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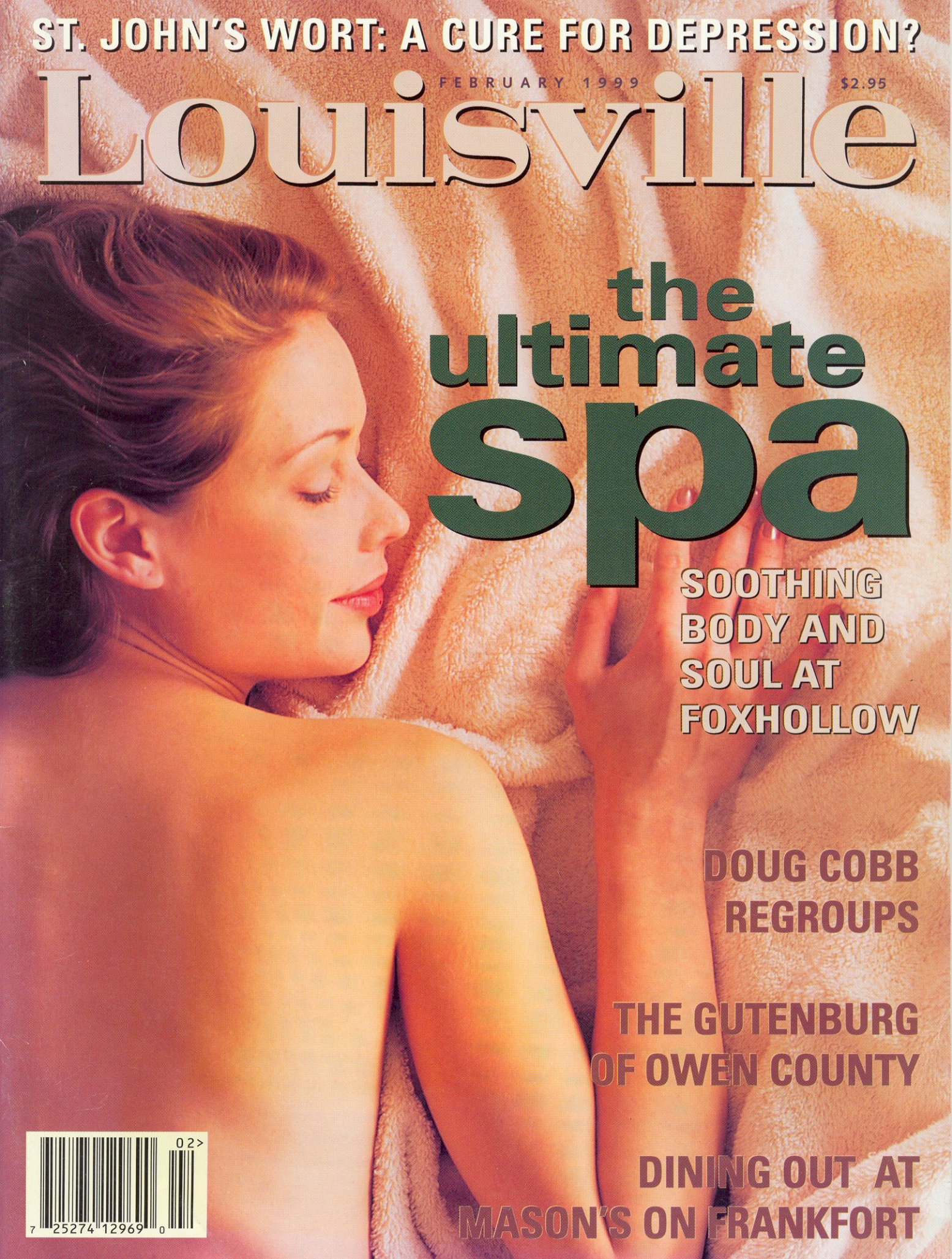

