

west view

Jake Zeitlin at 75—looking back

Text by Ward Ritchie, Photographs by Amanda Blanco

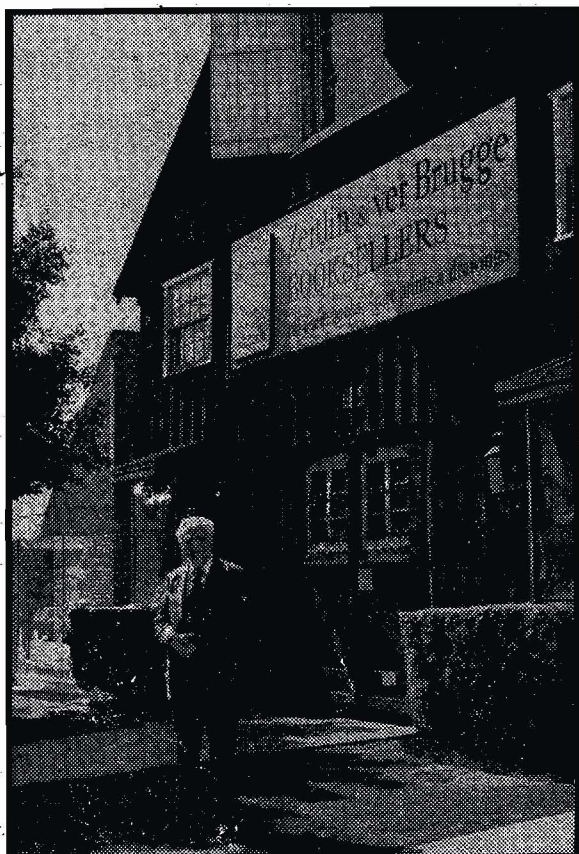
"For half a century, while Los Angeles indulged itself as the nation's crazy house, Jake Zeitlin sat like a happy spider at the hub of an invisible worldwide web in which he caught the treasures that now repose not only on the shelves of the many private collectors but also in dozens of libraries, museums, and universities."

—Jack Smith, *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 30, 1975

Nowadays, Jake Zeitlin drives a Cadillac, belongs to prestigious book clubs such as Grolier, Zamorano and Roxburghe, and makes numerous trips to Europe ferreting out treasures for the customers of his book shop on La Cienega Blvd. in Los Angeles.

I remember some 50 years ago when he was just plain Jake Zeitlin, a struggling, though visionary, book peddler who carried a valise full of books to show not only to lawyers, doctors and movie producers who might be interested but to the impecunious as well. He finally found a foothold in a converted hallway on Hope St. just around the corner from Sixth St., then the booksellers' row of Los Angeles. When the opportunity came, he moved to Sixth St. in slightly larger quarters, at 705½. Lloyd Wright designed the shop and made it attractive and inviting, as all of Jake's shops were to be. It was more than the half shop its address indicated. Though not large, it accommodated a few shelves of those fine press books for which the 1920s were renowned, new English first editions which few local bookstores had and a small gallery in which he gave many local artists their first showing.

Somehow, Jake attracted creative people. His shop was a magnet to them. His own enthusiasm, his innovative mind and his drive to start things resulted in many cooperative ventures with his friends. He spent almost as much time on these ventures as he did in selling books. It seemed obvious to most that he'd never become a rich man. And with so many young writers and artists hanging around, it was only natural that Jake would suggest that they should start a magazine in which they could sound off and offer their opinions. Obviously, it was named *Opinion* and with each of the sponsors helping to cover the printing costs, it was issued for a year or so beginning in 1929. In addition to Jake, such writers as Louis Adamic, Walter Arensberg, Merle Armitage, Gustave Boehme, Will Connell, Phil Townsend Hanna, Carl Haverlin, Paul Jordan-Smith, Carey McWilliams, Joseph Pijoan, W. W. Robinson, Jose Rodriguez, Sidney King Russell, Lloyd Wright and Judge Leon Yankwich made up this aristocracy of Los Angeles writers.



