

Literary history restored a page at a time

By ERIKA KELSEY

news@columbiainmissourian.com

Jim Downey's office, which sits in the back of his rambling Victorian home, resembles a well-lit torture chamber. On his desk are scalpels, tweezers, scissors, knives, needles and thread. A giant bladed guillotine looms in a far corner.

Downey is a book conservator, one of only three in Missouri. He restores books, documents and maps from the past 1,000 years. The guillotine is used for cutting pages, and the other tools are used to gently piece together tattered documents.

For more than one reason, Downey approaches his work with extreme caution.

"Blood stains are hard to remove," he says.

While studying at the University of Iowa, Downey learned the composition and style of books throughout history. Sifting through his box of treasures, he pulls out leather-bound, wood-covered and even chain-bound books of all shapes and sizes.

"Renaissance," he explains, and taps on a hardwood cover. "I made the paper, too."

Early paper made with linen and cotton was rare and expensive, but also high-quality. Downey pulled out a document, dated 1483. It was in perfect shape; the page was crisp like a new dollar bill, and the clear, elegant Latin script was intact.

"The old stuff holds up much better. Paper doesn't have to be brittle or yellow with age," Downey says.

After the Civil War, paper was made from trees. It soon became widely available and thus began the first era of writing and publishing. But because the paper contained a high level of



Courtesy of Jim Downey

In his studio, Jim Downey has repaired a page of the Gutenberg Bible.

acid, repairing items from the post-Civil War era takes time.

Downey is now restoring some high-way maps for a Stephens College professor. He doesn't make them "like-new," he says, but puts them in "very good condition for 100-year-old maps."

He also is working on an 1875 record book from a German church in Jefferson City. He has carefully edged the pages with wheat paste and Japanese tissue paper. He plans to bind them in the original cover.

Other items that Downey frequently repairs include marriage certificates, immigration papers, land grant documentation and family Bibles.

Most of his repairs last for centuries, Downey says, but everything he does is reversible. "Someone in 50 years should

be able to undo what I do," he said.

Other highlights of Downey's career include a page of the Gutenberg Bible for MU, land-grant documents from the Revolutionary War and personal letters by Florence Nightingale, Samuel Clemmons, "Buffalo Bill" Cody and Ulysses S. Grant. His favorite project was Mark Twain's private collection; Downey, who sleeps with a copy of "Roughing It" by his bed, calls it "a melding of two great loves."

The items Downey works on are priceless pieces of history, whether for an organization, a family or a private individual. His services, however, are not for everyone.

"The first thing I ask customers on the phone is, 'Can you buy a new one?' Chances are that would be cheaper."

JIM DOWNEY'S GUIDE TO CARING FOR BOOKS:

Storage: Keep books out of the attic and out of the garage. Humidity and moisture contribute to acid breakdown, mold and mildew. Avoid direct sunlight.

Preservation: Some museums, such as the Library of Congress, house old books and documents in nitrogen chambers and use laser spot-removal. "I'm just a country doctor," Downey says. "Not the Mayo Clinic." Downey warns against lamination — it adds acid. A better idea would be to wrap the items in acid-free paper — available at art stores — or invest in a protective archival sleeve.

Repair: Mold and mildew can be removed by putting the book or document into the freezer overnight and brushing it off. Tape should never be used because it is nearly impossible to remove. Many libraries offer a simple machine-binding service.

Handling: Wrap your fingers around the middle, not the top, to pull an old book off the shelf. Avoid using large bookmarks or leaving items (photos, flowers) between the pages. If it's necessary to make a photocopy of a book or document, make just one and use that for reference and to make future photocopies.

For more information and a downloadable pamphlet, go to www.legacybookbindery.com.