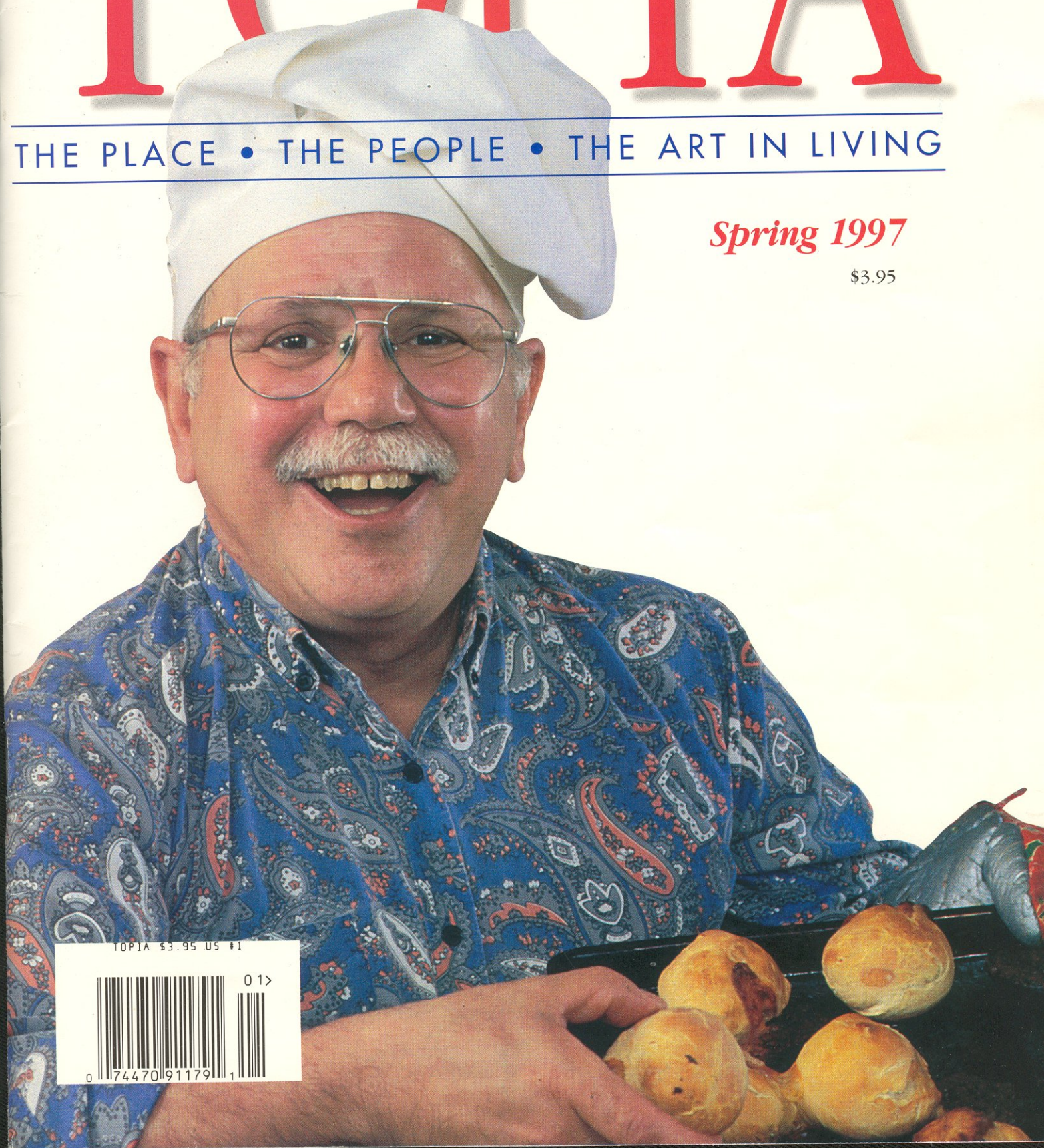


TOPIA

THE PLACE • THE PEOPLE • THE ART IN LIVING

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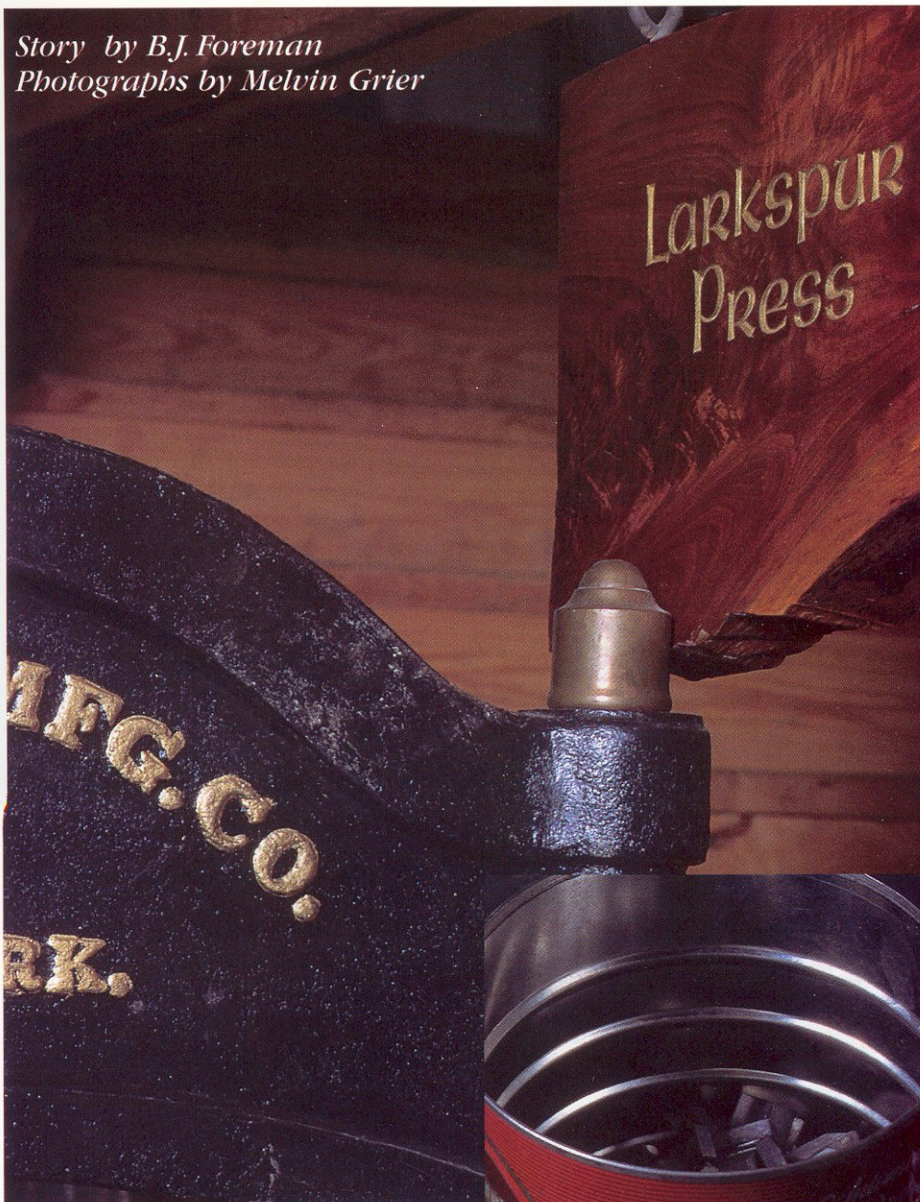
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A close-up, profile portrait of a man with a long, white, curly beard and mustache. He is wearing round, black-rimmed glasses. The background is dark and out of focus. The text "Gray Zeitz" is in the top right, and "LASTING IMPRESSIONS" is at the bottom.