Zeitlin at his bookshop on La Cienega

Jake, as a young man growing up in Texas, had been writing poetry when he was discovered and encouraged by Carl Sandburg. After his emigration to California, he gathered together a number of these poems and his friends, Theodore Lillenthal and Leon Gelber, who had a book shop in San Francisco, published the book "For Whispers and Chants" under the imprint of the Lantern Press in 1927. The Grabhorns printed it, Valenti Angelo illustrated it and Sandburg wrote a short foreword.

In the back of his mind, Jake also harbored the desire to publish an occasional book. The opportunity came when Margaret Eyer Wilbur translated an early book about Los Angeles by an Austrian visitor, Ludwig Louis Salvator. She agreed to partly subsidize it and Bruce McCallister printed it with Grant Dahlstrom helping with the design. Before it was finished, however, Carl Sandburg had included a couple of manuscript poems in his occasional letters to Jake.

I had just decided I wanted to become a printer and was learning how to set type at Frank Wiggins Trade School. Jake showed me Sandburg's poem "Soo Line Sonata" and asked me if I'd like to print it for him. Naturally, I was eager and set it in type only to be disappointed when Sandburg told Jake that he did not want it printed but that he could publish the other poem, "M'Liss and Louie," which Jake sold for the inflated price of \$1. These were the first things I ever printed and also the first poetry that Jake published.

In the next few years, though, he became more and more involved in publishing and formed the Primavera Press, using the fawn as his imprint. The press continued to publish some fairly distinguished books until 1936, when the Depression took its toll.

While Jake himself was only occasionally and peripherally involved in printing, he always was keenly interested in "fine printing." In his book shop he had many examples of the work of the best contemporary printers of the United States and Europe and was insistent on having his catalogs well designed and printed.

Young and aspiring printers also haunted Jake's shop to see the new books from various presses and to bask in Jake's enthusiasm. The Zamorano Club had been formed by a group of bibliophiles in 1928. We "youngsters" looked upon it with awe and envy, since we had not been asked to join. One night in October, 1931, while I was working for Jake, Grant Dahlstrom and Gregg Anderson and I sat in the book store and decided we'd form our own club and have monthly or at least occasional meetings. I printed the first announcement:

WASSAIL

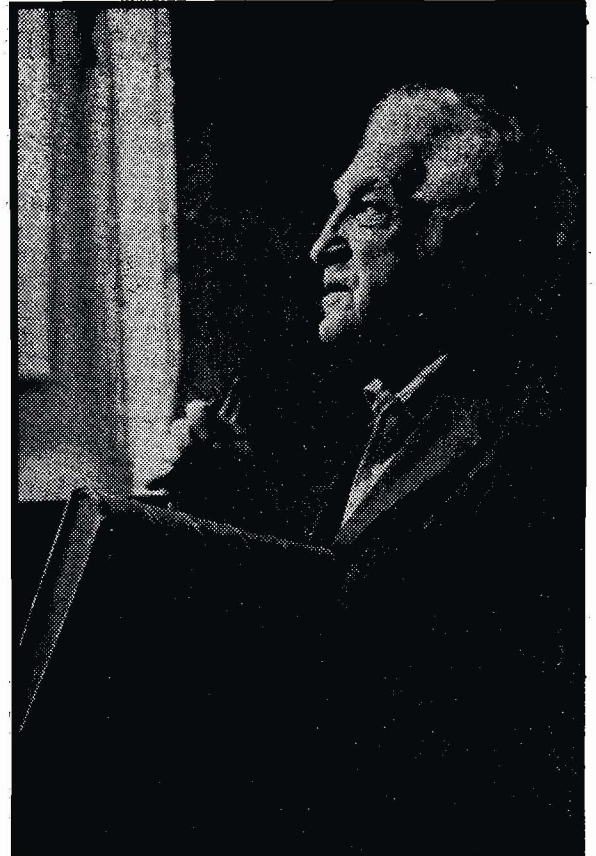
(ornament)

