

THE RED TYPEWRITER

By John F. Hall

The story begins in 1964. Most of it played out on Murray State, in Murray, Kentucky. My future wife, Paula Andree Oakley was commuting from Golden Pond with her two older brothers, Grover and Bruce, to the college. She was a freshman taking business courses. One of her courses was typing. The college had recently purchased the new IBM electric typewriter. It was called a Selectric typewriter and it would revolutionize typing. The wide-body, red business typewriter was given the name "Typewriter of Kings." It allowed an accomplished typist to reach 90 words a minute vs. 50 words a minute with a conventional electric typewriter. This was accomplished with the unique design of its "Typeball." Rather than have a "basket" of individual typebars that spring up to strike the ink ribbon and paper, the Selectric typeball element rotates and pivots to the correct position before striking the ink ribbon and paper.

Paula had a male typist instructor. At the end of the each 50 - minute class, he held what is called "Takes." These are one-minute and 5-minute takes to see how fast a student



could type. Some people are blessed with the ability to type without looking at the keyboard and to just look at the words to be typed without reading the sentence. Paula had phenomenal typing skills when she 18 years old. In a one-minute take, she could type 130 words a minute with no mistakes. In a 5-minute take, she could type 120 words a minute with no mistakes. I believed that no one could beat her accuracy or her speed. But she told me about a student in her class that had to have her Selectric typewriter

adjusted. Now the Selectric typewriter has 2,800 parts. Somehow, the college had an IBM representative come in and adjust a Selectric typewriter for this student. She could type 150 words a minute with no mistakes. Paula and this other student both received an "A" for the course.

In 1968, I transferred from the UK Hopkinsville Community College to Murray State. I signed up for Mrs. Simmons's typing class. I was, perhaps, the worst student in her typing class. I had to look at the keys on the typewriter and read what I was typing. The best that



I could do on a 5 - minute take was 20 words a minute and several mistakes. I would stay after class and lament to Mrs. Simmons that I was just not born to type. She would say, "Now John, you will get better but only if you practice, practice and practice." I said I wish I could but I was commuting every day from Cadiz to Murray. And I did not own a typewriter. Mrs. Simmons told me that the college auctions off its old typewriters and that I should go down to maintenance and put in a bid on a

typewriter that the college intends to auction off. So I went over, filled out a bid form, put it in an envelope, and put it with the only typewriter that was being auctioned off. It was a red, wide- body IBM Selectric typewriter. My bid was \$20.00. That is the equivalent of \$148.34 in purchasing power today.

I was a dirt poor student going to college on the GI Bill. I was deep in debt with student loans. I was married with a one year old son. I worked part-time for the campus Post Office. Paula worked as a Histologist for Jennie Stuart Hospital in Hopkinsville. We lived in a new duplex apartment in the Cadiz behind the Trigg County High School. The following year, I purchased a small mobile home and moved it on to a farm that belonged to Sam Armstrong. He had an old house on the property and for tearing it down, he would let me park my mobile home there, rent free. I began working during the summer months for the TVA over in the LBL. One summer day, one of my co-workers, who also lived on a farm, asked me if I wanted to buy a baby Yorkshire pig. I told him that I did not know anything about raising a pig. Besides, what would I do with the pig when it got too big? A Yorkshire pig becomes a large animal, weighing several hundred pounds. It is mainly white and has erect ears. My co-worker said, "Consider it an investment. You pay me \$10.00 for the pig and down the road, you can sell it and triple your money or you can have it slaughtered for food. Besides, they make good pets"

So the follow week, the co-worker came to work with a baby pig in the trunk of his car. He keep the trunk lid open to give the pig fresh air. The baby pig was in a lettuce crate. The previous week, I built a large pen for the baby pig. Sam Armstrong let me pick some of the field corn across the road to feed the pig. Word got out that I had a baby pig. Back at that time, they did not give out food stamps. They gave out commodities like cheese, oaks and other things. We were poor but we never signed up for that kind of assistance. We named the baby pig "Nar-nold" because our son could not say "Arnold." The pig only messed in one part of his large pen. He stayed clean. When I got home from college, he would run over to greet me. Because we lived right off the road, people would drop off some of the commodities that they did not eat, for Nar-nold. When the pig got too big, I told Paula there was no way that we were going to eat Nar-nold, So I sold the pig at a cattle auction in Hopkinsville.