*Gray
Zeitz*

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

Story by B.J. Foreman
Photographs by Melvin Grier



The Vandercook #4 printing press rolls almost noiselessly under Gray Zeitz's hand power. Imprinting itself into a single sheet of Curtis Rag paper is a poem by Laverne Zabielski, an apprentice at Zeitz's Larkspur Press in rural Monterey, Kentucky. She has come all the way from Lexington, more than an hour's drive, to hand-set this block of old-fashioned metal type. Zabielski watches the process expectantly.

Gray Zeitz pulls the page off and scrutinizes it. There's an apostrophe masquerading as a comma and an upside down capital I. Such are the niggling details of hand-set letterpress printing. He suggests that Ms. Zabielski re-set the page, adding two

additional points of space between each of her poem's lines when she makes the corrections. Instead of hovering in the middle third of the page, this will have the effect of spreading the poem all over the page, visually a big improvement.

"It's why I've come here to study with Gray. He's the artist," she says.

Gray Zeitz does not call himself an artist, though. He would like to be thought of as a letterpress printer, pure and simple. To him, it is a noble calling. Letterpress printing is the way everything was printed once upon a time. Hand set metal type is pounded into the bed of a printing press with a mallet and a leveling block. One sheet of paper is run through at a time, by hand crank or lever action.

The speed and accuracy, first, of offset printing and, then, computers have supplanted letterpress in commercial printing. Since the 1940s letterpress printing has become an artistic medium, in which small editions of special books are crafted slowly,



On most any given workday in a nondescript building on a farm in rural Monterey, Kentucky, you can find Gray Zeitz setting type, mixing ink or feeding paper into one of the three aging presses he owns. Zeitz is a letterpress printer, one of a vanishing breed of commercial printers who works with metal type and hand-fed presses. In the world of small presses Zeitz is a well known figure. He is a skilled craftsman and printer, a man with a passion for the work he does. Gray Zeitz calls himself a printer but those who admire and collect his work know him to be an artist.

for a small but attentive clientele. In reality, Gray Zeitz is an artist-craftsman-printer-publisher, one of an ever-decreasing few around the world. He loves the hands-on process, and the watchful dance from inking slab to one end of the press and then to the other side of it. The ink got into his blood, he says, when he first discovered letterpress as an apprentice to Carolyn Hammer at the University of Kentucky's King Library Press in the 1970s. He was a double major in history and English, and had already been publishing his own literary journal, *Handsel*. In the 1940s, Victor Hammer (Mrs. Hammer's late husband) revived the printing arts in Kentucky.

