

Harris Sweed

Halfwood Press - The Story

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An engineer meets an old professor he knew 40 years ago and finds him living in an imaginary network of perfect studios in an electronic virtual region he calls *Emeralda*. He tells how he builds etching presses made of wood and steel, and describes the people who own them.



Shown here, a Mini Halfwood Press, No. 26 fitted with a brass bed

by
Harris Sweed

in collaboration with Bill Ritchie and with the cooperation of owners of Halfwood Presses

Ritchie's
Perfect
Press

Ritchie's
Perfect Press
Seattle WA USA

USD\$9.95

HALFWOOD PRESS - THE STORY

A mockumentary¹ dynastybook² telling how an artist designed and made etching presses out of wood and steel, then sold them to thirty people, and finally how their owners used them. He weaves into this story descriptions of a game he made up called *Emeralda*. You see the Halfwood Press becoming a key piece in its playing. The game's payoff would be his long-held dream: *Perfect Studios*.

By
Harris Sweed,
in collaboration with **Bill Ritchie** and with the cooperation
of 32 Halfwood Press **owners** of the first generation

Halfwood Press - The story

By Harris Sweed

In Collaboration with Bill Ritchie

And with the cooperation of the first 30 owners of 32 Halfwood Presses

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Illustration on front cover, *Islands of Emeraldalda Region*, is by Bill Ritchie, and includes images of his 1981 poster composition, *Locus and Sea Squares*, writing from *The Journal of Vladimir Petroslovena Chichinoff*, and miscellaneous stamps and drawings of the Halfwood Press.

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<http://www.emeralda.com/pp/ppprod/books/hp-ts/hp-tsindex.html>

How to get illustrations

In this premier edition, the authors chose not to attempt the difficult and expensive process of reproducing images to illustrate this printed version. Instead, (and in keeping with the spirit of the age of digital reproduction) they chose to experiment, making what they call a *hybrid* of printed words with placeholders for virtual images—calling this experiment a “dynastorybook”—and then putting the illustrations online as they become available. This allows people to print, crop the images on their own and paste them in the book if they want to participate. Try the following:

1. Go to the Web site <http://www.emeralda.com>
2. There you should find a link to this book’s home page. If you do not see it, it is because Bill (who serves as the Webmaster) is giving access by permission at the time this edition was produced. E-mail him from the Emeraldalda home page for further information.
3. Once on to the book’s home page, you should find the illustrations on the Web at the URL indicated there. Then, if you want to, you may print the page on your printer (color or black-and-white, depending on what you are using), cut out the illustration, and paste it into this book in the placeholder provided.

Please be mindful that the owners of the first Halfwood Presses who have agreed to allow their images to be put online reserve all rights to their names and works. The images can be produced only to fill in this book and no images can be reproduced elsewhere without the owner’s permission.

Acknowledgements

Bill and I want to thank our friends on Two Dog Island, first, because it was their encouragement that made me decide to go ahead with this project. Laura Durlinger, Scott Turowe, Richard McRitchie, Bran Toolarian, Samuel Richardson, Dusty Cann, Carrie Wood, Ramone Vasquez, Stewart Shade, and Professor James Oddly. They constitute the core membership of the *Amateur Archeologists Club* on Two Dog and shared numerous examples of their intriguing discoveries with me.

Others on the island who helped were Dolly and Andrew Tillicherew, Billie Bryan, Betty Potter, and of course our Sisters—Aural, Media, Tetra and Techne from *The Flower Planet*.

The book wouldn't exist without the participation—directly and indirectly—of the 30 owners of the Halfwood Presses. A list of their names is in the Appendix.

Last and foremost, I'm thankful to Bill and Lynda Ritchie—those two people who, though dissimilar in almost every way, are bound and determined to see the Halfwood Press enterprise through to the end. Also to their good friends Tom and Margie Kughler, who gave me time—during a day of sailing—to learn about their side of the enterprise.

