

Ink in his blood

Article by Geoff Lee
Photographs by Darren Lum

Morgan Davis has printer's ink in his blood and on his hands, too, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather before him. The 72 year-old Bala cottage resident is as busy as one of Santa's elves in the months leading up to Christmas, printing Muskoka classic christmas cards and hasty notes using museum-class printing presses.

Come February, he will roll up his printer's sleeves again and go to work fulfilling orders for wedding invitations.

This month, he is making the rounds marketing his cards featuring photos of wintery Muskoka scenes taken by area photographers like Paul Madden, Bev McMullen and George Popadynec.

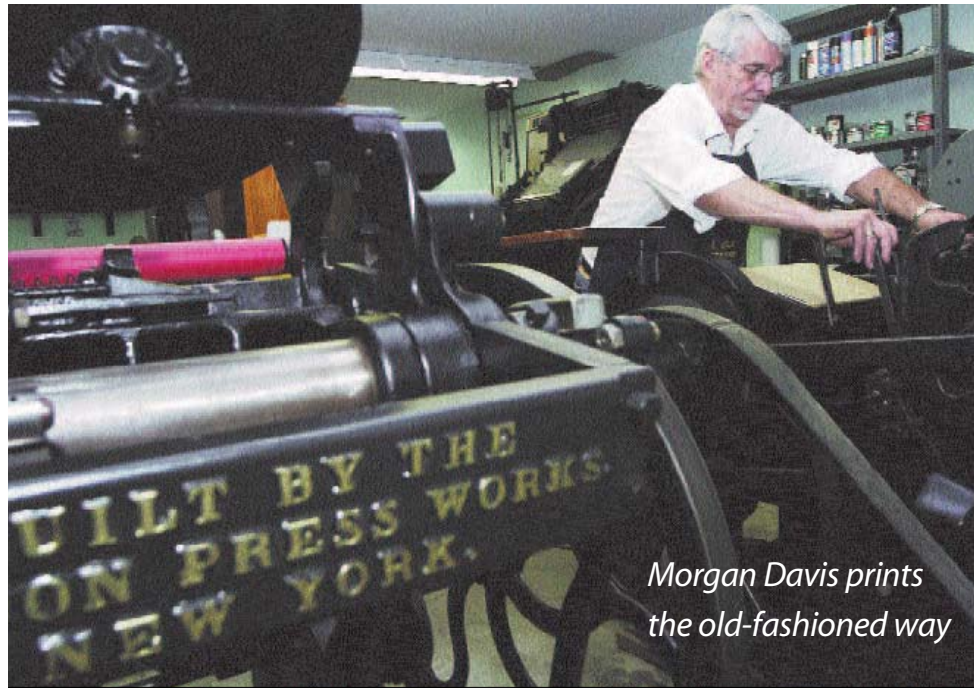
Since "retiring" four years ago, after several years in property development, Davis has amassed a set of vintage presses including a Hamada single colour off-set press he uses to make his cards – lithographs. In lithography, the printing and non-printing area of the plate are on the same level.

"I do one colour a day on the way to producing about 1,000 cards of each design," says Davis. It takes four colours to complete a card one at a time.

His best selling cards feature winter scenes of the *Segwun* and *Wenonah II* pho-



In retirement, career printer Morgan Davis produces high-quality greeting cards and wedding invitations on his beloved collection of vintage presses.



*Morgan Davis prints
the old-fashioned way*

tographed by Madden.

His cards are printed on beautiful felt weave text-weight cover paper in keeping with a high-quality approach to his work.

Asked why he doesn't simply use a computer to design and print cards and wedding invitations, Davis says: "I wouldn't go to heaven if I did that. It's an art putting ink to paper. It's a working hobby. I get a lot of satisfaction from it. It's fun for me."

Adding to his satisfaction is scoring his cards on an old-time Vertical Miehle letterpress that he uses for dye cutting. Letterpress printing from raised metal type pushes ink into the paper. The method is no longer commercially practical but lives on for pure hobbyists like Davis.

Davis got his start in printing at the young age of 15, working for Consolidated Press, a division of Saturday Night Press in Toronto.

"When I was 19, I bought a press. I sold a 1947 Monarch coupe for it," he says. "I bought a Chandler and Price and put it in my parents basement. My dad and grandfather were printers."

At his family home, Davis printed business cards, postcards and maps; then lucked out with a contract to do all of the printing for Associates Finance, an international company based in Indiana.

He quickly moved his operation to a shop his dad built for him at Yonge and Steeles and later expanded to Richmond Hill in the early 60s.

"I had a two-colour Chief 24 press for lithography work and a Heidelberg press with 15 employ-



ees," he says of those heady days.

In the 70s, he suffered a heart attack and his life changed. "Printing is a stressful job," he says. "In those days, you had to fight to get the job, fight to get the job done and fight to get paid for it."

Davis sold the business from his hospital bed but kept the building and launched a property development career from his home in Sharon. As we have learned, he could never shake his urge to print.

He has a cat named Gutenberg after the inventor of moveable type and he might have called the dog Linotype, after his type-casting machine if his wife Barb hadn't beat him to the punch. She named him Dallas but he likes to hang out in the shop as much as Davis does.

"This isn't stressful now," says Davis of his hobby. "There is no pressure. I love being busy. Some mornings, I am out here at 8 a.m."

Visitors are an opportunity for Davis to talk about his machines with much pride including his 115 year-old GP Gordon.

"I take very good care of all of them," he says. "If you look after the machine, oil it, and use good ink, it will last forever."

Davis uses the Chandler letterpress to print his wedding invitations that give words a 3-D look. "You can't do that on a computer," he says.

His fine papers are named Rosseau Natural and Windermere White and invitations include optional logos of his own design including a loon, a blue heron, Muskoka chairs or whatever a customer wants.

The logos are printed from copper engravings that he sub-contracts and customers have a wide selection of type faces to choose from.

"I offer a complete wedding invitation service," he says. "I will even address and mail them."

Davis has produced a polished catalogue that he loans out to brides to choose and order their stationery package.

Davis also uses his Linotype that casts metal type the old-fashioned way, and is always in the market for another piece of equipment in working order.

Before his property development career ended, Davis had purchased land in Gravenhurst and had visions of creating a printing museum to be housed in the new Muskoka Boat and Heritage Centre at the Muskoka Wharf.

"I was going to to supply the equipment and demonstrate it for children to let them know printing doesn't all come from a computer," he says.

"It's not unusual for a printing operation to be part of a museum. Printing is a part of our history."

Just about the time the project died, Davis sold the land he owned and had sought to develop as Steamboat Country Estates. The purchaser was Peter Freed who turned it into Muskoka Bay golf community.

"I spent 13 years putting together the development approvals. Everything was ready for Muskoka Bay to put the shovel in the ground," says Davis.


The sale led to his purchase of his year round cottage home, print shop and launched his printing hobby.

With Christmas approaching, making and selling his cards is foremost on his mind and customer reaction is positive.

Buyers include corporations, and local governments shopping for a high quality Muskoka card.

"You can only buy the cards from me," he says "or order them from my website."

Card wording includes an array of 25 verses and can be ordered in quantities of 25 to 200 with matching wallet flap envelopes. Prices go up for printing your name and address on the back flap.

The perfect verse for Morgan Davis himself could be his own words as follows: "Once you get the printer's ink in your blood, it's hard to get rid of it." 



Davis's collection of presses inside his shop near Bala includes a classic Linotype (left) which he uses to set type. He uses a Chandler letterpress to create his sought-after wedding invitations that give words a striking 3-D appearance.