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man of letters

by robin garr

photos by john nation

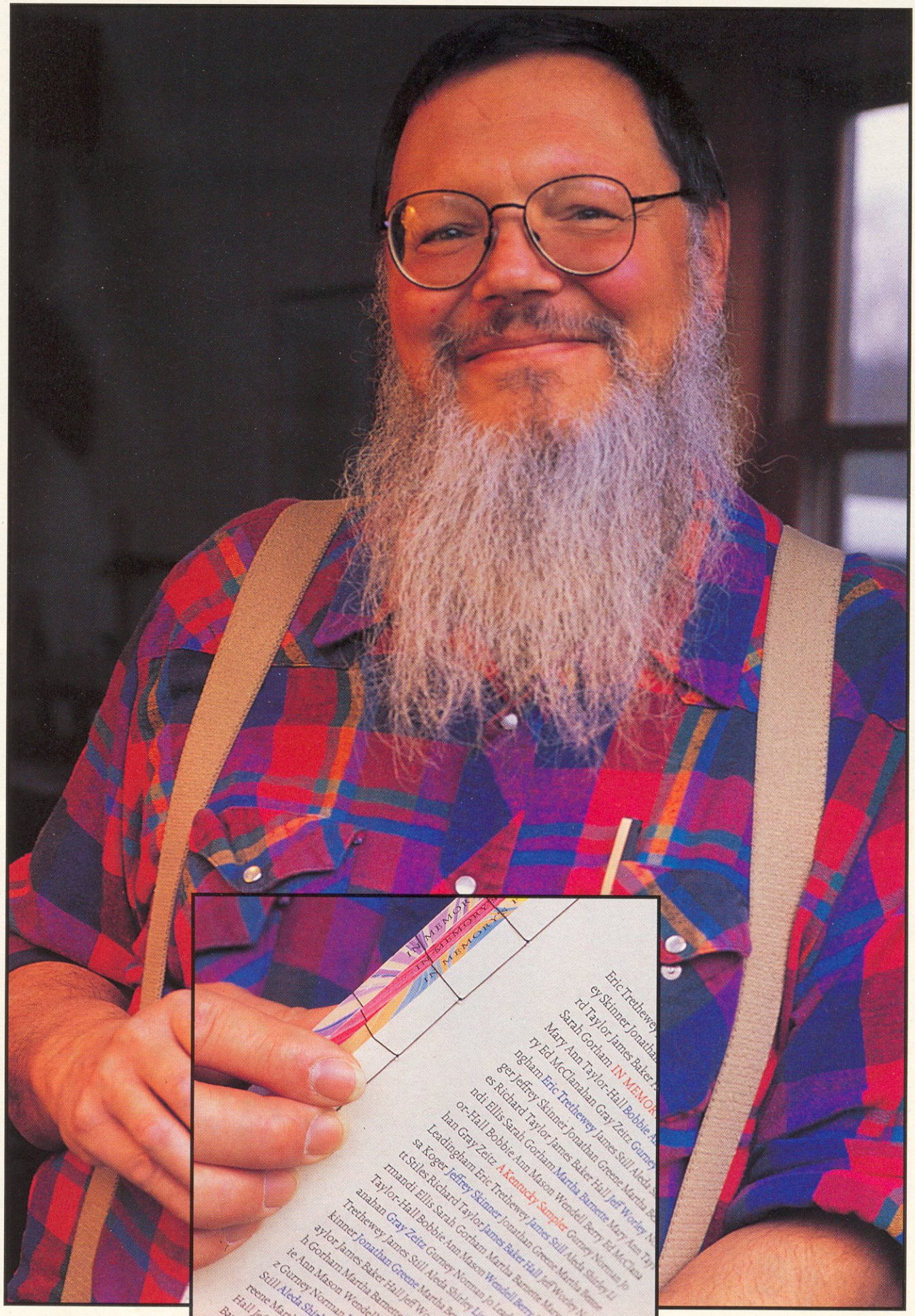
In a state that treasures its rich history, bookmaker Gray Zeitz, who single-handedly operates tiny Larkspur Press in Owen County, continues to embrace the meticulous printing methods of yesteryear — with glorious results.

"It all starts out here in the type drawer," says Gray Zeitz, using a long, polished thumbnail to flick tiny blocks of metal type into a hand-held, shiny steel tray called a composing stick, or type stick, that measures out a line of prose.

"All our books are set in type, one letter at a time. They're set in a type stick to specific measure and length. With individual letters, you have control of the space between letters, between words and between lines."

Flick, flick, flick, the letters fly, Zeitz talking as he goes, literally minding his p's and his q's.

"Copper spaces are used for spacing," he says. "Two half-point coppers make a brassie . . . but for very fine spacing, you can use paper. I like to get two points at least between words; I won't go less than a copper and a brassie."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Two more flicks and a quick click, and another line of type is done.

Meet Gray Zeitz, poet and bookmaker, whose tiny Larkspur Press, located on his creekbottom farm near Monterey, Ky., about 20 miles north of Frankfort, is gaining national attention for the rare high quality of its work.

