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Beyond Hollywood: Frank Gould, Lithographic Printer

Abstract
Frank Gould (b.1919) spent his working life variously employed as a rabbit hunter, truck driver and lithographic printer. His life experiences, including a period serving in the Australian army during WWII, are recorded in the following article.
Beyond Hollywood – Frank Gould, Lithographic Printer

Michael Organ

Lithographic printing on stone and aluminium plates is an art which developed a high level of sophistication in Australia during the first half of the twentieth century. In this present era of computer-generated digital design, the passing of individual practitioners in the art of lithography is resulting in the loss of a rich library of techniques built up by artists, designers and printers over the two centuries since the discovery of the process in 1798. One exponent who maintains his printing
skills is 87-year-old Frank Gould of Berry, New South Wales. With an antique printing press set up in his backyard shed, he continues to work with limestone and metal blocks and plates, producing lithographs and passing his knowledge on to those young artists and printers who care to show an interest.

Frank was interviewed at his home in Berry during February 2005, on a wide variety of topics ranging from his early childhood in the Illawarra, experiences during World War II, his career as a printer based in Sydney over the period 1935-83, and later life. The following is a summarised and edited account, based on the interview and additional material.

Frank Hewitt Gould was born at Lakemba, New South Wales, on 26 May 1919. With deadly influenza outbreaks common in Australia at the time, the young boy and his siblings were sent beyond the environs of the populated and infectious suburbs of Sydney to the Illawarra, 80km to the south. Here he stayed with his grandmother at Woonona. Frank spent a great deal of his childhood there during the 1920s and early 1930s. Around 1930, when aged 11, he recalls seeing his first bullock team working on the steep Rixon’s Pass road, hauling timber down from the mountain. Rixon’s Pass was located a couple of kilometres south-west of his grandmother’s. Today it is overgrown and unused, though for a period it, along with Bulli Pass to the north, was the only means of access into the area.

Frank lived in Woonona at a time when settlement in that part of the northern Illawarra was relatively sparse and the population mainly serviced the many coalmines dotted along the steep escarpment. The setting was a mixture of rural and industrial, but the latter was to take over in a substantial way during his period of residence. Paddocks with herds of cattle dotted the landscape, while brickworks and quarries operated on land abutting Stanhope Street and Rixon’s Pass road to the south. The brickworks continued through to the early 1990s, before transforming into the Edgewood residential development at the turn of the new millennium.

Christmas and winter holidays for the Gould children were regularly spent in the Illawarra, doing things that Australian kids typically did. With plenty of time on their hands, but not much money, they engaged in activities such as picking blackberries, playing in the creeks and open paddocks, and going to the local beaches, many of which were unpatrolled. Frank left school in 1934, aged 15. The following year he was apprenticed to the Sydney printing firm of S.T. Leigh & Co., where his brother also worked. The operation was initially located in Goulburn Street, Sydney, however during Frank’s time it moved to Ranleigh.
Park, Randwick, near the golf links. Frank learnt his trade as a lithographic printer with S.T. Leigh & Co., acquiring skills which served him well for the remainder of his working life. He eventually completed a six-year printing apprenticeship with the firm on 21 March 1941.

Outside of work, young Frank developed a love for racing bicycles. He was to reach the level of the state championships and raced at facilities such as Pratan Park, Strathfield. The intervention of World War II put an end to any serious attempts to take his bicycle career to a higher level, and by the time the war was over he was too old, for example, to participate in the Olympics. Frank nevertheless continued to ride and race well into the 1950s.

After the declaration of war in September 1939, Frank’s call-up came in 1940. Having completed his apprenticeship he left S.T. Leigh & Co. for the Belmore training camp and was in camp at the time of the bombing of Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941. During this period Frank also met his future wife, Dorothy Ross, and the couple married on 5 December 1942. At the time Frank was stationed at Victoria Park, Waterloo. His enlistment is recorded as taking place here on 24 December 1942. He joined the 2nd Division Army Service Corps – Transport Service, where he learnt to drive trucks.

