

Old Editions Book Shop & Gallery unlike other retail stores in WNY

Continued from Page 3

The other; a French bible from 1552, illustrated by Hans Holbein, whose wood block printing techniques, Alexander says, helped define and reshape book illustrations forever. Because the wood blocks were carved by Holbein himself, the book's elegant illustrations are considered by collectors to be as valuable as an original piece of art.

Beyond the antique Disney books, and autographed Henry Longfellow engravings, Cozzi produces an 1878 oversized edition of "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," illustrated by Gustav Dore, whose haunting and otherworldly illustrations appear as fresh on the page now as they did 142 years ago.

It's here Cozzi demonstrates that the vastness of his and his employees' knowledge extends not only for the objects in his store, but for the collectors who shop there.

"Somebody will come in and say, 'I collect so-and-so artist,' or 'I'm a fan of this author.' Somebody might be a fan of who did the covers; there's lots of reasons why a person will buy a book. We help them find what they're looking for," he says.

Yet, even a collection as vast and remarkable as the one found at Old Editions is never truly complete and Cozzi is looking to the public for more.

"We can't (decide) what we want to sell, we depend on the public," he says. "We can only show what the public sells us. ...I can't pick up the phone, 'Hello, send me some more first editions of "Alice in Wonderland," we're dependent on the public and we want to get the word out to the public we want to buy their books."

Looking around the store, one can't help but wonder: How have these relics of the past survived this long? And how did they all wind up here on Oliver Street?

Alexander often wonders the same thing.

"Every time I stand in this room, you look at any number of these books - some of which are from the 1500s and 1600s - you think about all the different time periods of history that they had been through," Alexander says. "How they got from Western Europe to over here; just all the things that these books have seen.



Matt Alexander stands with some of the unique items at Old Editions Book Shop & Gallery.



"It's very humbling because, when you're in this business, sometimes in a lot of these old books we'll see stickers from bookstores and booksellers from like the early 1800s and you really just get that sense that you're a custodian for these things. You're gonna have your time with them for the next 20 or 30 years and, if you take care of them, well, they're gonna get passed along and they're gonna have this huge history that's gonna go well beyond you. ... It's really an amazing experience."

As for Cozzi himself, he says it all started sort of by accident.

A chess champion in his youth, Cozzi began collecting rare and antique chess books. He began putting ads in the local paper, eventually receiving invites into people's homes. Inevitably, he says, when he would arrive, people tried to sell him their other old books. He eventually decided to begin selling his finds at the local flea market. Initially, he loaded

and unloaded them back into his car after each week until, one afternoon, the owner finally offered him a permanent space.

However, the book trade was only going to be temporary. Despite many calls to open his own store, Cozzi instead took a part-time job at the postal service, which he had developed an affinity for while his grandfather worked there. He hoped to eventually work his way up to an accountant position, but needed an MBA. He wanted to attend night school at the University at Buffalo but would need to provide proof that he held a full-time work position - something which was usually granted to part-timers after 90 days. However, on Cozzi's 89th day on the job, he was told he wouldn't be getting a full-time position.

Although he ended up sticking around the postal service for another five years in hopes of making it full-time, around 1976 he fell back into bookselling. After a couple of years renting a small

studio space and storage garages to store his books, he eventually founded his own store in 1978 on Allen Street.

The store moved throughout the Queen City numerous times throughout the years, with sites located on Hertel Avenue, Allentown, Main Street and Highgate Avenue, University Heights and finally Huron and Oak streets from 2002 to 2017.

After finally relocating to North Tonawanda in 2018, Cozzi thought that as a business owner, he had seen it all. But just as the new store was beginning to find its stride, the pandemic hit and Old Editions storefront was forced to close. To make matters worse, many of the trade shows that they had relied on were shut down as well.

"That really hurt because that's where you sell a lot of the really big items. That's where you get a lot of very serious collectors," Alexander says.

Like many brick and mortar stores, Cozzi says Old Editions basically went into "survival mode," simply trying to keep the bills paid every month. But beyond the decline in sales, Cozzi says what he has missed most was interacting with the general public.

"It's unfortunate. We love meeting people; we love talking to people. People will come in and we'll have a conversation for over an hour. ... So we want to let people know we're open and to have more communication with the public."

Fortunately, the shop was able to at least keep afloat through its online business, which Cozzi says Alexander manned throughout the shutdown, often on a volunteer basis. Alexander says his dedication during this period was less about keeping his own job, and more about keeping a tradition alive in Western New York.

"We're the last rare bookstore in Western New York as of this point," Alexander says. "There's a couple (area) bookstores that

dabble in a little bit, but they don't really have the specialty that we do. ... We keep the hobby going."

While he's certainly thankful for everything the internet has done to support the business, Alexander says that the experience of venturing through a store like Old Editions is something online shopping will never be able to compete with.

"So much about collecting is just kind of learning about these things that you didn't know about and suddenly just becoming fascinated with them. When you're searching online, you're searching for something specific. At a place like this, you're letting things find you. Especially with an inventory the size of Ron's, you're going to discover a ton of things that you never knew existed," Alexander said.

"So the brick and mortar stores, that's one of the real functions that I think we provide to the book world is we keep the hobby going in a way that online sales can't really replicate."

As Cozzi makes his way back to the front of the store, he speaks about his collection of relics with a slight bit of bashfulness.

"I do want to say again that we have many affordable paperbacks as well," Cozzi says adding that the outdoor summer sales will be stocked, not just with the front room stock, but also with their massive overflow inventory they can't currently put on the floor. "I just don't want people to be intimidated."

There are few places that can rightfully advertise they have something for everyone, but Old Editions is truly one of those places.

Old Editions Book Shop & Gallery is located at 954 Oliver St., North Tonawanda. It is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. For more information, visit <http://www.oldereditions.com>.

North Tonawanda Botanical Gardens Community Work Days

The North Tonawanda Botanical Garden Organization invites the public to assist at their upcoming Community Work Days from 9 a.m. until noon Saturdays, Aug. 22, Sept. 12, and Oct. 3 and 17, at 1825 Sweeney St.

"Please join us for all or part of that time and see our fantastic progress this season," the organization stated in a press release. "We will maintain and finish ongoing projects, such as planting,

flower bed maintenance, and protecting and mulching spruce trees. We welcome volunteers of all skill levels. Our 11 acres make social distancing easy! Masks are not required for these projects, as we can easily keep more than 6 feet apart, but masks are welcome."

The organization adds that this activity qualifies for community service hours for North Tonawanda High School and other or-

ganizations that require community service hours. Volunteers are asked to bring gloves and water.

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