Machiavellian role-play

“ . . . When evening comes I return to the house and go into my study. Before I enter I take off my rough mud-stained country dress. I put on my royal and curial robes and thus fittingly attired I enter into the assembly of men of old times. Welcomed by them I feed upon that food which is my true nourishment, and which has made me what I am. I dare to talk with them, and ask them the reason for their actions. Of their kindness they answer me. I no longer fear poverty or death . . . From these notes I have composed a little work, The Prince.” - Machiavelli³

On Epigraphs

The epigraph above, which Bill insisted on using, is an excerpt from *The Prince* by Niccolo Machiavelli. Throughout the writing of this book he made references to role-playing games, talking about both real and imaginary conversations with people who, in some cases, he made up. The epigraphs at the head of each session—while sometimes distracting and appearing irrelevant—he thought might shed light on the workings of a creative mind.

So we ask the reader to take on a double task in reading this book: One, of understanding it as a true account of events and, secondly, an exploration of a virtual reality, an imaginary place that some have found to be essential to satisfy a person’s creative appetite.

A background yarn

“You wanted me to write a foreword, and I struggled with that for a while but the best that I could do would be to include a few paragraphs from my journal.”

—Postcard from Dusty Cann, Librarian of Puntaville, Two Dog Island.

Journal, Two Dog Island: It is early in the morning and there is a light rain falling—no, not a rain but a very heavy mist is in the air. I’m standing on a beach on the West side of Two Dog, looking out on Dead Man’s Cove. I have walked down a trail to the rocky beach and I have stopped at about the middle.

Looking West I know that a hundred yards out, under 75 feet of water and several feet of green-black gunk and sea-growth, are parts of a broken ship, an eighteenth century vessel of the galleon class—probably English-built. No one believes me, but I’m pretty sure it’s there.

No ship of that type, of that time, is on any record of having been here—no document anywhere in the world. The only evidence is that of legends told by descendants of a Nation who disappeared hundreds of years ago. So, why should anyone believe what I am writing?

If a ship that size did sail among these islands in the late 18th Century, then somebody—such as Captain George Vancouver, for example—would have noted it in his log. But I say, despite the lack of documentation, there was a mystery ship, the *Emeralda*, anchored here about 20 years before Vancouver came. Maybe his two ships passed over what remained of the *Emeralda*, at the bottom of Dead Man’s Cove.

If someone on those later ships, surveying the island, had looked closely at this cove’s beaches, they might have made out pieces of the wreckage—planking and parts of furniture under the trees and blackberry vines choking the banks. They might have noticed parts of the masts and yardarms mixed in among the driftwood rimming the shore, or a tangle of tar-soaked hemp lines. Flotsam and jetsam that remained would escape their notice because they would not have thought to look for it.

The *Emeralda* was unknown to European or Russian explorers. I think it was a voyage commissioned by some secret society—a society of people fearing for their lives. They were people facing extermination in Continental Europe and the British Isles. Their covenant was in part a life or death mission for science and partly a search for freedom in a new homeland.

I think they crossed the Atlantic, made landfall at Florianópolis, off Brazil’s coast. They rounded the cape, stayed awhile in Ecuador, and continued north to the 47th latitude. It’s right here, in this cove, where their voyage ended. The fatal blow came in the form of a tsunami, obliterating the galleon. Here

ended hope for those people and their dreams of a new society in the new world of North America.

More than 70 people perished that night of that rogue wave. But there was one survivor. For him it was not the end, but a bittersweet beginning. I have taken his story and made it the beginning of my story, which I shared with the authors as part of the tale of a remarkable recovery and reconstruction of a miniature printing press that involves, in its small way, the *Emeralda*.

The story of the lone survivor, the castaway, is etched in my thoughts, and it is literally etched into metal—thin brass sheets the size of playing cards. Originally these printing plates came to the new world on the fated *Emeralda*. Although badly corroded, the words etched into them are difficult to make out, but are still readable.

How I came into possession of these plates is a story in itself. I will leave the telling of this saga to another; as he is a more adept storyteller than I am. As a trained engineer, who in his later years has taken up history and archeology, I lean toward the facts, and it is my wish to keep the record straight.

