

THE FOUNTAIN PEN IS ALIVE AND WELL

The other day I went into the bank to cash a check. In the presence of the teller I endorsed it with my fountain pen.

The teller looked at my signature and then the fountain pen as I replaced the cap and put it back into my pocket. He asked, "Is that an antique?" and then commented, "I didn't know they still made them."

The answers to his questions are: "No, my fountain pen is not an antique" and "Yes, they do still make them." As a matter of fact, more now than just five years ago.

Americans appear to have recently rediscovered the fountain pen. In contrast, the Europeans never lost their love for fountain pens nor completely abandoned them for the slick, smooth ball-point when it rolled its way into their lives—perhaps because the youngest European student begins writing with pen and ink.

My own love affair with the fountain pen began when I first learned to write "cursive." Our third-grade class made a field trip to Columbia to the R. L. Bryan Company to buy a supply of writing tablets, bottles of ink, long red and black pen staffs, and a variety of nibs.

Back at school we learned how to dip the nib in the ink, and make those endless loops and ovals, ascenders and descenders, always inclined slightly to the right, in the direction of the writing without dropping blotches of ink on our exercise tablets.

Those who write with pen and ink are using an instrument that has hardly changed from the bronze pen used by the Romans or from quills used by mediaeval scribes. The shape of the point on the quill used by the ancient scribe differs very little from the nib of my own modern fountain pen.

When the ball-point invaded fountain pen territory, it was advertised as "the miraculous pen that will revolutionize writing." It certainly did that. It made us inattentive to the artistic shape of letters, and handwriting in general became, if not second-rate, unreadable. It changed our attention to HOW we write.

But hard-core fountain-pen users were never seduced by the slick carelessness encouraged by the ball-point. And some who fell along the way have seen the error of their ways. And the fountain pen has again found favor. And it is not just nostalgia. It is a matter of being concerned with HOW we write.

Evidence of its rise in popularity is everywhere. There are a number of stores which sell only fountain pens and fine writing instruments. Several magazines are devoted entirely to writing about fountain pens and pen collecting. And there are even fountain pen hospitals to which you may send your broken Parker to repair the pocket clip, to replace a worn nib, or to install a new bladder.

Business is so brisk that one fountain pen store in Washington keeps on hand a stock of about ten thousand pens to keep up with demand.

And the market remains so promising that Parker, and others have issued remakes of their most popular pens. In the early 1990s Parker reissued their 1921 Duofold—in the same orange color. When it first appeared in 1921, it sold for a whopping \$7, more than twice the going price THEN. But it could hold twice the amount of ink as other pens, it had a flashy bright orange color, and it had a Parker guarantee. Other penmakers like Waterman, Shaeffer, and Waterman have followed the trend. Great reproductions of the ancient romantic fountain pens are available even with the inks they require.

The Duofold is available again but remade using modern technology—from inside out. It comes with an 18 karat gold nib, which has been polished in a rotating barrel of walnut shells for 56 hours and tipped with ruthenium, a metal harder than steel. And it is backed by a life-time guarantee.

So the fountain pen is here, stronger and better than ever. And the thrill of owning and writing with a fine ink-filled pen is awaiting those who have been until now, just "rolling along."