

B: Do you have a program of fringe benefits and so forth?

R: No, we never got into that.

B: Do you feel that in the future you might?

R: Yes, I think we might.

B: You worked during the Depression; what do you feel the biggest problem of printing during the Depression was?

R: Getting orders.

B: Can you tell some of the problems that you had during the 1920's and 1930's in the printing industry?

R: Well, in the 1920's things went pretty good up until about 1932. I never missed a week's work all through the Depression. We got down to 26 or 28 hours a week, but we worked every week. That's something you don't find in too many places.

B: Can you tell why this occurred?

R: Well, we had customers, old customers, and when they needed labels they sent us the orders. That's the only reason that I can figure that we kept working right along.

B: Can you remember any crisis the company had during this period of time?

R: No, I can't remember a thing.

B: What about supplies. Would they allow you to purchase them on credit?

R: Well, we never had much trouble with supplies. We always paid for them within thirty days. I knew little printers that they shut off altogether because they wouldn't pay their bills. But we always paid our bills. We kept them paid up every thirty days. We would pay in full.

B: What made you decide to buy Harrison Company?

R: I had worked there for so long that the banker came to me and told me, "You're the man to buy it." He said, "I'll finance you." So we fixed things up and I bought it.

B: Have you had any problems or crisis since you've taken over?

R: Not a one.

B: Do you feel that a small company like the Harrison Company has any future?

R: I think they do in the printing business.

B: Are you diversifying this business any, going out, trying to get new types of business?

R: Oh yes. My son came with me about ten years ago and we're doing six or seven times more business than we did when he started in there. We bought new equipment.

B: What type of equipment have you purchased?

R: We bought a new cutter that saved us a lot of time. Then we bought new presses. We've got two Heidelberg offset presses and two Heidelberg letterpresses.

B: Can you tell the difference between a letterpress and an offset press?

R: Well, it's just the type of printing they do. The rollers go around to hit the plate and your impression comes from your plate.

B: Which one is that?

R: That's your letterpress. Your offset press, you hit a blanket and your sheet comes around and picks the impression from the blanket.

B: Is this continuous rolls of paper being fed into the machine or just sheets of paper?

R: Just sheets of paper.

B: Then you have to cut these sheets up?

R: Then you cut the sheets up. Most of them are pressman runner sheets, 17 by 23.

B: Now, is the glue already on the back of the label or do you put it on the label?

R: No, it's on the label. We'll pick it when we buy it. When I first started to work for the Harrison Company, they used to have glue there. They would paint it on just like it was paper.

B: Was this before or after you made the labels?

R: After they were printed.

B: Do you have any problems in making labels, where the glue on the backs stick together and so forth?

R: No, we never seemed to have any problems. They always stick.

B: In the past or now?

R: Now.

B: Are you having any problems getting papers today?

R: There are some problems. My son doesn't buy too much from the salesman, he buys from the manufacturer. We get paper that way, much better than we do from buying from the salesman.

B: Do you try to buy a quantity or just as much as you need?

R: We keep a lot of paper on hand that we know we're going to use. We have a storeroom filled full with paper.

B: Is there any problem in storing this paper?

R: No, not a bit. Not as long as you keep it dry.

B: That's what I was talking about, the humidity and so forth. Do you have to watch this?

R: No, not the humidity so much, but you don't want any water to come along and hit it.

B: I was talking to the editor of the Salem News this last week. He stated that his manufacturer of paper is on strike. Do you run into this problem much or do you

diversify in your buying of paper?

