

Boston

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

Beloved Selectric type

By Joanne Mason

Ah, our old IBM Correcting Selectric typewriter.

I say that with the same nostalgic regard my father had for his 1954 turquoise and ivory Chevy Bel Air. The Correcting Selectric — now that was a piece of office equipment.

Introduced in the early 1970s, it was solid, possibly weighing more than any of its modern counterparts. It had a presence, much like the old television sets that were part appliance, part furniture. Our Selectric sat on a special typing table by the receptionist's desk, big and slate blue, the most colorful object in the area.

People laughed at the Selectric, but I loved it.

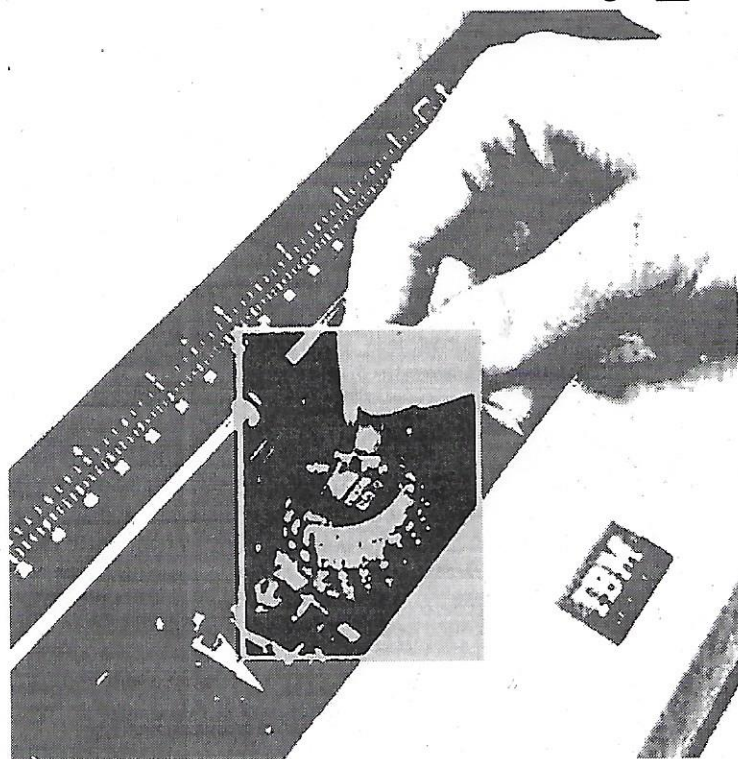
When you turned it on, it would squeak and howl, much like the critters that roamed my bedroom walls one winter. It would shake and sputter, but it was always ready for business.

Paper never slipped in the Selectric. The type was always clear; never would you get the half-black/half-red characters other typewriters left behind. And when you needed to correct something, you could just backspace using a correcting key. No messy correcting tape or liquid paper.

A month ago, I used it for the last time.

Maybe I just have a thing for typewriters. When I was 10 years old, what I wanted more than anything — more than a Lemon Twist or Andy Gibb 45s — was a typewriter. One Christmas, after much nagging, there it was, under the tree, out of its box with a vivid red bow.

It was an almond-colored Smith-Corona Courier manual. It



had metal keys, the kind that would get all dusty if you didn't keep the cover on. When you came to the right margin, that joyous "ding" would signal progress. You could push the carriage return lever and start again.

My mom bought me a how-to typing manual and pilfered correcting tape from her office. While my parents implored my brother to turn down the ELO records upstairs, the main sound coming out of my room was peck, peck, peck. I would type for hours sitting on the floor, hunched over my manuscripts, worsening my posture by the keystroke. Eventually, my dad came home with a sturdy wooden desk he bought from a co-worker for 10 bucks.

Technology moves quickly, though. For college, the Smith-Corona was replaced with an Olivetti electric, a high school graduation

