



FOUNTAIN PENS, INK WELLS, BLOTTERS AND THE CHANGING FACE OF TIME

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Learning to read the alphabet in elementary school has long been part of our early education. It was customary for classrooms to have each letter of the alphabet, both upper and lower case, displayed around the room above the blackboards. In Kindergarten we began to use crayons and pencils to form words in block letters. As the early grades of elementary school progressed we learned to join individual letters together in what is termed "cursive handwriting". In Collingwood when we reached Grade 5 we made the big jump from pencils to ink and we entered the fascinating world of fountain pens, ink wells and blotters. Each student's desk had a round hole in the upper right corner into which a small glass ink well would fit. These were periodically refilled from a large glass jar of ink kept in the classroom.

Fountain pens may require some explanation for younger readers who have never seen one and are accustomed to only ballpoint pens. Instead of having to dip the nib of an ordinary

pen (or a quill pen made from bird feathers as seen in movies set in Jane Austen's time) into the ink, the fountain pen has a reservoir inside that holds the ink and releases it by gravity and capillary action to the nib. Once called a "reservoir" pen, the fountain pens of our school days were filled by the principle of a vacuum. A small hinged lever on the side of the pen was pulled outward away from the pen to collapse the internal ink sack and create a vacuum and while holding the lever, the empty pen was then placed into the ink well. When the handle was slowly released, the ink was forced up into the pen's reservoir by atmospheric pressure. We were taught that "Nature abhors a vacuum" and filling a fountain pen was an early lesson in this interesting aspect of science. Unfortunately some of the boys grew up with the notion that this saying referred to vacuum cleaners, somehow justifying their aversion to using one to clean the house.

The big switch from pencils to ink came part way through Grade 5 in 1957 and I remember what a momentous occasion it was when our teacher at Victoria School on Maple St., David Brown, announced that we were going to start using ink. Our parents bought us our first pen as a gift (an early "rite of passage") and hoped that we wouldn't come home from school with ink all over our hands. My wife did come home from her Grade 5 class in Downsview with ink all over her hands and her mother

said if she couldn't do better than that she would ask the teacher to put Pam back on pencils.

We also went to Saunders' store and bought blotters to use in our new writing skill. Blotting paper was needed to help dry the ink and to absorb spills as we got used to this new technique. Within a few years at Senior Public School we could now buy ink in plastic cartridges by Sheaffer and this required buying a new pen which could be filled much more simply. The pen was unscrewed, the cartridge inserted, and when the pen was screwed back together it punctured the cartridge to allow the ink to flow to the nib.

Writing with ink was a new experience and with it came some hazards that were not actually connected with the written word. The nastiest hazard of all was the mischievous boy who would dip the pigtails of the girl sitting in front of him into the ink well on his desk. Another mischievous student was the one who held the pen horizontally and waved it back and forth like a missile to "shoot ink" at another student. Ballpoint pens existed at the time and I remember one incident in which a girl accused a boy with a ballpoint pen of shooting ink at her. Mr. Brown assured us that you can't shoot ink from a ballpoint pen.

Fountain pens are not extinct or displayed only in museums in the 21st Century and, while most of the world uses ballpoint pens for convenience, there is still a niche market for the older

type. On June 3, 2018 on CBC Radio's *The Sunday Edition*, Aparita Bhandari presented a documentary titled "*Inside the Inky World of Fountain Pen Lovers*" about people who adore using, collecting, buying, selling and trading these traditional writing instruments. It is stated that in 2016 the market for fountain pens was a billion dollar industry; some of these pens are custom-made and can cost many thousands of dollars in some cases. One custom-made pen from Japan costs \$1000.00 and there is a one year wait to get this work of art from the time it is ordered. The report states that one of the advantages/joys of fountain pens is that they do not require downward hand pressure to write as do ballpoint pens; writing is therefore smoother and non-tiring to the hand and wrist muscles. It is reported that there is a resurgence in the sale of fountain pens, particularly in Europe.

We can safely assume that there will always be some people (calligraphers, purists, traditionalists, nostalgics, etc.) using fountain pens and liquid ink to write. On a visit to a major office supply store I looked at the display of pens. One can buy a package of five disposable ballpoint pens for \$4.99, essentially a dollar a pen, whereas fountain pens were displayed ranging in price from about \$25.00 to \$77.00. A package of five ink cartridges for fountain pens costs \$4.42. While our throwaway society naturally gravitates to the convenience of cheaper

ballpoint pens, there obviously is still a market for the real thing which does not have to be thrown out when it is empty.

The above school days descriptions of learning to write with ink and fountain pens in Grade 5 are from a bygone era and in this high-tech digital age cursive handwriting—*for the majority of the population*—is fast becoming a curiosity of the distant past, a “lost art”. While relatively few people actually “write” letters anymore, and multitudes communicate with each other using their phones, tablets, laptops and computers all in block letters, there are still greeting cards and postcards that make use of this ancient skill. The day may come when people will eagerly take a cursive handwriting course which will have to be taught as a specialty in university night classes.