I'm happy that my contribution here is regarded as the background source of a certain tool—an instrument, as you will learn to call it—that I am in possession of, which is the miniature, the Halfwood Press.

- Dusty Cann

Authors and Collaborators

Harris Sweed earned his Master's degree in ergonomic engineering at the University of Washington in Seattle and worked with several of the dot-com startups in the Pacific Northwest. He witnessed firsthand the amazing rise in technology and the shift toward digital enterprises. He diverged from the mechanical to digital worlds, became a software engineer and built his own company. He sold it in 2003, went north and bought property on Two Dog Island, in San Juan County. Not ready to retire, he wanted to pursue his art interest.

Instead of making art, he found he was drawn more to history and antique art methods and machines. He began writing and lecturing, focused on printing press design, ink formulation, and papermaking. He studied the roles that printmaking plays in society and culture, building a library of ephemera, old books and journals focused on the media and its significance to humanity.

He developed friendships with other residents on Two Dog, mostly retired professionals, which made for lively intellectual conversations. Through his academic contacts, he participated in meetings on community college campuses and at Western Washington University, occasionally returning to the UW to lecture on printing technology. He headlines these—*Mechanization Takes Command*—a title he owes to Siegfried Gideon.⁴

By chance, he encountered Bill Ritchie, an art professor he had met in his college days, now retired. Urged by the professor and with encouragement by friends on Two Dog Island, Harris decided to collaborate with the artist/professor and write an account of Ritchie's small etching press company he calls *Halfwood Press*. Following the style of Tracy Kidder's *Soul of A New Machine*, he describes the art professor's mix of experiences that led to his press design and a new machine used for a very old printing technique called *intaglio*.

Thus, in the following pages, what we have is a story of an enterprise based on another, older kind of *new machine* including an account of the professor's unusual philosophy of art linked to a game he plays with what he calls *the gifts of life*. He titled his game, *Emeralda*.

Bill Ritchie's Studio, Seattle, 2007



Figure 1: The studio, workshop, and gallery at 825 Taylor Avenue North, in Seattle, Bill Ritchie's working studio. Photo and Artist Stamp by Mark Leonard.

Taylor Avenue Art Gallery

We re-connected first on Two Dog Island. The snapshot in the artist stamp above shows where I met Bill Ritchie the second time, his art studio and gallery located near the corner of Taylor Avenue North and Aloha Street in Seattle. It is here that he designed the Halfwood Press and, today, continues to assemble the wooden parts of the presses.

This little storefront has been Bill's retreat since January of 2004. At 300 square feet it was small by comparison to studios he'd shared in the past. He managed to organize the space so he could do the basic hand woodwork for the presses. Sometimes these operations spill out onto the sidewalk in front.

The space is sufficient to allow printmaking and painting, with space on the walls to hang his artworks. A 5-foot corner has a computer for his writing and digital art. In our conversations he frequently refers to this as his *Perfect Studio*, which is explained in Chapter 10.

He has another area for his computer and video work—a ten-by-ten spare bedroom in his condominium that is located across Aloha Street, one block away. Bill tells guests, "My commute is a one-minute walk."

1st Day - RIISMA

From Bill Ritchie's Journal:
"New Year" from RIISMA 'Zine, December 31, 2006

"After almost a year of writing Hunt for the Emeraldal Treasure, building a complete calendar of the 10th (and now in the 15th day of the 11th Year of Living Copiously, the Gates Prize) what have I learned?

"First, that there is something like a work of art in the future that I cannot even imagine. This work will be created in the Perfect Studio, as I defined it 23 years ago, as a game called Emeraldal.

"Second, the calculus of this work will be, speaking historically, a 21st Century calculus. You need to look at the game in this context. Comprehending the work, in other words, you look for pieces of a puzzle, something like a game.

"Third, the work will not sever connections to my past work. Each decade of my life is populated with actions and events driving me toward this time of my life—largely devoted to family, educational and artistic values."