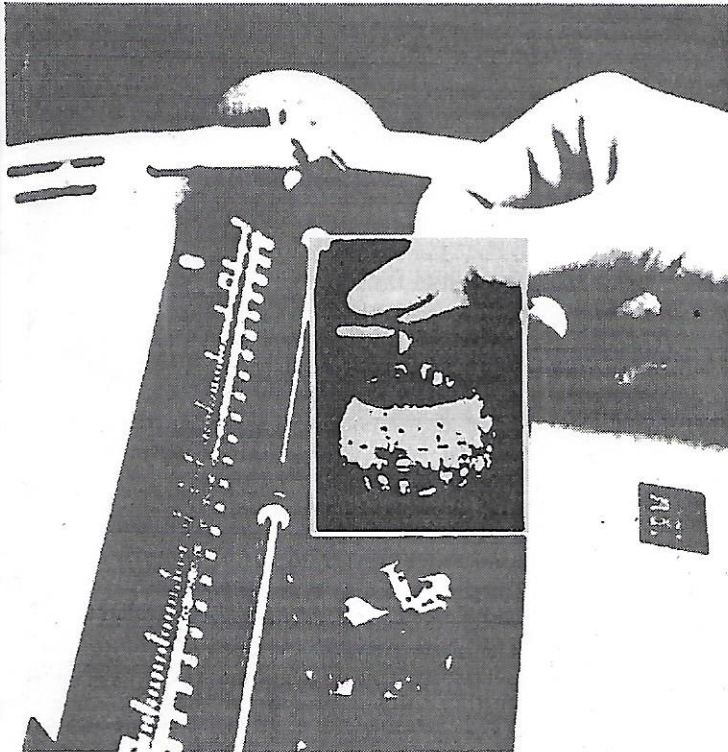
gift from my parents. The Olivetti was chosen for its sleek, modern style and for its keyboard, which included upside-down question marks and exclamation points, essential for Spanish study. After college came a Brother word processor, which actually had memory, along with a daisy wheel printing system and an unbelievable loudness that could wake the dead.

Now, I'm on my second computer, contemplating my third. As revered as they are, the typewriters and word processor live in my mother's attic. I dodge her frequent questions, such as "What are you going to do with that stuff?" I can't bear to get rid of them.

Lately, I have been convinced that my office is the only one on the planet still using typewriters in the 2000s. To prove this, I took an informal survey of family and

Works

writer leaves a legacy



ILLUSTRATION/ANTHONY SCHULTZ

friends. Who uses typewriters these days? Most responded along the lines of: "A what? Are you serious?"

Still, I was pleased to discover that typewriters are not necessarily relics stuck in the basement or off-site storage. An attorney friend confided that court forms were not always printer-friendly, especially if there were awkward carbons involved. Others agreed that while they use the computer for most things, it would be difficult to let the typewriters go, just for those seldom-needed forms and labels. A few actually mentioned the Selectric with great fondness.

It was an established office fixture when I arrived in 1993. Over 12 years, I have seen some of our other typewriters die slow, pathetic deaths, relegated to unused cubicles, their maintenance contracts expiring, becoming' so

obsolete nobody even remembered whether they worked or not. We had other, newfangled ways to process our words.

I confess to a short-lived fascination with our IBM Displaywriter, mainly because its diskettes were the size of record album covers. We had two terminals for the whole office. Soon, we had a brief stint with WordPerfect for the AS/400 and then OfficeVision, a cumbersome application that baffled our temps.

When PCs arrived, we rarely looked back. The Displaywriter moped in a corner, occasionally springing to life when someone needed to look up something ancient. OfficeVision became a distant bad memory.

The Selectric, of course, was the exception. Always a survivor, the Selectric lived on, humming and clicking away as folks typed

yellow folder labels that were too frustrating to go through inkjet printers. Some forms and applications were typed before we had electronic versions. I used it to type the signers' names on handwritten checks. The Selectric withstood just about anything — it was banged around, taken apart, moved a few times and even sworn at (but never by me). It persevered through temporary computer shutdowns and crashes. When the going gets rough, try the Selectric. It never failed us — ever.

But we failed the Selectric. When my office moved this summer, I thought for sure it was going to come with us. I hoped its position would be prominent, as it was a seasoned veteran of our office and had probably been around longer than anyone there.

After the move, I searched but only found the younger models, lightweight and with extra pitches and fonts.

I finally consulted our technology guy. "That thing? No, we didn't tag it," he said. "It probably ended up in a dumpster in the Back Bay." I tried to disguise my heartbreak.

So now, I type my forms and checks on the receptionist's substitute typewriter, which isn't nearly as much fun. Boring gray, it makes no entertaining noises whatsoever and doesn't have half the personality as the beloved Selectric.

My checks slip and slide and I have to have plenty of blue-out on hand because characters are never erased properly. The second signer's name often ends up in an unprofessional slant. I hope that someday we'll have software for this. It didn't bother me so much when the Selectric was around.

I'm sure that eventually, this typewriter will reach the same fate as the Selectric; but it will never share the same legacy.