

Generations

Paying homage to the humble typewriter

It's hard to imagine what life would be like without a computer, which progressed from an electric typewriter; passed on from its predecessor the chunky, manual Underwood; and developed in 1866 from the brain of American mechanical engineer Christopher Latham Sholes and a couple of his buddies.

His invention was a far cry from what we have now and what's in store for us in the future.

When I first walked into a typing class in the mid-1960s, there were only four IBM electric typewriters and the rest were manuals. The four were for typists that progressed to 45 words per minute with zero mistakes. It took me a while to get there, but I spent a day or two with the gadget that would become

my lifelong friend.

My first job was in a typing pool filled with electric typewriters. In those days, we used something called carbon paper for copies, and if you



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made a mistake, you'd have to correct all the carbon sheets in the typewriter and be careful not to tear the original. There was always an undercurrent of frustrated female cursing.

The IBM Selectric came next with a little ball in the center of the carriage that continually turned and popped up as one pounded away on the keyboard. Add to that the invention of Wite-Out and correction

tape, and the typing pool began to hum with happy enthusiasm.

During those olden days, however, there was no spell-check like there is today, so a dogeared Webster's sat on my desk plus a handy thesaurus to help me find a better word.

I worked for the town supervisor, and he seemed to enjoy dictating letters filled with words that were foreign to me. As I tried to transcribe every word of his legalese diatribe in squiggly Gregg shorthand, I remember one afternoon when I looked up at him after he had used the words "counter cylindrical."

"Didn't get that, did you, Peg?" he asked with a devilish smile.

"Not this time," I replied. He went on to explain

what the words meant while I tried to figure out how to capture them in shorthand. I ended up simply using a large CC, my own secret shorthand code for difficult words that I knew would slow me down. I swore that I'd remember counter cylindrical for the rest of my life, although I never heard the words again.

Creative writing had always been a passion for me, so it was good training throughout the years to look up the meaning of words, their often convoluted spelling, and the use of alternative words to make written material even stronger.

Then, around 35 years ago, the computer made its debut and, although scared at first because it was so new to me, I had no choice but to learn

its software programs. Lotus wasn't just a pretty flower, but an accounting program, later replaced by an even better Microsoft Excel.

Microsoft Word was so handy for the many drafts of my two manuscripts. And a note from an agent that read simply, "You need to go into another line of work," didn't stop me because rewrites now were a breeze thanks to the computer.

Today, I'm still learning new versions of software, and the only thing that scares me is the dreaded blue screen when the computer has a temperamental outburst. My husband has come to know the fear in my voice and quickly presses the right buttons to cure the computer's hiccups and save the valuable hard drive.

But what does the future hold for us and the typewriter? One thing-amajig talked about is Sprout, an all-in-one PC from Hewlett-Packard that promises to replace the keyboard and mouse with a 20-point, 20-inch projected touchpad.

Sprout is the first product in a new "Blended Reality" lineup that's meant to re-envision the interface between real and virtual, analog and digital. Along with its projector, there's a high-resolution camera and 3-D scanner, allowing one to easily "upload" objects into Sprout just by placing them on a mat.

What does all that mean? I haven't got a clue. Take comfort, Mr. Sholes. I still love your typewriter.

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