Kentucky Living

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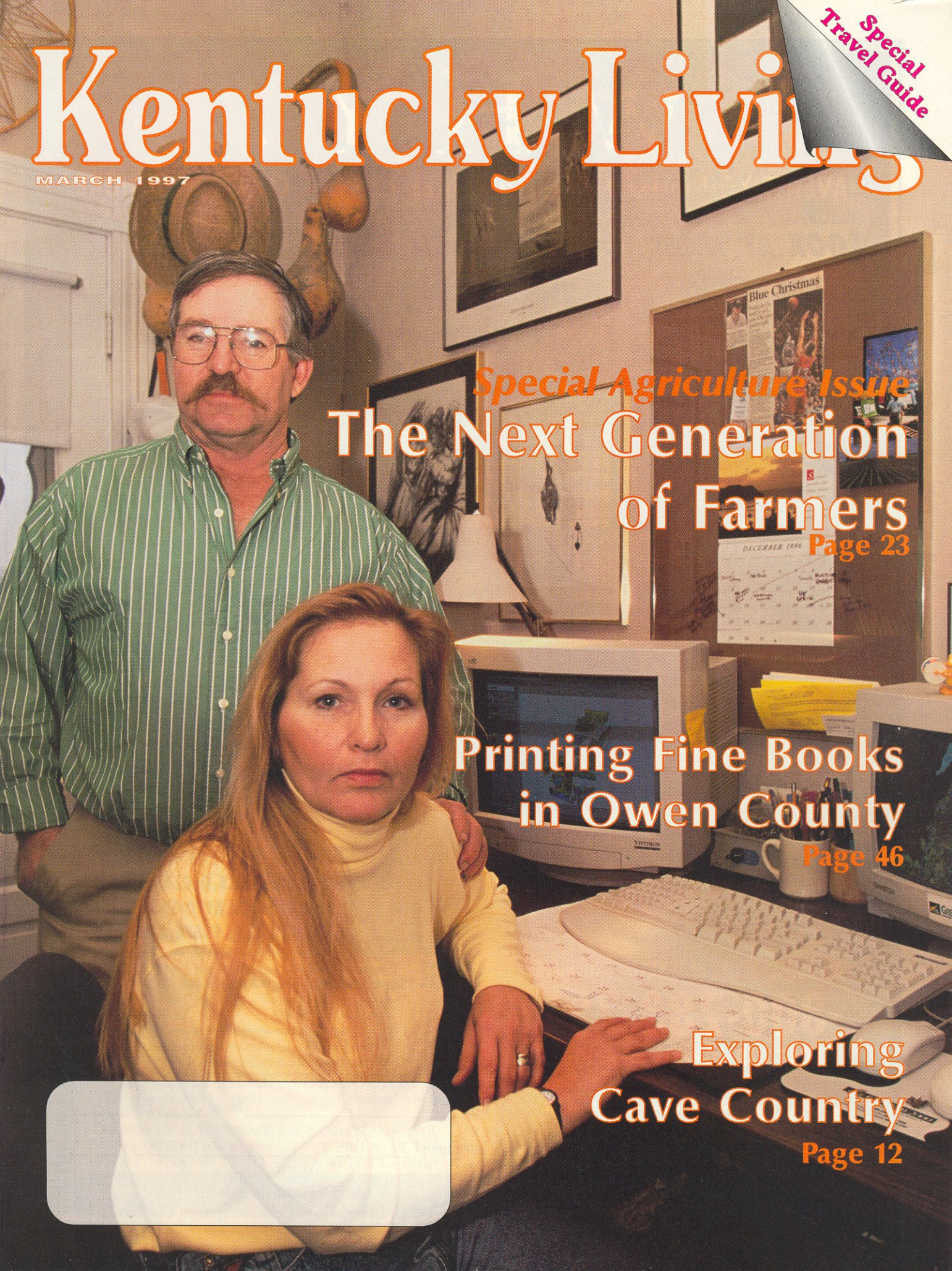
Special Travel Guide



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Gray Zeitz prints only the books he likes, in a way and a place he likes

by Marty Godbey

Publisher, printer, philosopher, and painstaking craftsman, Gray Zeitz produces books the old-fashioned way. At his Larkspur Press, in a quiet valley in Owen County, he uses letterpress printing, a process by which inked type is pressed onto paper, as opposed to newer offset or photographic methods, which transfer an image indirectly. Letterpress printing has changed little in five centuries.

"Gutenberg," Zeitz says, referring to the fifteenth-century German printer, "invented a way of casting movable letters. Basically, what I do is not too different from what he did."

Zeitz sets each piece of type by hand, locks each line into place, then feeds one page at a time into one of his hundred-year-old presses.

Other methods are quicker. With today's computer technology, the time between concept and printed page can be a matter of days, but, to Zeitz, "Speed is not important."

What *is* important is the quality of his work. With an output of three books — or less — per year, Larkspur Press is known for excellence in both content and finished product. Collections of poems, short fiction, and broadsides (unbound works printed on one side of a sheet of paper) have come from such noted Kentucky writers as Wendell Berry, Guy Davenport, James Baker Hall, and Bobbie Ann Mason.

Larkspur books are highly collectible for their scarcity (Zeitz prints far fewer copies of each book than commercial publishers do), beauty (of rare papers, workmanship of printer and binder), and the fact that they are important works that would not sell in sufficient numbers to interest mass-market publishers.

