



# Tim Yancey

Shares the Artistry of

# Gutenberg's Bible

by KIMBERLY ALLEN

In this life, only a chosen few get an opportunity to not only make history, but also help to revive it. Bookbinding novice Tim Yancey has done just that by transforming his hobby into a quest to make facsimiles of the historic *Gutenberg Bible* available to the masses.

My heritage is deep in Clayton County. My great, great, great grandfather, James Yancey, moved here from Virginia in 1833," says the Hampton resident. "He moved to what was then called, 'Rough and Ready' Georgia, which was located in the Forest Park area." Like his mother and ultimately his son, Tim graduated from Jonesboro High School. He subsequently graduated from the University of Georgia at Athens with a degree in Agricultural Engineering. Not long thereafter, Tim was hired by Chick-fil-A and worked his way up to Senior Director at its corporate headquarters in Atlanta. In his spare time Yancey collects books, and that passion led to a series of events that would not only change his life but reintroduce a historical text to the world.

"I like antiquarian books, and what I learned in collecting them is that I had difficulty finding someone who could do appropriate repairs on the old books. When I finally found someone to do the work I discovered I really didn't want a new binding," explains Tim. "It was very disheartening to have a book from the 1600s come back in a very modern-looking binding, which kind of destroyed the character of it. I wanted my books restored as opposed to just rebound or repaired to keep them in character with the time in which they were written. So I decided I would try to learn to do my own repairs."

The bibliophile purchased a how-to book and began experimenting on paperbacks picked up at local yard sales. "I'd just tear the covers off of them and turn them into hardback books to practice, using wallpaper as my first covering material," says Yancey. "Once I did a few of those I got up enough nerve to try a real book. Later, I decided to seek professional instruction and studied at The American Academy of Bookbinding. I also sought out private instruction from Michael L. Chrisman, a master at bookbinding, restoration and conservation with over 30 years' experience." Since he began keeping track, Tim has restored about 200 books to date, but none more important than the book he'd find in a most unlikely place.

### IN THE BEGINNING ...

It is easy to forget in our computer-driven age that all books were originally written by hand. These "manuscripts" were the only books available until the late 1400s. Since most people of Medieval times were illiterate, manuscripts were only accessible by the affluent and/or high ranking officials. The texts of these manuscripts were written down or copied by scribes in black ink. In order to make the book more attractive, decorative letters in red or blue (called rubrications) were added at the beginning of a new paragraph. To further enhance their work, additional accents and brightly colored pictures (called illuminations) were drawn in

the margins. Finally, the finished manuscript would be taken to a bookbinder in order to bind the pages together, keeping them in the proper order and protected from the elements. This laborious process made every manuscript unique. It was an expensive and time-consuming task.

Johann Gutenberg saw the need to be able to print manuscripts faster, and attempted to create a machine with wooden blocks of moveable type that would accomplish this. After exhausting his own fortune, Gutenberg found an investor who pumped more money into the idea. Annoyed with his lack of progress, the investor sued, winning all of Gutenberg's assets including everything related to his printing machine. Shortly thereafter, a

successful moveable type machine was perfected using metal blocks. Although Gutenberg lost his invention, the printing press literally changed the world by creating the first mass-produced printed book The Gutenberg Bible.

Gutenberg died in poverty, never profiting from his invention, but his name lives on via these historic bibles. "Depending on who you believe, there are 48 or 49 original Gutenberg Bibles still remaining," says Yancey. "Most of them are not complete copies, but about half of them are."

### BUY IT NOW

"In 2007, I learned of an unbound copy of the Cooper Square facsimile of the Gutenberg Bible being offered for sale on eBay. I thought how cool is that? If I could cover it in a historically appropriate binding, I could have my own Gutenberg Bible," says Tim. The seller was John

Prizeman, son-in-law of Henry Shelley, founder of Landmark Books in New York City. Shelly had a business relationship with Cooper Square Publishers, and had acquired a significant number of the bibles from them. He sold them (and bound just the quantity needed) from Landmark's Manhattan showroom until his death. Now years later, Prizeman was still trying to help his mother-in-law settle Shelley's estate.

"John mentioned that he had more copies of the Bible if I were interested. I thought he might have one or two copies so I asked how many he had, but he wasn't really sure because he was in New York and the Shelley's warehouse was in Connecticut," explains Yancey. "Later on we were able to determine that there were actually four pallets of boxed pages virtually buried in the warehouse."



