

A century of typewriters housed at Phillips County Museum

Written by Jes-c Brandt



How many people can relate to this hypothetical day? Wake up, check the email, drink some coffee, use a desktop computer at work, maybe check the blackberry for lunch plans or a take-out menu, shoot off a few emails, head home to check the personal email and repeat it all the next day.

In an age of email, message boards and Twitter, thinking of even a day without computer access will throw many off, but what about a whole lifetime without a computer? Don't think quite so far back to using feather pens at a poorly lit rolltop desk, but just to the early 1900s when typewriters began to be used for recording important information. At the time, they were the height of technology.

Typewriters were used through most of the 20th century and were considered a great asset. Now, however, there are almost none around, and they certainly aren't an everyday necessity.

While most all typewriters seem to be an antique in this day and age, the ones still in use look incredibly modern in comparison to the first typewriters.

Displayed at the Phillips County Museum are a number of typewriters still around from nearly 100 years ago; they are machines that seem almost alien to present-day computer lovers. The typewriters have no screens and no internal memory, but they do have a recognizable keyboard layout.

The standard keyboard layout is a design that has lasted since 1873. Known as the QWERTY layout—for the letters in the top, left corner—it was first used on the Sholes and Glidden typewriter. That layout has changed only slightly since its original adoption.

Changes include the addition of the numbers 0 and 1. Before the numbers were included, typists used the letters 'O' and 'I' to depict them. Also added in later versions was the exclamation point, which was formerly made using the apostrophe, backspace and period.

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Some may have noticed the word 'typewriter' can be spelled using only one line on the keyboard. This was not originally the case, however. The letter 'r' was moved to the top row for that specific purpose. Spelling 'typewriter' was a common sales gimmick in the first years of the typewriter.

Even if the similar keyboards could somehow trick the user into thinking he was using a computer rather than a typewriter, it wouldn't take long to notice some very obvious differences. The 'backspace' key on a computer, for example, removes a mistake instantly, leaving no trace of an error. A typewriter, on the other hand, isn't nearly as forgiving when a mistake is made.

And when it comes to saving work, doing so on a computer is a breeze. A huge number of files can be saved and organized, and finding them never requires rummaging through desks and loose papers.

Using a typewriter now would simply seem like an inconvenience. In the early 1900s, though, knowing how to use a typewriter was a rare and valuable talent.

Housed at the museum is a very special typewriter that was once owned by John M. Delander. Although he's not exactly a household name, he did play a vital role in the early years of the county.

Delander moved to Haxtun in 1905. When he arrived he was the only person in the area who knew how to use a typewriter. The model of his choice was an Underwood Standard No. 5. Also to his credit was his mastery of both English and Swedish. These skills made him a respected and sought-after man.

In his first years in the area, Delander went to work helping settlers with typing legal forms—especially those who spoke only Swedish. After providing such a service to the people, Delander went on to become the first town secretary and recorder/clerk when Haxtun was incorporated in 1909.

Delander's Underwood is one of many typewriters on display at the museum. Interestingly, the

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history of typewriter companies looks almost like a family tree, with companies merging and producing others. The museum has typewriters from most of the predominant companies, including Smith, Remington, Underwood and Corona.

To see the entire display of typewriters, as well as many other artifacts from communication history, visit the Phillips County Museum at 109 S. Campbell, Sundays from 2-4:30 p.m.