On my first visit to RIISMA

How I was drawn into playing Bill Ritchie's game that he calls *Emeraldal* (and pretending for the moment that I'm on an island in this game named *RIISMA*, on his map of *Emeraldal Region*) is connected to the project at hand—i.e., the Halfwood Press story. First I think you need to know a little about me, and why I agreed to write the story of Halfwood Press.

Suffice it to say, for now, that *RIISMA* (which stands for *Ritchie's International Institute for the Study of Media Art*) is part of his game. It's the research domain, a portal to anticipation and speculation, as he calls it. By chance occurrences it is my port of entry, or where I come in to his world as a way to start this story.

Ritchie and I go back about thirty years. I met him when he was still teaching at the University of Washington, the fall of 1976. I was a TA in ergonomic engineering, working on my Master's. I got the idea that, before I graduated, I wanted an art course.

It's said that engineers are boring. If I could get an art or music class, I thought that might make me a more interesting dinner guest. I went to the art advisor's office to get enrolled, but I learned that engineering students—in fact any *non-art* major—had to have special permission from an instructor to take art. That would be hard, I was told; art classes, being popular, were overloaded already by art majors.

They ran a coffee shop in the basement of the art building. I liked going there. Once there was a show of prints on the walls. That's when I aimed

to take printmaking. I became friends with the guy at the counter, a graduate student doing a triple major—printmaking, video and ceramics. His name was Dennis, but for some reason that I never figured out, people called him *Ubu*. He said I should talk to one of the printmaking professors, Bill Ritchie, about getting into his class.

When I called him, he was going on sabbatical. Though I couldn't wait until he came back, we talked a couple of times before he left. He said a visiting artist named Daniel Smith would be teaching his class, and he would probably let me in because visiting artists tended to ignore protocol. He was right about Smith and I was able to take stone lithography.

Ritchie went to Japan on his sabbatical, and some other places around the US. As for Daniel Smith, he didn't teach any more after that. He was an up-and-coming artist. He also opened an art supply store, which still exists. I didn't see Ritchie again until now.

By coincidence, he and I re-connected at the Gunderson General Store, on Two Dog Island. I was having coffee and I noticed him when he came in—obviously a tourist. He was with a red-haired woman I figured was his wife. At first I didn't know where or when I had seen him before but I thought it could have been at the UW. The two had lunch. I kept looking at him, wondering where I'd seen his face. He glanced my way a couple times.

People were leaving to catch the ferry, and I was about to do the same when he stood up, came over and said, "I think I know you. Weren't you that engineering student who wanted to take printmaking at the U?"

That's how we re-connected. When I told him my story—there wasn't really a lot to it—he said he was very interested that I was writing now, which surprised me. We walked outside. It was starting to rain, so we both were in a hurry to get back to our cars. His wife was waiting; they wanted to catch the next ferry, which was about to dock.

He said, "Visit my Web site—*emeralda.com*—and see what you think of my little etching press. E-mail me. We can continue this conversation." Then, as he was getting in the car and the ferry blew its horn, he added, "Hey, maybe this will be your next article!"

Now you see how this book got started. We had exchanged some messages online, and I did go to see him the next time I was in Seattle. Right away, the first day, the subject of the name of his Web site, *emeralda.com*, came up.

"It's a game I play," he said. "And in this game, you are right now in the domain of *Ritchie's Institute for the Study of Media Art*—or *RIISMA*." We decided, Yes I would try writing about his press and the events around it, and, Yes, I was willing to frame it in the imaginary domain of his "game" as he

called it. What the payoff for playing would be was not clear. It made me a little uneasy, but I went ahead.

First Halfwood: The Century

So I met Bill again at his little shop on Taylor Avenue in Seattle. He calls his operation *Emeralda Works*. I'll never forget the odd feeling I got when he showed me his doodles for the press design, for I'd seen something like it in a Bellingham newspaper. That's a different story in itself, for later.