Some pages got separated from the Connecticut warehouse, but after canvassing the various storage areas, 128 complete copies of the Cooper Square Gutenberg Bible were recovered.

Written in Latin and complete with illuminations, it turns out those texts were created, developed, and printed back in the late 1450s by Cooper Square Publishers. The edition took nearly five years to complete and was released in 1961 in celebration of the 500th anniversary of the printing of the Gutenberg Bible. Each Gutenberg Bible facsimile consists of two volumes; the first contains Genesis through Psalms, and the second concludes with Proverbs through Revelation.

While discovering these bibles is a once-in-a-lifetime coup for any book collector, the amount of work involved was overwhelming. Realizing the pallets contained 160,000 unbound pages packed in deteriorating boxes that were wrapped in plastic and covered with decades of dust, Yancey knew he'd need help from someone who could appreciate the historical significance of the texts and exert the patience necessary to restore and bind them properly.

"I really consider Cooper Square Printing to be a national treasure. From the first day I discovered the bibles, the only real option was to treat them as such and create the very best historically correct binding possible," clarifies Yancey. "So I called my friend and former teacher Michael Chrisman, explained what I had found, and asked if he thought we could salvage the text and make them available to the world again. After a great deal of discussion and crunching numbers, we bought them and then spent the next two and one-half years just doing research before we ever started binding a single book."

### LABOR OF LOVE

Tim discovered the Cooper Square edition was a facsimile based on the original Gutenberg Bible currently located in Berlin, Germany. The Berlin copy is considered to be one of the most beautifully illuminated of all the remaining Gutenberg Bibles. Wanting to remain true to its geographic origins and medieval time period, Yancey and Chrisman conducted exhaustive research. "I was granted private access to an original Gutenberg Bible and took detailed measurements, photos, and copious notes about its design and the construction of the binding. So instead of putting a modern binding on them we decided to use a historically accurate 15th century German wooden board binding, the way it was done from the region where Gutenberg lived," describes Tim.

As a result, hundreds of man hours are required to complete each two-volume set, which includes sewing and making the wooden boards, then obtaining its various distinctive materials such as the cord, brass bosses, and clasps before any assembly begins. The skins used for the leather covering are treated using an ancient process

called tawing, which was common in 15th century Germany.

Their efforts and attention to detail have not gone unnoticed, as their bound version of the Gutenberg Bible was exhibited at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. for the 400th anniversary of the printing of the King James Bible in 2011.

But the most impressive honor came straight from the source when Tim and Michael's Gutenberg Bible became the first and only reproduction to ever grace the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz, Germany. "A real Gutenberg Bible would be about 550 years old. The Gutenberg Museum wanted to exhibit our work because it looked like it would have looked in the 15th Century in Gutenberg's era," affirms Yancey. "Our recreation is the closest you can get to a historically correct Gutenberg bible without owning an original."

Just in case you are curious, the value of an original Gutenberg Bible is estimated to be about \$50 million today, and the asking price for a single original page could cost upwards of \$100,000. However there are no Gutenberg Bibles in private hands. All of the remaining copies are owned by museums or institutions such as the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress.

So far, the men have bound about 40 of the 128 two-volume sets, and are constantly working on the remaining copies. Always in various stages of binding, Tim works part-time from his home-based workshop, while Michael, binds full-time at his New York bookbinding business. They hope to complete the project within the next five years.

These unique Gutenberg Bibles will finally receive some local recognition as "The Artistry of Gutenberg's Bible" exhibits at Arts Clayton from August 3

through September 28. Get a firsthand look at the beautiful illuminations and details of their bibles, or attend the Artist Demonstrations hosted by Yancey himself.

The first demonstration, "Hand Tooling Leather Books in Historically Correct Style – A Lost Art," will be held August 18, and "How To Make and Cover Your Own Book or Journal" follows on September 15. Each will begin at 11:00 AM, costs \$25.00 per person, and includes a private guided tour of the Gutenberg exhibit by the Artist (reserve through Arts Clayton).

In the meantime, Tim and his wife of 30 years, Connie, are looking forward to the birth of their first grandchild and just enjoying living life in Clayton County. "It's home. I think Clayton, like a lot of other places has its challenges, but it has its benefits as well, so we really like where we are. Unless somebody else has something in mind or I get transferred somewhere, I'm staying."

