No matter how popular eBooks have become, people still treasure the heft of printed Bibles and the memories sparked by Mom’s cookbook. And when those books lose covers and crack spines, there’s steady work for Max Marbles/Bookbinder in the Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill.

Frank “Max” Lindholm, his real name, has spent the past 24 years in a kitchen-sized studio here. The bare wood walls are crammed with books, and soft light filters through old bottles in the north and west windows.

“For me, it’s been great being down here,” said Lindholm, 61. “I like being in an old setting, and it suits my traditional craft.”

It’s a craft that hasn’t changed appreciably in 800 years, he said. He orders book-cover
leather from a British company that has been in business for 400 years. His tools — hand presses, a massive paper cutter and a stamper for gold leaf — all are a century or more old.

He has restored a $50,000 book that Sotheby’s famous auction house accidentally dropped. A wealthy businessman delivered his family’s tattered 1830s Bible via private jet.

Tom Kay, the great-grandson of Mission Mill’s original owner, brought his grandmother’s Bible to Lindholm for repairs.

“I took it into him in pieces, and when I got it back, you wouldn’t know it had not come from the publisher,” Kay said.

The bookbinder also restores ordinary books that show the strain of decades. (He keeps the food stains in cookbooks and the scribbles in storybooks, saying they add to the volumes’ soul.)

At either end of the cost spectrum — $50 to several thousand dollars — the process is similar. Lindholm fixes tears by painstakingly teasing apart the layers in paper materials and gluing them back together. He gently scrapes off dried glue and rebuilds books’ spines. He mounts old leather fragments on new leather, then cleans the old and stresses the new so they’ll match.

“There’s a balance there,” he said. “That’s where the art comes in.”

Serendipitous choice

He came to bookbinding through a circuitous route: as a lighting designer for such rock legends as Ted Nugent and Loggins and Messina and when he was a wild-bearded hippie marbling paper in a McKenzie River tepee (hence the name “Marbles,” which has practically supplanted his own Swedish surname). He did factory work at Boeing and spent six months in Mexico, where he claims to have focused on beer.