- R: Well, I think we diversify it. We don't buy it from the same person. We've got different places to buy it. I never remember running into that.
- B: Can you remember some of the types of business that you did during World War II?
- R: Yes, we printed for Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company. Right now I can't recall any of the other names. Well, we printed for some local shop here in town.
- B: Did you do much printing and labels or anything for the government?
- R: We do now, we didn't then. We print quite a few labels for the government now.
- B: What type?
- R: Mostly just gum labels. I don't know what they use it for. They just order the labels from us and we print them.
- B: Since you do have a contract from the government for different types of materials, do they give you any stipulations?
- R: Yes, they mark right on the order what it's supposed to be, what the paper is supposed to be and what type of glue to be on it. You must live right up to that or they'll turn the job down.
- B: Do you put different styles in paper, labels, and so forth?
- R: Yes, we print almost all weights of paper in different styles. We print what they order. If they order a certain style, we'll print it that way.
- B: Your letterheads and your other assignments, do you print these mainly for businesses?
- R: Yes.
- B: Do they stipulate what styles or grade of paper?
- R: They stipulate what grades of paper. They give us a copy and we match the copy when we make the plate.
- B: Can you tell me something about the grades of paper and so forth?
- R: Do you mean how they are made?



B: Yes.

R: I couldn't tell you how they are made, but they come 6 or 9 pound, 13 pound, 16 pound, 20 pound and 24 pound. That's what you print most of your letterheads on, one of those grades of paper.

B: What about your labels?

R: Well, we print almost all the labels on the same kind of paper. But these meat labels take a special paper, and different jobs we print take special paper. You've got to match that when you print them. When you get the order and they specify what kind of paper they want, you must match that.

B: Have you ever had any trouble matching a type of paper sent in?

R: Yes, we lost a nice job one time because we couldn't match the paper.

B: Was it special or what?

R: Special paper, we couldn't find anyone that would make it, so we lost the job.

B: Do you do any type of printing that they don't want to be counterfeited or so forth? Do you run into this type of printing at all?

R: I don't remember.

B: Like printing a stamp or so forth?

R: I don't remember.

B: You stayed strictly in the labels and the letterheads?

R: Yes.

B: Do you feel that there will be any changes in the future in the label printing business?

R: Oh, there probably will be a lot of changes. You take now, since the last twenty years, they print a lot of labels in rolls that we used to print flat paper. They print them in rolls and they just are going great guns in that type of thing.

B: I talked to one or two other printing companies and the newspaper and they say that they do a lot by computer.

R: By computer?

B: Yes, they are programmed machines. Do you use anything of this nature?

R: No.

B: Mr. Dean said that all set presses in the future would probably be all electrical where there would just be a tape into it. Does this label business work more with just individual machines?

R: I think it is now.

B: How long does an average machine last?

R: Well, if you take care of the machine you'll only get twelve or thirteen years wear out of one.

B: How many type changes have occurred in the offset presses?

R: Do you mean in the last . . .

B: . . . twenty or thirty years.

R: Oh, they're always changing them. Almost every year they come out with one. They add something new on it and make it better and easier to run. They're changing them continually.

B: Do you have different grades of ink that you use on your labels and so forth?

R: Well, certain types of paper take certain types of ink. You've got to make sure you get the right ink and the right paper so it won't dry.

B: How can you print more than one color at the same time?

R: We don't have a two color press, but I've seen them run. You have the two forms if you run the two color press, and they both print while the sheet is going around. It's the same as the single color press, only they've got two forms in there and two different colors of ink. That's the way it works.

B: You say you only print one color labels?

R: One color at a time. We print color labels, but we print each color at separate times, not at the same time.

B: Does this create a problem of overlapping sometimes?

