

As I was figuring out how to insert the ink cartridge in our relatively new printer, I started thinking about the ways printing and copying have changed during the past several decades. One does not have to go back to times when copying or writing involved chipping runic symbols into stone or to the pre-book era of scrolls, or even to the days when newspaper copy was hand set for the printing presses. It is easy to find some very significant recent changes.

Of course, to me, “recent” means within my memory—something that would probably be considered the distant past by some of the younger people I know. Nevertheless, the changes have been—and will probably continue to be—interesting.

As I sit here writing on this computer keyboard, when I make a mistake, my finger automatically hits the backspace key and my error is gone. That wasn’t the case when I was in high school, taking a beginning typing class on manual typewriters. A mere touch of the keys did not do the job. And striking each key hard enough to produce an equally dark letter was not always easy. I resorted to banging away, leading Mrs. Brehm to put pennies on my wrists to keep me from flailing at the keyboard. I spent a lot of time under the desk retrieving my pennies. But, eventually, I learned to type well enough to prepare me for typing papers in college. I am still grateful for Mrs. Brehm’s methods, too. The keys of the typewriters were blanks. No letters showed us what we were typing. So, all of us, from the fast and clever typists who would hold good jobs that required this skill to those of us who bumbled along, learned to “touch type.”

So, I went off to the university with a portable manual typewriter. In time, though, in graduate school, we were required to provide five copies of each long seminar paper so that the other students in the course could read what we had written. The papers were kept at the library where we could check out each one just as we did with books. Five copies—carbon copies. Not everybody is familiar with carbon paper these days, but inserting one of these thin, black sheets between two pieces of typing paper made it possible to produce a pretty good copy. For five copies, we were allowed to use “onionskin” paper for all but the original, as this thin writing material made it possible to produce five copies on a little portable typewriter like most of us had.

This is a problem that has disappeared since those days. Now, I can tell the printer how many copies of anything I want, and it spits them out, each perfect.

Other kinds of printed matter have also undergone many changes. And, some of the old ways are coming back, although for a different purpose. When my mother taught in a one room country school in the 1930s and even decades later, when my sister taught in a similar school, there was a handy tool available to them. This was the hectograph, sold with a company name as “hektograph.” Looking for information about this old solution to making copies, I found a recipe for making the gelatin sheet that acted as the copying medium. And, in looking for that information, I discovered that hectographs are making a comeback—in the art world.

Then, there was the “ditto” machine. I looked that up now, too, to see

just what its generic name was. It was a “spirit duplicator,” so called because alcohol products were a major part of the ink. After reading this information, I could nearly smell that distinctive, almost intoxicating odor, of the ditto copies.

And, when I was in high school, our school paper was printed by means of a hand cranked mimeograph machine. We made over 200 copies of each issue of the paper, stapled the pages together, and sent them out to every rural route address and post office box number that our post office serviced.

That mimeo machine did a good job, but cutting the stencils was work for our best typists. Each article was typed on the special stencil material, and errors were painstakingly repaired and redone so that nearly every issue was perfect. A couple of the boys on our newspaper staff usually ran the mimeograph machine, though at least once, when some of the girls on the staff were ready to take a turn, it seemed that someone—and the perpetrator could only have been one of two particular male members of the staff—had covered the red handle of the mimeo machine with red ink, not detected until a wet hand came away from the handle covered in bright red.

When I was in college, I worked in the history department, and my job was often to make copies of an exam or other material for one of the professors. The process was far different than it would be today. First, I had to ask for a key to the Xerox room. There was—at least for general departmental use—only one copy machine in Warriner Hall, where the history department and some others were located. I unlocked the door, followed whatever directions were necessary for copy machines at that time, and, taking the papers back with me, locked the room again.

So, people who are so young that this copying method we use primarily today is the only one in their memory—I can only wonder, if they look back at 2021, they will think with surprise and a little nostalgia of the home computers and printers of their youth.