The first things you notice about this burly man are his happy laugh and the full, graying, ZZ Top-style beard that reaches halfway down his sturdy paunch, which in its turn is bracketed by broad suspenders that hold up low-slung, faded jeans. Squint past the impressive beard and his bright plaid lumberjack shirt, though, and his short, neatly trimmed brown hair and black wire-rimmed glasses might just as easily adorn a gray-suited businessman.

In fine book printing, it's the little things that count. For instance, Zeitz says, the printer must bring different approaches to printing prose and poetry. Commercial books customarily fill each page with "justified" margins, straight-edge borders down both the right and left side of every page. Not Larkspur's books of prose.

"I won't use a justified margin but a sawtooth pattern," Zeitz explains — one long line, one slightly shorter, one longer and so on down the page. "It's harder to do than a justified margin, but the page looks solid," he says, adding that he'll also use judicious spacing to avoid a "river," an odd and random pattern in which the spaces between words fall in a long white stream down the page.

"Consistency is the key," he says, grabbing a copy of Larkspur's edition of Bobbie Ann Mason's *Still Life With Watermelon*. "This page looks solid. No distractions to the reader — that's what you're doing in trying to make a readable book."

He grabs another Larkspur volume, Wendell Berry's long poem *The Farm*, pointing out that the large, colored letters that begin each stanza required a separate press run to print the second color after the first run was done. The accompanying illustrations required sending each page through the press for yet another impression.

The Farm, a small, squarish book whose 800-copy first printing was followed by a 1,500-copy second printing, was Larkspur's largest project yet, and may turn out to be its largest ever.

After the stress of running that second edition — a massive chore for an artisan printer who does everything by hand, feeding his 75-year-old Chandler & Price platen, or "clamshell," presses one sheet at a time (66,000 separate feeds were required for the 48-page book) — Zeitz says he grew tired and lost his concentration. The job, in short, stopped being fun.

And fun, for Zeitz, is what this job is all about.

He traces the roots of his craft to his college days when, as an undergraduate at the University of Kentucky in the early '70s, he started a literary magazine called *handsel*, a Middle English word meaning "a gift for a new beginning."

"I didn't want to have it be connected with the English department. They had a magazine; there was censorship; you had to have what you intended to do OK'd. I didn't like that," he says.

So a commune of sociology students let Zeitz use their ancient A.B. Dick offset printer, a rickety device held together with rubber bands. He rented a typewriter and, using master sheets typed by hand, made his publishing debut.

"When he was an undergraduate at UK, I was a grad student in English," recalls Richard Taylor, a Kentucky poet who now owns a bookshop in Frankfort and teaches English at Kentucky State University. "He came around to a number of writers on campus and asked for submissions. From that time on, Gray has been a friend."

Before long, Zeitz met Charlyn Hammer, then director of archives at UK's King Library, who took him on as an apprentice to learn the letterpress printer's trade. Through Hammer he also was able to meet many well-known Kentucky authors and editors. At the end of his apprenticeship she gave him a small clamshell press and a set of type to help him get started with his own press.

He moved to Monterey, in Owen County, and opened Larkspur Press there in 1974, operating on the twin principles that he wanted to publish the best work of contemporary, living Kentucky authors and to produce books of such stunning typography and construction that the books themselves would be works of art.

Essentially penniless and with no clients for his would-be publishing venture, he worked on a tobacco farm for the free use of a house that had no windows and no electricity. After he and his wife, Jean, were married, they moved to a better house — with electricity — in exchange for adding calf feeding to his tobacco-farm duties.

With expenses near zero and spare time for printing, it was a cost-efficient if unluxurious way to build his business.

In 1978, he and Jean bought a 60-acre farm on Sawdridge Creek, a mile or so south of Monterey, and began working a tobacco base and raising calves while continuing to build the printing business.

Hand-setting type is meticulous work, unchanged since Franklin's time, in which each page is put together letter by letter, space by space. On a good day, Zeitz can do maybe six to eight pages of poetry, three of prose.

In 1991, they added a printing shop, a lofty, modern-style wooden building with lots of big windows turned to catch the indirect, and thus shadowless, northern light. "I designed the shop," he says, "and I got two good friends who are also very good carpenters to take out what wouldn't work and then build it."

Larkspur Press marked the beginning of its 25th year with a reading there on Nov. 13, and a substantial gallery of Kentucky authors and friends — including Berry, Mason, Taylor, James Baker Hall, Ed McClanahan and Fred Smock — showed up to give readings.

