

Some antique typewriters show up far more frequently than others. Though there is a straightforward and logical reason behind the frequency of most, a few violate all the laws of common sense and appear in numbers that challenge explanation.

Several factors influence how many examples of a given typewriter may still exist. The most obvious is the quantities in which it was produced; one manufactured in huge numbers has a statistical likelihood of surviving in larger amounts than one manufactured in small quantities. Nearly as obvious is when it was made. Typewriters manufactured more recently have a greater chance of surviving simply because there has been less time for something to happen to them. Also, typewriter production generally tended to be higher in the early 20th century than in the 1890s, and in the 1890s than the 1880s. As for the 1870s, it is unlikely that as many as ten thousand typewriters were manufactured during the entire decade.

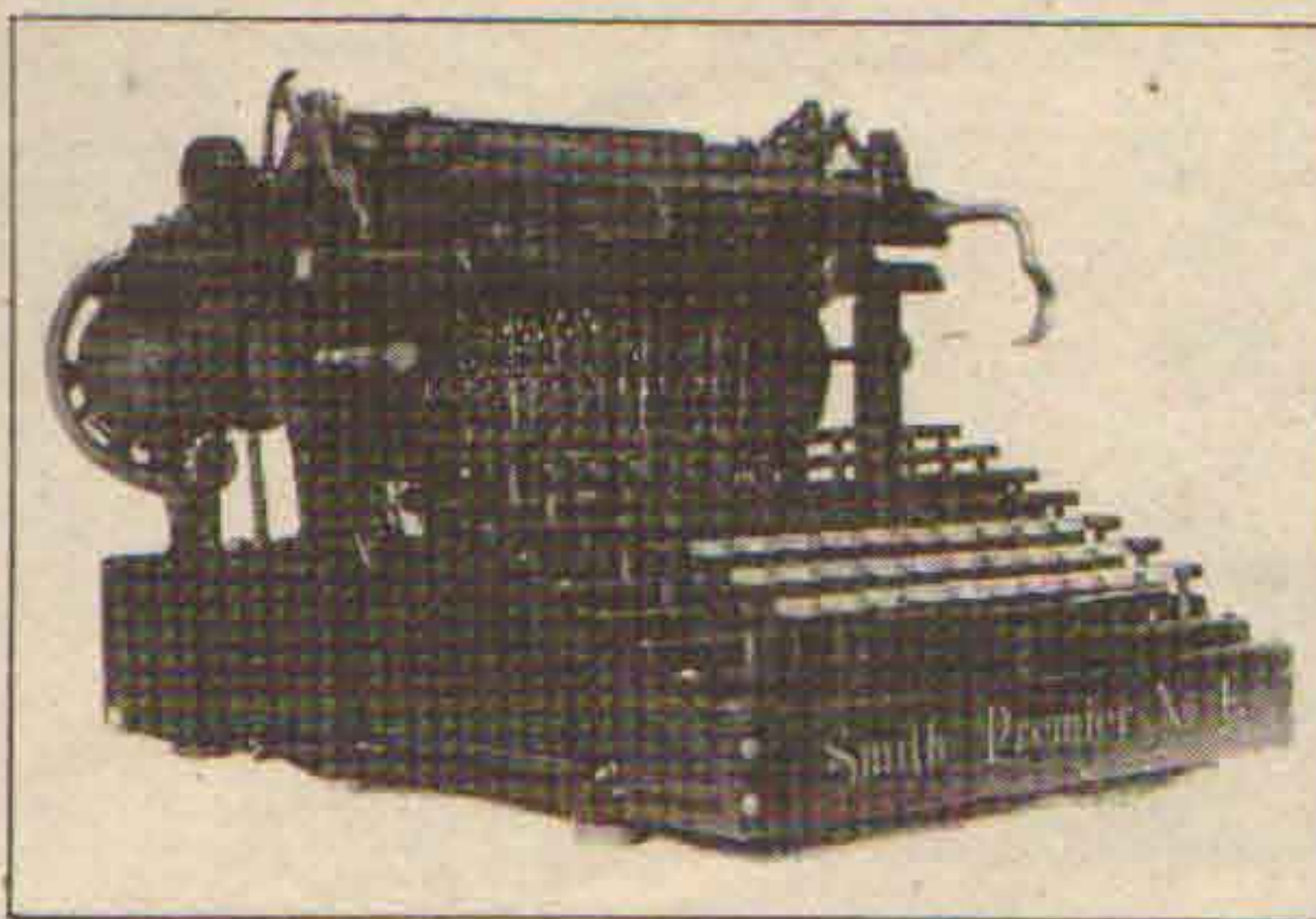
Thus, of the early typewriters that interest most collectors, the Remingtons are among the most frequently seen. Serial numbers imply that around a half-million upstroke Remingtons were manufactured in all; naturally, the No. 6 series is more common than the No. 2 series — being both later and more widely sold in its own day — but nearly all Remington models are considered garden-variety by modern collectors.

