

Reporter's Writers Now Have Added Chores

By John Rico

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THE COMPUTER AGE IS NOT FOR ME - When I started to set type back in 1924, and doing my small bit to help produce the Vacaville Reporter, little thought did I give to that day in 1981 when Publisher Richard Rico would unwrap a new typesetting system which is not in my bag of endeavors.

For several weeks past, editorial writers, and other employees at The Reporter plant, have been going through training in the use of a new sophisticated computerized typesetting installation which I have decided are for young minds only.

Back before 1868, a German inventor by the name of Johannes Gutenberg, made available movable type, which revolutionized the printing industry. If Gutenberg could see the new 1981 process in use at The Reporter, he no doubt would exclaim: "Whatinell."

Another German inventor, while residing in the United States, made obsolete Gutenberg's movable type by perfecting a typesetting machine around 1899. The Mergenthaler linotype accomplished mechanically the tedious job of at least six printers who toiled long days picking up one letter at a time and assembling the type into words. The Reporter joined the march to mechanized typesetting in 1914.

I can still see the late C. L. Adsit, editor of The Reporter (the only writer on the staff), pecking away at his Smith Premier No. 2 typewriter. A museum piece today, that typewriter had a separate set of keys for upper and lower case-letters, plus extra keys for figures, punctuation marks, etc. It was impossible to use the touch system because of the size of the keyboard, and if the writer wanted to see what he or she had just typed it was necessary to tilt the platen to expose the words.

After Adsit had completed the story on his Smith Premier, he would read over the copy to make whatever corrections he desired the linotype operator to make. Then it was the linotype operator's turn to make a few mistakes along the way. A proof-reader would check over the copy, and when corrections were to be made, back to the linotype operator went the story. Although most of the copy appearing in story form in The Reporter had been checked at least four times, it was amazing the number of mistakes which made their appearance.

Now the day of reckoning is at hand. The writers are being called upon not only to write

their copy, but are expected to make the necessary corrections before the story is sent on its way to the computer system, which rests cosily in a temperature controlled room, where there is no dust, no smoking. Those computers have passed along the word - treat us right and we will be your servants.

Every writer now sits in front of a gadget called a terminal, which is a combination of a sophisticated typewriter and a television screen. At present there are 16 of these terminals installed at The Reporter, and if more are needed they will be added.

When the writers compile their stories, they can see the end result on the screen, and they also can make whatever corrections in spelling, alterations in words or paragraphs, etc., before pressing the proper button sending it on to the computers. But, as near human as these computers can be, it is necessary to pass out instructions. The computers, could they speak, would ask: "What do you want done with that bit of copy you just put into my system?" To give the computers the instructions, the writers have approximately 50 separate keys on their terminals which they can press to get the message across to the nerve center. In the two new systems handling the 16 different terminals are input capacity for 20 million variations.

The copy editor, perhaps wanting to double-check a story which has been programmed into the computer, can request that the computer send it back to his screen so that he can do the necessary editing or make whatever changes needed to be made.

When asked if I wanted one of those new terminals so that whatever stories I write can go through the computer, I graciously rejected with a "no thanks."

But, come to think of it, I can, well recall back when as a youngster of 15, my former employers, Clayton Adsit and Edward Andrews, pulled up a chair, placed it near the monstrous linotype machine and issued an order of: "Sit down, and start setting type."

The linotype keyboard had 90 keys, and as many as 5,000 moving parts. How I dreaded those first few weeks of sitting eight long hours, hunting, pecking, to get a few lines of type from the machine that Mergenthaler had invented to help expedite the printed word.

The advances in recent years made in the field of computers borders on the fantastic. Their fields of accomplishment are so broad it can boggle the human brain. But, as yet, even though computers are approaching the fool-proof stage, no computer has been developed that can spell correctly, so don't be a bit surprised if for awhile you find more than the average number of mistakes in The Reporter. Computers are extra sensitive, but if a writer chooses to send through undetected a foul four-letter word, that's the way the computer is going to handle it.

It has often been said computers have gone a long way in replacing the duties of the human brain. While this may be true, and it may also be equally as true that computers will not develop ulcers, I can assure you there may be a few writers at The Reporter who will come down with at least a pain in the belly before they become masters of the new innovation in producing a newspaper.

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