THE THISTLE CLUB
will partake of the brew
and bread of Jake Zeitlin
whose eyrie is at 1559
Altivo Way on the third
Thursday of November
being the nineteenth
at the stroke of SEVEN

W. Ritchie, Sec.

The meeting was jovial, which became a tradition of the club. My choice of the name Thistle was squelched by the negative vociferation of Zeitlin and Dahlstrom and the name Rounce and Coffin substituted. Aside from offering camaraderie between printers, booksellers and librarians and entertaining visiting dignitaries of the book world, the main accomplishment of the club has been the annual selection of the best-printed Western books which are exhibited throughout the country.

Jake's outside activities didn't quite submerge his book shop. It prospered to the extent that it was moved across Sixth St. and down towards town a block, where Lloyd Wright again created a charming atmosphere and a much larger shop, also with a gallery. Jake was quite accustomed to adulating females dropping into the shop, but he was not prepared for the appearance one day of a wholesome-looking, down-to-earth Dutch schoolteacher from Kansas who was looking for a summer job. Jake confided to me that this was the girl he'd like to marry. We nearly ruined his chances one late night when we decided we'd like to see this Josephine Ver Brugge, who was living in a three-story apartment house somewhere near Vermont Ave. I am sure that we'd had a couple of drinks before we started out, but



Jake Zeitlin, "dreams and impressions."

we managed to find the place only to discover that it had been locked tight at midnight curfew. Undeterred, we gathered a supply of pebbles and systematically threw one at every window as we yelled loudly, "Josephine, Josephine." We had innumerable abusive responses but never one from Josephine. We wisely decided to retreat, as there was a threat that the cops had been called. Fortunately, there was a happy ending as Josephine became Mrs. Zeitlin.

Jake's next move was to the carriage house of the old Earl home at Wilshire and Carondelet, which as usual Jake made extremely attractive. The place, a red brick building smothered in ivy, had basic charm. Walter Berman created a warm interior with rough planking and since there were quarters on the second floor the Zeitlins were able to both live and work there and breed some children. It was here, too, that Jake nearly died.

I was extremely fond of him. We had worked together and played for many years. I had bought his books and he had bought my printing. We saw much of one another. When he began complaining about his ulcers, I was concerned, and when they became so bad that he was taken to bed, I became really worried. One day he was so weak he could hardly talk. As I left he was barely audible as he said, "This may be goodbye." I hardly slept that night, expecting a call from Josephine. None came, so late the next morning I drove over to see how he was. Imagine my astonishment when I entered the shop to see a chipper Jake Zeitlin puffing on a cigar and looking quite healthy. His first words to me were "Let's go down to the closest bar and have a drink. It's been a long time since I've had one."

Jake explained that he had read an article in *Fortune* saying that ulcers were psychosomatic and he'd concluded that he wasn't sick after all.

The shop on Carondelet was a charmer but the property belonged to the county's Otis Art Institute, to which it backed up. The institute wished to expand and planned to tear down both the Earl home and the carriage house and the Zeitlins were told to move. Fortunately, they found a huge red barn which Ernest Pascal had built on La Cienega Blvd. and which met Jake's requirements for charm and individuality. Here they moved the shop, which has prospered under the sensible management of Josephine, allowing Jake the freedom to indulge in the creative book selling and occasional publishing he enjoys and can do so well. It was that happy summer day many years ago when the schoolteacher from the Midwest walked into his life that made possible the Cadillac he now drives. That is why the proud sign on the Red Barn reads "Zeitlin and Ver Brugge."

Excerpted from "The Many Faces of Jake Zeitlin," a limited-edition portfolio issued by Cal State Northridge to commemorate the 75th birthday of Jake Zeitlin.