The same rationale accounts for the abundance of Smith Premier machines nowadays. The Premier was made during a time of high production generally (1889 onward) and was extremely popular within that context. It was also an extremely durable product — another factor that should have no small influence upon its survival likelihood.

But a less obvious factor in the survival rate of typewriters is the issue of who used it. Blickensderfers, for example, are today at least as common as Remingtons and Smith Premiers; yet serial numbers suggest that only half as many, and possibly fewer, Blickensderfers as Remingtons were produced during 1893-1917. Why are there not only half as many Blickensderfers surviving? Probably because the low-cost, portable, simple Blickensderfer was more likely to be used at home, and the big, expensive Remington was more likely to be used in the office. Personally-owned typewriters had a lower likelihood of being scrapped than those used in business, because businessmen would have been more inclined to a ruthless attitude when typewriters grew old. Also, a personally-owned typewriter, being subjected to less wear than one used professionally, was inclined to stay in good shape longer. Thus, although both Remingtons and Blickensderfers today exist in approximately equal numbers, the Blickensderfers survive in a higher proportion to their original numbers.

A similarly high proportion of Hammonds survives. It was a very popular machine, so large numbers were made in the first place; serial numbers suggest that around 300,000 had been produced by the late 1920s. And, though expensive,

What Typewriters Survive — And How Come



Smith Premier No. 4; 1894.

Hammond machines were more likely to be used by the well-heeled individual than in the steno pool. The automatic printing mechanism of the Hammond caused its carriage to have a heavy resistance to being returned for the start of a new line; instead of "throwing" it, as typists do in steno pools, the carriage had to be given a concerted push all the way. Also, the Hammond was more susceptible to malfunction because of slight amounts of dirt than was a Remington. These characteristics made the Hammond less agreeable for steno-pool typists, who themselves were nothing more than biological extensions of automated correspondence factories, and who were supposed to spend their time typing instead of shoving carriages or cleaning typewriters. But engineers, scientists, clergymen, scholars, and similar typewriter users, did not have to sit all day typing letters. They could indulge a little extra effort in the use of their machines. Meantime, personalities like theirs might view an elegant yet idiosyncratic mechanism as representing nothing but the high-strung nature of the thoroughbred. The typical Hammond, therefore, was used in a setting other than the strictly-business setting of the typical Remington, by persons who were inclined to admire it and care for it.

A case in which all the factors so far enumerated come together is the Oliver. Enormous numbers of Olivers survive, particularly the No. 9 model. The Oliver was popular to begin with, and serial numbers suggest that around one million were produced between the early 1890s and the late 1920s. Around 1916, when the No. 9 came out, the Oliver Company decided to sell their typewriter at half price, direct to the customer. Now priced the same as portables aimed for the home market, it was still a fullsize office machine with an outstanding reputation. So it was embraced in huge numbers for home use by people who underutilized its sturdy mechanism,

and who were disinclined to scrap it when old; all this at a comparatively recent date. Oliver 9s haunt collectors with such persistence that some people believe the 9 refers to the number of lives each has.

