

## Meet Martin Howard, who goes to great lengths as he hunts and pecks for vintage typewriters.

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Martin Howard

Nick Kozak FOR THE TORONTO STAR

By Samantha Edwards Special to the Star

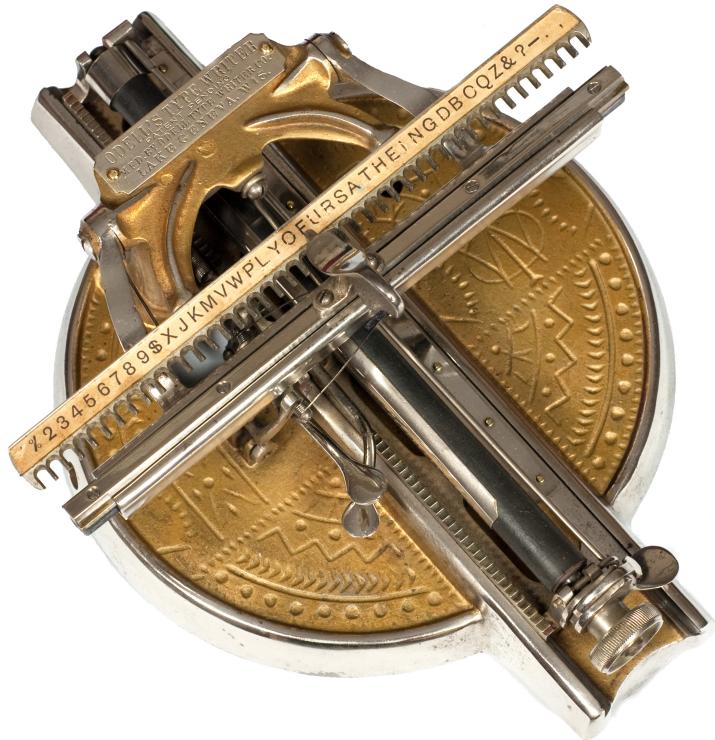
Martin Howard has always been a collector. As a child, he accumulated British coins, cigarette packages and wine bottle labels, which he'd press like autumn leaves and store in photo albums. Then in his late twenties, he started amassing what would become his most prized and expansive collection: the world's earliest typewriters, specifically from the late 1880s and early 1890s, a period Howard calls "The wild west of typewriters."

"What I love about 19th-century typewriters is that they were made for visual appeal," Howard says. "A lot of them have beautiful gold stenciling and lovely decals. The end of my collecting period is not long after 1896 - that's when the Underwood came along and would define what the standard typewriter would look like for the next century."

Indeed, Howard's collection, which is made up of 70 machines acquired over 30 years, features typewriters of all shapes and sizes. There's the keyboard-less Hall 1 (1881) that's operated with one hand and weighs just seven pounds; the Ford (1895) which boasts a Victorian two-tone grille but was not ideal for fast typing; and the hand-sized Odell 1 (1888) with a circular base featuring a carved Native American gold motif. Howard stores his collection in his Scarborough home, on shelves and in display cabinets. He also has a workbench set up where he carefully restores, repairs and cleans his machines. "It's like my playroom," he says.



Ford - 1895



Odell 1 - 1888

Because his collection is from such a specific era, Howard usually cannot find his treasures at flea markets, junk shops and antique shows - although he does love perusing these places. Instead, he mostly relies on antique dealers and folks to reach out to him through his website, antiquetypewriters.com. And there's no distance Howard won't travel. To nab the rare Alexis from 1890, Howard drove 15 hours to Normal, Illinois; to get the London-made Waverley from 1895, he flew to Scotland. "There's only nine known worldwide," he says. "It's one of those legendary machines that you have no right to expect to ever own because it's so rare. So, when lightning strikes, you go." A rare typewriter can cost a few hundred to a few thousand dollars.



There's still at least one that's on Howard's bucket list: the Horton, made in Toronto in 1885. "It was the first typewriter to enable one to see what they typed, when they type," he says. The inventor, Edward Horton, worked as a reporter at The Globe and Mail before becoming a stenographer at the Ontario Court of Appeal in Toronto, which is when he started designing the typewriter. "It is a very fragile machine with its delicate open frame and not many have survived to this day," Howard says. "It's my white whale."

Not surprisingly, Howard has encyclopedic knowledge of typewriters, easily rattling off dates and manufacturers, model numbers and inventors. He was even featured in the 2016 documentary "California Typewriter", which profiled artists (including Tom Hanks), writers and collectors who are passionate about typewriters, and had his own personal collection exhibited at the Royal Ontario Museum in 2007.

These days, though, Howard gets the most joy helping others discover the beauty and possibility of typewriters.

Over the past couple of years, he's been selling 20th-century portable typewriters to teenagers who like the retro chic aesthetic, older folks who want to experience the thumping of the keys again and writers hoping to compose their great novel on one. "They want a tool that does not have the distraction of spell check or emails coming in," says Howard. "There's a different feel at a manual typewriter than a computer keyboard. The cadence of the keys helps one think. The beat is like a metronome on a piano."

He ships typewriters across the country, but most of his buyers are based in Toronto, where they can test-drive a few. He shows them how to insert paper, replace the ribbon and cover up mistakes - after all, most of his customers have never used one before.

"When somebody buys a manual typewriter today, they're not buying it as a machine of drudgery," he says, "They're buying it as a machine of liberation and creativity."