

LIVING History by the bagful

Old printer proofs reveal Nashville company's legacy, a colorful slice of Americana

Entrepreneur William Kantz Jr. is letting his story out of the "bag" as he sheds light on the colorful legacy of a Nashville business. It's all about textile bags, manufactured by the millions during nearly all of the 20th century by the Werthan Bag Co.

In late 1999, Kantz, who is heavily involved in real estate, was exploring the Werthan Building on Eighth Avenue North when he stumbled across thousands of printer proofs in the catacomb like basement of the old building.

"It was like inadvertently coming upon a shipwreck in the ocean as a diver, and you find a chest full of gold," said Kantz, 36. "I went on further to the second floor and there I also found about 30 or 40 wooden bins filled with these unique prints... One old printer proof after another. I couldn't believe it. I thought, 'These are something historically unique.' I knew I had to figure out a way to keep all of them together."

The wheels in Kantz's head were spinning. The antique printer proofs Kantz found were special copies that printers kept that showed exactly what was printed on the burlap and white-cotton fabric bags used for packaging foodstuffs such as sugar, seeds, beans, meal and milled flour.

These printer proofs measure 18 by 24 inches and many contain signatures, dates and information on companies that ordered them. The artwork is laden with nostalgic scenes, representing hundreds of companies and their products from the past such as Nashville's Martha White Flour to the Boiling Fork Mill in Winchester, Tenn.

"What we have is a time capsule of these United States companies," Kantz said.

The brick buildings were built in the 1860s and 1880s where the Werthan Bag Co. churned out

its products, and today they are nationally listed as "Historic". During its peak years, in the 1970s,

Werthan employed approximately 1,200 workers. The company quit making cloth bags in the 1990s and today, known as Werthan Packaging Inc., makes paper bags mainly for the pet products industry.

"The artwork that William has is wonderful. It depicts an era that we won't see again, of family businesses and hundreds and hun-

dreds of small companies. It's classic Americana," said Tony Werthan, chairman of the company. "This is a legacy."

Recognizing the history in the prints, Kantz wanted to document everything. "I want to totally categorize the printer proofs. It has taken months of hard work by someone I trust. She has inventoried them by city, state, company name, quality of the print, graded them from good to poor, identified the number of colors and given each a description," he said.

Kantz now has two Web sites; www.printerproofs.com that has a gallery of the proofs and www.americanartimages.com that offers limited reproductions (\$35) and open reproductions (\$10) of selected colorful, printer proofs as well as their images on coffee mugs (\$7) and T-shirts (\$18). He has submitted the proofs to the United States Postal Service for consideration as a limited stamp collection.

"I think I have a good shot. They have 12 criteria and the proofs meet all of them," the entrepreneur said. He hopes to display some of the printer proofs next year at Nashville International Airport. *CONTENT EDITED DUE TO SIZE RESTRICTIONS."

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