By this time S.T. Leigh & Co. was engaged in the printing of maps for the American armed forces. Frank’s former boss suggested he bring his experiences as a printer to the attention of the army. Frank followed this up and was claimed by Major Kegg of the Australian Army Printing Unit, then stationed at Toowoomba in southern Queensland. While this part of Australia possessed an attractive environment, located as it is on a tableland, the isolation caused difficulties for Frank and his new bride. It was announced that Dorothy would not be allowed to travel to Toowoomba to be with her husband. However she took matters into her own hands and, four months pregnant, followed him to Queensland. The couple eventually found some local accommodation and Frank sought permission to escape the confines of barracks and set up house with Dorothy in town.

Frank’s work with the Army Printing Unit involved two presses working three shifts, mostly printing maps for the war effort and covering areas such as northern Australia and New Guinea. The work was familiar to him, following on his years as an apprentice, and enjoyable despite the pressures and conditions of the time. During 1943 Frank was finally given unofficial leave to reside with his wife and newly born child out of barracks in Toowoomba. Life settled down for a while to a
routine which was in many ways normal, but this was not to last due to the changing circumstances of the war. The Printing Unit travelled to Tolga for six months, before moving on to Brisbane in 1944. Once again Dorothy following Frank there. He was now a Lance Corporal in the Second 1st Topographic Survey Company, busy with the production of maps to support the Allied invasion of lands formerly taken by the Japanese. During 1944 and early 1945 Frank was stationed with the printing unit at Wongabel, then Townsville and later Moratei Island in the Celebes (Indonesia). He was there for about six months with the Australian and American forces until the war ended. Frank remembers taking the call for Major Middleton on 2 September 1945 telling him that the Japanese had surrendered. He was discharged on 22 November 1945.

Upon his release from the Army Frank took a well deserved three month holiday, before returning to work with S.T. Leigh & Co. Unfortunately his war experiences had made him restless, like so many others diggers, and he found it difficult to settle down to the kind of life he had formerly enjoyed. Frank left S.T. Leigh & Co. and began working for the small printing firm of W.J. Cryer in Marriot Street, Redfern. He also took up racing bikes again and came third in the Australian championship. At one stage he was the Australian champion over twenty-five miles on an unposted road, between Parramatta and St Mary’s. His brother, Jim L. Gould, was Australian champion over 100 miles.

Frank was now 26 years old, and with family and work commitments he was forced to give up any thoughts of racing professionally. He also made a decision, one he would come to regret, to leave his career as a printer behind. Europe needed food, there was a rabbit plague in Australia, and he was tired of living in crowded conditions with relatives in Sydney. Frank’s father-in-law was a drover, and in 1948 he went bush for four months, trapping rabbits. He travelled between Coolah and the Queensland border and up to Corindi. As he looked back on these times in 2005, Frank noted that they were an enjoyable part of his life. The break was obviously much needed following on the stresses of the war years. After wandering around northern Australia for a year, in 1949 Frank decided to return home and to printing. He was immediately able to secure six months employment with the well-known firm of John Sands, at Druitt Street, Sydney. Frank and Dorothy now had two young children. Initially they lived in a tent in a friend’s backyard in Bankstown, before eventually securing Housing Commission accommodation at Herne Bay (now Riverwood) near Sydney.
This comprised a hut in a former hospital complex. The Goulds paid a rent of £1 per week and remained there for three years.

Frank’s return to printing was brief. Turning to some of the skills he had acquired while in the Army, around 1950 he purchased a truck and set up a transport business. His first truck lasted for about a year and took him to the Snowy Mountains hydroelectric scheme in search of work. He remained there for about nine months, before returning to Sydney to purchase a new vehicle. In 1951 the family moved out of the cramped Housing Commission premises into a house in Olive Crescent, Peakhurst, where they remained until 1970.

During 1951–2 Frank worked his tipper truck for about ten months with the Department of Main Roads at Cooma. He then returned once again to Sydney. The truck hire business lasted until 1956, by which time he was ready to consider a return to printing. Because of his experience, Frank quickly picked up work utilising his skills as a lithographic printer. He subsequently decided to specialise in the preparation of zinc lithographic plates for various Sydney printing firms and set up a small business in which he would collect used plates and re-grain and re-sensitize them so they could be re-used. Frank concentrated on developing this business between 1959-61, working under the name The Lithographic Plate Graining Service.

