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machines will skyrocket, that a general mania will develop wherein glassy-eyed collectors will furiously attempt to outbid one another for this hottest of new collectables.

A peculiarity of this contention is that it is almost exclusively made by retailers who happen to have a handful of typewriters they want to sell.

The greater likelihood is that typewriters will retain a low profile as collectables. While new collectors have joined the ranks during the decade that this writer has been collecting, they do little more than compensate for the older collectors who passed away, or who just got tired of their collections and unloaded them.

There are several reasons for the probable stagnation of the typewriter as a hot collectable. One is that the machines are large. Unlike pocket watches or mechanical banks (antiques that could appeal to the same kind of psychology that typewriters would) a substantial collection takes more than just a display case or a few shelves. An entire room will do.

As much as the typewriters individually are large, any real collection would have to contain a large number of examples. For if a "real" collection gets defined as one containing at least one representative of each fundamental type of its subject, a "real" typewriter collection necessarily includes one each of at least 19 schools of design. That can be a lot of hardware.

Some observers have tried to draw parallels between typewriters and phonographs as collectables, thereby finding grist for the "typewriters are hot" mill. For indeed, antique phonographs were, perhaps 10 or 15 years ago, unappreciated items that sold at low prices; but today even garden-variety outside-horn machines can command several hundred dollars. Since phonographs are mechanical, like typewriters, they become a template for many prognosticators upon the typewriter collecting field. The parallel, however, has many reasons for being viewed as unsound.

First, collectors have a tendency to consider a collection to be almost a living entity; it is a situation where the whole exceeds the sum of its parts, for although the individual pieces within a collection are important, the collection as a mass becomes a piece of sculpture for its assembler to arrange and align and organize. Phonographs are easier to do this with for the simple reason that there are not as many fundamental types. Outside horn and inside, cylinder and disc, constitute the four brazen visible fundamental differences among phonographs, after which a phonograph collection segues into realms of design subtlety that, while significant, become obvious only to the serious student. Somebody interested in working in that fine artform of collection-building, therefore, stands a better chance of doing a full job with phonographs than with typewriters. If the situation were compared with a paint-by-numbers canvas, it would turn out that the typewriter version requires

substantially more tones and shades to be completed, in a fashion that does not encourage serious pursuit.

For typewriters, unlike phonographs, do not have a secondary appeal that makes them attractive to people (such as spouses) who do not have the collector's compulsions as such, and who require some additional reinforcement to go along with the peculiarly obsessive madness that most collectors exhibit. A phonograph plays phonograph records, and therein it firmly establishes its extra appeal. An old recording puts the listener in direct touch with another age, complete with its distinctive concept of what is pretty, humorous, moving, or whatever, and through this direct contact the listener gets a sense of communion with his own heritage. People who are not fascinated by antique phonographs as such can easily be fascinated by antique records (as witnessed by the numbers of early recordings that get transcribed to modern discs and sold through popular outlets) and therein early talking machines become acceptable to people who are cooler to the collector's mania. In the typewriter field, such secondary justifications are not so readily at hand. Old typewriters do not, for example, automatically spew out correspondence in the 19th-century argot.

The question of restoration also enters the picture. Putting an old typewriter back into shape might take a lot more effort than the equivalent labors required for a phonograph. A mechanical phonograph that possesses one hundred parts is probably a complex phonograph; a typewriter with ten times that number of parts is a simple typewriter. While collectors of mechanical things are known for the pleasure they take in tinkering, there is the matter of degree; the amount of work that an early typewriter can require does not necessarily discourage the devotee, but few would admit to being encouraged by the prospect. But more than any other consider-

ation is the intricate balance that must exist between supply and demand. For collectables to become "hot," they must be scarce enough to make their acquisition an achievement; yet they must be accessible enough that the collector remains confident of his ability to acquire. Phonographs fit these requirements far better than typewriters do. For phonographs, being entertainment devices, often acquired an affection from their owners, and, when they became old-fashioned, they often were sequestered in some safe closet or attic, still protected by the grateful people whose lives they enriched. Typewriters, by contrast, were utilities. Except for those that were "grandpa's typewriter," relatively few lent themselves to a sentimental retirement. Indeed, the vast majority of typewriters were owned not by nostalgic families, but by cost-conscious, efficiency-minded, practical businessmen. An outmoded typewriter got traded-in or scrapped. Putting it up for storage meant spending capital for a utility that could no longer be utilized.

Because of this, there tends to be an extremism in the way typewriters survive today; the common ones are extremely common, the rare ones are extremely rare. The new collector faces the prospect of having relatively easy access to equipment that exists in large numbers, and almost no access to the truly distinctive pieces. This does not encourage new collectors.

Substantiation of these contentions presents itself in the form of prices paid for antique typewriters. They have remained remarkably constant over the past decade. Though it is true that the late 60s saw a greater abundance of \$5.00 and even \$1.50 typewriters than the present time does, the fact remains that something in the range of \$35 is the "going price" for most typewriters, then and now.

This does not mean that there are never collectors who pay higher prices. Some collectors, being more compulsive than others, or perhaps

simply wealthier, have offered exorbitant sums for certain machines. However, having acquired the objects of their desires, they tend to withdraw their offers. So, though they themselves overpay for an item, they do not really have the effect of driving up the market. Once they have been satiated, the market levels off to something the remainder of the collectors are willing to pay. This is why those typewriters that do appear at antiques shops and flea markets with prices over \$100.00 usually tend to be there the following week.

The theme of this installment of "The Unknown Writing Machine" has been that people try, in various ways, to aggrandize typewriters. The final way is economic aggrandizement. Some people try to insist that they are sensational investments. Alas, all indications are that, once again, typewriters must be admired for what they are and not what they accomplish, financially or otherwise.

Too bad about that. When my own collection was begun ten years ago, I thought I might be feathering my nest for the then-near future. Instead, I find myself with a roomful of old iron. I have to content myself with the satisfaction of knowing that I rescued these ingenious contrivances from the scrapheap, where, with the dispassion that always surrounded them, most were scheduled for destruction most matter-of-factly. I can't eat that, but perhaps it enhances the flavor of comestibles supplied through more pragmatic channels over the years. And, of course, there is a sense of enrichment from taking people on the tour of Central Typewriterdom. With an almost incredible consistency, people first seeing this assemblage of equipment make the identical response: "Oh my God, I don't believe it!" That doesn't buy the groceries, either. It merely sets the stage for telling people a lot of things they didn't know about a subject that would not be as much fun if its abundance of surprises were common knowledge.



Central Typewriterdom, December 4, 1978.