

THE INTERNAL COMBUSTION TYPEWRITER

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When I started grade school in the 1950s, there was a sense of excitement in the air. Television had entered the homes of many Americans, and with it the desire to bring the world into the future. My third grade music teacher, Mr. Underwood, was a typist and an inventor. By day, he taught piano, and by night he typed up ideas for his inventions. One night, he realized that he could come up with many more ideas if he could type faster.

“Eureka!” he said (according to his biography), “To type faster, I need a faster typewriter.” Soon he began work on the world’s first internal combustion typewriter. Powered by steam and trimmed with brass, his working model was a wonder to behold. In silver letters on black ivory, the words “UNDERWOOD STEAMER” gleamed in the sunlight.

When he took it out to his backyard for a trial run, the entire neighborhood gathered around his chain link fence to watch. He started a small fire under a steam chamber in the back of the machine. It heated the water that drove the keys. After waiting for the steam to build up, Mr. Underwood sat down to type. He broke the record for words a minute—268! He also broke the record for blank spaces separating the letters within words, for that was the Underwood Steamer’s problem: The steam engine only went at one speed forward and one speed in reverse, and that speed made it extremely difficult to change directions.

“Get a pencil!” shouted one of the neighbors, who had a pencil resting comfortably between his ear and his temple. Mr. Underwood threw the Underwood Steamer at the man, who ducked in time to avoid getting his block knocked off. However, his pencil wasn’t quite as lucky. The typewriter hit the pencil, which landed in some tall pencil-shaped plants, never to be found again.

“Get a typewriter!” shouted Mr. Underwood to his neighbor. The neighbor grabbed the Steamer and threw it back at Mr. Underwood, who caught it and took it inside. The gawkers waited for him to emerge, but he didn’t come out for a month.

During that month, he built the world’s first solar typewriter. Powered by the very rays of the sun itself and trimmed with chrome, his working model was a greater wonder than its predecessor. In golden letters on white ivory, the words “UNDERWOOD SOLAR” twinkled in the moonlight.

When he took it out for a trial run, the entire neighborhood and three nearby suburbs gathered around his chain link fence to watch. It was so crowded that some people brought binoculars. The typewriter sat on a table, soaking in the sun’s rays. Suddenly, a buzz indicated that the Underwood Solar was ready to type. Mr. Underwood sat down at the table, released the brake on the Solar, and typed faster than any mortal had ever typed before—412 words a minute! This time there was no problem with blank spaces separating the letters within words. Alas, a new problem cropped up: The letters tended to burn through the paper. The letter o was the biggest offender.

“Get a pen!” shouted the same obnoxious neighbor, who now had a Bic Banana resting between his ear and his temple. This time Mr. Underwood grabbed the Underwood Solar and raced to the fence, but he didn’t throw it at the smart Alec. He just stood there and gave him the dirtiest look he’d ever given anyone. Feeling very threatened, the man walked over to Underwood, stood almost nose to nose, and growled, “I said get a pen!”

Mr. Underwood held the 90-pound Underwood Solar over the fence, smiled, and dropped it on his neighbor's right foot. As his neighbor howled in pain, Mr. Underwood grabbed the Bic Banana from the man's ear and hurled it into the crowd. A little girl caught it and kept it as a souvenir. Meanwhile, the neighbor, hopping on one foot, managed to lean over and pick up the Underwood Solar. He held it over the fence, smiled, and dropped it on Mr. Underwood's foot—or so he thought. Mr. Underwood had cleverly removed his foot from his shoe. The Underwood Solar landed on the empty shoe.

"Missed," hissed Mr. Underwood. He picked up the Solar, stuck his foot in his shoe, and retreated to his house. The gawkers mingled among each other. Some made bets. Others got into fights. By sunset, they realized that Mr. Underwood wasn't coming out again that day. The Underwood Solar wouldn't work in the dark. Everyone went home except for Mr. Underwood, because he was already at home, working in his basement typewriter lab on his next project, his most powerful, most dangerous, most radical, most fearsome typewriter of all—the UNDERWOOD NUCLEAR LETTER TAPPER. He spent two months working on it.

Finally, on a beautiful spring day in 1957, the Underwood Nuclear Letter Tapper was ready to revolutionize typing as we know it. The secret energy source was uranium, the beautiful, elusive metal that held so much power within its graceful, gently glowing isotopes and that had a half-life of 10,000 years. Over 500 generations of typists could use the Letter Tapper before the uranium battery needed replacing!

