



C.C.I.'S OLD TYPEWRITERS WERE INDESTRUCTIBLE - H. David Vuckson

This story originally appeared in the former Enterprise-Bulletin newspaper on June 19, 2015. This is a much-expanded version of that story. Some of the events described here took place at Collingwood Collegiate Institute between 55 and 59 years ago.

Between September 1962 and June 1964 I had two years of typing at C.C.I.—the same typewriter at the same desk in the same classroom in Grades 10 and 11. The grade 10 teacher was Miss Margaret Anderson whom others referred to as “Sparky”. The grade 11 teacher was Marion Russell, the wife of Jim Russell (one of the two male Phys. Ed. teachers).

Typing, like riding a bicycle, is a skill that, once learned, stays with you. It is a very useful skill and with computer keyboards now so ubiquitous, those of us who took typing in high school can type fast on our computers because the layout of the letters of the alphabet is still standard from the days of mechanical typewriters (although the layout of *some* of the other characters like punctuation and other symbols are not). In those days, to hear an entire classroom of 30 or so typewriters all clacking away at the same time was like the scenes in old movies where they show a busy newsroom at a large newspaper office with the reporters all typing. As you will see later in this story, typing (and typing well) was a factor in my passing Grade 12 and the skill subsequently served me well in Grade 13 and during three years at university as well as today, a half-century later, when writing my *Stories of Collingwood*.

The C.C.I. building on Cameron St. was eight years old when I entered the world of typing and the typewriters had simply been transferred from the old Collegiate on Hume St. in April 1954 when the new school opened. The typewriter at my classroom desk was—and still is here at home—a Royal KMG model. A search on the Internet for serial numbers indicates it was made in 1950. It is quite heavy (30 pounds), made of cast iron and could serve as an anchor for a small boat—there is nothing “portable” about this one. All of the classroom typewriters had

“blank” keyboards—no indication at all of what would appear on the paper when you pressed a key. We learned to type from a large chart on the wall above the blackboard. Since keyboard layouts were standardized regardless of the brand (the classroom contained Royals, Underwoods, Remingtons and Smith-Coronas) an entire class had common ground for learning where the keys for letters, numerals, punctuation and other items () “? @ # \$ % & - / were located and could do so on any brand of typewriter. There was a key for the British Pound sign, and one for the “cent” sign and keys for the fractions $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$. We learned to use the lower case of the letter L (l) for the numeral “one”, to make an exclamation mark (!) by typing an apostrophe and then back spacing and typing a period under it. An asterisk (*) was made by typing a capital letter A, then backspacing and typing a small letter “v” over top of it. Two hyphens made a “dash”, no space before or after. On our very first day in typing class a number of students, myself included, showed up without having bought themselves a pad of typing paper and had to get some from other students---duh!

There were finger-twisting sentences to practice such as, “I go to see if it is to be as it was to be or if it is to be at all”, containing a multitude of two-letter words requiring quick thinking to use the spacer bar at the right time. Another standard practice drill was “Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country”. We had speed tests that were timed to see how many words per minute we could type as it related to the number of errors. Mrs. Russell said I would have a fantastic rate if I didn’t have so many errors (tons of them) but in the final speed test in 1964 my score was 60w/p/m with 2 errors.

In the spring of 1964 while in Grade 11, it was announced that we would be getting new typewriters and, if we liked, we could purchase the old typewriter at our desk for \$35.00. These machines were useless to the general public because of the blank keyboard and I jumped at the chance to buy the one I was so familiar with. The new typewriters were called “Underwood-Olivetti”, and were made in the Olivetti plant in Barcelona, Spain (the Italian firm Olivetti had purchased the Underwood Typewriter Company in 1959). The day they arrived, the old heavy typewriters were lifted out of the desk well and set on the floor, then the new lighter-weight ones were put in the place of the old ones. In my case, after I set the new typewriter down in the desk and pressed the tab bar to set the carriage in motion, the carriage thought it was supposed to attempt perpetual motion for it travelled all the way to the right and instead of ringing the bell and stopping, it kept on going right off the typewriter and onto the floor. My first thought was, “They sure don’t make them like they used to”. After school I carried my 30 pound cast iron Royal KMG the two blocks home to Ste. Marie St. The school had to find me another Underwood-Olivetti that would not self-destruct right out of the box. The temporary replacement had a regular keyboard until they could get another classroom model with a blank keyboard. I doubt that these brand-new replacement machines worked and lasted as well as the ones they replaced.

