

Author Keeps in the Spirit of Walt Whitman (8 April 1982)

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BISBEE —

You understand something about the character of author Michael Gregory when you consider that he invested ten to twelve hours of his own labor to set the type and print each sheet of his 216-page book of poetry, titled "Hunger Weather II."

The book finally came of the press — his own press — in February after two years of work. It is the sixth book printing project in five years for the Bisbee Press Collective, an organization Gregory thinks is on the verge of becoming a publishing house for all Southwest writers.

Indeed, some of the eight dues-paying members of the collective already have made contacts with prominent authors during the annual festival here, Gregory said. The collective subsequently has arranged to print some of their new works.

The collective first hopes to print work of either Allen Ginsberg or Michael McClure. Later projects include works of Jackson MacLow, Drummond Hadley, Alice Notley, Will Inman and Ted Berrigan. In 1980 it published Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Mule Mountain Dreams" as its fifth printing project. "The book is handset and printed by foot power on an antique letterpress."

Gregory's road to the Bisbee press has been a varied one. He has taught English, been a journeyman electrician, homesteaded in Canada, fought forest fires, worked on the railroad and was a member of a commune. At 41, he lives in a 1951 schoolbus on a 40-acre McNeal-area farm he bought in 1973 for \$125 an acre.

He started writing in Toledo, Ohio where he was born and received his first college degree. He worked toward a doctorate at Penn State University, where he studied English and folklore, and at UCLA, where he attended the Center for Comparative Folklore and Mythology.

He later was a faculty member at Chapman College in Orange, Calif. But when protests to the Vietnam war heightened, he dropped out to travel and join a commune.

The idea for the Hunger Weather series, he said, dates back to high school, "when I got the idea of doing a Walt Whitman 'Leaves of Grass' kind of book. I first started it in about 1956 but I threw most of it out when I got married and started teaching college in the early 1960s."

Most of the material in "Hunger Weather I" (printed in 1979 as the collective's third project) and "Hunger Weather II" was written between 1963 and 1973, he said. "It became a chronicle of the 60s, a recording of the passage of time.

"I knew it was going to take a long time to do — but 15 years," he said with a laugh. "I guess it

required the 60s to end to finish it.”

It also required the turn-of-the-century, cast iron Chandler letterpress Gregory found in 1975 in the San Francisco area. “I bought it to print my own books,” he said. When I went to a commercial printer and found it would take about \$1500 for 500 books, including my labor, and I found this press for \$595 plus \$350 for the type, I knew I had a good deal.”

The press first traveled to Tucson and then to Bisbee where Gregory and his friends organized the collective in the Philadelphia Hotel. Later they were offered space in the old Central School by Cochise Behavioral Health Services.

The idea was to make the press available to anyone who wanted it and was willing to donate labor in the production of books.

Gregory started by publishing “The Valley Floor,” a book of verse about his life at McNeal, in 1978. The collective’s first client was a Fort Huachuca officer who wanted to publish his poetry. “There’s a tradition of printer-poets,” Gregory explained. There’s Blake, Whitman, Yeats and William Everson. There really is a lot of satisfaction in it. You get to make changes up to the last second. When you see it finally in print form, you suddenly get that old inspiration back again. You can make what you feel are good changes.” And then you get the satisfaction of starting something and carrying it through the process. I really do like to sit at the press and get the thing done.”

In 1980 the collective received a \$400 grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts to put out the first Bisbee Poetry Anthology, a collection of verse from Cochise County writers.

This week the collective applied to the commission for \$1200 to cover the cost of a second anthology. Gregory said June 1 is the deadline for Cochise County writers to submit up to five poems, drawings, or up to 1,500 words of prose for the planned 100-page anthology.

The press also is planning to put out a second “Ecotonics” this year, an anthology of environmental writings.

Such projects indicate the collective is moving in a new direction. “My interest in it has become more business-oriented,” Gregory said, noting that members have applied for tax-exempt status as a non-incorporated organization. “We want to start it a s means of publishing Southwest writers in general.

“I thought it also looked too much like an ego trip to publish my own stuff like that. There was something of the mystique of a vanity press about it.” Besides, he said, he has received an offer from a publisher to print more of his own work, with the printer doing the work.