Hemingway, Groton and the Corona typewriter

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Hemingway used one. Cronkite, Vonnegut and Capote used one. And they were all made here.

(Photo: FILE PHOTO)

The roots of a great writer can always be traced back to some point. When reflecting on the origins of a literary giant like, say, Ernest Hemingway, the lines can be traced back to numerous starting points.

One could argue the seed was planted in the newsroom of the Kansas City Star, pounding out copy on rickety keys with an editor on his back or even in Toronto, refining his craft in a different setting. Maybe it could have been while at war, serving as an ambulance driver in Italy, where he found the prose that would make him a legend.

Some could say he found his muse on the keys of a gift given to him on his 22nd birthday, July 21, 1921 by then fianceé, Hadley Richardson — a Corona 3 typewriter, made in Groton, New York.

That typewriter became Hemingway's tool of choice while serving as a war correspondent for the Toronto Star in France, where in 20 months, 88 stories with Hemingway's byline were filed from the ribbon of the small, compact machine.

(Photo: NICK REYNOLDS / Staff Photo)

In the early-20th century, Corona typewriters, the Number 3 in particular, dominated the press tents of killing fields around the world. They were inexpensive, lightweight and portable, the first typewriter to fold into itself and fit into an easy-to-carry case.

The device became so commonplace, the company legacy even extended to pop culture. Heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey's famous fall through the ropes in front of 80,000 at the Polo Grounds in 1923 ending on top of a card table and a sportswriter's Corona 3. (The punchline became: "Firpo could take out Dempsey, but he couldn't take out the Corona.")

Though a good chunk of their products were manufactured in the company's plants in Cortland and Syracuse, among other locations, that little Number 3 spurred the creation of one of the most enduring brands in literature; writers including Kurt Vonnegut, Gore Vidal, Truman Capote and journalist Walter Cronkite all used Smith-Corona electrics.

For years, the tiny Tompkins County town of Groton was the starting point of some of the greatest books and stories ever written.

Then, 30-some years ago, it all went away.

(Photo: NICK REYNOLDS / Staff Photo)

Groton, a senator and a typewriter

The seeds of Groton's success were planted in a New York City loft occupied by Frank Rose, who developed the earliest version of the Corona 3 with his invention of the Standard Folding Typewriter. It was a good design, but a design he wouldn't see the success of; Rose died May 23, 1905, just three weeks shy of his 49th birthday, leaving control of the company to his son, George.

Though the product was sound, the company was not and with a weak marketing strategy, the future of the typewriter was doomed to sink on Rose's watch. Then, in 1909, Rose was introduced to Groton Sen. Benn Conger, who had become enamored with the Standard Folding Typewriter on a train ride to Albany after seeing one in use by a fellow passenger.

"George's biggest contribution to the typewriter community was actually selling the design to Conger," Hartford, Connecticut-based typewriter historian Greg Fudacz said.

(Photo: Landmarks of Tompkins County, New York by W.T. Hewitt)

The sale, it seemed, was timely for both.

Conger, an influential state senator, was under pressure from his constituency to find a suitable replacement for the Groton Carriage Works, a 175-employee operation at its peak that had gone bankrupt in 1905 or 1906. The culprit was the start of the mass-produced automobile in America, an era initiated by Oldsmobile's first mass production run in 1901.

At the same time, Groton's other major industry, the 160-employee Groton Bridge Co., had been purchased and liquidated by Morgan's American Bridge Company, which was looking to eliminate competition. (The plant was later repurchased by Conger and reopened, Groton Town Historian Lee Shurtleff said, only to be closed because of growing state regulations, competition from Pittsburgh and Conger's involvement in the typewriter industry.)

(Photo: NICK REYNOLDS / Staff Photo)

Mass production of typewriters was an industry no longer just in the hands of large-scale pioneers like Remington or built in the boutique workshops of small-time machinists, but a more efficient, profitable market spread across hundreds of small-scale operations nationwide.

With the typewriter, Conger brought along engineer C.F. Brown and moved into the vacant carriage works building with 20 workers and Ohio designer Otto Peterman. Peterman wanted to make a more elaborate machine, but it was too expensive and the powers that be wouldn't have it. So the Number 3 was the result and was marketed at $50 a pop (more than $1,100 in today's currency).

Though Groton had brief success with the award-winning Crandall Typewriter Co. (shuttered in 1896), Corona, with its new design, would become the town's first truly successful company in the 20th century.

By 1915, production had outgrown the Carriage Works and a new factory was built, one that would produce Hemingway's typewriter and, for the better part of the 20th century, would serve as Groton's beating heart.

(Photo: NICK REYNOLDS / Staff Photo)

"It was the first truly successful American typewriter," Hartford, Connecticut-based typewriter historian Greg Fudacz said.

"That sales pitch was probably why," he added. "They didn't invent the portable typewriter, but they perfected it. Before that, most were big, office-sized 35-pound typewriters or index machines, which didn't have keyboards. .... This machine was foldable and pressed-steel, weighed just about 10 pounds, an added shift and two-color ribbon ... more than anything else, the marketing team did a good job selling them."

Selling including changing the name to Corona — "crown" in Latin — as "Standard Folding Typewriter" didn't translate so well to the now-lucrative European markets. Despite the renaming, for nearly 30 years, the machine was the standard, with more than 675,000 units produced, outselling its closest competitor, Blick, by a wide margin.