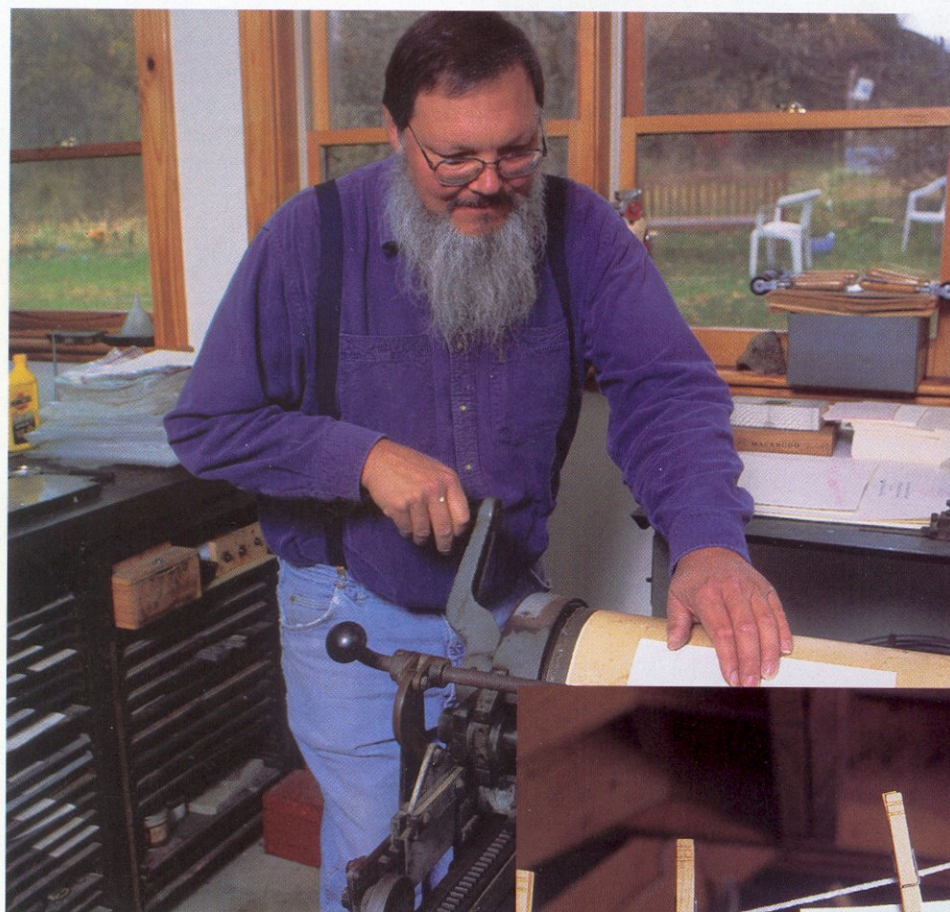
Today, Zeitz and Larkspur are as famous in the world of letterpress as any equine Derby superstar is in the world of racing. Their reputation grows as their peers fall to the wayside, abandoning letterpress for more lucrative endeavors.

Spelling isn't his forte. He doesn't own a computer. He doesn't want to. He's a man whose press catalogue once spoke of the way that words "tap their meanings on a page." He's a poet, a blue collar laborer. A friend and publisher of famous writers, Zeitz is as familiar with Zen as he is with tobacco farming, which he chose to quit in 1984 as Larkspur Press became economically viable.

It's a highly refined world, that

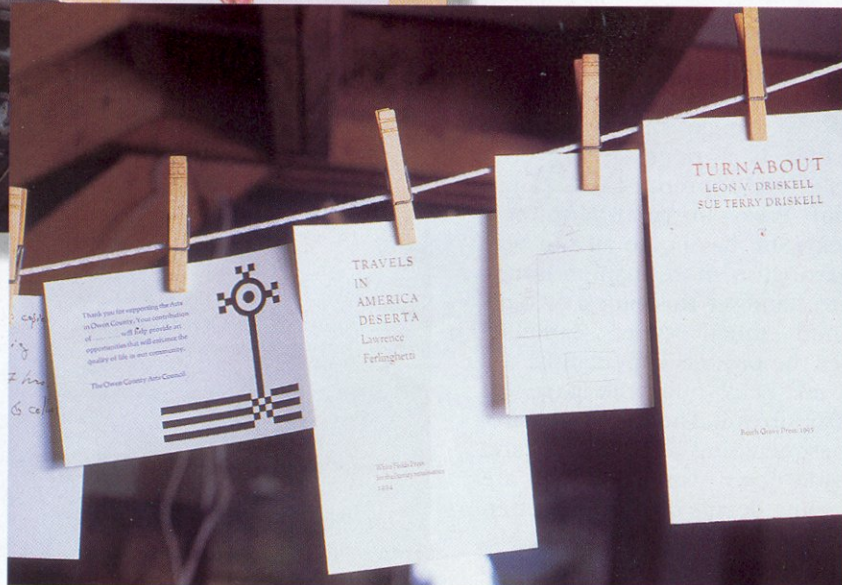
of the small press, which has a passion for archival documentation. The catalogues of what such presses produce are called "bibliographies," and they describe what paper is used and who made it, which printing press was used, what that machine's pet name is, who was involved each step of the way, what type faces are used and who designed them and how the book is sewn together.

The books may be expensive to buy (special editions often cost more than \$100), but they rarely turn a profit for their makers. Letterpress is about the melding of words and type and paper so that the sum of the parts transcends those of the parts taken separately. Larkspur books and broadsides are a delight to hold in the hand. In letterpress printing, the words are *in* the paper, not on it. To run your fingers over them is a tactile delight. The papers Zeitz uses, even in his regular editions, are sensual. "Look at this paper," he says as he caresses a sample between thumb and forefinger. "You could wear a shirt made of this paper," he chuckles. "You're not going to want to wear most of the papers you touch in your life!" Larkspur Press generally releases two or three editions a year, many illustrated. There is usually a regular edition, commonly 500 to 1000 books, printed on 80 pound machine-made letterpress paper and commercially bound in cloth-covered boards or soft covers. "I like to make my books, at least the regular editions, affordable and still have them be quality works," he



Above — With the steady band of a skilled craftsman, Zeitz slowly advances a single sheet through the letterpress.

Right — Pages hanging up to dry.



says. Another concern is that the words come first. So many fine presses start with illustrations, picking the writing to blend with the art. At Larkspur, the words come first, and the illustrations are chosen to harmonize with them.

The editions closest to his heart, however, are the special editions, printed in editions of 26 to 100. These can cost more than a hundred dollars, and double in price on the resale market once they sell out, which is pretty quickly. These are printed on and bound with hand-made papers. Often they are printed on Iyo Glazed or Johannot papers. They are hand bound, usually by associate Carolyn Whitesel of Yellowbird Editions, and are greatly enhanced by the marbled and decorative papers she creates specially to blend with the words and the typeset aesthetic. "Gray doesn't want it done in a hurry," says Whitesel. "He wants it done right. He has a good sense of design, elegant in an unpretentious way, that makes quality writers glad for the chance to have their books published in such a beautiful way."

If the work is by a named author, Zeitz counts on the edition being sold out in three to four months. If it's a work by a new author, he knows at least 100 will be sold to his faithful collectors. Most of his older editions are out of print and, cherished as they are, not many find their way to the resale market.

