Charles Spiro: Reaching Back in Time

By Bertha S. Spiro
Introduced by Martin Howard

I recently received an e-mail from Dan of Pleasantville, N.Y. He was buying the Bar-Lock 4 photographic print through my website, one of a number of images for sale. This was very nice but paled in comparison to what he told me next: his great-grandfather is Mr. Charles Spiro! I was excited to say the least, knowing that I was speaking to a relative of this great typewriter pioneer. Dan said that he was, in general, aware of Mr. Spiro's work with the early typewriter industry but had no stories to tell. He said that if his mother were still alive she would have much to say, and added that his aunt Rosemary, his mother's sister, was 83 and living in a nursing home and that he would speak with her on the next opportunity to see if there was more history to share.

Well, he got back to me a week later with a photo of the man himself, Mr. Charles Spiro, with a lovely young girl in his arms: his granddaughter, Rosemary! She may be the only person left now who knew Mr. Spiro firsthand. It has been a moving experience for me to be able to reach back in time to see the face of Mr. Spiro and to know that the beautiful young girl with him is still alive and has memories of him. Mr. Spiro was born in 1850 (died 1932), so he was probably around eighty in this picture. Now Rosemary is that age. The chasm of time has not yet closed.

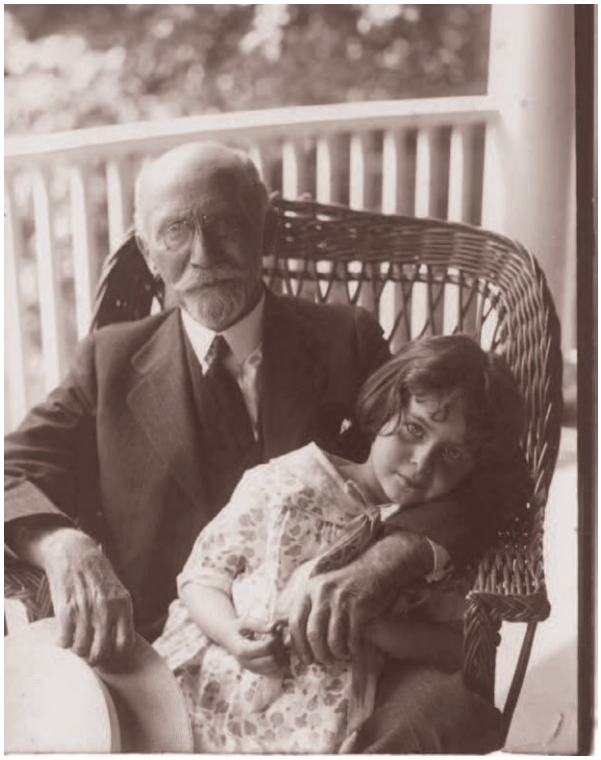
What Dan also found was a biographical sketch of Mr. Spiro written by Rosemary's mother, Bertha Spiro, wife of Walter Spiro, son of Charles. The sketch was apparently written for Collier's magazine, and as Dan says, "I'd be surprised if it was accepted". The story is a personal and affectionate look at Spiro's life by his daughter-in-law. The chronology of Spiro's typewriter development is weak, but in her account of his work as a watchmaker, his profession as a lawyer, and his dedication to inventing typewriters, we get a much broader sense of Mr. Spiro than we had before. He would have been an impressive man in any age.

This might be the first time a photo of Mr. Spiro has been published in recent history, and I am very happy to be able to share it with you. I will ensure that Dan receives this copy of ETCetera *that pays tribute to his special great-grandfather!*

Back in the mechanically dark ages of 1850 Charles Spiro, one of the first and greatest of the typewriter inventors, was born. The hero of this little sketch, although he worked in narrower fields than his more famous compatriot Thomas Alva Edison, has also made a useful and significant contribution to the mechanical progress of the nineteenth century.

The only son of a watch and chronometer maker, Mr. Spiro was from earliest childhood surrounded by the tools of his father's trade in the little shop down in the lower business district [of New York City], where the watches and chronometers sold in the shop were made by hand as was the custom at that time.

