

# The Annual TYPEWRITING CONTEST

By Bonnie Miller

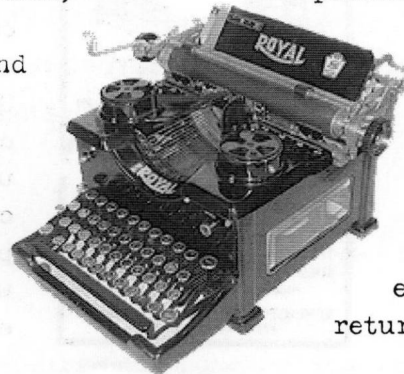
The first mechanical business machine was probably the typewriter. Today we take for granted the use of computers, photocopiers and fax machines, but up until the 1880s documents were produced, and reproduced, almost entirely by hand.

The first patented typing machine dates back to 1713, but the first working model was developed by Pellegrino Turri in 1808 who invented it for his blind friend Countess Carolina Fantoni da Fivizzano. In 1852 an American, John Jones, attempted to mass manufacture the typewriter and produced 130 models before his factory burned down. It was not until the 1870s that a marketable model was created. In 1863 a mechanical engineer, Christopher Latham Sholes

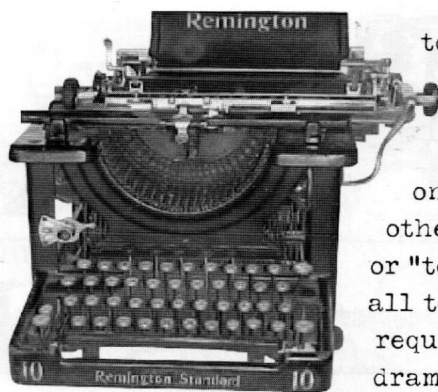
invented the first practical typewriter. It took several improvements and patents with partners Samuel W. Soule and Carlos Glidden to produce an improved model that remained remarkably unchanged for many decades.

One of the biggest challenges to making the new machine work was to prevent the keys from constantly jamming. Another associate, James Densmore suggested splitting the keys up across the board so that they were prioritized based on how often they would expect to be struck.

In an amusing twist, what he suggested was to spread apart the keys based on their likeliness of being used to actually slow down the time between each letter, time enough to allow each key to return to rest before the next key



was struck, which prevented the jamming problem. The resulting keyboard layout became known as the "QWERTY" keyboard, so-named for the first six letters. Despite further mechanical and eventual electric improvements to the keyboard, the layout of the letters developed in 1874 remained unchanged and is still what we use today on modern computer keyboards.



Sholes did not have the patience or business acumen to market his new invention, so he sold the rights to his associate Dunsmore who convinced his friend Philo Remington to produce it. Remington had the asset of the Remington Arms Company to produce and sell this new device which was then first offered for sale in 1874.

The first typewriters were met with skepticism and were not immediate commercial successes as they had many cumbersome flaws. Additionally there was resistance to embracing the new machine as the standardized printing revealed poor spellers who could no longer hide their ignorance with poor handwriting. The keys still tended to jam, they only printed in capital letters, and the page which was being typed upon could not be viewed by the typist. Eventually engineers worked out these mechanical problems and the typewriter gained popularity as business tool.

Standardizing the typist was another matter. (Early terminology referred to the person doing the "type writing" as the "type writer" rather than a typist). Early typists followed two schools of thought as to how to approach the keys. One method is what we refer to

today as the two fingered or "hunt and seek" method of watching the keyboard and deciding where to strike one of the two forefingers. The other method was called "touch" or "ten finger" and promoted using all ten fingers to strike the required keys. This second method dramatically sped up the output of the typist as they could use all

ten fingers to work rather than rely on only two. This productivity was no more dramatically displayed that at the first known typing contest held informally on July 25, 1888 in Cincinnati, Ohio, where two gentlemen who each claimed to be the world's fastest typist challenged each other. One gentleman used the two finger method while the other used the touch method. The touch method produced far more words in the assigned time and thereafter became the preferred method of typists but it was not until the following year that a standardized method was developed which assigned certain letter responsibilities to each of the ten fingers. Once mastered, the typist need not look down at their fingers as they could keep their eyes on their assignment rather than watch their fingers.

Typewriters were quirky things. Early sales promotions called it a cure for "pen paralysis" and curvature of the spine. Lofty claims, indeed! Early models

were decorated similar to sewing machines with flowers and other embellishments, and advertised as a piece of elegant furniture or a complement to any parlor. The Sholes & Glidden typewriter came with its own table and used a foot paddle for the carriage return. One model produced in the late 1800s was believed to be the least expensive model ever produced,

**A Record of 30 Years**

1873      1903

THIRTY YEARS AGO the advent of the

**REMINGTON**

created the typewriter industry.

