

In the Service of Scholarship

Harold Hugo &
The Meriden Gravure Company

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Preface

THERE ARE already modest amounts of information in print on the subject of Harold Hugo and the Meriden Gravure Co. However, they tend to be devoted to only one aspect of the firm's activities. Further, they appear for the most part only as privately printed limited editions for noncommercial distribution, and they rarely turn up today in the antiquarian book trade.

An important motivation for me was to make the story of Harold Hugo and the Meriden Gravure Co. more widely known to present and future generations of practitioners, students, historians and collectors of the graphic arts. My qualification for this attempt to record this episode in printing history is that I had day-to-day personal contact with Harold over many years. I joined the firm in 1961 and was assigned a wide variety of tasks under him. A great deal of my time was spent in sales and customer service, but I also did production supervision, quality control, estimating, purchasing, contract administration and billing. Harold was, until his death, my most important career mentor.

Much of what is contained here is memoir and comes from the lore and oral tradition that was passed down to me during my time at Meriden. This information has been supplemented by Gay Walker's research on the Meriden Gravure Co. and her extensive interviews during Harold's lifetime. I have drawn on these previously published sources for much useful information in my account of the entire 100-year history of the firm. This has been augmented by documents from the Hugo family and contributions from various individuals and institutions that figure in the narration. I have necessarily had to be selective and representative rather than comprehensive and all-inclusive in my recording of people, publications and events. I have included some historical background to give context to my observations. In my text I have given considerable attention to many of the important publications that made the company's reputation. John Peckham preceded me in this endeavor when he gave a talk to the Club of Odd Volumes in 1984 entitled "Adventures in Printing: A Talk on the Career of Harold Hugo." It was a selection of a baker's dozen of the most challenging and important publications produced at Meriden. His talk appeared in print in 1995, handsomely produced and issued by the Stinehour Press. It was offered to subscribing

members of a half-dozen organizations of which Harold had been a member. With some exceptions, I have chosen not to dwell upon these books in my text since Peckham has already discussed them in excellent detail. When I do mention them, it is in a somewhat different context. The thirteen titles are an important part of Harold's lifetime achievement, and they are listed in the Appendix.

The span of Harold's career was a period of substantial change in printing technology, the dissemination of knowledge, business practice and social conduct. When Harold began his career in the late twenties, letterpress was king. When he retired almost fifty years later, offset dominated most areas of the printing industry and the digital revolution was sending forth its first tender but disruptive shoots. Between his passing in 1985 and the present time, digital technology has become dominant in typesetting, in design and in the reproduction of illustrations. Many of the groundbreaking procedures that Harold pioneered have become obsolete. But his attitude toward work, his refusal to compromise on quality, his attention to detail, and his unwillingness to take the line of least resistance when dealing with difficulties is applicable to any technology.

Harold's leadership of the Meriden Gravure Co. took advantage of contemporary improvements in the photo-offset process and raised the bar further yet. During his time, the nation went through the Great Depression, fought a World War, and assumed the economic, political and cultural leadership of the free world. America's postwar prosperity permitted great things. Among them was a greatly expanded system of higher education. This started with the GI Bill but continued to grow long after the last of the World War II veterans had left the classroom. The arts prospered and grew as the public taste became more sophisticated. Art museums, libraries and institutions of higher learning expanded, and new ones were founded. Harold and his company, to which he devoted his life, were both beneficiaries of these developments and important contributors to them, as will be seen.