- R: No, we never seem to have any trouble with it.
- B: How long do you have to wait in between?
- R: We could run one color in the morning and in the afternoon run the other color through.
- B: Does this require very much work?
- R: No, very little.
- B: In your trade, do you diversify your business or do you have just a few large customers?
- R: No, we do business for anyone that comes in. If we can handle their work and they want us to take an order, we take it.
- B: How many of the large chain stores do you print for?
- R: Well, we print for Superior over in Massillon. We do some printing for the A&P.
- B: Would you rather do small orders or large orders?
- R: I'd rather do a large order. You put a large order on the press and let it run for a couple days. If it runs good you're making money. A lot of these small runs you put on you just can't charge enough for them for what you should make out.
- B: These plates, how long could you normally use them?
- R: Well, they're good for as high as a quarter of a million prints, but most of them you get a hundred thousand or a hundred and fifty thousand on them and they start to look a little weak until you make a new one.
- B: Now, this is just an engraved plate that you make from a photograph?
- R: Yes.
- B: What is used, acids and so forth?
- R: Yes, they use acids. They burn them in and then they use acids to rub them off.
- B: When they wear down, you just have to throw them away and start all over again?
- R: Yes.

- B: Can you remember any amusing incidents that occurred in the business?
- R: Yes. I was working one day and I had a girl running a press and I heard this scream. I turned around and she had got her skirt in the gears and tore her skirt off.
- B: I know that one man told me that one time he had a roll of paper get away from him. It was rolling down the street. Anything amusing like this occur?
- R: No, we don't print with rolls. That was probably for the newspaper press.
- B: Has inflation affected the printing industry any today?
- R: Oh, very much. We've got paper that has doubled in the last year.
- B: Is this why you're trying to stockpile?
- R: Well, that's where we started to stockpile, but we saw how paper was going. Now that's used up and you're right in inflation's hands when you go to buy paper now.
- B: When you buy paper, do you make a bid for a year or do they offer you paper for a year or just so much paper each quarter?
- R: Well, you buy it by the pound. Five thousand pounds is a good order to give a paper company. We've ordered ten thousand pounds two or three different times this past summer because you save money by buying it in a larger quantity.
- B: Do you think this drastic rise in costs will stabilize?
- R: Oh, I think it has got to come down. It can't keep going on like this forever.
- B: What has this drastic rise in paper forced you to do in regards to the labels?
- R: Well, it's the same in everything. It has all gone up, all the papers went up.
- B: That means that you continually have to raise your prices?
- R: You couldn't stay in business if you didn't.
- B: What are the profits today in the printing business as compared to the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's?

R: I think the 1950's was about the best time a printer ever had.

B: Can you explain why?

R: No, I couldn't explain why.

B: Was it low costs?

R: Well, it was low costs and everything seemed to be at a level scale. Now everything you buy is way out of line in costs.

B: What about your workers, are they continuously asking for raises?

R: Some of them are. Some of them you could raise every week and the next week they would be back for another raise.

B: You mentioned that you had three journeymen printers, is it hard to get a journeyman printer today?

R: Well, no, I wouldn't say it's hard.

B: I have noticed that in talking with different people it seems like these printers will just work for everyone in the same industry. Can you explain why?

R: No, I can't explain why. That's the way they seem to do.

B: I know I've talked to one, he said he worked here ten years and there five years. It seems they just go around. Some, that is, not others. As you mentioned, you had some for a long time.

R: Since I've taken over the place up there in 1956, this man came a short time after I had taken over and he's our foreman now. I think he'll stay with us for some time.

B: Are you anticipating an expansion in your business?

R: We keep expanding a little each year. Since my son came up there with us, we've got these four vertical presses. That was a big expansion for us.

B: Could you explain what a vertical press is?

R: A vertical, that was our old type press. It's a German-made press, a Heidelberg.

B: What is the advantage of the Heidelberg over the American?