EVER SINCE the Remington has been the recognized leader among writing machines.

TODAY its supremacy is unquestioned. **SOLID MERIT** is the foundation of its enduring fame.

REMINGTON TYPEWRITER COMPANY  
327 Broadway, New York

cost only one dollar, and was appropriately named The Dollar Typewriter. The smallest portable model was called The Junior and could fit inside a coat pocket. Over 400 different brands have produced typewriters since their inception.

Perhaps the most famous early convert to the typewriter was our own beloved Mark Twain. Twain loved to embrace new ideas, and the newfangled typewriter fascinated him. He was one of the first purchasers of a Sholes & Glidden typewriter. He is believed to have been the first author to have submitted a typed manuscript to his publisher.

By the 1890s the typewriter was rapidly replacing handwriting as the preferred method of document production. Typewriters were soon in all offices, and the skill of typing was revered and even taught in local schools. Both girls and boys took the typing classes. Most clerks in the late 1800s were men, but the introduction of the typewriter in the business world promoted women for clerical work. A 1933 book on the story of the typewriter dedicated a chapter to "How Women Achieved Economic Emancipation Through The Writing Machine."

It was not until around 1902 that typing entirely replaced handwriting in Calaveras County business and it had already been available for almost thirty years. Ten years later it was being taught as an elective course at Calaveras High School. The school taught education basics such as history and literature, and practical "business" skills such as shorthand and typewriting. In 1913 an enthusiastic business instructor Mr. F. J. Pribble joined the staff of Calaveras High School. His official title was "Master of Accts, Commercial Branches." He taught the business classes as well as coached boys' athletics. But his true passion was the typewriter.

In keeping with a growing national fascination for the typewriter and the skill it took to successfully operate

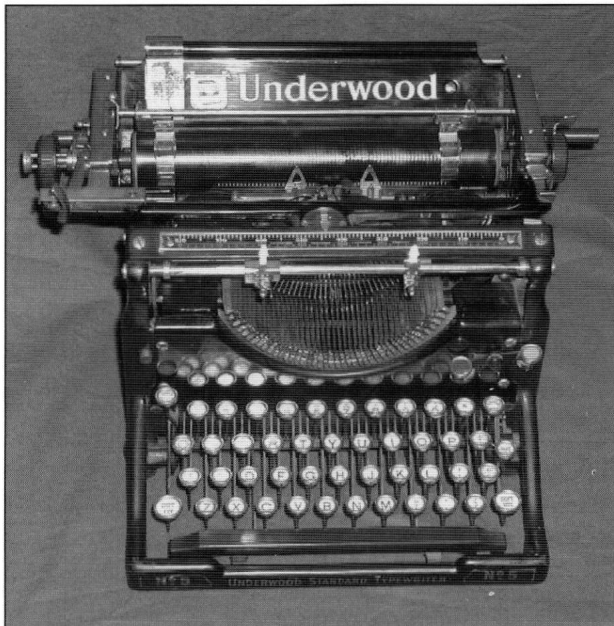


**F. J. Pribble, Commercial Department of Calaveras High School, from the 1913 annual *The Skull*.**

it, Pribble created a local contest to show off his students' prowess. Public exhibitions were rare and television did not even exist, so the idea of a contest of any kind provided great entertainment for people. The Calaveras Weekly Citizen reported that Pribble "inaugurated" the contest locally and launched the first Mother Lode Typewriting Contest on May 29, 1915. The rules of the contest followed the national lead, which used Rules for International Typewriting School Contests. In fact, Pribble was credited with holding the first such contest using the International Rules in the state of California. As a check, the results were additionally graded under the Business College Rules which were much more strict in penalizing errors.

There were fifteen entrants from three schools, Amador County High School, Jackson Union High School and Calaveras. Perhaps Calaveras had an advantage, as nine of the fifteen students were from Calaveras! They competed for five prizes: Amateur, School, Novice, First-Year Student, and Second-Year Student. The top prize went





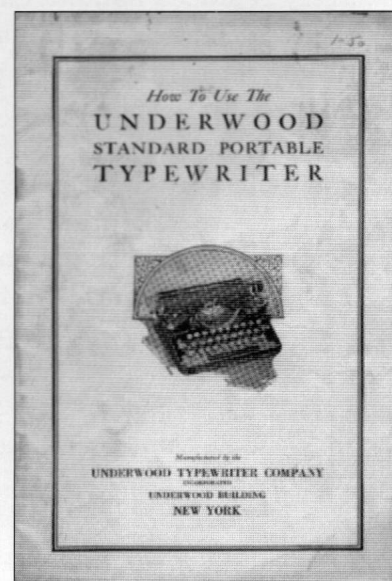
**The Model 5 Underwood, the standard business typewriter of the early 1900s. Internet image.**

to Calaveras student Rita Stewart who produced 2482 words with only 106 errors in 30 minutes. She averaged 65 words per minute. Calaveras proudly took home the top three honors. The trophies were three large and very attractive loving cups.

