

NEW!

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THE PRINTING INDUSTRY AUTHORITY

WARREN WILKINS
CEO, Webcom

PRINTER
of the
year

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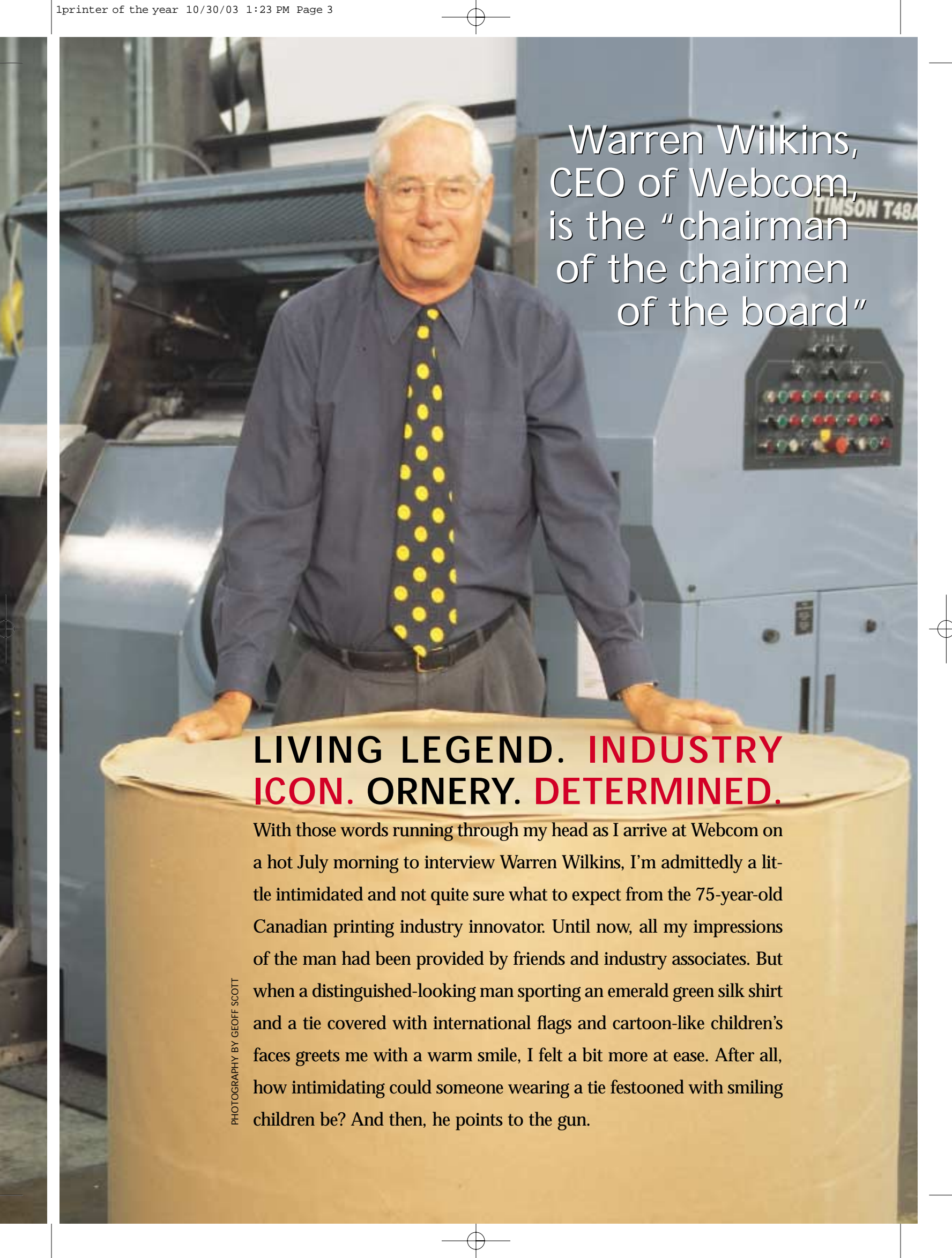
WEBCOM
books and beyond

cover feature

A large, blue industrial printing press machine is shown in a factory setting. A roll of white paper is being processed by the machine. The machine has a control panel with a gauge, several buttons, and a warning symbol. The text "WPC" and "SCM" are visible on the machine's frame.

PRINTER *of the year*

By Lana Castleman

A photograph of Warren Wilkins, CEO of Webcom, standing in a printing plant. He is wearing a blue dress shirt and a yellow polka-dot tie. He is smiling and has his hands resting on a large roll of paper. In the background, there is a large piece of industrial machinery with a control panel featuring many buttons and a label that reads "TIMSON T48A".