- R: You get better income rates on it. It runs faster than the vertical press.
- B: You said you've been steadily growing since your son came in; do you see in the future any building expansion or do you have plenty of stock room?
- R: Well, we have room to expand further. We put up a storage building at the back of our lot. That's where we store all of the paper. It's full up to the roof now.
- B: Your building seems rather large.
- R: It's large. We could expand the second floor quite a bit. Just recently we finished the second floor.
- B: You said you finished it?
- R: Yes, it was never finished altogether, so we put a ceiling and put new siding on and it's really nice up there.
- B: Do you anticipate in the future any great speed-up or slow-down in the printing industry or do you think it will remain the same?
- R: Well, it looks to me as though it's slowing down now. We're not nearly as busy as we were six months ago.
- B: In your business do you go out and bid?
- R: Yes, we go out and do work all the time.
- B: How competitive or how many printing businesses are you bidding against?
- R: Well, these government jobs, that's the way we get them. They send out bids for what they want and we're on their list. They have fourteen different label companies. As a rule, we're never more than third from the top, the ones we bid on.
- B: Does the government normally take the lowest bid or how do they work it?
- R: That's what they claim; they take the lowest bid. If you write in and you want to know who got the job you bid on, they'll tell you. They send you the list of the bidders and what they bid.
- B: Would you rather have the bid type job or just have them come in?

Q: Have you ever bid on a job where you thought you could produce the label and then found problems afterwards?

R: A lot of jobs.

B: You don't normally lose?

R: No, as a rule, after you work at it for awhile, you get on to it.

B: What is the type of bid job that you would prefer to stay away from, if you had your choice?

R: That's hard to say. I can't think of which one it would be. I haven't done any of the bidding for the last seven years. You should talk to my son about that. He does it.

B: Well, can you remember when you were working, what were the ones that you would just rather not bid on?

R: I'd rather not bid on one that was running gold paper. I had never had much luck running gold paper. After you run it through awhile it'll curl on you. If it was a two color run, you would have trouble registering the form the second time through.

B: You mentioned gold paper, is that a brand name of paper?

R: No, that's gold plated paper.

B: What do you use it for?

R: Different labels.

B: Basically, the paper you get for your labels is this white? Do you do your own coloring?

R: Yes.

B: This is the problem you have when you have to make your different color paper?

R: Yes, that's right.

B: How long does it take for you to start the job and finish the job?

R: Well, that depends on how big it is. You take an average job and you could start it and finish it in two hours at five thousand runs. I'm talking about printing; I'm not talking about cutting it up.

B: These plates, I've seen some that just look like a heavy cast, are there two different types of plates?

R: They're mostly zinc.

B: You don't make them?

R: No, you buy that plate. Then you put your image on the plate.

B: You said you had the roll and you had the flat type forms, correct?

R: No, ours are all flat.

B: You don't use the roll print?

R: No, but there are a lot of roll labels printed anymore. My gosh, they really print them.

B: Mr. Ritchie, you stated that you make some tags?

R: Yes, we print a lot of tags, one, two, three, four, and even five part tags.

B: What is a five part tag?

R: Well, you print the tag and then you print these other parts of paper and they go to different departments. When they use the one, they tear it off and they send them to each department where they're supposed to go.

B: This is for what type of business?

R: The vending company here in town. We print a lot of three part tags. Then some company in Youngstown, I can't recall the name, we print an awful lot of three and four part tags for them.

B: Can you think of any of the printers or workers that you have worked with that you would like to mention?

R: Well, years ago there was a man who would come around each year. He was about sixty years old at the time. He was a compositor. Every year he would come around at the same time and he would work for two or three days. Then he would take off again. I always thought that was strange, that he would hit the same places each year about the same time of the year, too.

B: Was he a good worker?

R: He was a good worker.



B: You knew that he was only going to be here that long?

R: Yes, we would just give him work, if we had work for him. He was what they call a tramp printer.

B: Can you mention any other people or incidents that you would like to relate?

R: No, I can't think of anything.

B: Can you, in the foreseeable future, see any rapid changes in the label business?

R: Well, I don't see any change in the type we're printing, but there'll probably be a lot of changes.

B: Do you think there will be complete automation in the printing industry eventually?

R: No, I don't think it'll ever be that because there are too many small runs and it wouldn't pay to set it up that way.

B: Do you have anything else that you would like to discuss at this time?

R: I think we hit quite a bit of that.

B: That'll be about it. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW