

Interesting Stories About Interesting People

The Man Who Illustrated Webster's.

EVERYBODY hereabouts who uses the dictionary at all knows that a West Hartford man was responsible for the original reading matter in it, but few realize that they owe the thousands of pictures in Webster's International to another Connecticut man, William Fowler Hopson of New Haven.

It was a tremendous job. Speaking of it only the other day, Mr. Hopson said it took three years work, from 1887 to 1890, and involved cutting 2,500 wood blocks. Many were made from his own designs, each one involving research and study.

Considering the importance of the work, very little public recognition has come to Mr. Hopson from this source, nor from his long work for the government. Many of his commissions were from Yale professors engaged in preparing scientific monographs. Twenty years ago, for example, Prof. O. C. Marsh's books on extinct mammals, issued by the government, created a sensation—Mr. Hopson was responsible for the engraving of dinoceras and dinotherium among them.

In another field, Mr. Hopson has

place is chosen. Among the Hartford men for whom Mr. Hopson has made plates are Charles Dexter Allen, author of an authoritative book on American bookplates, Charles T. Welles, Dwight C. Kilburn, William F. J. Boardman, Lucius Barbour, Newton C. Brainard, Albert C. Bates of the Connecticut Historical Society and George S. Godard, State librarian.

Mr. Hopson has been observing with interest the recent revival of book and magazine illustrations from wood blocks. He himself did a great deal of this work at the beginning of his career but in 1890 and thereabouts, the cheapness of photo-engraving and half-tone plates drove the old method out of general use. Mr. Hopson then turned to engraving on metal himself, for which the same tools are used, the difference being that on the wood block



In another field, Mr. Hopson has made himself a name, one known wherever bibliophiles take pride and interest in the bookplates with which they mark their treasures as their own. Exhibitions of Mr. Hopson's ex-libris have been held at the British Museum, at the Pan-American Exhibition of 1900 in Paris, in Italy and in Spain. His work is shown also in the large libraries of the United States, especially at the New York Public Library and the Boston Public Library. Hartford has a good selection in the Hettie Gray Baker Collection at the Morgan Memorial.

Mr. Hopson was born in Watertown, Conn., but moved to New Haven many, many years ago. When still a youngster he showed marked talent for drawing and says himself that he cannot remember the time when he was not "in it." His teachers were L. Sanford, a wood engraver of New Haven, J. D. Felter, head of the engraving department of the Methodist Book Concern of New York, and August Will, a New York artist.



William F. Hopson

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artist.

Early in life Mr. Hopson was a commercial engraver, under the firm name of Hopson and Sherman, but the demand for his work grew so great that he retired from down-town business in the eighties. For thirty years now he has worked in the pleasant shop on the top floor of his home at 730 Whitney Avenue.

Undoubtedly it is the bookplates that are nearest Mr. Hopson's heart. Not only has he made more than 200 for others but he has made several for himself and his wife and has collected thousands of prints of other artists' work.

Many are the pleasant contacts which this work has brought him, with famous bookmen, with lawyers, doctors, authors and scholars. Mr. Hopson wouldn't pick out the most famous person he had ever made a plate for. He has never designed one for a president. The way that is done, he said with mingled amusement and scorn, is to make the plate and present it to the chief executive as a gift. Whether he uses it or not, the advertising value is assured. Nevertheless Mr. Hopson has known a President, long his neighbor in New Haven, William Howard Taft. He used to strike proofs for Mr. Taft from a plate some one else had designed. Of recent years, though Mr. Taft's library continued to grow, there were no requests for prints; the bookplate had been lost. Only recently it came to light—when the Coolidges cleared out the attic of the White House, preparatory to having the roof raised and

the lines which are to show are raised, on the metal plate gouged out.

The woodcuts of today look rough and crude to Mr. Hopson. The artist makes a drawing and then hacks it out. The skill with which he does it he could acquire in two weeks' apprenticeship. No more seems to be wanted and Mr. Hopson explains this by showing that the art of wood engraving has passed within his lifetime from one, to the other of the cycle common to all the arts. At first woodcuts were crude and primitive, no one knew how to do better, then as the years went by, both skill and taste led to further and further elaboration. When such a point was reached that the elaboration was the picture and all vitality had gone, the art died down. Another generation has taken it up in due course of time and works crudely; the cycle has started again.

Mr. Hopson has no apprentices now, nor has he ever had any yet he is pressed with work and is constantly refusing new commissions. What work he does he undertakes for its own sake and for pleasure. He is an active member of several societies, the Acorn Club of Connecticut, for example, which is limited to twenty-five members chosen from the librarians, book-collectors and artists of the state. For several years he has been in charge of this society's publications which are largely historical in interest. He has done much work on them himself. He is a member of the Bibliographical Society of London, the Bibliophile Society of New York, the Connecticut Historical Society, the Gutter Club of New York,

repaired.

A great many of Mr. Hopson's plates were designed for Connecticut institutions—particularly for special gifts to various libraries, Yale College, for example, Trinity College, the Bar Library and the Connecticut State Library. Often these commissions come after a man's death and a conversation with the widow or children discloses the most appropriate pictures or symbols for the *ex libris*. Very often something to typify the man's career and his interests is chosen, or his portrait.

In the case of living men, portraits seem to indicate a little too much vanity and usually a view of the man's library, his home, fireside, his garden, or some favorite water scene or public

Society, the Grolier Club of New York, the Odd Volume Club of Boston, the Rowfant Club of Cleveland, and the Paint and Clay Club of New Haven.

In the home shop where a great part of his life's work has been accomplished, in his library, rich in beautifully bound and finely illustrated books in bookplates and autographs, Mr. Hopson is enjoying the hobbies and delights for which long devotion has given him ever-increasing appreciation.

On the bookplate Mr. Hopson engraved for himself in 1893, he asked for what he now enjoys.

Old wood to carve,
Old books to read,
Old prints to scan
Old friends to greet.

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