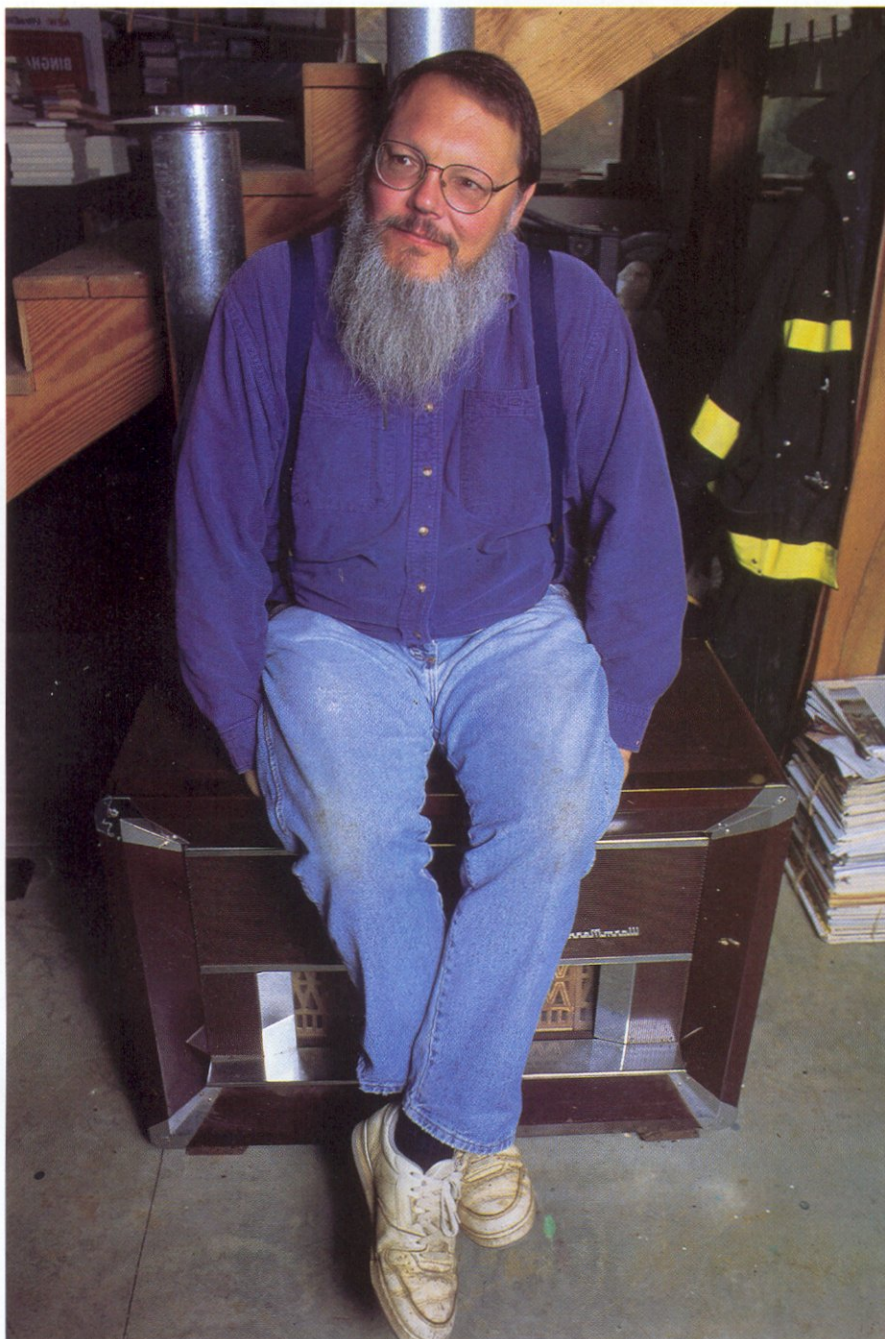
Gray Zeitz started Larkspur Press in the 1970s, out of the back of

a candle shop in downtown Monterey which he rented for \$10 a month. The first book took him three years to turn out, a job he now can do in the space of eight months. He

raised tobacco as a day job while the printing business was building. Today, he is a full time printer. He used to go to the bank and ask for a loan to print an edition. He was a master of arts

council grantsmanship. Now, he can float an edition himself. Zeitz is now able to make a living from Larkspur Press, half on the printing and publishing, the other half from commercial printing orders. His reputation attracts paying workshop attendees from around the country.

"The press is housed now in a no-nonsense building on the Zeitz farm, and what it produces is a reflection of this man and his sensibilities, both literary and artistic. The three early to mid-century Chandler and Price hand-fed presses have pet names: Black Beauty is named to retain the initials of its predecessor, Big Blue (it was painted blue in honor of the University of Kentucky's basketball team); and The Owenton Express is named for the Owenton News-Herald, whence it came. A third, replacing the press he called



"Larkspur books and broadsides are a delight to hold in the hand. In letterpress printing, the words are in the paper, not on it. To run your fingers over them is a tactile delight."

Han Shen (an homage to the ancient Chinese haiku poet) doesn't have a name yet, although if you get to know Gray Zeitz, you know it will, eventually.

"I like to talk to my presses. Everything that happens on a press has a reason. If you listen long enough you can figure it out. A pressman and his press is a real personal relationship, requiring a lot of hands on labor. You get real familiar with each press' idiosyncrasies."

