

Rye Reflections

A journey through life with a friend, a keyboard

A personal look at a lifetime of communication

By Bill Pappou Drew

It is warm and comforting as I sit here in front of my keyboard. Outside yard work, golf, cooking, boating, skiing, travel, decorating, or any of hundreds of other activities, are lower on my priority list.

Besides those involving my family, favorite activities include creating, building something, historical research, designing machinery, massaging and enhancing images, preparing graphic presentations, creative writing and communication with others. I can do this with the aid of a keyboard.



Office Underwood, Model 5: First introduced in 1922. This one manufactured perhaps in the 1930's or 1940's (personal photo with border graphics by Bill Drew)

For Christmas during my first year in college, my mother presented me a brightly decorated gift containing a big old gray square box-like machine called an Office Underwood: Model 5, 1922 version typewriter. She added, "With this, I expect in return to receive type written letters, and I don't care if there are mistakes in spelling, grammar, organization.

Just relate your experiences and mail them to me." To satisfy the obligation of receiving this large mechanical behemoth, and to honor her wish, my mother did receive numerous letters and a lot of communication, the early versions barely readable but for all the mistakes. This machine very quickly became a best friend and was so for over twenty years.

Why did she select this gift? I did not know how to type. What was she thinking? Did she give of herself?

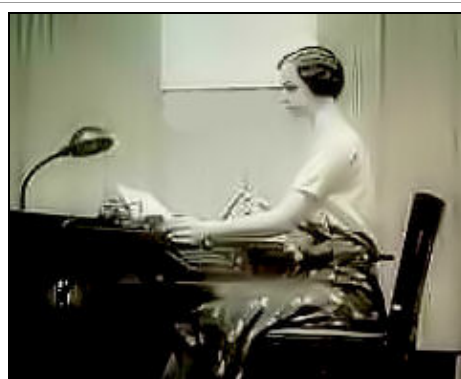
Her hometown was Detroit. As it fell on her shoulders to provide a home for her mother, she became a secretary. Quickly rising through the ranks, she began working for a sales executive in an automobile manufacturing company. Her typing skills paved the way in making new friends and experiencing a new life. She met a traveling salesman from New Hampshire and the rest is history, a family, my family.

Maybe she had a vision where the world of the future would revolve around a keyboard. Being on the rather quiet and reserved side, she may have hoped it

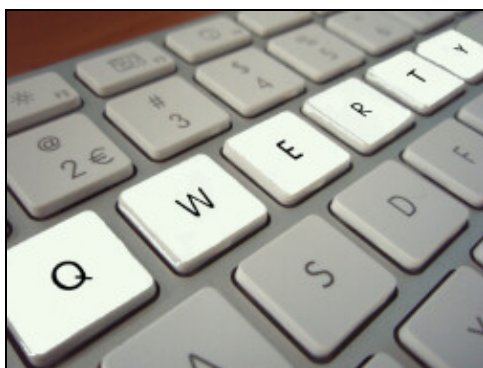
might pave the way, as in her case, for me to have a brighter more self-fulfilling future.

Quickly, I learned to touch-type using this crazy arrangement of the letters in the alphabet.

Developed and then patented in 1874, the [QWERTY](#) design leads to efficient use of the fingers of each hand. This strange name comes from the first six letters appearing in the top left hand corner of a keyboard. During this era,



A secretary in the 1930's (Courtesy of BPW/USA)



The upper left hand portion of a typical keyboard (enhanced pic by Bill Drew)

typewriter salesmen impressed potential customers by typing the word *typewriter* using only the top row of keys. A later pattern of keys, the [Dvorak Simplified Keyboard](#), provided an even more efficient arrangement. It never caught on as QWERTY was the XEROX of its day, the first. As I am left handed, it is no wonder I was able to learn quickly as the number of words typed by only the left hand is in the thousands while the number of those typed only by the right hand is in the low hundreds.

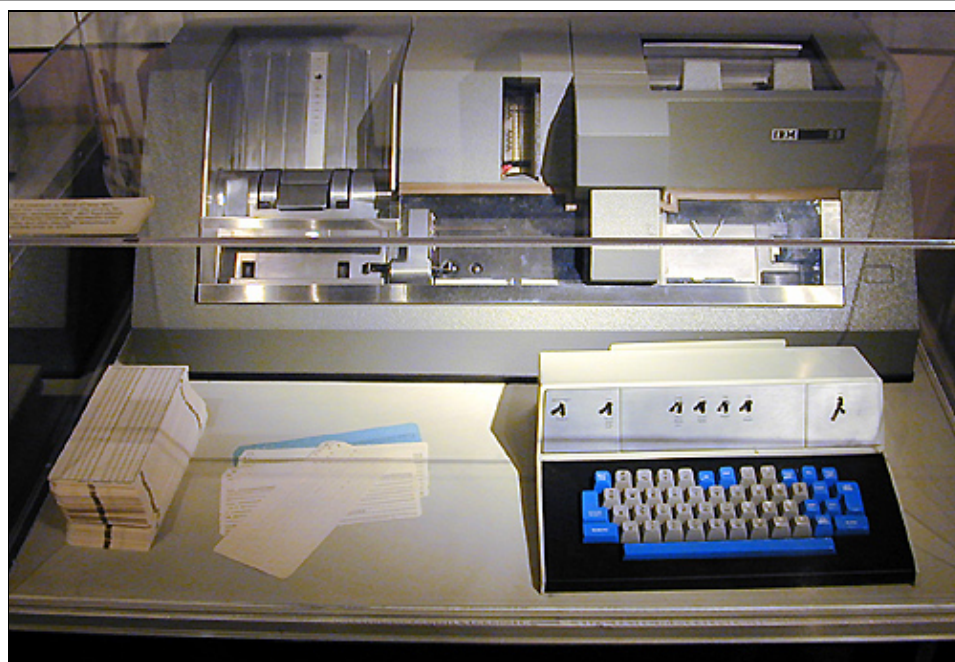
Within a few years, I began dating a first year student in college. In the process to gain acceptance, for four years I typed her numerous required "papers." Only years later did I learn she too knew how to type. Apparently, and I am not quite sure how it happened, but these newly acquired typing skills moved me into marriage.