An incident in recent years reinforces this theory. A 3rd cousin of mine learned that The Collingwood Museum staff discovered that the students they hired for the summer one year could not read cursive handwriting. This raises an alarm because museums, of all places [!], contain old handwritten documents: maps, journals, diaries, legal documents, etc. This can seriously hamper historical research if one cannot read cursive handwriting. Some handwritten documents (and newspapers as well) from the Victorian era also have their challenges due, not only to the style of handwriting and the spelling of some words, but also the use of what *looks* like the letter “f” in place of an “s”. This was actually not an “f” but an archaic long form

of the letter “s” without a complete crossbar and it was used at the beginning of a word and in the place of the first of a double “s”. Example: *ficknefs* for “sickness”. Some words spelled in this old way can be downright embarrassing to try to pronounce phonetically for the unwary who may find themselves swearing unintentionally!

My friend Su Murdoch of Barrie who does historical consulting, sent me images of a large number of Victorian-era handwritten documents relating to my great-great-grandfather Frederick O’Brien (died in Barrie in 1866). I had to go over these laboriously with a magnifying glass to decipher the mid-19th Century handwriting in order to copy it out in my own handwriting and then transcribe it to a computer document to save for future easy reference.

In writing this story I consulted a friend who is an elementary school teacher and another who teaches at college level. When I asked if cursive handwriting is still taught today the first one said “it is pretty much gone”. The second one said it is no longer part of the curriculum although some teachers may choose to teach it as an option. Two other items of literacy that have gone out the window with cursive handwriting are grammar and spelling.

Another interesting aspect of our modern technical age relates to the telling of time. An incident in my personal experience will illustrate this. Some years ago, Pam and I toured the

Museum in Sooke, a community west of Victoria. Visitors can self-guide themselves around most of the exhibits, but tours for a couple of special exhibits required arranging in advance with one of the staff members.

“Muir Creek Cottage” is a rustic residence that was brought into town from a former logging area to be placed on the museum grounds. We were speaking to a young woman on the staff, a university student on a summer job. She was about age 21. We said we would like to see the inside of the cottage (I had earlier consulted on an old Heintzman piano that was being donated to the cottage as part of the furnishings). She said she could give us a tour, but first she had to change into a period costume so that when we knocked on the front door, she would open the door from the inside to greet us and admit us into the world of 1900. She said the last tour was at 4:30 p.m. and she did not know what the current time was. Without saying anything, I held up my analog wristwatch for her to see (the time was 4:10 p.m.). She stared at it blankly and then said, “I only know digital time”. I felt my world shudder.

I am really dating myself here when I say that my mother taught me how to tell time before I went to Kindergarten in 1952. She sat me down and using the alarm clock from my parents’ bedroom drilled me in telling what time it showed as she moved the hands over and over pointing to different numbers on the clock face. In Public School in the mid-20th

Century we also learned to read Roman Numerals that appear on the face of many clocks, especially in public places such as in the Collingwood Town Hall clock tower. Everyone once learned how to tell time from the face of a clock or a watch by the relative positions of the big hand and the little hand (this did not apply on *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* TV show where the announcer Gary Owens' studio clock hands pointed in four directions at the same time; time, like everything else on that show was manic).

Analog time was the only time we knew. We could tell the time automatically without stopping to think about it—it was as natural as knowing how to tie our shoe laces. Now, the old way of telling time has to compete with digital time on phones, computers, tablets, clock radios, cars, and various electronics. It makes me sad to think that a person who has grown up knowing only digital time cannot look at the face of the Collingwood Town Clock and be able to understand what time it is except when the bell rings during daylight hours (the bell is silent from 10:00 p.m. through 6:00 a.m.). I expect that when school children visit the Collingwood Museum they cannot tell what is the time shown on the hand-held wooden watch of the Father Time statue. The time on his watch is correct twice a day whether Standard or Daylight Saving Time and the Roman numerals on the face must look like gobbledygook to the children.

This situation can also impact the sale of old style clocks and watches. There will always be those who collect older wind-up clocks who will keep a few horologists employed to service and repair them (a collector friend of mine has forty-eight manually-wound clocks in her house; I have just three of that type—Pam said three is enough. We have a European-trained clock and watch expert here on Vancouver Island who told me recently that he used to service thirteen jewellers in Victoria, now it is only three. Fewer people are wearing a wristwatch these days because their phone/tablet/laptop gives them the time digitally. I recently congratulated a young female bank teller for wearing a traditional analog wristwatch while commenting about my concerns for the lost art of reading the face of a traditional clock/watch in this digital age. She responded that, although having grown up with digital time, she *can* tell the time from her traditional wristwatch but that “it takes a while to figure it out”.

I have tried to think what it is like for a person who knows *only* digital time when they look at the face of an analog clock or watch. For example, if the hands indicate that the time is twenty minutes before two o’clock, all they will see is one hand pointing to the numeral “8” and the other hand about three-quarters of the way between “1” and “2” and it is meaningless to them.

A recent observation of analog watch faces in a department store shows a variety of choices. Some have all the numerals from “1” to “12”, some have just the numerals “12”, “3”, “6” and “9” or just a straight single line in place of any numerals, some are totally blank except for the hands, and then there is my favourite, Roman numerals. Like cursive handwriting, the teaching of Roman numerals in Public School is pretty much a lost art. Roman numerals also used to appear at the end of the closing credits in movies and we oldtimers could quickly calculate the year. For example “MCMLVII” = 1957, the year of my first fountain pen.

The world has changed much in the past 70 years and cursive handwriting and analog clocks and watches appear to be threatened species. But all is not lost. My European clock maker tells me that in Europe the pendulum is swinging back, so to speak, and that there is a renewed interest in non-digital timepieces. The information above concerning fountain pens also illustrates that there is still hope for some of the old ways to continue in the 21st Century.

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