Getting back to the red typewriter story. Apparently, no one else made a bid on that typewriter. It looked good and I guess they thought it did not work, because at an auction it sells as is. I was notified to come over to maintenance, after I paid the college \$20.00, and pick up my typewriter. In 1968, the wide—body IBM Selectric typewriter, when new, sold for \$445.00. In today's dollars the value would be \$3,300.61. I felt that I made a good bid. But I really did not like the wide body Selectric typewriter. I liked the regular smaller model. I did not know if the typewriter I purchased even worked. It did work and I was very thankful. Paula was very helpful to me during my two undergraduate years at Murray State. She could type out in minutes what it would take me hours to type.

Coach Johnny Reagan was my business adviser. I made an appointment to see him one day. We talked about my progress and the business courses that I was taking. He was also my marketing professor. As we were talking, I noticed that he had the regular model, red

Selectric typewriter. I told him that I had purchased the wide—body business Selectric typewriter from the college, and it is more than I needed. He said, “John, I'm just the opposite. I don't like the model I have. I need the wide-body. How would you feel about an even exchange, your business model for my smaller model?” So the next day I brought my typewriter to his office. He checked it out and made the exchange.

I cannot say enough good things about Coach Reagan. He was the head baseball coach at Murray State University for 36 years. He amassed a record of 776 wins, 508 losses, and 11 ties. This included 11 Ohio Valley Conference Championships. He was one of the most honored and loved figures in Murray State athletics history. He was very soft spoken and very congenial. For some reason, he treated me like I was a member of his own family. Some people, like Coach Reagan, radiate happiness and are Christ-like. He died December 14, 2018 at the age of 92. My family physician, Dr. Daniel Butler, reminds me of Coach Reagan. He is soft spoken and Christ-like in his actions and his beliefs. Besides, he likes my stories.

I kept the old, red Selectric typewriter that I received from Coach Reagan for more than 51 years. Andrea and Heather, when they were little, treated it like it was just another one of their toys. The motor still works when you turn it on. One of its 2,800 parts malfunctioned long ago. I don't believe that parts are even available to fix it. It has more sentimental value than antique value. One last comment on the IBM Selectric typewriter that was introduced in 1961. It was an enormous influence on the modern computer keyboard. Administrators grew to love the feel of the Selectric's keyboard and many early computer keyboards mimicked it. I have a 1988, IBM Model M keyboard that can attest to that feel.

Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald were the two greatest writers of their day. They were friends, at times, but their personal lives were a mess. Only Hemingway used a typewriter for most of his writings. I am certainly no Sherlock Holmes or even the French fictional Inspector Jacques Clouseau, but I was an Inspector General for nine years and I know a thing or two. So let me share a story with you about Hemingway. He owned a manual typewriter that he kept in a case when he was a war correspondent writing articles for Collier's Magazine. He wanted to be an Army Officer but he failed his military physical. He served as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross and was given a medal for bravery.

When my son, John was six years, Paula and I took him on a vacation to Miami, Florida. I drove over to my former Ada Merritt Junior High School located at 660 SW 3rd street, near downtown Miami. The front entrance to the school had two life-size concrete lions that were painted in gold paint. I got out of my car and walked over and touched the noses on each lion, as I did as a kid. I felt that no one could steal these gold lions because they each must weigh at least a thousand pounds. The school closed in 1979 because of structural damage. It was abandoned and later demolished. A new school was built based on its original 1920s design. All that remains from the original building are the lion statues in the front entrance. It is Miami's only commuter school that starts early and ends late for parents who live outside the county.

