

The Unknown Writing Machine — Part III

by Don Sutherland

If anything has plagued the typewriter since its inception over a century ago, it is that the best most people can say for it is they take it for granted. Even people who like typewriters seem influenced by this outlook, for those who have written about the machine grope at any shred of aggrandizement they may see floating by, in the apparent hope that such shreds may elevate the subject of their efforts to something a cut above the insignificant. It is, after all, very frustrating to labor over lengthy tomes about a subject that everyone else considers unimportant.

Unfortunately, most defensive positions are self-perpetuating; the persons who have tried to aggrandize the typewriter have, unconsciously, continued the conditions that make it necessary for that aggrandizement to be produced in the first place. These people have fallen victim to the perceptual disease that makes it necessary for the worth of something to be determined by some external measurement. They have tried to make us appreciate the typewriter not because of what it is, but because of who used it or the effects that came to pass because of its use. These things are all very nice in an academic way, but they still constitute, in the final analysis, nothing more than rationalizations for the typewriter's existence. Such rationalizations ought not to be necessary, for the typewriter is capable of holding its own purely on the basis of the mechanical inspirations that make it go.

Nevertheless, past commentators on the subject have, with a diligent redundancy, stated certain ennobling facts of the history of the typewriter. These statements are presented here in headline form, and then followed by the material that makes them questionable.

MARK TWAIN TYPED THE FIRST TYPEWRITTEN BOOK MANUSCRIPT

Mark Twain being an illustrious figure, he becomes the literary darling of typewriter historians who seek to dress up their work with a famous name. Any glimpse into that author's life does, of course, seem to reveal something charming, so it is pleasant that his presence decorates

of people who were charming or witty or great — as well as people who had less graceful personality traits — have used typewriters. But all right, let us go over the Twain episode once more, clarifying and adding to that which is generally published.

Indeed, Mark Twain bought a Type Writer in 1874, during the first year of the machine's sale. That historians keep reminding us of this fact is possibly attributable to the reality that Twain is one of the few 19th-century celebrities that can be unquestionably tied to the typewriter. As usual, though, historians give the appearance of inflating the machine's importance not for its intrinsic value, but because in their own insecurity over its importance they have sought, and found, a way to aggrandize it by association.

The Twain episode as generally reported does have its entertaining aspects. It is told, for example, that the author was impressed by the ease and speed with which a girl demonstrated the Type Writer's operation, until hours later when he discovered that she had been typing the same memorized line over and over. Even a letter he is supposed to have typed to his brother carries inflections of Twain's wit, as well as the intriguing reality that the commonplace was, once upon a time, new and strange:

"I am trying to get the hang of this new fangled writing machine, but I am not making a shining success of it. However this is the first attempt I have ever made & yet I perceive I shall soon & easily acquire a fine facility in its use . . . I believe it will print faster than I can write. One may lean back in his chair & work it. It piles an awful stack of words on one page. It don't muss things or scatter ink blots around . . ."

The story continues that, in response to a Remington request for testimonials from users, Twain replied (and Remington published):

"Please do not use my name in any way. Please do not even divulge the fact that I own a machine. I have entirely stopped using the Type-Writer, for the reason that I

anybody without receiving a request by return mail that I would not only describe the machine but state what progress I had made in the use of it, etc. etc. I don't like to write letters, and so I don't want people to know that I own this curiosity breeding little joker."

Twain's biography conveys further information that the typewriter historians do not: apparently the writing machine was subject to constant malfunction that made Twain "wont to swear." Concerned for his moral standing under the circumstances, the book reports that Twain gave the machine to a friend who had no morals anyway.

What the historians do relate is that Twain's autobiography claims "Tom Sawyer" to have been his first (and probably *the* first) typewritten manuscript submitted for publication, but that Twain must have been retrospectively in error in so saying; that "Life on the Mississippi" was the first typewritten manuscript. Whichever was first, the impression given, by the sequence of presentation, is that Twain himself sat pecking away at the machine to get the manuscript finished. However, it would have been more in keeping of a successful author to hire a stenographer to do the job. Indeed, in a Remington catalog published in late 1883, we find support of this in another Twain testimonial, this one undocumented in other typewritten histories:

"This is to certify that Mr. H.M. Clark copied a great portion of my forthcoming book, "Life on the Mississippi," for me on a Type-Writer; that previously my books had been copied for the press with the pen exclusively. This experience with the Type-Writer has been of so high value to me that not even the Type-Writer itself can describe it. It has banished one of the prime sorrows of my life. After one has read a chapter or two of his literature in the Type-Writer character, the faces of the sheets begin to look natural and rational and as void of offense to his eye as do his own written pages; therefore he can alter and amend

but this is never the case with a book copied by pen. The pen pages have a foreign, unsympathetic look, and this they never lose. One cannot recognize himself in them. The amending and revamping of one's literature in this form is barren of interest, and indeed as repellant as if it were the literature of a stranger and an enemy. My copying is always done on the Type Writer now, and I shall not be likely to use any other system. I take pleasure in offering this testimony."

Thus it seems that Mark Twain, the typewriter's only early hero acquired an attitude like everyone else's: that the instrument was one of value and utility, and that it should physically be kept as far from one's person as possible.

Most authors now typewrite all their work, of course, but in the roster of achievements attributed to the typewriter by historians, the likelihood that the machine actually is responsible for new literary styles curiously is excluded. Yet it follows that this would be true; for could stream-of-consciousness prose styles have developed in quite the form they did if the writers had to slow their creating to the pace of handwriting? Inspiration comes and goes with the speed of thought, and though the typewriter is not quite *that* fast, it is quick enough to catch quite a few ideas that otherwise might slip past. Yet for all the gratitude that professional writers might convey to the writing machine — and perhaps such gratitude is visible in the fact that the really great collections of typewriters appear to have been assembled by professional writers more than by people in any other line of work outside the typewriter industry itself — it is by a completely different definition of humanity that historians seek to aggrandize the typewriter. They tell us, with a numbing redundancy, that

THE TYPEWRITER IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

It is true that prior to the typewriter's widespread acceptance, the business office was almost exclusively a male domain, and that the white-collar career woman a-