

The New York Times

LONG ISLAND EDITION

B O O K S

It's Not a Labor of Love, but They Love It Anyway

BY PETER BOODY

BRIDGEHAMPTON

For some, retirement may be about golf, gardening, grandchildren and a smug satisfaction about a life well lived. But that was not on the agenda for Barbara and Warren H. Phillips of Bridgehampton. When he retired nearly 13 years ago at 65 as chief executive officer and publisher of The Wall Street Journal, and she gave up a teaching and freelance writing career that she had persevered in while raising two daughters, they wanted a new challenge.

It had to be something that would use their skills. They also wanted to keep active in the world, even as they left Manhattan for full-time residence at their weekend place overlooking the bridge across Sagg Pond, between Bridgehampton and Sagaponack. One thought was buying a local newspaper, but none were for sale.

The idea they came up with was to found Bridge Works Publishing Company, which today has about 85 hardback and paperback titles to its credit and lately is averaging 12 a year, mostly fiction. Its next release, due in January, is a murder mystery set in New Jersey during the British occupation in the Revolutionary War.

The Phillipses run the company out of their home; Mrs. Phillips is the editor, and Mr. Phillips handles the business side. They have a part-time editorial staff of two.

"You must be crazy" to go into fiction publishing, people told them, Mrs. Phillips recalled, in a recent interview in the cozy study of their home. But they have had success with Bridge Works. Although they usually sell only a few thousand copies of each title in hardback, they have landed paperback and foreign reprint contracts as well as some television and movie options.

"It can pay off," said Mr. Phillips with a laugh, as if it were a miracle.

For example, Ballantine Books bought the paperback rights to "Patty Jane's House of Curl," a novel by Lorna Landvik published by Bridge Works in 1995. It has sold more than a quarter of a million copies, with proceeds of about \$200,000 going to Bridge Works.

One of the company's biggest success stories is that of Alan Isler, who had given up trying to sell his novel, "Prince of West End Avenue," when the Phillipses accepted it. Published in 1994, the novel was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle award that year. Penguin put out its paperback edition. Mr. Isler has since had a book published by Viking.

Another success is Tom Perrotta, whose first book, "Bad



Warren and Barbara Phillips, founders of Bridge Works Publishing Company, which they run out of their home in Bridgehampton. They started the company after he retired as chief executive officer and publisher of The Wall Street Journal.

Haircut: Stories of the Seventies,” a collection of short stories, was also published in 1994 by Bridge Works. It was reprinted by Berkley, part of Penguin, which signed him on for more books, including one that is supposed to be made into a film with Reese Witherspoon, Mrs. Phillips said.

“We don’t mind being the farm team and see them succeed with bigger money than we can afford,” she said.

Mrs. Phillips grew up on the eastern shore of Virginia, and graduated from the University of Virginia with a degree in English. Mr. Phillips was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., and grew up in Queens. He graduated from Queens College with a degree in economics. They met at a cocktail party in the early 1950’s in London. He was The Journal’s bureau chief, and she worked in an office job for the United States Office of Naval Research. They were married in London a year later.

In the mid-1950s, after The Journal had brought Mr. Phillips back to New York and the couple was raising a family in Manhattan, she got a master’s degree from New York University and began teaching at a private school in Brooklyn, as well as editing and writing as a freelancer.

They moved to Chicago, where Mr. Phillips ran The Journal’s Midwest edition for seven years, and then returned to New York. Mr. Phillips was named publisher and chief executive officer of the newspaper in 1975. He had worked for The Journal in one capacity or another since college.

“We had a long and successful professional life and then suddenly you decided to retire,” Mrs. Phillips said.

“I was 65,” he interrupted.

“And we decided we would start another profession, the two of us,” she said.

He continued, “It had to be a shared interest, something to do with the world of words and ideas, a world that dealt with interesting people — newspaper people, authors, writers. . . .”

“And you had never had any experience with any kind of writing other than newspaper work,” she said.

“Barbara had written book reviews, freelanced for Vogue and New York magazine,” he said.

“I taught English,” she said. “I knew all the great 20th-century-and-before writers. I thought it would be fun to bring Warren into it because his interest in writing and reading was. . . .”

“Strictly journalistic,” he offered.

“Except for reading ‘Editor & Publisher,’” she said.

“The best thing is that she raised my horizons,” he said with a half smile.

It was obvious they had been a team for a long time.

They looked into buying The Southampton Press, but it was not for sale. Talks with the East Hampton Star went nowhere.

“We were just brainstorming,” Mrs. Phillips said, when they got the idea of forming their own publishing company. The South Fork already had Bill Henderson’s Pushcart Press in Amagansett and Martin and Judith Shepherd’s Permanent Press in Sag Harbor. And New York friends in the publishing business warned them of its pitfalls.

But from the beginning, things worked out well. In 2000, they sold the company to Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group in Lanham, Md., which owns the distributor they use. The Phillipses said they sold the business because their children, two daughters, have their own careers, and there was no succession plan.

Under the arrangement with Rowman & Littlefield, though, they continue to choose and edit books. Mr. Phillips still handles much of the marketing, including getting the book reviews that, along with word of mouth and local booksellers, make a book sell.

Mr. Phillips said they learned early on how important book reviews were with their 1993 book, “The Hard Way: The Odyssey of a Weekly Newspaper Editor” by Alexander B. Brook. The book, a memoir by Mr. Brook on his life as editor and publisher of a weekly newspaper in Maine, “was reviewed up and down the country,” Mr. Phillips said. That made it “a really good launch,” he said, adding that because it was about the newspaper businesses, editors wanted to review it.

“It helped that you knew everybody,” Mrs. Phillips added.

She and their staff, Alexandra Shelley, the deputy editorial director, and Dorothea Halliday, the office manager, pore through more than 3,000 submissions a year, better than 60 a week, she said. It is exhausting work, and Mrs. Phillips said it was not a labor of love.

“I don’t think Warren and I ever have gone into anything as dilettantes,” she said. “We wanted to do something that would keep us interested in the world. We haven’t regretted a moment of it even though we work so hard.”

She added: “People ask us why. If we were not doing this, we’d be sitting some nursing home reading.”

“My golf game would be better,” Mr. Phillips said.