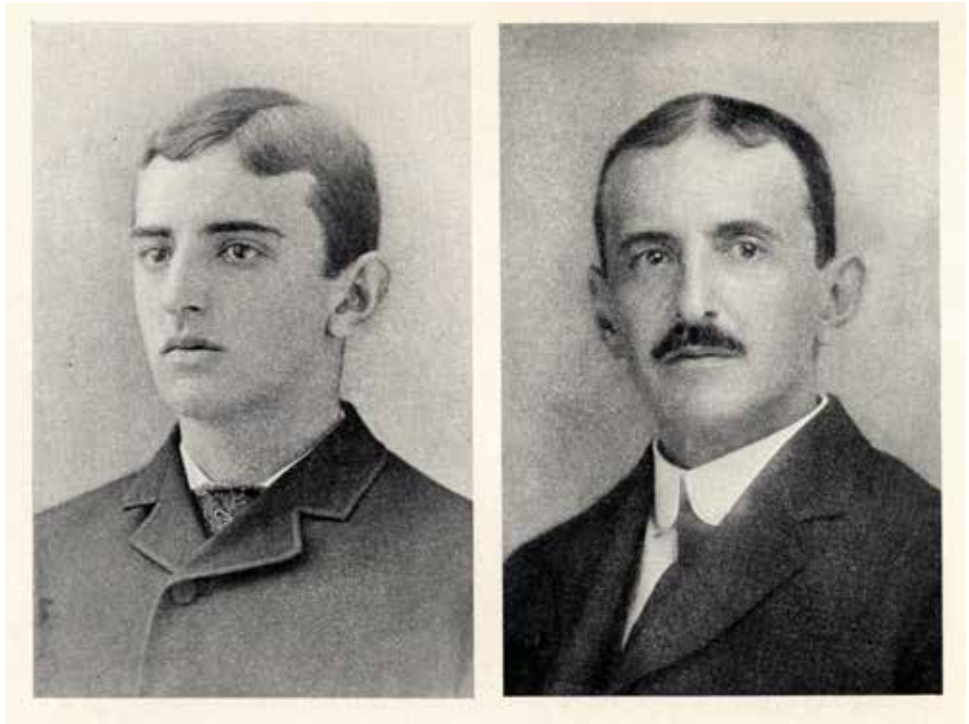


FIG. 1.1. James Ferguson Allen as a college student and as a businessman in his early fifties. Both photos are from his Yale Class Report thirty years out of college. (Yale University Library, Manuscripts and Archives)

One

The Early Years of Meriden Gravure, 1888–1923

The Meriden Gravure Co. was founded by James Ferguson Allen, a young man born and raised in New Haven. After graduating from Yale in 1882, his family staked him to a start in life, which he used to purchase land in Montana in partnership with a Yale classmate. In doing so he was taking a path similar to that taken by his contemporaries, Theodore Roosevelt and Frederic Remington. All were Eastern college boys seeking their fortune in the Golden West. But their careers did not run parallel for long. Remington devoted himself to painting and sculpture in preference to ranching. Roosevelt was wiped out in the prairie blizzard of 1886 and returned to the East and plunged into politics. Allen, along with his partner, lost everything in the same blizzard, and he retreated home, a failure in the harsh judgment of his family.¹ Getting no sympathy from his own family, he turned to Charles Parker, the leading diversified industrialist of Meriden. Parker had been Meriden's first mayor when it adopted its city charter and was the occupant of the grandest mansion in town. Parker had backed two men, Frank Eaton and Carlton Peck, in the business of engraving halftone printing plates, but they did not work out to Parker's satisfaction. He forced them out and lent money to Allen to take over the business, the loan being on terms very favorable to the lender.²

At this time in the progress of printing technology, there were many people working on schemes to marry the new and rapidly improving process of photography to the mechanics of printing. There was photoengraving, photogravure, photolithography and various hybrid variants of these processes. All were attempts to produce illustrations quickly, accurately, economically and in large quantities. The most common illustration techniques at the time were wood engraving, copperplate engraving and stone lithography, all of which were slow, expensive handcraft processes. Among the processes being developed in Germany (where lithography was invented) was a process called "Lichtdruck" (literally "light printing") in German and photogelatin or collotype in English. (Collotype takes its name from the Greek word "kolla," meaning glue, and refers to the adhesive properties of the gelatin.³ It should not be confused with Fox Talbot's Calotype process, which was a