Ritchie told me that after he left the UW in 1985 (he resigned over some differences of opinion as to where printmaking was headed) he faced some tough times as a printmaker with no press. He had sold out his studio to help finance his last sabbatical in 1983—this time to go around the world.⁵

After that, it was only by getting press time in studios of his former students, or attending *Open Press* sessions at the Daniel Smith's art supply store, that he could print his plates. He had no place to work. He etched his copper plates in his wife's kitchen. Once he rented a commercial space in his condo's building; another time he and his wife bought another condo next door for his work—and sold it after a year.

Figure 2: *Two Dog Island*, a print from a plate Bill etched in the kitchen sink, printed at the Seattle Daniel Smith store's *Open Press*.

Then there was a period of floating from one workspace or cooperative to another. In January of 2004 he rented a little storefront around the corner from his home. He decided to design and build a press for himself. I might mention here that, in addition to making prints, he is fond of woodworking, wood antiques, and wooden boats. That's why he incorporated wood as a way to make a press that was light but strong, and also showed his love of fine woodworking.

The idea of making a wooden press originated in 1969 while he was on leave, studying in Europe. In the Netherlands, the *Rembrandthuis* featured a reconstruction of an all-wood etching press. In 1983 he saw lithograph presses in France that were mostly wood.⁶ Bill's etching press would be a combination of form and function in wood and steel.

A Canadian named Doug Forsythe has a press design on the Internet.⁷ Ritchie bought the plans and began. He made a wooden prototype. He went around to various Seattle suppliers to buy bearings and threaded rod, the basics that he could buy off the shelf; he bolted them together so he had a wood and steel model of his dream press.

He hauled his wooden prototype around Seattle looking for a shop to mill the rollers and cut out the side plates. It was discouraging at first. Then he found an engineer and steel wright named Tom Kughler of Kughler Company, in the Ballard district of Seattle. When Bill told Tom he needed someone to help him build his etching press, Tom said, “I don’t know what an etching press is, but if you show me how it works, I can build one.” Kughler took his drawings and the wood version and set about turning Bill’s design into all-steel reality. It had a 24-inch wide bed and two 6-inch diameter rollers.



Figure 3: Tom Kughler, left, and Bill discuss the first parts that Tom fabricated for the *Century* etching press.

While Tom worked on the side plates, crossties and rollers, Bill, in his little studio/workshop across town, was shaping the outer cladding of wood that would cover and lengthen the steel sides. As he worked on the veneer plywood that he chose for the test model, he kept thinking about a classic speedboat called the *Century* that he wanted when he was a teenager. It was solid mahogany.

For his press, mahogany veneer plywood would have to suffice because he couldn’t afford to make his press with the solid mahogany like that speedboat. He hoped to improve his press later on. That is, if the press design worked the way it was supposed to.

Tom and his wife Margie (she was also his assistant) delivered the steel core of the press on May 22, 2004. With the help of Nick Dellos, Bill’s neighbor, the four of them carried the 200-lb unit into his studio. Bill had improvised a sort of stand for it out of a boxy section from an old bookcase someone had left in the condo’s storage room.

The press proved to work fine, but Ritchie didn’t have any more money for the real mahogany. Nor could he buy the inch-thick slab of resin composite for the bed, nor the driving wheel. So, for the press bed he

substituted a castaway tabletop he found behind his condo—a high-density wood product covered with melamine. For a wheel Tom fashioned him a crank, cut in the curly shape of an orange peeling (Bill thought was more interesting than the straight crank in the Forsythe plans).

In May of 2004, he pulled the first prints with his press, and he named the press the *Century*.



Figure 4: The *Century*, with the first print Bill Ritchie made with it.

The first Mini Halfwood

In the frequent visits they had while making the *Century*, Bill became friends with Tom and Margie. The artist was impressed with the care that Kughler took with the design, and got his advice to improve on it. They found they had shared interests—one being sailing. For years, Tom used his creativity for designing and improving on industrial equipment, custom home and architectural furnishings—plus he built their home—a 36-foot live-aboard steel-hulled sailboat. There was artistic talent in Tom’s family, too; Tom told about an uncle who was a painter of note early last Century.

