

Book Review: History of paper a ripping read

By **GLENN C. ALTSCHULER** Special to the Tulsa World | Posted: Sunday, February 9, 2014
12:00 am

Pointing to the "tendency on the part of paper to take the place of everything else, to become a universal substitute, so to speak," a journalist concluded in 1881 "that the future had a grand development in store for it."

He was right on both counts. As Nicholas Basbanes, the author of "A Gentle Madness," "Patience & Fortitude" and "A Splendor of Letters," reveals in this wide-ranging, engaging and enchanting book, paper has had a profound impact on society and culture.

In "On Paper," he traces "this versatile material" from its invention in China about 2,000 years ago to its spread to Japan, the Middle East, Western Europe and North America.

Basbanes describes how paper was made, its many uses and the cultural achievements recorded on it by, among others, Da Vinci, Shakespeare and Beethoven (who was deaf and depended on paper to write down and revise ideas and communicate with friends and colleagues).

"On Paper" is filled with fascinating details about mass-produced paper-based products, ranging from facial tissues to cigarette paper, cartridges (for bullets), money, sanitary napkins, Dixie Cups and Post-it notepads.

Produced commercially for the first time in 1857 (and sold in perforated rolls about 20 years later), toilet paper saved untold lives by preventing the spread of infectious diseases.

It was especially welcome, Basbanes points out, among rural folks who used the Sears, Roebuck catalogue (dubbed "Rears and Sorebutts") or the Old Farmer's Almanac (hanged on a nail) in their outhouses. Designed to dissolve easily in water, toilet paper proliferated along with indoor plumbing.

Basbanes demonstrates as well that for engineers and architects, as early as the construction of the Taj Mahal, and routinely during and after the Industrial Revolution, paper provided an essential link between conception and reality, design and production. The new visual communication permitted these professionals to store technical expertise and pass it along to others.

Basbanes does not believe that paper is becoming obsolete. In matters of personal hygiene, he claims, it is here to stay. By using recycled paper for all its products, moreover, Marcal saves 2 million trees and

close to a billion gallons of water each year.

With somewhat less confidence, Basbanes disputes the argument of a Yale undergraduate, who opined that his generation views libraries in the same way they respond to Europe's great cathedrals, "as greatly admired but seldom used," by pointing to the use of books as cultural products and to modern libraries "as nerve centers for the exchange of ideas," including online resources.

"On Paper" concludes with an elegant chapter titled "Elegy in Fragments," about Sept. 11, 2001. In a grim contrast to ticker-tape parades, Basbanes writes, "paper rain" fell after the attack on the World Trade Center.

The tattered sheets bore witness to the ordinary and extraordinary lives of the victims, writ small and large in deposit slips, legal memoranda, and a call for help from a man on the 84th floor. And to the place of paper as "artifacts of consequence."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.