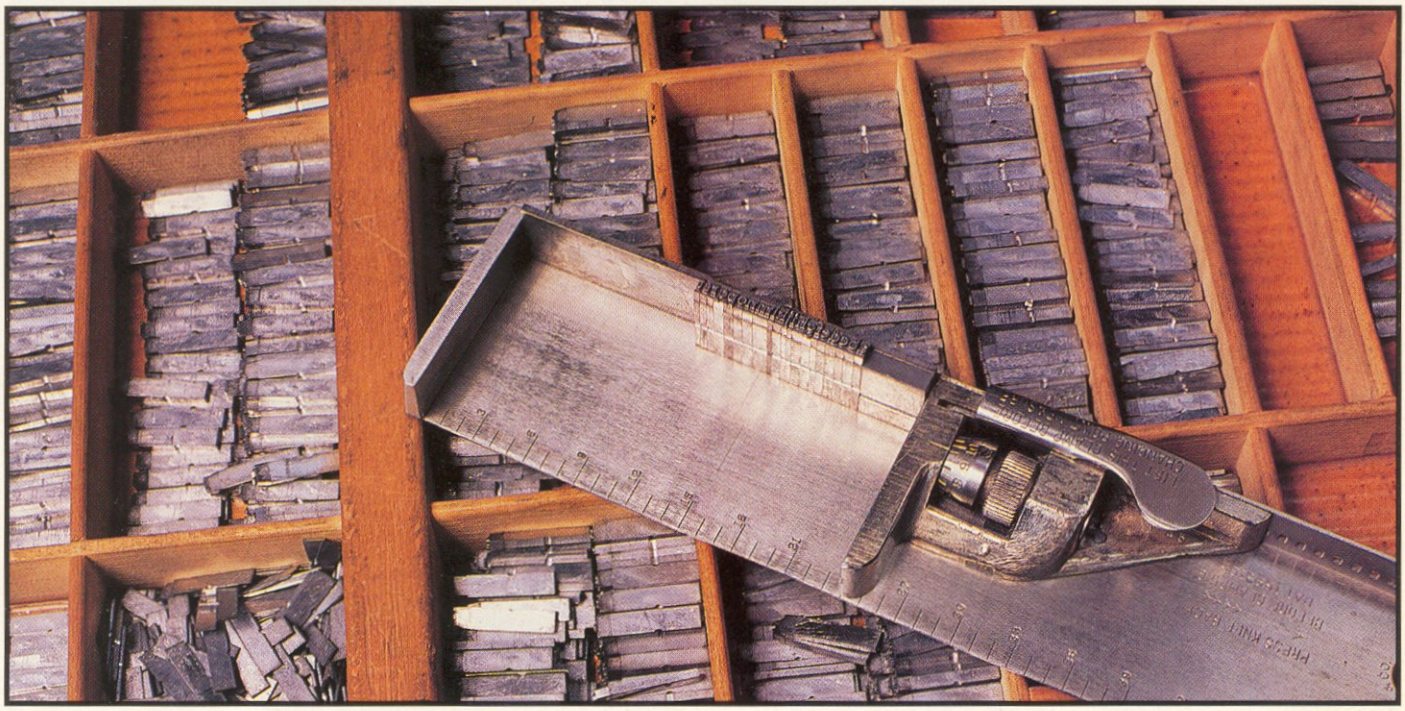
In addition to his serious book publishing, Zeitz also does "job" printing, ranging from Christmas cards for a local firm to business cards and stationery, mostly for businesses located near his Owen County farm. But it's all fine, hand-set letterpress printing, even something as simple as the souvenir bookmark he printed that bears these words of wisdom from Cicero: "If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need."

Zeitz has both, as well as a printing shop filled with vintage equipment. A Washington flat-bed press is well over a century old, and the three clamshell presses he uses for most of his work date to the teens

(above) Zeitz's type chests stand in the background; in the foreground is a desk called a "composition stone."

(right) Letters, words, sentences and lines are separated with metal spacers called "coppers," "brassies" and "quoins."

(below) Zeitz measures out lines of type, one letter or spacer at a time, with a hand-held tool called a "type stick."



and early '20s, as does his rolling composing stone (called a "turtle" in printer's jargon). Even some of his type chests — their long, shallow drawers filled with carefully sorted type made of a printer's alloy of lead, tin and antimony — are 19th-century antiques.

Would Benjamin Franklin, or even Gutenberg, find much to surprise him if he walked in to this shop? Not at all, Zeitz says. They'd feel right at home with the type, and it wouldn't take them long to figure out the presses.