The art of watch making, which was the



first of the great modern industries to become mechanized, was still entirely a hand craft. As a souvenir from that earlier day I have in my possession watch number 29, uncompleted, which was the last one upon which Mr. Spiro worked. As a lad of 16 in his father's shop his ingenious mind pondered over the set-up of a watch to discover a better way to wind and set it than by the clumsy key and side button then in use. Before that time the operation of winding one's watch was comparable in its awkwardness to the frantic cranking of the first automobiles. After pondering over the problem for some time he worked out the stem setter and winder for watches, and for this radical improvement received the magnificent sum of four thousand dollars. [U.S. Patent 96844, Nov. 16, 1869 — Ed.] While to us a sum of that size seems like a joke for recompense of an epochal invention, to the watch-maker's son it seemed a princely and illimitable fortune. His imagination did not reach further than the pleasures it would purchase.

After a division of the reward with his proud father he promptly threw down his tools, deserted the chronometer shop, and set sail for the older world to see and taste life. The next six months were very pleasantly passed in rambling about in England and Germany. The young mechanic really surrendered to the spell of European culture and acquired cosmopolitanism all too rare in the product of New York. His violin training had been started in his sixth year, and now with leisure and at least temporary opulence, he was able to indulge in concert-going in the musical Germany of that day and to improve his own technique in practice. Later on he was forced to professionalize this gift, and it stood him in good stead as a means to further education.

As his return to America drew nearer the prospect of long hours at the watch-maker's bench held a very faint appeal for the young inventor. As a school boy he had possessed a real flair for debating, and his mother, like so many women in a humble social class, was ambitious to place her son in one of the learned professions. He fell in with this notion now; mechanics seemed a dull and dusty business, which failed to offer the excitement and variety of a lawyer's life.

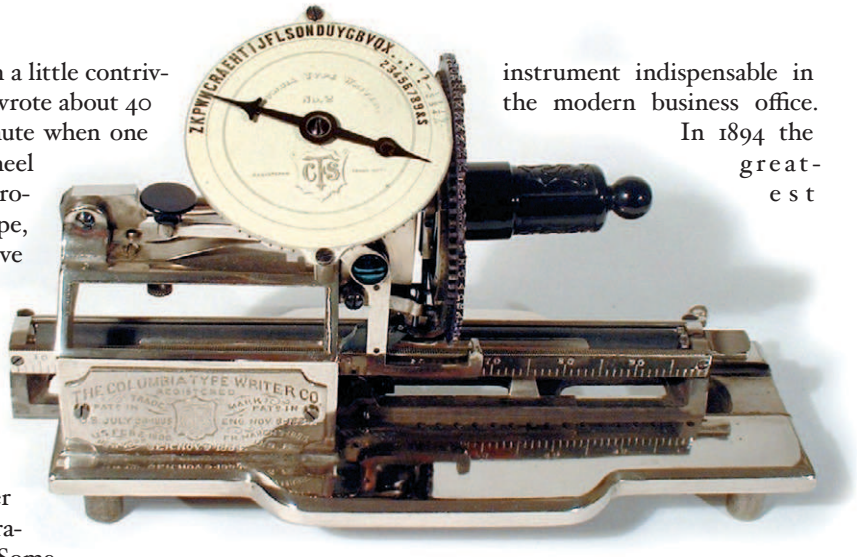
So with the full consent of his parents, and the enthusiastic support of his mother, he broke away from his old life. Enrollment at Washington University, now Washington and Lee University, followed, and the next two years were spent there. Mr. Spiro graduated from that institution with the degree of L.L.B. During those years he supported himself by playing the violin in a theatre orchestra in the City of Washington. The states at that time were separate entities to a much greater degree than at present, and when he returned to New York he was not admitted to the bar of his native state until an additional year of study at New York University certified his as ready to practice law in the state.

