

# MOVEABLE TYPES

*Artist and author Kara Sievewright offers some background about the inspiration for her new 'zine, Moveable Types, created for this issue of Amphora.*

LIKE OTHER TRADES in Renaissance Europe, from carpenters to hatters, the notion of journeyman was considered a necessary part of learning the craft of printing. After a couple of years as an apprentice, it was obligatory to journey to a different shop, city or even country to learn from a variety of master printers. By the 18th century, printing guilds across Europe had set up a system of tramping, where if a printer wanted to look for work elsewhere, they were given a document to show they were in good standing. The journeyman printer could present this paper to a local secretary at a house of call, usually a pub, and they would be given supper, a place to stay, a drink and a tramp allowance. If there was work they would be hired to do it, but if not, the printer would simply move on.

When printing shops spread across North America, the tradition continued, for the secrets of printing were not quickly learned but once known could easily be transferred from place to place. Printing work was often irregular and printers were in demand in different places, at different times across the continent. By the late 19th century, tramp printers were well-known folk figures. Even Allan Pinkerton, founder of the Pinkerton Detective Agency—the original private eyes and strike-breakers—had a grudging respect for tramp printers. In his 1878 book, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps, and Detectives*, he wrote, “Never was there another such a shrewd, good-natured, harmless, and yet reckless class of strollers on earth.”

Tramp printers carried the rituals, traditions and folklore of printing from shop to shop, making sure the culture was passed on and adhered to. Every shop was organized into a chapel with an elected chairperson, who was responsible for distributing the work fairly so the swifts—the fastest compositors—did not take too large a share. Chapel rules were not questioned. There was no fighting, no whistling in the composing room. All infractions were paid for in beer. A printer who accepted less than the established wages or took the place of printers on strike was ostracized as a rat.

Tramp printers were known to be strong unionists, making sure to organize shops along their travels, spreading the word that “the printing press, the power mightier than kings, more powerful than armies, armaments, or navies, which shall yet overthrow ignorance and oppression and emancipate labour, is your slave.” Printers started the first unions in North America and in 1872, the Toronto Typographical Union was the first group of workers in North America to strike for the nine-hour day. During the strike, 24 printers were arrested and charged with conspiracy. Ten thousand people came out to a demonstration calling for an end to the law that made trade unions illegal. This resulted in the first annual Labour Day.

In 1886, Ottmar Mergenthaler invented the Linotype, a machine that finally replaced a printing system that had gone practically unchanged for almost 450 years. A Linotype operator could produce as much type in one day as a swift hand compositor could produce in one week. Employers were reluctant to train printers on the machines and tried to go outside the trade to find workers, mainly women, who they thought would not be as independent or militant as the traditional printers. Printers predicted the death of tramp printers, proclaiming, “That vast and vagulous army is no more.” But the new workers were quickly assimilated into the customs and rituals of the trade, and the International Typographical Union insisted on equal pay for women and minorities because they were afraid of unfair competition. During the early part of the century and again during the Depression, tramp printers increasingly crossed the country, still riding the rods and the freight trains. The tramp printer finally died out in the 1970s, when printing presses, the Linotype machines and the skilled workers who ran them were replaced by computers.

*ABOUT THIS 'ZINE: The artwork was done on scratchboard, each original measuring approximately 5 x 7 inches. “I like that scratchboard feels similar in tone to linocuts or woodcuts, but it’s a much more forgiving medium. I’ve used it for some illustrations and posters, but this is the first time I’ve used scratchboard for a comic,” Kara says. She is a writer, artist and activist based in Vancouver.*



*Amphorae* **EMITZ**  
KARA SIEVEWRIGHT

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They would  
arrive in  
boxcars-

the  
**TRAMP  
PRINTERS**

-knights of the road  
and the typeslick

They'd turn up at the local  
print shop & work all  
night with ink blackened  
fingers.



The tramp printers well read, militant, salty, & eerily skilled...

I CAN DO ANYTHING  
A GODDAMN MAN  
CAN DO EXCEPT  
PISS IN A  
BOTTLE!

Big Marie  
Tramp Printer

PICKING LETTERS  
FROM LARGE  
DRAWERS

they would swiftly place words  
& sentences upside down & back  
wards as if through a mirror.

And  
when the  
newspaper had  
been put to bed...



The printers would  
throw  
their  
spacing  
bars into  
the air  
like dice  
to see who  
would pay  
for drinks



And off they go to the  
nearest printers saloon

where a broke  
tramp printer  
could lay a  
typeshick on  
the bar and  
receive a free  
drink.



The drinking would  
start the flow of  
exaggerated truths  
of the road, the small  
places of sin...

Until closing when  
the tramps were  
allowed to lie under  
the tables  
until the  
manager  
yelled...

ALL  
OUT!



And if there is no more work in town,  
they'd be off on a freight train carrying  
with them to the next print shop...

the banner of the tramp printers



the rights of the union and

the rituals of the trade

the history of the journeyman printer going

back to the invention of moveable type.

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