"We're talking about an 18th-century technology that Gray applies in that shop," Richard Taylor says with a laugh.

Opening up the old Washington press, Zeitz shows how yesteryear's printers worked it: A team of three would place the hand-set type on the press's flat bed, carefully ink the type with sponges, then place a sheet of paper over the type, move a heavy press into place and pull a so-called "devil's tail" lever to press the paper firmly down onto the type. One sheet at a time, stop, take it off, do it again . . . and a trained team could still make 3,000 sheets during a day's labor.

It was hard work then, and it's hard work now. Zeitz usually produces two or three books in a year, giving each his full attention.

A project typically begins when Zeitz contacts an author — most often one of his many friends in the Kentucky literary community — and asks for a manuscript. "It's got to be something I really enjoy," he said, "because I put so much time into it."

Taylor's recently published book of poems *In the Country of Morning Calm* took nearly two years from start to finish, Zeitz says; and he already has publishing contracts to take him into the new millennium. So, sorry, prospective writers, but Larkspur is not in the market for unsolicited manuscripts.

The manuscript usually goes back and forth between the author and Zeitz for a few readings and exchanges. He doesn't consider himself an editor and wouldn't presume to correct the work of clients like Taylor, Mason or Berry; but he'll tell them whether he likes it, and talk about what he likes.

Then, the contents of the manuscript literally shape the design of the book.

With poetry, for example, Zeitz considers the length — and width — of the poems. He doesn't want to break the lines to fit the page, so he'll design the page to fit the poems instead. He determines the shape of each page by using a deceptively simple-looking system of diagonal and perpendicular lines to generate the proportions of the mathematical "golden mean."

This design goes to the illustrator to create pictures of the necessary size and shape. While the artist is at work, Zeitz starts setting type.

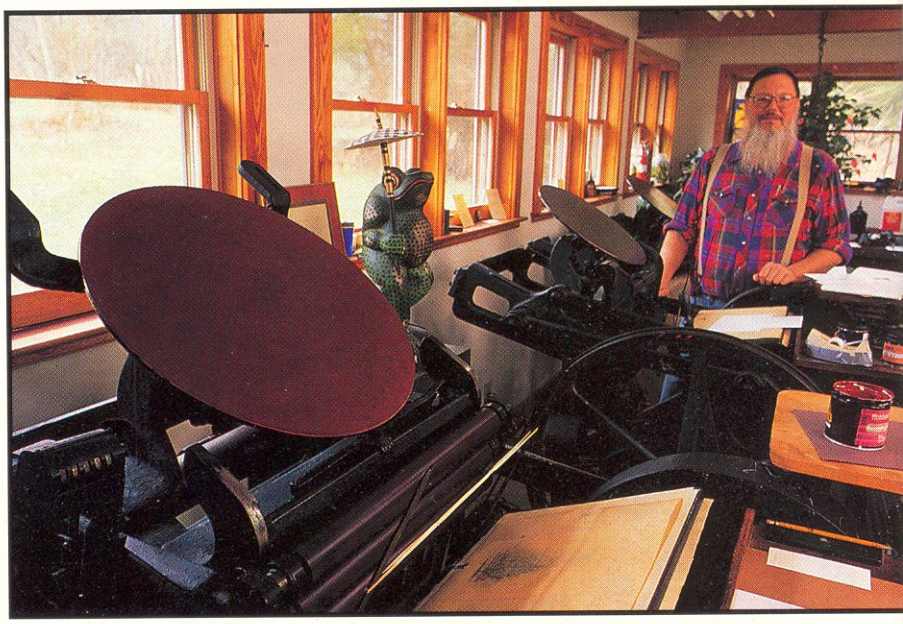
Hand-setting type is painstaking, meticulous work, unchanged since Franklin's time, in which the compositor carefully puts together each page, letter by letter, space by space. On a good day, Zeitz says, he can do maybe six to eight pages of poetry, three of prose.

And then there's the search for typographical errors. "I'll pull a proof and proof it — that's two different meanings for the word 'proof' — but I can't catch it all," he says. "I send proofs to the author, and to two real good proofreaders; and the author usually has another proofreader look at it, too. And when we go to print it I proof it again, and I'll catch even more. It's almost proofed to death, and mistakes still — still — *still* get through. And I hate it."