Warren Wilkins,
CEO of Webcom,
is the “chairman
of the chairmen
of the board”

**LIVING LEGEND. INDUSTRY
ICON. ORNERY. DETERMINED.**

With those words running through my head as I arrive at Webcom on a hot July morning to interview Warren Wilkins, I’m admittedly a little intimidated and not quite sure what to expect from the 75-year-old Canadian printing industry innovator. Until now, all my impressions of the man had been provided by friends and industry associates. But when a distinguished-looking man sporting an emerald green silk shirt and a tie covered with international flags and cartoon-like children’s faces greets me with a warm smile, I felt a bit more at ease. After all, how intimidating could someone wearing a tie festooned with smiling children be? And then, he points to the gun.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEOFF SCOTT

cover feature

Just as we're about to set out on a tour of Webcom's 195,000 sq. ft. state-of-the-art plant in Toronto that prints more than 40 million books each year, Warren proudly presents a carefully shadowboxed antique rifle that hangs just outside his office door. While assuring me it's in good working order, he says he searched high and low for the circa 1870 Martini Tanner & Co. specimen. Notably, the Martini in the rifle manufacturer's name later went on to become part of bindery equipment giant Müller Martini. "You know why it's here?" Warren asks me. "Um, I dunno," I say, hoping it wasn't meant to scare off nosy writers. "Well," he says, his eyes alight, "we have a lot of Müller Martini equipment in here and we told the sales rep that if it didn't work, we'd shoot him with this."



Warren of Arabia (left), with his brother Doug in the 1940s. "We lived on a dollar a day, slept in tents or jails because jails were free... you realize how well off we are in this country"

Fortunately for the Müller Martini rep, this is just an example of Warren's notoriously dry wit and sense of humour and not part of his standard business practices. Rather than spending his time sending equipment sales reps running for the hills, Warren has been occupied with building one of North America's most successful book-printing companies and contributing to the betterment of the printing industry as a whole through his extensive involvement in our industry's associations, namely the CPIA and PIA.

Boy, has he been busy. Webcom today, with annual sales bordering on the \$75 million mark and with about 400 employees, is markedly different from the

How we chose Printer of the Year

Two years ago the publishers and editors of *Graphic Monthly* decided to celebrate printers who exemplified the best of this industry. We have always believed there is much in this industry worth boasting about. Many individuals with talent, vision and drive have built exceptional companies. And so, Printer of the Year was born. Our first honoree, last October, was Dick Kouwenhoven, president of Hemlock Printers of Burnaby, B.C.

The Printer of the Year is chosen by the publishers and editors of *Graphic Monthly*. Sponsors are not involved in the judging. The award is bestowed on the printer who best fits the following criteria: 1. A printer who, in the course of building his or her business, has changed the industry and placed his or her mark upon it. 2. A printer who has also made a contribution to the betterment of the industry as a whole.

Warren Wilkins was an easy choice for the award this year. His company, Webcom, ranked No. 24 on the *Graphic Monthly* Gold List of Top 100 Printers this June, with annual sales of \$77 million. (The original company he helped found, Web Offset Publications, ranks 44th.) Webcom is widely known as one of Canada's most successful book printers, largely because Warren blazed a trail with the shrewd use of new technology over the decades.

But he's known, of course, for much more than his business success. He is a staunch supporter of the Canadian Printing Industries Association, having put in time as its chairman, and having made significant financial contributions to its initiatives. His reputation crosses borders, for he has also served as chair of Washington, D.C.-based Printing Industries Association, only the third Canadian to do so.

As you'll read in our story and see in the pictures, Warren is also someone who embraces life. At 75 he's overshot retirement age and remains as CEO of Webcom, though his third son Jeff runs the day-to-day operations as president.

Warren will be formally inducted into our fledgling "hall of fame" at a special event at the new Heidelberg Centre at Ryerson University in Toronto this fall. Sponsors for *Graphic Monthly's* Printer of the Year project include Heidelberg Canada.



Warren Wilkins



Dick Kouwenhoven



Warren and third son Jeff, now president of Webcom, in front of an early Creo platesetter in the mid-1990s. Careful adoption of new printing technology has paid off handsomely over the years

cover feature



Jeff Wilkins, Warren and Warren's wife Willy ("Mr. & Mrs. Print") inside the plant

Webcom of 1977 that earned \$1 million annually and a far cry from the fledgling Web Offset Publications created in 1961 by Warren and Bob Chittick that later spawned Webcom. Warren and Chittick's decision to pay \$81,000 to buy the first Goss Suburban coldset web press in Canada, form Web Offset and start printing newspapers out of a three-car garage in Toronto, sparked a long string of technological firsts for Warren's companies.

