

A Century of Typewriters



The typewriter, now rapidly disappearing from business, school, and home, was once a familiar part of American life. Particularly in the last half of this century, we have often taken it for granted, forgetting that it had once been a technological innovation. The typewriter as we think of it today emerged from a period of varying designs and mechanical processes. These five models, all from the museum collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa, attest to inventors' various attempts to make a better typewriter.

—by Jack Lufkin, museum curator
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(Photos by Chuck Greiner)

Quite rare today, this model became the first commercially successful typewriter. Invented by Christopher Sholes and Carlos Glidden, it was manufactured and marketed in 1874 by E. Remington & Sons, a gunsmith and sewing machine manufacturer. The machine was mounted on a sewing machine stand; pressing the foot treadle activated the carriage return. Soon renamed the Remington, the Sholes and Glidden model only typed in capital letters.



Double-keyboard typewriters like this one had separate keys for upper-case and lower-case letters. Patented by George A. Jewett, this model was first manufactured in Des Moines in 1892. Double keyboards, however, did not become the industry standard; instead, adding a shift key allowed for both upper- and lower-case letters. The Jewett Typewriter Company closed in 1910.



Index typewriters, like this Odell Model #4, operated by moving the linear type slide over the desired letter and pressing it to print. Levi Judson Odell of Chicago was granted the patent design in 1887; this machine appeared in 1904. Despite its low price, it was slow and soon vanished from the marketplace.



Because many early typewriters were large and heavy, some inventors worked to produce lightweight models. Charles Bennett introduced this typewriter in 1910. Tucked into its 11"x5" case and often made of aluminum, the Bennett weighed only a few pounds and could easily be carried in a briefcase or satchel.



By the 1950s, most typewriter manufacturers marketed a portable model. The lightweight Smith-Corona Skyriter, a favorite for travelers and reporters, was produced between 1949 and 1962. This Skyriter was used by Willis Garner "Sec" Taylor, sports editor and columnist for the *Des Moines Register* from 1914 to 1965.