As I continued down the educational path, my ability with a keyboard extended to the preparation of punched cards. In gathering and analyzing material for my graduate thesis, the sustenance for an insatiable appetite of a roomful of equipment called an [IBM 1620](#), and then one called an [IBM 360](#), required cards, cards, and more cards. With all its peripheral equipment, the 360 certainly did surround a room.

A keyboard was an integral part of the process. Now there were mounds and mounds of printed pages of words and numbers as well as hundreds, nay, thousands, of smaller boxes holding quickly useless punched cards. Who can we blame for all this excess? The keyboard did it.

My next experience was in the seeking and creation of control, telling a machine to do something. My work at a keyboard enabled a desktop sized machine to punch holes in a narrow strip of paper tape. A "reader" on a machine, such as a machine shop milling system, then interprets the tape. The tape then instructs the machine to perform the required sequential operations, over, and over again. It is fascinating to watch.

As a mechanical engineer, I spent a good deal of time behind a slanted drawing table putting my thoughts and creations to paper. As in any profession, revision and updating are the names of the game. An eraser is a necessity. Toward the



An IBM-029, keypunch card system on display at the [MIT Museum](#). (photo by Jim Cerny)



IMB Computer, System 360: a mainframe computer system family announced by IBM on April 7, 1964 (Courtesy of IMB)

end of my career, a keyboard and a [CAD](#) (computer-aided design) program enabled me to perform this often-needed function with ease, along with a host of other operations. One was the ability to draw a straight line at last, another to observe a finished design visually without having to use imagination.

A marvel arrives, the personal computer, a [PC](#)

Recall those first TV advertisements from IBM, with comedian Charlie Chaplin sitting in front of a keyboard, personally handling ALL of the functions of a company's operation; promotion, sales, manufacturing, accounting, shipping, and the "financials." The computer does it all, or at least the person with a



The blue-ribbon team that developed the IBM Personal Computer (1984) referred to it as a mini-compact, at a mini-price, with IBM engineering under the hood. (Photo and caption courtesy of IBM)

keyboard in front of him could do it all.

At a meeting I attend each week, I observe an individual who sits across from me, huddled over a keyboard, concentrating, performing and creating as he has for more than fifty years. There is a sense of satisfaction and serenity. He is at home. I see in him myself and am in awe at the accomplishments and achievements each of us are able to make through use of a keyboard. From our minds, we communicate our thoughts and this leads to results. Six rows of buttons permit us to live our lives to the fullest.

In doing research for this piece, I came across a couple of articles linked to one another. ["The web is my Underwood typewriter,"](#) and ["Why computers are screwed up,"](#) the latter by CBS columnist Andy Rooney. One line I love is when asked about change, Mr. Rooney says, "Actually, I've written on a lot of computers. I had one typewriter for 50 years, but I have bought seven computers in six years. I suppose that is why Bill Gates is rich and Underwood is out of business."

My 11-year-old granddaughter likes typing away on the laptop I loaned her six months ago, satisfying a newly acquired fondness of creating her own arrangement of words in expressing herself. I see my eight-year-old granddaughter pecking away at keys able to do wondrous things like text messaging and game playing, activities far beyond my capabilities to understand or perform.

Eleven year old Noel, author, in front of her keyboard and eight year old Kianna working the keys. (Bill Drew photos)

I had the opportunity to test a product, a small [laptop-OLPC](#) developed for use by children in remote areas of the world. Its design is an economical way to enhance their education and their ability to communicate, not just with one another, but also to the world via the Internet. I turn green with envy that in my childhood these type products were unavailable

Being on-line has opened up all sorts of opportunities and experiences. There are limitations and dangers but a vast ability to express an opinion or perform some creative writing using sources of material that would otherwise be unknown. Gone are the days of standing beside a card index file, handwriting



The author green with envy. (Jim Cerny photo)



From Bill Pappou Drew

Go to Letters in December, 2008

notations of books and articles to secure reference material. It is all here now at our fingertips. "How do I make an egg salad sandwich?" or "What is the Secret of Roan Inish, IMDB?" For the latter, I can visualize all of you, to obtain the quick answer, "Googling it" through a keyboard. I'll save you time, click [here](#). Have fun.

Now for Christmas presents. What should I give to my grandchildren? I guess maybe to each of them something with a keyboard, so they can reach out to the world.

December, 2008

Copyright © Rye Reflections 2008. All rights reserved.