Chittick says Web Offset initially had no business to feed the Goss, but both he and Warren believed the coldset web would eclipse the letterpress in the newspaper business. They guessed right. By the late 1960s Web Offset had left its cramped quarters and continued breaking new technological ground by being one of the first plants in North America to start using IBM computers for typesetting, following that up by bringing in an Opticopy camera—the fifth printer in the world to do so. And it was around this time that Warren, says Chittick, saw that “we could print books” using a web press. “Warren sees the big picture,” he says. “He’s able to correlate the use of equipment with an idea to capture the market.”

And industry peers point to Warren's ability to understand new technology and capitalize on it as one of the chief reasons

for his success. Warren saw the possibility of using the double-parallel format of the web press to print one- and two-colour books when no one else in North America had. It's more efficient as the signatures come off the web ready for the bindery and don't require cutting and folding like sheetfed-printed signatures. He's an innovator and a pioneer, says David Friesen, president of Manitoba-based Friesens Corp. and fellow book printer. “The

majority of books now printed in black and white in Canada are done via web. Warren was certainly the leader.” Warren, perhaps too modestly, says he was “just lucky” that he turned out to be right.

By the mid-'70s Warren was becoming increasingly interested in the book side of Web Offset's business and he and Chittick started Webcom as a subsidiary. In 1977 Warren and Chittick came to an amicable agreement to split the two companies.



The Webcom plant on Pharmacy Avenue in Toronto. Employing more than 300 it was custom-designed for book printing

cover feature

Warren took Webcom and Chittick continued on as head of Web Offset (which, like Webcom, is a *Graphic Monthly* Gold List 100 company) until Chittick sold his interest in it in 1986. And for Webcom, the technological “hits” just kept on coming.

“He has a passion and flavour for innovation,” says Jeff Wilkins, president of Webcom and Warren’s third son. “He’s always embraced technology from the get go. It’s in his DNA.” To that end, in Canada, Webcom was one of the first to introduce Otabind, a relatively new form of bookbinding, and it leapt head-first into converting from an analogue workflow to CTP in 1993, installing the first Creo platesetter and front end for a cool \$1 million. Webcom also became one of the first book printers to open a digital book factory in 2000. Now Warren, as CEO of Webcom, has his sights set on turning the plant onto computer-integrated manufacturing.

Meanwhile, back on the tour, Warren admits to me that he sees his keen interest in staying on the bleeding edge of technology as key to Webcom’s success. But more important than that are the people he employs. “People plus technology equals more with less,” he says, standing in front of an ancient punch time clock stationed in Webcom’s lobby.

“This clock is very important to us because we don’t use any time clocks here,” he says. “We assume that people are responsible for doing a day’s work, so we don’t monitor that. That’s the whole basis of our business—putting the responsibility with the people and getting them to give solutions to the challenges we face.” Webcom’s press operators are responsible for running their own department, doing their own hiring, firing and payroll, for example. “We have three shifts and only have so-called supervisors around for eight of those, and people manage themselves. It’s really important that they do that,” he says.

The “people part” of his job, as he calls it, is what attracted him to what’s become the second part of his printing career and a key reason for his acclamation as Printer of the Year—his association work.

Warren’s been both CPIA chairman in 1991 and the 100th—and only the third Canadian—chairman of Washington D.C.-based PIA in 2000. When I ask what he’s gained from his involvement he immediately points to the friendships and business relationships he’s formed. “You make good friends and you benefit from it,” he says. But dig a little deeper and



Clockwise from top left: On a 1994 trip to Ecuador; on a hunting expedition; relaxing in a typical playful moment; in China in June 1994

you find that the reasons for Warren’s twenty-odd years of association work centre around bolstering the “people part” of the industry.

Harkening back to his world travelling days with his brother in the late 1940s, Warren puts his work in context. “We lived on a dollar a day, we slept in a tent or a jail because jails were free, and you learn about how other people live and realize how well off we are in this country. The same thing goes on in this industry. We’ve had all our competitors through our plant. And there’s no problem with sharing. Everyone benefits and that’s the same sort of thing you do through associations. There are companies that don’t believe in them or can’t afford to join, but they benefit from the work that the associations do.”

And Warren’s proven to be quite the leader in this realm of his career as well. “I call Warren the chairman of the chairmen of the board,” says Don Gain Sr., president of Toronto’s Harmony Printing and former CPIA chairman. “Whenever I get discouraged about participation in the CPIA,” he says, “I think of Warren. I say, ‘Warren’s going to be there, why the hell can’t I be?’ He motivates some of us in ways he doesn’t recognize just by the example he sets.”