The first contest was held in the San Andreas Courtroom. Imagine the noise of fifteen students banging away on mechanical typewriters and slamming carriage returns and ringing bells in that crowded room! The contest was also highlighted with a demonstration by a Mr. Hammond of the Sacramento office of the Underwood Typewriter Company. He demonstrated his ability to take apart and completely reassemble any model selected from the typewriters available that day. Eleven year old Peter Snyder in the audience selected one of the older and more unique models which Mr. Hammond promptly disassembled and reassembled for the audience in only four minutes and fifty-two seconds. The fact that the Underwood Typewriter Company provided such a demonstration illustrated the appreciation that the typewriter industry had for Pribble's efforts.

Pribble's success with the school's Typewriting Department was endearingly memorialized in the school's annual, The Skull. Three pages were dedicated to reproducing the best one minute test that each of the eighteen students produced that year. The successful typing contest was credited with not only increasing an interest in typing, but it encouraged speed and accuracy as well. The following year the 1916 Skull noted that the high school had added "stenotypy" to its curriculum, one of the first schools in the state to do so. Students were "blazing the way in vocational education by the adoption of a stenotypy course" claimed the Skull. Stenotype was an improved method of taking dictation that produced better results than shorthand.

In the spring of 1916 the communities anxiously awaited the Second Annual Mother Lode Typewriting Contest which was held in Jackson on May 20. The Calaveras Weekly Citizen and the Calaveras Prospect each reported on the event. The second contest included four participating schools, and shorthand was included as an additional competition. Interestingly the Calaveras students did not participate in the shorthand contest as there were objections to the fact that the Calaveras students used the stenotype machine for their shorthand. The four participating schools in the typing contest were Calaveras, Angels, Jackson, and Sutter



**Underwood Typewriter Manual, printed in 1919. Internet image.**



Creek, who provided a total of thirty-one competing students. Again they used International Rules, and the event was further sanctioned by the Annual Business Show of New York. Trophies were given for three typing competitions that year described as "Novice", or first-year; "School", or second-year; and "Amateur", or a free-for-all class. The first eight places in the School class scored higher than the previous year's overall winner, indicating that the second year students were showing a marked overall improvement in abilities over the previous year.

Rita Stewart, the previous year's winner competed in the Amateur division and won that class. Rita's average had grown to 90.2 words per minute. Doris Treat of San Andreas won the School class contest with 68.5 words per minute. Even though they didn't compete in the shorthand competition, the Calaveras shorthand students gave a stenotype demonstration to the spectators under the direction of a representative of the Underwood Typewriter Company, which was well received by the crowd. Their stenotype demonstration indicated that they could take dictation and record it on the stenotype at a speed of about eighty words per minute. In all it was a successful day for the Calaveras students.

Later that same year the prowess of Doris Treat was further extolled in the pages of the Calaveras Prospect. On December 30, 1916 it was reported that Miss Treat, who was a 1916 graduate from Calaveras High School, had gone on to attend the Polytechnic College of Engineering in Oakland. Her continued study and success in typewriting allowed her to achieve an average of 101 words per minute. This rate was considered quite remarkable and

caught the attention of the Underwood Typewriter Company of New York. They committed to the Prospect that they would send a representative on a special trip to Oakland to investigate this typing phenomenon! The Prospect noted that although Miss Treat was attending school in Oakland, she "remained loyal to her Alma Mater, and would give full credit to the Calaveras school and to Mr. Pribble her instructor here."

By the time of the Third Annual Mother Lode Typewriter Contest, enthusiasm was high for both the students and the spectators. The Calaveras Weekly Citizen reported that four prizes were



Pribble with the boys basketball team, 1914 *Skull*.



Typewriting class trophies, the loving cups won for the typing contest, 1916 *Skull*.

given at the 1917 event, one of which was for "Stenotypy (machine shorthand)". The students from Calaveras took home all four trophies. The individual sensation of the event was Minnie McSorley who won the Novice class with 58 words per minute. She had only started learning typewriting the previous September yet managed to break all previous records for the class. The *Citizen* and also the Calaveras Prospect also recognized Marian Tower for her accuracy record. "She wrote a total of 1051 words in the 20 minutes with only 10 errors" reported the *Citizen*. "That is, in 1051 words - about 6,305 strokes on the typewriter - she misstruck only 10 keys. Only 10 mistakes out of 6,305 strokes is considered a marvelous record for accuracy." Marian had also entered the typewriting class only just the previous September.