Although these descriptions do not cover all the typewriters that have a high survival quotient, they cover enough to illustrate an irony of typewriter collecting. In their day, the most popular typewriters tended to be the best ones within their groups; yet collectors tend to seek rarity. Thus, while collectors in many other fields aspire to the finest their fields produced, typewriter collectors are often in pursuit of the worst in their field. For the worst were often early, they were usually made in small numbers, and people would have been disinclined to protect them. The really good typewriters are the ones that collectors are blasé about, or even contemptuous: "oh no, not another Oliver!"

As mentioned at the beginning, there is a logic to the incidence of survival of most typewriters, but, from time to time, enigmas pop up. An example is the Sholes & Glidden Type Writer, the first typewriter itself. Between 40 and 60 are reported extant so far, yet only about 4,000 are supposed to have been manufactured. They supposedly were made for only four years (1873-78) as long ago as a typewriter could have been; and they were not very good instruments. By all these criteria, very few Sholes & Gliddens should survive. Yet, assuming all the figures are accurate, at least 1% of the Sholes & Glidden production still survives.

This is a high percentage, all things considered. If 1% of the Remington No. 6 — manufactured 20 to 35 years more recently in perhaps 50 times the numbers of Sholes & Gliddens still survived, this should mean that nearly 2,000 Remington 6s should be extant. Yet, though Remington 6s are quite common, it is hard to imagine that 500 is not a high estimate for all

those in existence.

So what accounts for the relatively high proportion of Sholes & Gliddens?

The explanations so far seem as unlikely as the question itself.

One possibility is that the Sholes & Glidden was recycled, and therefore kept on the market longer than its four years of manufacture. It is known that Remington offered to update early Sholes & Gliddens as later improvements were developed. Also, Remington literature of the early 1880s still lists Sholes & Gliddens — referring to them as No. 1s — at half their original price. It is unlikely that these were brand-new products so much as rebuilds. The high incidence of surviving Sholes & Gliddens with an "A" prefix in their serial numbers — which is generally believed to signify that the machine was rebuilt — tends to support the recycling theory.

Yet the mere fact alone of their being rebuilt and kept in operation does not satisfactorily explain their abundance. One would think that people who bought them as "cheap typewriters" would have run them into the ground. Moreover, the rebuilt Sholes & Gliddens appear to have been sold at the same time and around the same price as the No. 1 Caligraph, but the No. 1 Caligraph appears to be scarcer today.

The most common explanation for the phenomenon is that the Sholes & Glidden was the "first typewriter," and as such, people had a tendency to preserve it. This makes sense after a point — but the point appears to be years after most of the Sholes & Gliddens ought to have been disposed of. Certainly people did not take the historic view during the typewriter's first decade, for at that time there was an uncertain future for even the second typewriter. Was it the 1890s, then, when typewriters really became hot items, that people began to identify the historic importance of the Sholes & Glidden? Perhaps. But that left 20-odd years for Sholes & Gliddens to get beaten around as cheap old typewriters of dubious worth, before they got "recognized" as historically significant. One wonders, in the light of that, how come so many of them today are in such comparatively good condition.

All the theories that explain the high proportion of Sholes & Gliddens have a plausibility, but, unfortunately, so have all the counter-theories. Yet there is the glaring and inescapable fact: all those Sholes & Gliddens exist, and that tends to weaken those ideas that tell us why there should be no Sholes & Gliddens.

There is no natural law, of course, that insists that events will follow the course of probability as we perceive it. Maybe there is no definitive explanation for all those Sholes & Gliddens. Maybe a random assortment of explanations has to be considered, and maybe they all just happened to occur in relation to the Sholes & Glidden. Whatever the events of history may have been, their result is that the contrivance generally viewed as the inaugurator of machine writing is present in abundance for us to behold, and, if we think that way, to make us ponder how far we have come.