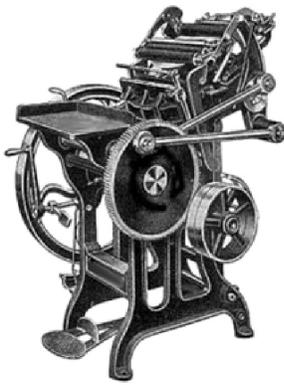


## The Snapper

Old Man Moore was a maestro of the hand-fed printing press in my father's print shop. With his ruddy, grizzled face, gap-toothed grin, and ink-stained, battered clothes, he looked like he'd just walked in from one of Dickens' London alleys. On his good days he was a competent pressman who produced quantities of envelopes, custom stationery, invoices, and other small jobs.

His machine, called a "Snapper," was a clamshell platen press. Parts moved in all directions, causing me as a child to see a living creature. Ink rollers on its sloping head moved down and up to re-ink the type, which was inside its open mouth; a clean bed for the paper was attached to the "lower jaw." When the mouth closed it squeezed the type against a sheet of paper.

A tiny shelf like a left hand held the feed paper. The finished product landed on the front shelf. I am a little kid in the back shop, mouth agape, listening to the sounds of that press, watching Moore at work.



He releases the flywheel and moistens his fingers from the daub of orange glycerine on the back of his gnarled left hand. The press shudders as it comes to life. Moore's motion is hypnotic. As the mouth yawns, his left hand pulls a printed envelope out and his right slips a new one in against the paper guide. The maw closes, then opens and he pulls an envelope out with his left, inserts a fresh one with the right—left pulls, right feeds, left, right, left, right in a fluid, continuous motion in time with the opening and closing of the press. I've read that some of the best old-time printers could feed a job at 5,000 copies an hour. That would be 3/4 of a second for each sheet, faster than a sheet for every heartbeat! I doubt this old press or its weathered pressman ever achieved that.

The machine clatters, belts rattle, joints squeak in a regular sequence; when the ink rollers contact puddles of fresh ink they make a tearing sound, like duct tape being ripped off a wall. My child's heart is thrilled by the sights and sounds of this press, even feeling the vibrations in my feet.

Moore never seemed to change—I probably saw him at work over 10 or 12 years—he always looked old and decrepit to me. My grandfather hired him in the late 1920s, considered him "a first class workman," even though the local constable garnished his wages from time to time. Moore may have been a drinker, but when he and his "snapper" were in sync, he could keep her going for a long time.

Had he ever gotten his hand caught and hadn't it hurt? I took a good look: misshapen fingers on each hand. Yes, he had known the bite of The Snapper.