The Royal typewriter saw me through the remaining two years of high school. In Grade 12 (1964-65) as part of our Phys. Ed. curriculum we had a "health" class once a week in a classroom in the new Technical Wing with Greg Titus (1921-1994), our gym teacher. I wasn't highly regarded by Mr. Titus because, as he said to my parents on Parents' Night in Grade 9 (September 1961) when I was age 13, "What's the matter with that kid? He can't kick a ball, catch a ball, or throw a ball!" My father replied, "No, and he won't if he's here till he's 90". Then he asked, "Can he do anything?" and when he was told that I played the piano he said that maybe my coordination in sports would come later. Sports meant everything to Greg Titus and nothing to me. He didn't understand that some of us had different strengths, abilities, passions and interests other than being a football hero. In the fall term of 1964, at age 13, he told us with great pride, "The best years of my life were in high school on the football team". If you didn't measure up to that standard it was as though you had something wrong with you. At the end of a gym class, because of my less-than-enthusiastic participation, he asked if I had an ailment and threatened to take me down to the Office to be straightened out by Chromedome if I didn't smarten up.

In his health classes Greg Titus would hand out copies of information on various health topics which he himself had typed or drawn using the "Ditto" copy forms. Ditto Machines, also known as "Spirit Duplicators" because of the alcohol-based solvent (not ink) used in them, were invented in 1923 and were widely used in schools for notices, classroom handouts, etc. They were handy for making multiple copies without the use of carbon paper between each sheet of typewriter paper. For those who don't remember the Ditto Machine for making copies here is a refresher: The master copy consisted of a top sheet of white paper and a backing sheet coated with wax coloured with purple dye. This form was inserted into a typewriter, and the document was typed. In the process of typing, the purple wax was transferred to the typewritten impressions on the back of the top sheet as a mirror image. The waxed backing sheet was discarded and the top sheet with the back side facing out was placed on the drum of the machine, many of which were hand-cranked although there were electric versions as well. An alcohol-based solvent, usually a 50-50 mixture of Isopropanol and Methanol was used to dissolve a small amount of the dye as the drum rotated so that the impressions from the typewriter were transferred to the copy paper. The master was good for about 50 or so copies before the dye ran out and the impression faded. Copies made this way had a distinctive smell when fresh off the machine and, it is claimed, some students loved to inhale the aroma to get high. Because Ditto machines did not use ink, the image was prone to fading away in sunlight. This was different from the "Gestetner" copy machine that forced ink through a stencil that was "cut" using a typewriter with the ribbon in "neutral". These machines could produce any number of copies by keeping the ink replenished. All of this technology was prior to when photocopier machines became commonplace in the schools. The use of Ditto Machines and

Gestetners began to fade in the 1970's but it is said that the hand-cranked variety are still in use in places around the world that don't have electricity.

Mr. Titus' health class handouts were poorly typed with a lot of mistakes and one day in Grade 12 I was bold and asked him if I could do his typing for him if he handed me his written notes and he agreed. This actually worked out quite well and demonstrated to him that I could do "finger gymnastics" on a typewriter keyboard even if I was useless attempting gymnastics in the gym, throwing a football, dribbling a basketball, running cross country, etc. I brought his notes home and typed the master on my Royal typewriter and he ran off the copies at school. I got on the good side of him through this and he saw me in a different light. I did quite well academically in his weekly health class so that one day he told me that if I hadn't done so well in that class, I would have "failed" at Phys. Ed. It could be said, therefore, that my Royal typewriter and my skill in using it helped me to pass Grade 12 and I ended my time with Greg Titus on good terms. There was no Phys. Ed. in Grade 13 and I could concentrate on my academic studies leading to graduation, followed by university.

The heavy old Royal typewriter went with me for three years to York University. At York, essays had to be handed in typed and few students had a typewriter. Word got around the residence that I had one and I was frequently asked if I would loan it out. When I asked if they could use a blank keyboard some of the responses could not be printed in a newspaper. Consequently, never once in the 56 years I have owned it, did anyone borrow my Royal. I used it regularly until about 25 years ago when I learned to use a computer but the Royal is still called into action once a year to type up some lists at tax time. It has not been serviced since I bought it in 1964 other than replacing the ribbon a number of times. It has a "touch control" dial to make the touch lighter or heavier; "heavy" was a good way to develop finger muscles. Compared to today's plastic keyboards, it would not suit someone with arthritic hands.

In the throw-away world of 2020, the 70-year-old cast iron typewriter I bought from C.C.I. 56 years ago still works. It appears to be indestructible and has outlived generations of plastic versions. It is also a souvenir of my school days as well as an artifact from the 1926 C.C.I. building on Hume St. Even though that now-demolished school building was renamed twice, first as Senior Public School in 1954 and, later, as Admiral Collingwood Public School in 1981, I will always remember it as "the old high school".

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B. C.