He chooses his fonts and paper stock based on what he thinks would look best with each book. Taylor's book of poetry, for instance, was printed on Mohawk Molino paper, one of Zeitz's favorites; but the luxury special edition was printed on Biblio, an expensive, hand-made paper that must be moistened to soften it before putting it in the press. "I like a paper that *feels* good. Some of the mold-made papers feel like cloth — you could wear them."

Similar care goes into selecting the typeface. *In the Country of Morning Calm*, for instance, was printed in Hermann Zapf's Palatino. "I only have a handful of typefaces I can use. It's too expensive to have everything. I guess someone with a computer would find this terribly limiting, but I *like* that limitation, because I know these fonts and don't misuse them. I see books where people seem to have no idea what they're doing. Maybe I'm just too nuts-and-bolts, but I approach a page by giving myself limitations. Determine what I can do and what I can't do, and then work from there."

When the type is finally ready, locked into its metal "chase" with metal and wood spacer blocks called "furniture" and wedges called "quoins," it's gently hammered into place with a few soft mallet whacks against the printer's "composing stone" and clamped into the clamshell press.



Zeitz shows off his three Chandler & Price clamshell presses, all of which date back to World War I days.

After adding just a touch of printer's ink to a large circular steel disk that tops the press, Zeitz hits a switch to set the flywheel spinning. Three wide rollers bearing a strange resemblance to an old-fashioned washing machine roll up and over the disk, spreading the ink into a smooth, even coating that the rollers then wipe down across the type. With a practiced ease that makes the job look simple, Zeitz adds one sheet of paper at a time, and the press clamps tight, squeezing the paper and inked type in one quick embrace. Out comes the paper, into a stack, and in goes another, the pile of finished pages growing with surprising speed.

Even so, this is limited-production work. For Taylor's book — a typical Larkspur production run — just 450 copies of its $25 regular clothbound edition were produced; the special hand-bound, signed edition was limited to 33 copies and cost $110.

(Zeitz does almost all of his books in two editions. "I want to do one that's affordable, he explains. "I do contemporary writers — live contemporary writers . . . well, except for Merton — and I'm often printing *new* writers, (including) Fred Smock's and Richard Taylor's first books. But who's going to pay $200 for a new writer's book? So I want one edition that's affordable, but nicely done. But I also want to play,

and have fun. For that, I do a special edition.")

The results show, Taylor says. "Each page that the reader touches, he realizes that Gray has undergone at least one separate and distinct act of printing in producing it. In many instances, when he uses color, that may involve two, three, even four separate impressions. So I appreciate not only the beauty of it but the intensity of the labor it takes to produce that kind of quality work. It is a great joy."

How many books has Larkspur published? Zeitz frowns, thinks, decides he isn't certain. A bibliography done by Morehead University's librarians a few years ago listed 50 titles, but it lists his regular and special editions as separate books. "Fifty? 75? 100? — I really don't know," he says, shaking his head.

Zeitz's wife, Jean, teaches preschool in the PACE program at Owen County Elementary. His son, Jesse, is a senior at Lindsey Wilson College in Columbia, Ky., and his daughter, Laurel, is a senior at Frankfort High School. Both children have worked in the shop, but they don't now. Says Zeitz, laughing, "When Jesse was in the seventh grade, I told him, 'This summer you're going to work. You can work with me, and I'll pay you, or you can get a job.' After a week working for me, he got a job roofing."

Their farmhouse, a 1940s frame structure, is a startling lavender color with dark-red trim, which makes it rather stand out on the hillside above Sawdridge Creek, accessible only by crossing an alarmingly narrow concrete bridge and negotiating a rough gravel road. Gardens are everywhere on the property.

Says Taylor, who's been Zeitz's friend for 30 years: "Gray is a relaxed, easy person. Here is a guy who has a garden outside his door in which he's growing papyrus, the old Egyptian reed used for paper. Between printing and flowers, he leads a productive and blooming kind of existence."

Zeitz is also a poet in his own right, spinning out lines of free verse that flow as smooth as Kentucky bourbon. A snippet: "Explanation On Being Late For Work — You know, sometime when you get up in the morning, you're where you want to be; and don't want to go anywhere."

Larkspur has published *Finger Ridge*, a book of Zeitz's poetry, and he's had others in the *Journal of Kentucky Studies* and other journals. He's thinking about sending out another manuscript to an outside publisher, but whenever the notion arises, he says, a small voice inside him asks, "Who else would do it as well as I would?"

Still, after a moment to think about how that sounds, he adds with an almost bashful grin, "I'm a much better bookmaker than I am a poet." ■