During this period Frank worked with a variety of printers, including his old Army printing buddy, Robert “Bob” Burton. Burton had worked in the Army Printing Unit during the war years and by 1956 had set up a highly successful firm in Sydney which was regularly printing, among other things, movie posters. These posters were mostly stone and zinc plate lithographic daybills and one-sheet posters. The process of producing these posters was described in some detail by Frank during the interview as it represents something of a dying art. A transparency would be obtained from the film distribution company of the required design, or of an overseas poster design, which was to be copied locally. The transparency would then be projected onto a wall and the artist, or printer, would quickly make a charcoal outline copy of the image onto a lithographic plate, or plates, for printing. This was a rather rough-and-ready method, and the quality of the resultant posters suffered as a result.

In the early days of cinema, prior to the introduction of sound at the beginning of the 1930s, the big printing firms in Australia and overseas employed a number of artists to assist with this process of designing posters and drawing on
lithographic plates. In such instances the quality of the final lithographed poster would be high, dependent upon the skills of the artist. However, in the post war years in Australia it was often the case that the printing firms no longer employed artists. The printer therefore was forced to do the work formerly carried out by the artist, and the result could be crude. The nature of movie poster production also meant that there were short lead times between the release of features and the need for posters. Jobs often had to be rushed. In such instances quality suffered and this variability can be seen in many of the movie posters printed in Australia after 1945. The fact that the posters were largely ephemeral items, meant to be placed on theatre walls, lamp posts or in shop windows for a couple of days, meant that high quality was not always required.

It should be noted that Australia persisted with stone and zinc plate lithography for movie posters well into the 1970s, as did a few other countries such as France. This was many years after it had been abandoned by United States and British film and distribution companies, who instead turned to cheaper and quicker offset printing. Frank’s friend Bob Burton was one of the last of the Australian printers to produce lithographic film posters. The proliferation of lithography in Australia, both for movie posters and printing in general, kept Frank Gould and his plate graining services in business. Whilst Frank was a tradesman printer, Bob Burton was both artist and printer. On a number of occasions they worked together, and Frank still possesses some examples of their collaboration. The technique utilised with a movie poster, such as the multi-coloured Quo Vadis daybill, required the rendering or copying of the transparency by the artist or printer onto a number of stone or zinc plates, dependent upon the number of colours to be used. This was often only two, but more usually four or five plates were required in order to produce the most colourful, attractive and eye-catching images possible. For any major release in Australia it is estimated that about 3000 daybills were printed, of a standard size 13 x 30 inches. At the same time a couple of hundred one sheet posters – 27 x 40 inches – may also have been printed, featuring the same design elements. Frank Gould, during his life as a printer, was involved in the production of a wide variety of material, of which movie posters were just one interesting aspect.

Tiring of the travel, and other issues involved in his lithographic plate graining service, in 1960 Frank purchased his own printing press and set up the family business, Stanley Printing Company, in collaboration with his nephew, Jeffrey
Gould, who had previously worked in advertising. Frank remained with the company up to his retirement in 1983. Some of the Stanley Printing Company’s earliest work was in the production of book jackets for Halstead Press. This was alongside the more routine jobs such as the printing of books, labels and annual reports.

In looking back at his long working life, Frank noted that he would have been better served staying with printing, rather than going off chasing rabbits in northern Australia or driving a truck around the Snowy Mountains. During his almost half-century working as a lithographic printer, Frank saw printing evolve from the simple, though effective, stone and zinc plate lithographic process very much depended upon the skill of the artist and printer, through to automated photographic-plate machine printing and on into the modern digital realm. He rightly cherishes his skills as a lithographer, an art which he is happy to pass on to young people, doing so at every opportunity.

Frank’s house bears witness to his years as a printer and his appreciation of the skill of his colleagues and the art of printing. Upon the walls hang examples of numerous printing techniques, from nineteenth century engravings through to twentieth century lithographs and offset images. In his study examples of Australian lithographic movie posters from the 1920s through to the 1980s are prominently displayed. They are works of art cherished by a skilled practitioner of the lithographic printing process. Many of those posters bear the signature of his old friend Bob Burton.