More than motivation, both Ruby Thomas, Versatel’s vice president of strategic management and former CPIA chair, and Michael Makin, PIA president, credit Warren with providing real help to the CPIA. They say he played a key role in pulling the organization away from the brink of collapse in the mid-’90s. At the

cover feature

time, Thomas and Makin were chair and president of the CPIA, respectively. CPIA hired Michael in June of 1995, says Thomas and in July she got a panicked call from him. "What have you done to me," he said. "This organization has no money." Thomas says she reassured Makin that there were people in the industry who would not let the CPIA falter. "Warren was tough and externally very critical of CPIA's management. He knew it had to be run like a business...but I knew he would never leave the organization and he did lend his financial [and managerial] support."

Makin says that the CPIA was on its last legs. Besides the financial help Warren offered (a fact which Makin says Warren "would not want commented upon"), Makin says he "made sure the Toronto marketplace continued to see a value in the national voice that CPIA represented."

Warren, for his part, is modest about his involvement and doesn't acknowledge his singular role in CPIA's turnaround. "Well, [CPIA] did get in trouble. All associations do that...But you've got to think of it this way, if you didn't have them where would you be? And who better to help them out than the industry...We all contribute."

While he seems almost shy about answering this question, in talking to his association colleagues I've learned he's anything but when he believes in something. Gain, Thomas, Makin, former PIA president Ray Roper, his son Jeff and even his wife Willy say Warren is not particularly politically lightfooted. "He's earned the privilege to communicate the way he does," says Gain. "Warren doesn't worry about stepping on someone's toes." Thomas adds, "He's a man that if he's got a thought, he says, 'You know, I may ruffle some feathers but something's got to be said.'" Makin agrees and says Warren has "earned his berth of curmudgeoness," also noting that he's the strongest chair CPIA ever had.

Lately, he's turned that determined and outspoken nature to working on behalf of the industry's future. Citing, again, that people are what makes the industry tick, Warren says the biggest problem right now is training bright young men and women entering the industry and instituting a program of continuing education for people already employed by it.

In 2001 Webcom, led by Warren, donated \$100,000 to the Canadian Printing Industries Scholarship Trustfund (CPIST), which had been languishing. He



Engaging in another favourite pastime. Travel, golf, skiing also keep him busy outside work

vowed that the endowment for the trust fund—it disburses about 50 scholarships worth \$1,200 each annually to students enrolled in graphic arts programs in Canada—would reach a healthy \$1 million dollars. It's sitting at around \$700,000 right now and that's with Warren's admission that he'd been holding back on his fundraising efforts until the new Heidelberg Centre at Ryerson went up. But now that it's built, he says you can expect to hear from his committee regarding trust fund donations.

So, at 75 is it time to slow down? Where does he go from here, I ask. Warren says he's been spending more time on association work since 2000 when he stepped back from the day-to-day operations of the business, which now fall into the capable hands of Jeff Wilkins. Jeff says he relies on his father's insight and drive for innovation to help steer the company. So he'll be around Webcom for some time. And don't even mention the word retirement to him.

"It's not easy when you've worked all your life to suddenly think, 'I'm not going to do anything.' I think that would be a quick route to the grave," says Warren. "But," he says, "the real reason I come into the office every day is that Willy wants me to retire and she's got a two-page list of projects waiting for me. It's so much easier to come here." Kidding aside, he says he's got too much left to do. Besides it's not all work these days. Warren plans to indulge his passion for travelling and his love of skiing, fishing and gardening when he's not plotting Webcom's next move.

We're almost at the end of the tour and I've kept Warren's words in mind. "Look at the employees' reactions to the boss when you go through a plant. Watch that. If they scowl at him, he's not a good boss." I've noticed that no matter where we go in the plant, employees chirp out a hello or stop to chat briefly with him—there's not a scowl in the joint. ■



Wilkins at his induction into the PIA's Ash Khan Society in October 2001. The society is made up of print leaders who have made substantial contributions to the industry through the PIA and its affiliates. With Wilkins are PIA members Jerry Williamson (left) and Donald C. Bishop.

2003 ANOTHER FIRST: WARREN WILKINS NAMED PRINTER OF THE YEAR!



First book specialist in Canada to install Digital Print Technologies 2000

First printer in Canada to install a CTP system 1995

1980 First in Canada to install Otabind

1980 First printer in North America to offer UV coatings for books covers

1971 First in Canada to use Opti-Copy camera for computerized imposition

1971 First in Canada to install web presses for books

1965 First in Canada to install photo-typesetting machine - the PHOTON 713

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