Visually, the Letter Tapper was an unsurpassable work of art in itself. Its sleek lines and soft curves held the keys in perfect order. Its body was mirror-finished titanium with a freon-release return key and neon-lit space bar. It blazed in the sunlight. On the front, the sky-blue words Underwood Nuclear Letter Tapper seemed to race across the titanium. Beneath the letters, a beautiful miniature painting of a mushroom cloud seemed to smile at the typist.

When Mr. Underwood took it out in his backyard for a trial run, he wore a radiation suit. It wasn't necessary, but it was so impressive that everyone in the entire county swooped in to see the genius of the typing world unveil the most magnificent machine of all. The question on everyone's tongue was, "How fast will it type, Mr. Underwood?"

With a sense of history in his hands, Mr. Underwood sat down behind the Letter Tapper, lifted up the lid to the uranium chamber, plucked out the glowing rock, and held it high for all to see. Everyone clapped as if Mr. Underwood were the entire New York Philharmonic about to play "Charge of the Light Brigade." He dropped the uranium back into its lead chamber and closed it. Then he sat down and removed the lead shield from the keyboard. Everyone gasped! A glow of light emanated from each key in the shape of the letter that the key controlled. The Letter Tapper seemed as magical as it was scientific.

And then he began to type. He started with a fugue of "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their party." After he typed a few hundred lines in less than a minute, the crowd began to applaud. Mr. Underwood stood up, bowed, and said, "Now I will double the time as I type a rapid pizzicato of 'The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.'"

He sat down and rubbed his hands together. Then, like a concert pianist, he lifted them high in the air and brought them down dramatically to the keyboard. His fingers danced so fast that it seemed as if he'd lost his hands, but they were there typing at a rate that became legendary. Mr. Underwood had installed a billboard-sized odometer behind him so that the onlookers could watch as he raced to his top speed. Within seconds, the odometer indicated that he'd reached 13,824 words per minute. Suddenly, a warning alarm sounded. Mr. Underwood stood up and shouted, "Everyone take cover! That alarm indicates that the typewriter might blow up and take most of the neighborhood with it."

Panic swept through the thousands of onlookers, who stampeded away from the dangerous Underwood Nuclear Letter Tapper. Pandemonium swept the streets of the county. Chaos seemed to reign everywhere. However, Mr. Underwood stood there in his back yard

facing his next door neighbor, who stood on the other side of the fence staring back at Mr. Underwood.

“Get a felt marker!” shouted the neighbor, once again trying to rattle Mr. Underwood.

“Catch!” shouted Mr. Underwood, hurling the Underwood Nuclear Letter Tapper through the air to the neighbor. The neighbor didn’t know what to do, so he raced inside and let the Letter Tapper crash to the ground. It landed upside down, and its nuclear core spilled out onto the grass, causing several frogs to instantly breed mutant creatures that resembled unidentifiable prehistoric things.

“What next, Underwood?” shouted his neighbor from an open window. “Electric typewriters?”

“Don’t be foolish, sir,” he replied. “Electric typewriters wouldn’t work as well, wouldn’t type as fast, and wouldn’t be as safe. Too many people would be electrocuted trying to type letters to their friends and family. No, I’ve come to the conclusion that the best typewriter of all—for speed, reliability, safety—must be powered by sails scooping up the wind. I’m talking about the Underwood Word Schooner.”

And that is why today, 50 years later, we have typewriters that use the basic concepts of sailing ships to capture the wind and let it lift the keys to strike the paper. Although Underwood Word Schooners type at a top speed of only 17 words per minute, they are very popular. Only one major problem remains to be solved: On extremely windy days, the typewriters blow away.

Drawn Inward

The November 1999 and February 2001 issues of *Word Ways* featured “Drawn Inward and Other Poems” by Mike Maguire. These 18 poems and many others have now been published in a slim (42-page) paperback by Spineless Books, Box 2458, Providence RI 02906 (<http://spinelessbooks.com>). His oeuvre consists of letter palindromes, word palindromes, charade poems (repeated and repunctuated such as *I Numb Rage—In Umbrage*), and poems about trains. No price is given, but the ISBN number is ISBN 0-9724244-3-1. Get a copy!