All of the wonderful successes of the Mother Lode Typewriter Contests must have gained much attention for F. J. Pribble. Apparently he was offered another job away from Calaveras. Shortly after the 1917 contest he moved to Marysville where he became director of that community's high school commercial department and he continued sponsoring typewriting and other business skills contests for students both locally and statewide. He organized the Sacramento Valley Typewriter Contest, and eventually served as the judge for the Mother

Lode contest. His later contests were often spiced with visits by world class champions who offered demonstrations to the spectators. He often attended business machine shows and corresponded with or was often visited by dignitaries and company representatives from the business machine industry throughout his career. In 1925 he left public education and



Pribble shown with his Stenotypy Class, 1916 *Skull*.

started a private school, the Pribble School of Business in Sacramento. In 1932 he served as a Supervisor of Instruction for Sacramento High School.

Pribble only taught at Calaveras High School for four years but his impact to the school and the Mother Lode Typewriting Contest was well documented. What we do know about Pribble was recorded in the pages of *The Skull*, or lovingly pasted in to a scrap book which found its way in to the hands of the Calaveras County Historical Society. The scrapbook contains newspaper clippings of his achievements from 1915 to 1926. Amusingly the scrapbook is in fact an old handwritten accounts ledger. The newspaper clippings are



Early 1900s postcard glamorizing the typewriter with a female typist with a lot of leg showing. Internet image.

pasted over manual journal entries such as...

*Hardware Twine, 0.25;*

*Pumice Stone 0.20;*

*and Post Office*

*Box, 3 mos 0.75.*

Toward the back of the book, demurely pasted away from the limelight of Pribble's glow, are a few clippings of social events in which Mrs. F. J. Pribble is mentioned. We credit her for collecting the clippings.

...

Do you know that the longest English word believed to be spelled using only the top letter keys of the typewriter is the word "typewriter?"

## **A student's best one minute test, reproduced in the 1915 *Skull*:**

"More than this, the time will come and it will not be so very far in the future, when shorthand as we know it will be wrapped in its grave clothes and be laid away with all the other mummies and in its place will stand a typewriter on which we will be able to do all that is now..."

—LOUISE TERRY,

60 words without error

"There are some of the thinks that come to me as I sit in my office and smoke a cigar handed to me by a friend and which cigar causes me to take a pessimistic view of When I had got to the place spoken of above, where I did wish I had some real good way of polishing off my enemies, my attention was drawn..."

—CLAIRE ONETO,

67 words, without error.



# Calaveras County Historical Society

30 No. Main Street P.O. Box 721 San Andreas, CA 95249

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*Las Calaveras* is published quarterly by the Calaveras County Historical Society. A subscription to *Las Calaveras* comes with membership in the Calaveras County Historical Society for \$16.00 per year. Non-members may obtain copies from the Historical Society office. The original historical material presented in *Las Calaveras* is not copyrighted and anyone is invited to use it. Mention of the source would be appreciated. Contributions of articles about Calaveras County are appreciated and may be submitted to the Historical Society for consideration.

The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 to 4:00 in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museum while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com.

## New Members

The Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

### **March 2004**

Robert & Dorothy Buchanan, Murphys  
Gordon & Patricia Gottschalk, Murphys

### **April 2004**

Pat & Eileen Cafferty, Moraga  
Wayne & Gwen Segale, Stockton  
David & Carla Montagner, Woodridge

### **May 2004**

Matilda Soyland, Valley Springs  
Loretta Weidhofer, Angels Camp  
Kathleen Zancanella, San Andreas  
Debbie & Scot Kohler, San Andreas  
Victoria Erickson, Valley Springs

## Red Barn Museum Grand Opening July 31

Mark your calendars and be sure to attend this grand event—the opening of our newest museum, the Red Barn Museum in San Andreas. Plan on attending the art show or participating in a variety of fun activities.

For more information,  
contact the Historical Society at 754-1058.

## Donations

The Historical Society is grateful for the following donations:

### **March 2004**

Post car of the Hotel Treat, Mother Lode County Pamphlet—Denise Konz, San Andreas

### **May 2004**

1934-40 The Skull Yearbooks—Ruth Matson  
Booklet "A Tour of the Calaveras Cement Company Plant"—Harriet "Jo" Sanders, Murphys