His wife Margie, who is also Tom’s helpmate, was almost always in the shop. She took a liking to the press project, especially since she herself was into rubber-stamping and scrap booking. She would help assemble the parts of the press. At first, all that mattered was making the *Century*. No one in the trio foresaw what was coming next, which would be the Mini Halfwood.

To actually make a *miniature* etching press like the *Century* wasn’t Bill’s idea. It happened because one day as Bill was at Tom’s shop and the artist was musing, thinking aloud, as to how interesting and fun it would be to have a scale model of the *Century*—an etching press so small and light that you could carry it around.

“If you had a scale model, you could even take it sailing on the *Kadeca* (Tom and Margie’s sloop),” Bill said.

Tom responded: “I make models.” His company’s specialty is heavy equipment—attachments for fork lifts mostly—and when he launched his product line he built working scale models of them for displaying how they

worked at trade shows. The machines were like toys and they actually worked, lifting and pouring “barrels” of M&Ms.

Nothing more was said about a miniature press as Bill turned his attention to making prints on his new press. Kughler, on his own time and money, quietly built a one-fourth-scale model of the press; he calculated everything, down to the size of the bearings and the curve of the extended wood sides. So, the bed width was six-inches. Instead of mahogany sides, Tom used a type of ironwood called *Ipe* (pronounced variously *eye-pay* or *ee-pay*) that had been lying around his shop.

Kughler delivered the prototype Mini Halfwood to Bill’s studio in mid-June, 2004. Bill recalls the day:

“Tom said he was going to stop by. He drove up in his red pickup truck. I opened my door, and Tom was walking up to me with this tiny press in one hand, swinging it to and fro at his side, carrying it like a brief case. I had to laugh, and Tom was grinning. I said, ‘You look like a giant carrying the Century in one hand.’ I was used to my big new press that that’s how it struck me—like Tom was twenty feet tall. It was very funny.”

While Bill was telling me this he was working on wooden parts for the last two presses that Tom made after that initial introduction back in 2004—which came to a total of 36, including two different sizes of press. The wood parts on his bench were for Mini Halfwoods, two of them I recognized as walnut. The third was ebony.

I recognized what he was working on was what he calls the *hood*, a short, thin piece of hardwood that fitted over the top of the press. His story about Tom seemed forgotten for a minute as Bill opened a notebook and began flipping through the pages.

“This might interest you. It’s a kind of instruction book I’m always writing. It comes in handy. For example, just now I was not sure what size holes to drill in this hood. I can look it up.” With that he closed the book and began setting up his drill press.

“Could someone build a Mini Halfwood by reading that book?” I asked.

“Maybe. Actually, we thought about making a kit that people could buy and put together themselves. Then we thought about each of the steps and we decided it takes too much—what should I call it—*skill*?” He paused and stroked the walnut sides of one of the press. It had a white tag hanging on it with #30 scrawled in marking pen.

“For example, if you tighten the tiny screws that go in here too much, they can strip the threads off the wood cladding. And the tolerance for this

space here is ideally 1/32-inch.” He was pointing at the place between the sides of the press.

His explanation drifted off as he was now measuring, marking, drilling, counter-sinking wood; then he drilled and was tapping short pieces of steel bar—for what I wasn’t sure. I sensed that this would be a good time for me to go.

End of online sample

¹ Mockumentary is a genre that pretends to be rooted in actuality or memory, behaving like a documentary, history, or biography (or, in this instance, an autobiography) but it is largely fiction. Mockumentary writing subverts fact-based storytelling to illuminate and embellish.

² Dynastorybook is a made up word referring to a hybrid, combining a printed book with an e-book to which readers and writers can make additions, such as adding pictures, giving it a dynamic character.

³ Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. Oxford University Press. Mentor Book. New York. 1935 - 1952. Introduction by Professor Christian Gauss.

⁴ Giedion, Siegfried. "Mechanization Takes Command." W. W. Norton Co. NY. 1948

⁵ A record of his sabbatical leaves in 1975 and 1983 are online.

⁶ The 2007 film, *Goya's Ghosts*, included a scene that reconstructed the printing of a Goya etching, and the press was made of wood.

⁷ www.buildyourownetchingpress.com