Mr. Spiro enjoyed several years of ease and prosperity as a young lawyer with a growing

practice. In fact there was talk of making him a judge. He undoubtedly would have had an honorable career on the bench, but fate willed it otherwise. After nine years as a lawyer his legal career was brought to an untimely end by one of those chances that so often change the course of our lives. The man in the office across the hall became a proud possessor of a Remington typewriter and called Mr. Spiro in one day when he was passing to admire the new marvel. His feelings were mingled of admiration for the ingenuity displayed in the machine and criticism that such a clever mechanism should be so unhandily and clumsily contrived. At home, with his mind still filled with the wonder of the invention he had just seen, he was busy mentally designing and re-designing it. Mechanics was still one of his hobbies and he had a little machine shop set up in the cellar with a lathe and tools.

After some weeks spent in working out problems of design the model was started on the lathe and in two months the new machine was completed. At this point Mr. Spiro showed it to a brother-in-law who ejaculated in traditional brother-in-law fashion, "Charlie, we've got a fortune there." Other relatives were now invited to inspect the new machine and all felt that it marked a great advance on the few primitive typewriters then in use and expressed great confidence in its future.

That was at the very beginning of the typewriter art. The machines were very crude affairs in much the stage of their development as the early motor car. And although people did not shout "Get a horse" at their users they undoubtedly often had cause to say, "Get a pen." It is no part of my purpose to describe here the evolution of the typewriter, to which the gentleman I am describing made such a great contribution. We know that it evolved from a little contrivance which wrote about 40 words a minute when one revolved a wheel by hand to rotate the type, to the massive structure it is today, which does everything in a business office but powder the stenographer's nose. Some of Mr. Spiro's improvements on the typewriter are the automatic ribbon feed, the bar-lock, which prevents the typing from being carried off the paper, the removable platen, and most important of all, visible writing; that is that every part of what is written is completely visible continuously.



A small company with capital contributed by relatives was formed in 1884 to manufacture the new machine under the name of the "Columbia Typewriter Co." Typical of the way in which the work of the inventor is regarded by businessmen, Mr. Spiro put in as much money as the other partners in the enterprise, and the invention of the typewriter, for the same amount of return on the investment as the other interested persons received. The new company started manufacturing in an old wooden building in Harlem. So much difficulty was encountered in finding a competent superintendent that all those interested in the business decided that the inventor of the machine was the only person capable of guiding the steps of the infant industry through its endangered beginnings until it should be launched as a going manufacturing business. Perhaps the part of any process of invention least understood by the lay public is the long tedious stretch of time between a perfect working model of a device and the transformation of the same device into a marketable manufactured product. It involves all the steps between theory and practice in any line of endeavor.

Mr. Spiro relinquished his pleasant and lucrative law practice and took active charge of the new venture. Ten years saw the almost complete evolution of the typewriter into the mechanically perfect instrument indispensable in the modern business office. In 1894 the greatest tribute that can be paid to an American inventor was bestowed upon Mr. Spiro when the John Scott medal of the Franklin Institute was conferred upon him in recognition of his typewriter inventions described in a series of 20 patents, which comprise the history and development of the typewriter. During the first years of the business the machine was sold in this country, but as the industry developed England and the continent took most of the output of the factory. The business was housed for many years in a solid old red brick building on West 116th St., which now is headquarters for a religious and social settlement house. The business received a blow from which it never recovered when one of the partners hypothecated the securities for some financial scheme of his own. This crippled the business, deprived it of capital and forced manufacturing on a smaller scale.

The business and patents have been sold long since and this is all ancient history. Mr. Spiro's four sons have followed in the mechanical tradition of their father and manufacture and sell their own mechanical products in old red brick factory in a country town on the Hudson shores.

A rich and interesting life has been lived by the subject of this sketch; his mind has ranged over many fields of design and he has taken out patents in phonography, matrix machines and automatic machinery. Music has been his dear companion and solace during a long and stormy life of 82 years. He is still trying to perfect his technique on his fiddle and the mechanical and social progress of the future holds great interest for him. Although his achievements are very great, he interests me even more because of the unique quality of haphazardness and lack of any formal preparation for the fields in which he has so successfully toiled.

Pictured: Columbia No. 2 #977 & Bar-Lock No. 4 #13133, from the Martin Howard collection.