

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A TYPEWRITTEN LETTER OF 1846

The Martin County Historical Society has recently acquired a valuable and interesting addition to its collection in the form of a typewritten letter, dated in 1846. The reader will see nothing unusual in the above statement unless he happens to know that the first successful typewriter was not invented until 1868 and was not manufactured and put on the market until 1873. In fact, its use was negligible until 1882. The inventors were C. Latham Sholes and Carlos Glidden. Yet here is a letter typewritten in 1846. How can that be?

Here is the explanation. The letter is dated January 28, 1846, at Norwich (presumably Norwich, Connecticut), is addressed to Miss Sarah Wheelock, Shewsbury, Massachusetts, and is signed by Charles Thurber, the signature being typewritten. Miss Wheelock later married Samuel B. Carpenter, and with her husband came, in June, 1856, to the vicinity of Kasota, Le Sueur County, Minnesota Territory. In August, 1856, their son, Charles Wheelock Carpenter, was born—a territorial baby. Upon the death of his parents, the younger Carpenter came into possession of this and other old letters and documents, which he carefully kept.

Mr. Carpenter, now in his eightieth year, a resident of Ontario, California, spent the major portion of his life in Le Sueur and Nicollet counties, and a short period in Martin County, Minnesota. His granddaughter, Miss Jean Zierke, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. R. H. Zierke of Fairmont, being interested in stamp collecting, wrote to her grandfather for some of his old letters, in the hope of securing old stamps. The writer was shown the old letters and noticed that the Thurber-Wheelock letter was dated 1846 and was type-

written. Although it had been frequently scanned, it seems that no one before had noted anything unusual about the letter or its date. How the writer came to do so remains unanswered and unexplained. It was one of those things which just happen.

So far as is known, the letter was not preserved because it was typewritten. Mrs. Carpenter saved many other letters and documents of that and other periods. She had handed down to her and saved a Massachusetts newspaper giving an account of the battle of Lexington and Concord in 1775. This paper was recently donated to the Minnesota Historical Society by her son. The preservation of all these papers probably was prompted by the New England characteristic to destroy as little as possible. It may be truthfully said of the New Englander that he has few spells of "burning up a lot of old trash."

In an effort to learn something of the circumstances of the writing of this letter, the writer corresponded with Remington Rand, Incorporated, successors to E. Remington and Sons, of Ilion, New York, manufacturers of firearms and sewing machines, who manufactured the first typewriter in 1873. That concern could furnish but little information. It did, however, send a pamphlet giving information about early attempts to invent a typewriter, which included an account and an illustration of one invented by Charles Thurber in 1843.

Thurber says: "This letter I write with my new machine. The letters you will notice are not smoothly formed, because the machinery is somewhat imperfect. The machine however operates as well as ever I expected." The characters are all capitals, of ordinary small type size. The paper upon which the letter is written is bluish in color, such as was used generally in the forties and fifties of the last century. The communication was not enclosed in an envelope. Envelopes had not yet come into use. It was folded and sealed lightly with sealing wax. Nor were

postage stamps attached. The first United States postage stamps were issued in 1847.

The Thurber typewriting machine never was manufactured or sold. Efforts, thus far, to learn who Charles Thurber was, what he did, and how he came to invent this machine have been unsuccessful. The same is true as to the whereabouts of this quaint old printing device. Information recently obtained from the patent office at Washington, however, shows that Thurber, while residing at Worcester, Massachusetts, on August 26, 1843, was granted a patent for a machine for printing, and that two years later, on November 18, 1845, when he was living at Norwich, Connecticut, he received a patent for a writing machine. The latter also is referred to as a "mechanical chirographer."

The original letter and a picture of the machine are among the exhibits of the Martin County Historical Society. A photostatic copy of the letter has been presented to the Minnesota Historical Society. Those interested will be much pleased if the publication of this article brings further information about Thurber and his early typewriting apparatus.

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