

BILL MINTER

Think Back—*Do You Remember When . . .?*

ABSTRACT

Today, as conservators, we have the great advantage in the culmination of many years of experience when we make a treatment decision. That, however, has not always been the case. Remember when there were no training programs; when there were few conservation materials; when there was only one conservation supplier; when there was no AIC, and definitely, no Book and Paper Group? This paper attempted to examine and discuss some of the materials and treatments that we use in order to fulfill our obligation in the preservation of books and paper.

Remember when chloramine-T was considered the best way to remove stains from paper? There was a time when modern commercial papermakers did not even know about acid-free paper. There was a time when the only adhesives were animal glue and wheat paste. Remember when it was suggested that we should apply potassium lactate to leather bindings, and to follow that with a leather dressing of lanolin and neatsfoot oil? In fact, some instructions from the late 1970s recommended to apply the dressing “liberally with a paint brush and allow [it] to sit for 48 hours before removing the excess.” I still cringe at the thought of that statement. Today, we have gone to the opposite extreme, where little or nothing is applied to leather.

The book and paper restorers who have come before us had very little preservation experience. In the years prior to 1966, many of them worked in isolation and they used the materials and techniques that were readily available. We cannot, and should not, condemn them for any of their actions.

The Florence flood of 1966 was the catastrophic stimulus for gathering many of those restorers in one place to

work together. They quickly realized that they needed help to determine the best way to deal with the recovery operation. Today, we might consider “The Flood” as the birth of modern book and paper conservation. Our field, however, is still in its adolescence, as there still are many things to understand. We must realize that future conservators might condemn some of the treatments we perform today. Fortunately, we have the experience of our predecessors and a forum, such as AIC and now the Internet, where we can exchange information. We have access to research chemists and scientists who can assist us with our decision making, and help us to find the best materials. We also have an opportunity to look back at some of those early treatments to see what has survived the test of time and the actual handling by patrons.

We should take the time to reexamine some of the treatments that are now twenty to forty years old. We are the only ones who have the expertise to assess the long-term effects of our treatments and it is our responsibility to evaluate the treatments that have been done in our lifetime. We cannot assume that we have all the answers. We must be ever vigilant as our treatments and the materials we use naturally age and as we observe how these items endure handling by patrons in our libraries, archives, and museums. This paper looked at a few of those early treatments and the treatments we use today.

BILL MINTER

William Minter Bookbinding & Conservation
Woodbury, Pennsylvania
wminter@pennswoods.net

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