"This is fun," Zeitz says. "It's my work and my hobby. My wife won't let me stay down here (at the press) all the time. I have a hard time thinking of it as a business, but it is a business; I have to show a profit."

Gray Zeitz prints books by setting each piece of lead type by hand, then printing pages one at a time using one of his hundred-year-old presses. Photo by Jim Battles.

Printing speed is not important to Gray Zeitz of Larkspur Press in Owen County. He prefers to concentrate on qualities like beauty, and whether he considers the books to be important. Photos by Jim Battles.

Born in Alabama, Zeitz moved to Kentucky with his family at the age of four, and grew up in Elizabethtown. While attending the University of Kentucky in the 1970s, he apprenticed at the King Library Press, worked part time at a printing job, and published his own "little" magazine.

"It was called 'handsel,' " he explains, "meaning 'a gift at a new beginning.' It was a fairly good magazine that published a lot of good writers. We'd sell it door to door, and it would make enough money to put out another issue. It was a lot of fun; nobody ever thought of it as a business, it was just putting out a magazine."

This matter-of-fact attitude characterizes Zeitz, who laughs a lot, looks about half his age, and is clearly a person happy with his life, his occupation, and his surroundings. In the 20-odd years since he came to Owen County, Zeitz has become an integral part of the community, where he serves as a volunteer fireman and town clerk of Monterey.

The Kentucky River town, about 20 miles north of Frankfort, lost its focus when river traffic diminished, but in the 1970s became a haven for writers, artisans, and craftspeople.

"It was real strange," Zeitz says. "It just happened. It wasn't any grand plan or anything, and no one person knew everybody. A group came down from Champaign, Illinois, to farmstead; I came because it looked like this would be a place I could set up a press without much money.

"It just happened that a bookbinder came here at the same time — she did some of our first books. When I first came here, I set up in back of the candle shop. Later, I moved to the old pool hall, then bought a building and stayed there until I built this building. The reason I bought this farm was because of Monterey floods.

"We don't have flash floods, we have slow rises. When we went through the 1978 flood, I had water navel-deep in my shop, and I still have type I haven't cleaned.

"We bought this place in '78, but didn't move the press out here until three or four years ago. It was a change, moving

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out here; in Monterey, a lot of townspeople would drop by. You need that. Those kinds of connections make you feel like you're living in a place, like you have a past. Kentucky is still a state where you can do that, but we're losing that."

Zeitz's concerns about his community range from changes that will come with the new road (US 127 is being widened, and will bypass Monterey) to development in underpopulated Owen County.

"It's a hard choice," he says. "In a county like this, if you don't have *something* for a young person to do to make a living, then he has to leave the county, which goes against everything I believe in, about being in a place. If you don't feel attached to a place, you're not going to take care of it."

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The care he feels for his "place" shows in his spotless, organized workshop, where each book is planned, often with the author, long before work begins.

Appropriate paper and type are chosen for each book; for special editions, paper may be handmade. "That has to be dampened before it is printed," Zeitz explains, "so it takes as long to print 50 as 500 on regular paper."

Other papers and cloths for covers are selected; cover paper may be marbled or printed by hand, and everything blends to make an attractive whole.

"Carolyn Whitesel is really a big part of this," Zeitz says. "She also apprenticed at the King Library. We sort of team up in designing the binding, although I bow to her expertise frequently. She does handbinding of the special editions, and has illustrated several books."

Whitesel, a native of Richmond, now lives in Cincinnati, where she works as an artist and studies landscaping and horticulture. "She's not going to give up bookbinding," Zeitz says.

"These are all ancient techniques we're using. I've often compared it to tobacco, as far as labor-intensity is concerned. You're setting type, then you pull your proofs, then make your corrections. You've already touched the type twice.

"You cut your sheets (of paper) in the guillotine (a kind of paper cutter), then each page is fed into the press. You'll print the first side, then the back side, then if there is any color or any illustration is used, some sheets could go through the press four to six times."

When Zeitz's books return from the binder, each one is a work of art. Not only are they visually beautiful, but tactile, due to the textured papers and handwork.

Handbound special editions, limited to 26 to 100 copies, can retail for $65 to $130 per copy; regular editions cost less, but still appeal to collectors, who cherish them for their own sakes, and know their value will go up with time.

Marketing is simple. "I've always been sort of word-of-mouth," Zeitz says. "I've never had a budget for advertising. I have a mailing list, and send out announcements. Booksellers order from all to just a number of titles. Some will buy poetry, some will buy fiction, some will just buy one particular author, so there are a number of reasons why these books are sold, although they're not high on the list of what people buy in the mass market.

"There are some things published here that are from people in the community that are important to me personally and to the community."

The final determining factor in whether a book is published by Larkspur Press: "If I like it," Zeitz says. "In this business, you're publishing in an older technique because it's more fun, and because it does a better job, but you're also working with contemporary authors. Living authors. If a person comes in my door and I convince them to read Wendell Berry, Bobbie Ann Mason, or Jim Hall, then that's great.

"On some days, I feel it's important to get out new authors; on other days, that it's important to keep the tradition of letterpress printing alive, because people need to see how books are made. I think both those things are equally important. I couldn't see myself doing anything else."