

My Dream Job

by Marilyn Reeves

When I used to tell people I was a typesetter, their response was often something along the lines of, “Uh ... okay.” Or they might picture me manually placing one metal letter at a time along strips of leading, which was the original method of setting type.

Up until 1979, the word didn't mean much to me either. I had never, in my wildest dreams, thought I would become a typesetter! But that year I got a job in a little print shop in Aurora called Printing Unlimited. In addition to writing up customer orders, folding and collating brochures, I was expected to learn how to set type on their Compugraphic Editwriter – a monstrous 400 pound state-of-the-art electronic typesetting machine.

In those days, if you wanted a brochure or an ad or a newsletter done up, you would take a rough draft to your local printer and ask him to “make it pretty”. So the job first went to the typesetter, who would type in the words, using different fonts in various sizes and weights to enhance certain lines and phrases. The screen on the Editwriter didn't show these variations, however – all it showed was about a quarter-page of same-size type. The operator had to envision in her mind's eye which variables to use and program them in ‘blind’.

Two font strips – long black plastic bands, out of which the letters in various shapes and sizes were precisely stenciled – were wrapped around a drum inside the machine. As the wheel spun the font strips, it also moved laterally to expose each letter in its turn to a beam of light that projected its image onto a roll of photo-sensitive paper that was wound inside a canister. The paper was then fed into a chemical bath, and pulled out and left to dry. The typesetter would then wax the back side of the paper, cut it apart using a T-square and an X-acto knife, and paste up the lines of type onto an art board, perhaps enhancing the layout with a picture or other graphic.

After the layout was approved by the customer, the finished image was then transferred via a special camera to a metal plate, which was placed on an offset press that ran off the desired number of copies.

It was exacting and sometimes exasperating work, but I loved it. Combining my typing skills with a little bit of artistic talent, it created what was, for me, the most satisfying work of my career.

A few years later I purchased my own Editwriter and opened a studio called The Em Space Typesetting. Eventually I replaced the outmoded Editwriter, but continued serving various local printers, realtors and other area businesses with my newly acquired PC, which made the job so much faster and easier. But in the end, the ubiquitous PC became the death of my career. Instead of people taking their jobs to a typesetter, they started using their own PC's to create their own printed material, and my services were no longer needed.

But sometimes, in my night dreams, I am back at my old job, frantically trying to process stacks and stacks of work on my old Compugraphic Editwriter. Some things, it seems, never really leave you.