I then decided to drive down to Key West, Florida, the former home of Ernest Hemingway. It takes about four hours to drive from Miami to Key West. I guess that I wanted to go back to Key West one more time. I was in jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia, in November 1962. This was during the Cuban Missile Crisis when the Soviets and the Americans were about to start a nuclear war. I was told that my third jump would be over Havana, Cuba. But things cooled down and the Russians pulled their nuclear tipped missiles out of Cuba. The end of the road in Key West is mile marker "0" on U.S. Highway 1. It is 90 miles by water to Cuba. We stayed the night at a motel and the next day we drove past Ernest Hemingway's former house on our way back to Miami. Hemingway died in 1961 at the age of 61.

I suspected that there was something fishy about Ernest Hemingway's former writing studio in his house on 901 Whitehead Street in Key West. The house was sold by his widow, Mary to Mrs. Bernice Dickson after Hemingway's death. She founded the museum. The manager of the Ernest Hemingway house and museum gave an interview that can be seen on YouTube. He was standing facing the person asking the questions. He made the statement that Hemingway did about 70% of his writing over a nine-year period in that studio. There was a simple table, a simple chair and Hemingway's typewriter on the table. William Shakespeare wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players..." The problem with the museum director's stage, is that Hemingway was



a manly, tough soul. It takes great physical effort to stand up and type for hours upon hours. But that is exactly what Hemingway did. He always stood when he typed out his stories and novels on his manual typewriter. He developed that working habit from the very beginning of his writing career. He would put his typewriter on a chest-high bookcase and type out his stories. Hemingway's writing studio should have pencils and paper on the table and the typewriter on one of the chest—high bookcases in the room. It is misleading to charge the public \$14 for an adult ticket and \$6 for a child's ticket

(ages 6 to 12) to walk into Hemingway's writing studio and not tell them the truth that Hemingway typed standing up not sitting at the table.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote his novel "The Great Gatsby" using a journal and a pencil. Someone else typed his manuscripts that were given to his publishers. Success in life for Fitzgerald and Hemingway came from writing novels and stories. Hemingway once said, "Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know. Fitzgerald told his daughter, Frances, "I am glad that you are happy-but I never believe in much happiness..." There are two things these two writers may not have read in their life time. The first is found in Psalm, Chapter 144, Verse 15, "Happy are the people whose God is Lord." The second is found in Ecclesiastes, Chapter 2, Verse 26, " To the person who pleases Him, God gives

wisdom, knowledge, and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

A person that trusts in Christ and believes in Him will always be in Christ's good grace, unlike the person who doesn't and goes against His teachings. Chasing after success and accomplishments without having Christ at your side, is like typing on an old manual typewriter with no ink ribbon and no paper. It is just wearing out the typewriter keys. I know that I am not a good proof reader of my own stories and that some of my sentences are grammatically incorrect, but I am guided by what is found in Matthew, Chapter 10, Verse 33, “But whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” I try to acknowledge Christ in most of my stories. In our secular society, it seems that chasing after the wind, rather than chasing after Christ, leads to a lot of unhappiness and disenchantment with life. Rather than repenting of their faults, it seems that some people can't forgive themselves or others and live very unhappy lives.

Some day I might box up my red IBM Selectric typewriter, that weighs 37 pounds, and ship to a repair shop that might be able to fix it. It has memories from my days at Murray State where Mrs. Simmons told me to bid on a typewriter. I have the memory of Coach Reagan who traded me his small Selectric for my wide- body Selectric. I have memories of Paula typing my school papers and Andrea and Heather playing with it like it was one of their toys. For now, I'll put the plastic cover over it and put it under the bed. It has some sentimental value. But memories, like dreams, gradually grow faint and disappear. The Red Typewriter served its purpose. I use a small Dell laptop to type out my stories that I mail to Jade, Skyler, Lexie, Trish, Audrey, Mike and Dr. Butler. During this pandemic crisis, my stories are a way to stay connected with them and to let them know that I care about them. My craft is limited because I don't write fiction stories and make up characters like Sherlock Homes and Inspector Jacques Clouseau.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:

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