Larkspur doesn't have a thousand type faces the way most folks' computers do. There are only four companies making metal type anymore, and it's frightfully expensive. Type is a self-destructive medium, becoming worn down as it is used, and eventually it has to be replaced. It might cost \$5,000 for the type to set a full-length book, which would mean enough to set eight to twelve pages at a time.

Gray Zeitz started with just one typeface: Emerson. It was an advantage, he says, to be limited to learning just a couple of fonts early on. Later, he added American Uncial (a quirky gothic-style font designed by Victor Hammer to slow a reader's appreciation of literature) and then Palatino, Johanna, Perpetua and Garamond.

Rarely are all three presses in operation on the same day. Perhaps two might be: one with a book, the other with some commercial job.

Part of the reason why Zeitz has chosen to live in the country is to be a part of a small community. Monterey has 200 residents, and Zeitz is deeply involved in civic life. He is a member of the fire department and serves as town clerk. He prints political materials and jobs for the schools. A decade ago, he said that Owen County was a place where most people would rather eat a bug than read a poem. Today, he says, things have changed. His neighbors, like Tim Strohmeier, the County Agent, and Bettina Sommerville, an Owen County Librarian, have put together an award winning literary lecture series that rivals anything in any big city. He is involved, and that's a part of his life as a printer that he cherishes.

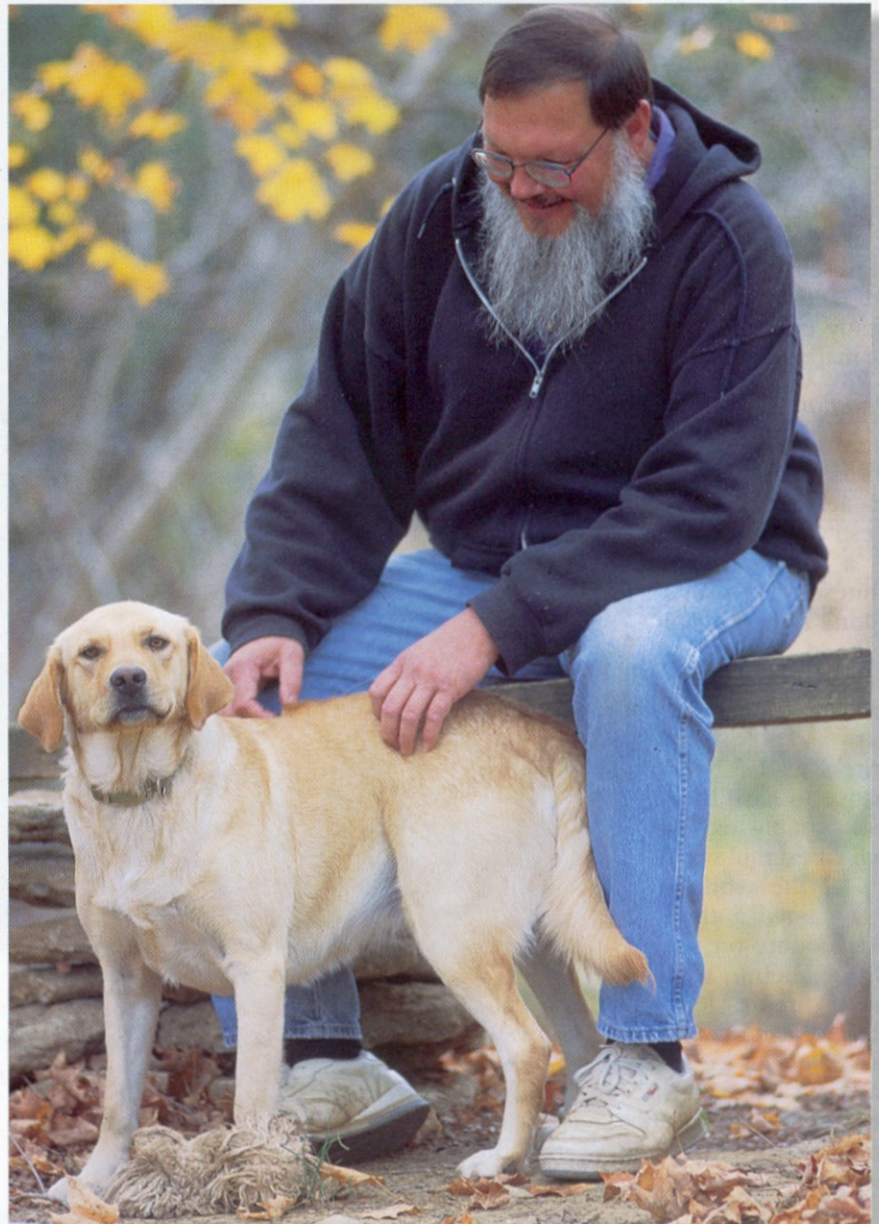
The other part of his life as a printer, that of books and broadsides, is cherished by him, as well as by others, as a mission. "What I'm doing is dying. The book arts world is turned to making one-of-a-kind per-

