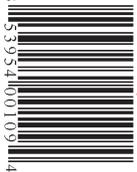


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Antique Week

THE WEEKLY ANTIQUE AUCTION & COLLECTING NEWSPAPER

EASTERN EDITION

VOL. 48, ISSUE NO. 2499

WWW.ANTIQUEWEEK.COM

JULY 31, 2017

Typewriters are writing their way back into the narrative of wordsmiths young and old

By Barbara Miller Beem

Smudged fingers from handling carbon paper. That distinctive smell of Liquid Paper. The sound of clickety-clickety-clickety-PING. Hipsters and nostalgic diehards (as well as people somewhere in between) are embracing typewriters with a renewed appreciation, reestablishing the romance between man and manual machine. But for some collectors, it never ended.

Gradual efforts to impress letters onto paper resulted in the first commercially produced typewriter in the United States in 1874. The Sholes & Glidden Type Writer, manufactured by E. Remington & Sons, produced uneven upper-case-only letters, which typists were unable to see while they were writing. The imperfections of this "blind Remington" were enough to dampen the enthusiasm of an eager public, including writer Samuel Clemens. However, Christopher Latham Sholes, one of this model's inventors, did leave an indelible mark on typists with his development of the QWERTY keyboard.

Nonetheless, according to Tony Casillo, what followed was a period of competition as entrepreneurs sought to corner the market. "Typewriter inventors saw great opportunity in the new device," said Casillo, a serious, longtime typewriter collector and repairman, and even though Remington had patents in place, "there were many different designs developed to circumvent the patents." At the time, he reminded, there were no standards established for how a typewriter should look and operate. Consequently, over the next 30



Beauty is only skin deep: The Crandall is highly regarded by collectors for its splendid Victorian beauty. Ornately decorated with inlaid mother-of-pearl and gold-painted decorations, it was not nearly as efficient as many of its competitors and had only limited success in the marketplace.

years, there were more than 300 makes and models manufactured in North America alone. This "golden age of design" was a period of growth in the industry that produced beautiful inventions, including examples decorated with mother-of-pearl and painted flowers, as well as one that was plated with bronze; mahogany covers elevated some machines to the level of fine furniture. But not every attempt to manufacture a perfect machine was successful; some of the failures of their day are now great collectibles.

Then, in 1896, the standard for efficient office machines was taken to a new level when Underwood introduced what would become the first modern typewriter. It featured four rows of keys and an accelerating typebar. The Underwood typewriter marked "a defining moment, when all the rules were changed," Casillo said. "They made a nice sound when the typist hit the keys," he noted wistfully. But most importantly, what was being typed could now be viewed by the typist. So popular were Underwood typewriters, with production numbers in the millions, that they were the office machine of choice for half of all American businesses in the 1920s.

Refinements to typewriters continued to be made, with the need for speed resulting in the introduction of an electric typewriter, first by Remington and, within a few years, by IBM. By the mid-1900s, manual typewriters hit the peak of perfection, with companies like Royal, Olympia, Underwood and Smith Corona manufacturing machines that were abundant and well designed; conditions that continue to favor today's collectors.

"No one starts collecting full force," Casillo said with a chuckle. His personal obsession began around 1979 with the discovery of an Oliver machine which he called a "big green monster." Over the years, his collection has grown as his tastes have been refined, and with noted authority Paul Lippman as his mentor, his knowledge expanded. Casillo's collection is now the basis for his new book, *Typewriters: Iconic Machines from the Golden Age of Mechanical Writing* (with a foreword written by fellow typewriter enthusiast Tom Hanks).

Trying to focus a collection around a specific manufacturer, time period or unusual feature often falls by the wayside, Casillo continued. But fortunately for those interested in collecting typewriters, "there's a level for every budget." Prices are determined according to rarity

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Left: The Sholes & Glidden Type Writer has the distinction of being the first commercially successful typewriter. The legacy it left behind is its keyboard arrangement, known as QWERTY, which is still in use today. The name refers to the position of the first six keys on the top left letter row of the keyboard.



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Typewriters

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and desirability, as well as condition. But it's possible to start a collection with a \$15 to \$20 purchase. Older collectors tend to focus on antique models, trading up to improve the condition of examples in their collections. Casillo added that younger collectors are at somewhat of an advantage, as they discover reasonably priced typewriters from the mid-20th century for the first time in their lives.

About a decade ago, a typewriter revolution, or, as Richard Polt prefers to call it, the "insurgency," began to take hold. Polt said, "People are typing poems and stories on the street." Polt, a self-described typewriter lover and the author of *The Typewriter Revolution*, pointed out the social connections between typewriter enthusiasts. "Type-ins" and letter-writing parties bring people together; taking Leroy Anderson's *The Typewriter* one step further, the Boston Typewriter Orchestra celebrates the musical possibilities of what many would otherwise consider to be simply an office workhorse. Maintaining that this is more than a fad, Polt noted, "I think there can be a permanent place for typewriters in our culture."

Polt's first typewriter was a 1937 Remington Noiseless Portable Model 7. "It came to me 40 years ago, and I still enjoy it," he said. Once used for schoolwork, he now uses it (and others in his collection) for blogging (text can be scanned or photographed and then posted), and for personal

Below (Top): This Olivetti, dating from 1969, was dubbed the "Valentine" for obvious reasons.

Below (Bottom): The Underwood typewriter was a game changer for the 1890s typewriter industry, offering visible typing in a front-strike typewriter. This basic design would be the template for all other typewriter manufacturers for the next half century.

Right: Invented by Eugene A. Ford, no relation to Henry Ford or Ford Motor Co., the Ford typewriter is best known today for its ornate bronze-finished lattice grill-work.

and professional projects. "I often use a typewriter to brainstorm."

Those new to typewriters enjoy them as a novelty, he continued. There's the "fun of sensations, and the knowledge that you are making something physical through a process you can feel and understand." For older typists, it's the "thrill of rediscovering a forgotten pleasure."

Polt thinks that this summer's release of *California Typewriter*, a documentary that features typewriter enthusiast Tom Hanks (Polt appears in the film as well) will do nothing but help reinforce the joys of typing. "I think the typewriter movement reflects our growing irritation with the overuse of digital technology," he said. "By now, most of us realize that our typical uses of computers and smartphones erode our privacy, concentration and self-reliance." The non-digital technology of a typewriter "helps us to get a healthy perspective on the digital world and let go of the compulsion to be efficient, connected and fashionable all the time."

Typewriters emblazoned with their manufacturer's name and model number (often in gold) are easily identified. Patent numbers can only suggest the earliest date an example was made. Serial numbers and old catalogs and advertisements can be useful.



Keeping in mind the importance of condition, Tony Casillo suggested the following values for typewriters:

- Hammond No. 1, \$2,000.
- Royal Quiet Deluxe, 1940s, gray, \$25.
- Royal Quiet Deluxe, 1950s, pink, \$250.
- Royal Quiet Deluxe, gold plated, \$500.
- Sholes & Glidden Type Writer (Decorated Model), \$20,000.
- Crandall, New Model with mother-of-pearl decoration, in "good" condition, \$7,000.

Below: An early Remington typewriter, produced after the Sholes & Glidden, with carriage raised in order to see what was typed. "Blind" typewriters were understandably frustrating for their users.

