

TECHNOLOGY

Celebrating Linotype, 125 Years Since Its Debut

JOHN HENDEL MAY 20, 2011

Around for a century, Linotype machines were made obsolete in the 1970s by changing technologies -- but they have not been forgotten



To embark on Linotype was to embark on greatness. Linotype machines powered newspapers, factories, a whole industry that was as American as any and existed for a century, at least until the tides of technology wiped it out as an occupation in the 1960s and 1970s -- and now, Linotype is nearly extinguished from American memory. Yet Thomas Edison, it's said, called the machine the Eighth Wonder of the World (no faint praise from the man who invented the light bulb). This fabled technology, this wonder, once occupied the imagination of countless people in our nation's past.

The summer of 2011 marks 125 years since the Linotype machine's innovation entered the newspaper world -- the *New York Tribune* first integrated the machine into its operations in July 1886. Before its invention and implementation, no newspaper could easily run longer than a few brief pages, and this new way of producing text marked a radical evolution in the history of printing and

typography. Linotype dominated for nearly a hundred years, and it's time to revisit the machine's origins.

A German immigrant named Ottmar Mergenthaler invented it in the 1880s and continued to promote and expand its use until dying in Baltimore in 1899. The Linotype's power involved transferring a line of text (typed with meticulous care by a Linotypist onto a special 90-key keyboard) to a sheet, creating a "line o' type" that could be rapidly printed onto many subsequent pages, thanks to the genius of matrices and hot metal.

A massive legion of dexterous Linotypists quickly rose up, their responsibility to type out the finished newspaper text in order to allow for quick, relatively easy printing. By 1895, London newspaper proprietors assembled to form an association of the new typesetters. Their ranks swelled throughout the 20th century, with 25,000 of the machines in use by 1911 and 33,000 by 1916, according to *The Linotype Bulletin* (yes, seriously) and a "complete and practical treatise" on the Linotype written in those respective years. People began to appreciate the industry as its own institution within journalism. In 1929, a Boy Scout visited a newspaper plant to earn his Journalism Merit Badge and called the Linotype "one of the three wonders of the modern newspaper plant," spending several paragraphs explaining the process. Four decades later, by 1954, the number of Linotype machines in operation swelled to 100,000. The invention had become a critical part of producing newspapers, ads, books and more.

Furthermore, typesetters' wages were "relatively prosperous" in mid-century America, according to a Linotypist's long account in a 1979 issue of *Texas Monthly*. As interesting as the profile itself happens to be, little can match the punch of the subhead: They travel from town to town. They drink hard, they work hard, they are dedicated to their craft. They're typesetters. Oh yes they are. The author of the piece, Pat Hathcock, later adds, "Typesetters have always been drinkers. Benjamin Franklin mentioned it. Thorstein Veblen mentioned it. My wives even mentioned it." Those practicing Linotype even acted as unauthorized editors of the newspapers, apparently, according to a 1972 *New York* article, a reflection of their spontaneous character. "With me, if [the Linotypists] don't like what I'm writing,

they change my opinions," a writer for the Yiddish paper *The Forward* explained to a colleague who had noticed a spelling change in one of his articles.

Hathcock recollects learning the trade in the 1950s and 1960s, first on a dummy keyboard before he could "contend with the added complications of the matrices and molten metal." He began work in Oklahoma, earning \$65 a week ("I haven't had so much buying power since"). Linotype had its own magic due to the ease and flexibility of the trade. Take note, for instance, of the people Hathcock called "the travelers":

I became aware of "travelers" -- men who moved across the country from print shop to print shop. They spoke nonchalantly about every good-sized town in the country, and they always delivered their judgments in terms of the bars, women, and hotels, as well as the print shops and newspapers. Men who have traveled that much (and most travelers were men) have a sophistication that transcends formal education, an ease in any surroundings, and a brash confidence in their skills.... They had more nicknames than the Mafia -- Two Star, Dirty Shirt, the Silver Fox, Speedy, Ten High, the Wandering Jew, Pete the Tramp.... One of my friends, a Scotsman, has set type everywhere in the world that English is spoken.

Yet by the time of Hathcock's 1979 profile, the world of Linotype was fading, as the writer acknowledges. He talks about a union's attempts to train members in other areas of printing, "unable to do much more than slow down the flood of new processes."

But even our literature has elevated the profession. For the best example, look to John Updike's four iconic Rabbit novels, written over the course of the past half century. In the first books, we learn that the protagonist's father and eventually the protagonist himself, Harry Angstrom, works at centers of Linotype. The printing plant looms especially large in this second of the four novels, 1971's *Rabbit Redux*, thanks to the special relationship Harry has with his aging father as they both work as Linotypists (and have throughout the 10 years since *Rabbit Run*'s events). The book's very opening refers to how "men emerge pale" from the little Pennsylvania printing plant, working for the Brewer Vat. Father and son exit work together, weary, and frequently throughout the novel find themselves in need, not surprisingly, of a good drink after hours of Linotype. Even a bout of lovemaking

turns Harry's mind to "feathering the Linotype keys, of work tomorrow, and [he] is already there."

By the final years of the Carter administration, the time of Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* follow-up, Harry's father is dead, and Harry has moved past Linotype. "Harry had been a Linotyper until Linotyping became obsolete," Updike writes. Harry's mind keeps returning to the profession throughout the book, however, to changing times and even to the hemorrhoids he once received from the squat of the Linotypist, from when "years ago, when he was sitting all day at the Linotype on that hard steel bench, under tension, the matrices rattling down in response to the touch of his fingertips, every slip a ruined slug, everyone around him unhappy."

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As we reach 125 years since the commercial introduction of Linotype, a small resurgence of interest has occurred. A young man named Doug Wilson has put together *Linotype: The Film*, which tells the machine's history and collects stories about its role, and has raised around \$25,000 from the crowd-funding site Kickstarter alone. So far, the filmmakers have shown bits and pieces of the

documentary at public screenings, and a slick trailer is available for viewing online. The Internet also has multiple videos celebrating the machine -- here, watch as an elderly deaf man types away at the distinctive keyboard.

The most ubiquitous sign of the Linotype may be right on your computer's Word processor. For the machine's 100th centennial in 1986, Adobe designed a special serif font, Linotype Centennial, to honor the fading world of typesetters. And despite the trade's death, the company behind it never actually died. Mergenthaler Linotype Company lives on as one as a dispenser of fonts, sporting "one of the world's largest font libraries, offering more than 10,500 high-quality typefaces," according to its Linotype website.

Even this brief history of Linotype -- from metal typesetting to hard-drinking travelers to Updike and now to the marketing and licensing of fonts -- is one worth remembering on the 125th anniversary of its debut.

Image: grendalkhan/Flickr.

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