sonal art objects. Most of the people who started out publishing like I do have turned to offset presses or gone into computers. They know how to make an aesthetically pleasing book because of their tenure as letterpress publishers. I'm guessing they have turned to this other kind of publishing to do larger editions: they couldn't afford to go on like this."

Larkspur has consciously become a true regional press, publishing some of Kentucky's finest and most celebrated literary voices. Wendell Berry, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Richard Taylor all have repeated entries in the Larkspur bibliography. The list also contains titles by other southern writers as well as various

writers from elsewhere—from Hawaii and Alaska to the East Coast—whose work Zeitz has taken a liking to as they passed through the literary triangle, defined by Louisville, Lexington and Cincinnati, of which he hovers in the center. Its list reflects Zeitz's own penchant for poetry.

Zen is a recurrent theme in the bibliography as well. *Larkspur's Encounter*, the correspondence between American Trappist monk Thomas Merton and Zen Monk D.T. Suzuki, is a collector's item; its special edition sold out. Merton's Bardstown, Kentucky monastic home accounts for the Blue Grass correctness of these topics in Zeitz's regional aesthetic. *A Haiku Homage to Merton*



by Ron Seitz, Steve Sanfield's *American Zen: by a Guy Who Tried It* and Robert Aitken's *The Dragon Who Never Sleeps: Verses for Zen Buddhist Practice* are other Larkspur titles that speak to this brand of Kentucky spirituality.

Wendell Berry's poem, "Horses," was published in 1975, the first year that Larkspur produced; and his poem, "The Farm," came out in 1995. There have been many books and poems by Berry on the Larkspur list in intervening years. Berry was Zeitz's teacher at the University of Kentucky, and now is a neighbor. Berry likes the idea of being published close to home, where the actual writing is done.

"First, it's just a great pleasure to be so beautifully published. No large commercial publisher can do work with the quality that Gray can," says Berry. Like the other Larkspur authors, he publishes not for money, but for copies. "It's a very extraordinary kind of pleasure that Gray puts my work into the hands of my friends in a very satisfactory way."

"This is not a get rich quick scheme," Gray Zeitz laughs. He talks about staying a habitual two years behind. While it may take eight months to actually print a book, there's a year before that in which he's trying to put it together: the design work, the trial sets, the acquiring of paper and type, proofreading, paperwork and binding.

His hobby is printing, and his dreams revolve around the printing projects that will follow. At the end of the two years it takes for a Larkspur project, he says, he's hatching the next, saying to himself, "I'm going to make a better book than any book I've ever made."

"I've never finished a book and held it in my hands and said 'this is the best book in the world.' It takes me about two years to know if what I've done is worth a hoot. It's possible to print too well, you know. It would be wrong to overpower the words." 🍷

*Photographs of Gray Zeitz are by
Melvin Grier Photography
of Cincinnati, Ohio.*