The Corona Era

As the company grew, the village's west side became Corona's domain. Policemen were assigned to direct traffic at the corner of Cortland and Main streets, to direct traffic as the factory's 1,600 or so employees came to or left work each day.

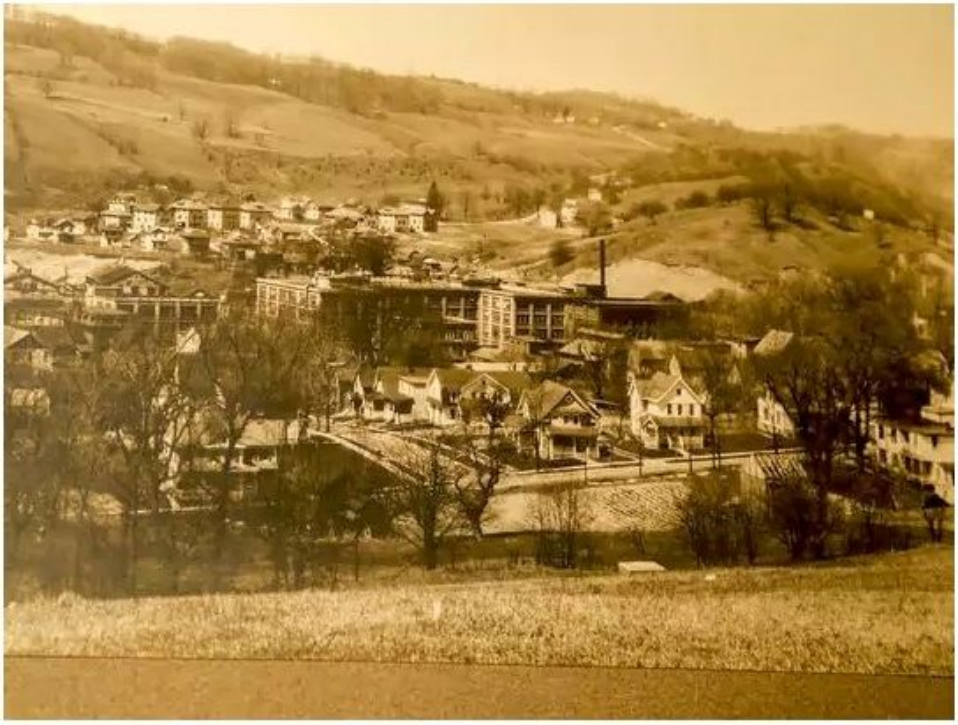
An opera house became the Corona Theater, and the still-standing Corona Club was built on the company dime to provide entertainment to its workers.

(Photo: NICK REYNOLDS / Staff Photo)

Money was sunk into West Cortland and Spring streets, the factory lining the avenues with rows of single-family homes, boarding houses and tenements, which were rented out to the workers. For those looking to own and settle down, a Corona worker could finance his home through the factory's own Savings & Loan, who would deduct the worker's mortgage payments from each paycheck.

"It was a real company town," Shurtleff said. "They were a real big part of the social fabric. All of the social activities were centered around Corona. They had a marching band that led all the parades, a fire company, they even had their own semi-professional baseball team that traveled the circuit."

Even businesses in town, like Tom Hefferin's cafeteria, made their cut from the trickling of Corona's wealth. It was at Tom's catering business Groton mainstay Bob Walpole would come each summer between 1961 and 1965, starting work at 6 a.m. Each day, Walpole would roll the coffee wagon to the factory filled with doughnuts, coffee, "anything you could want," Walpole said.



(Photo: NICK REYNOLDS / Staff Photo)

Before then, he worked at the Red and White, one of several grocery stores in town. Fully stocked, it had its own butcher shop; at lunch hour it was regularly filled with factory workers.

Today, Walpole owns the store, only it specializes in gifts. The meat market is now a liquor store, also run by Walpole. The Victory market, the last grocer in town, is long gone, along with the factory and the money that kept it afloat.

“It’s all small mom and pop shops now,” Walpole said. “So much has changed everywhere and they’re all gone, not just here. It’s a changing of the times I guess. That’s what’s happened to all these small towns.”

For Corona, that change came from across the Pacific when a new wave of technology felled it.

(Photo: NICK REYNOLDS / Staff Photo)

“In the late ‘70s, they were fighting what we call a Japanese dumping,” Shurtleff said. “Under the terms of the trade agreements at the time, Japanese manufacturers were introducing typewriters into the U.S. at a cost less than it took to manufacture them.”

Shurtleff recalled his father, a representative on the Tompkins County Legislature at the time, took a trip to Washington to lobby a change in the trade agreement to stop the bleeding. The efforts failed.

By 1983, Corona was gone. The factory was torn down a year later and since, Groton has never grown beyond its population of around 6,000.

“We hate to use the term, but we have become a bedroom community,” Shurtleff said. “We’ve tried to get some industry here, but as far as anything the size of Corona? No.”

Today, there’s no sign, no memorial on the corner of Main Street and Spring Street, no indication anything — much less one of Tompkins County’s greatest industries — stood there once. There are no policemen directing traffic, no place to buy groceries, save for Walpole’s or the Dollar General on the other side of town. But there is a gas station.

(Photo: NICK REYNOLDS / Staff Photo)