

Good-Bye, Fountain Pens

ONE OCTOBER MORNING in 1945, more than 5,000 people jammed the entrance to Gimbel's department store in New York City. They weren't looking for the latest toy; they were waiting for another innovation—a ballpoint pen, heralded in a full-page ad in *The New York Times*.

The store sold out its entire stock of 10,000 that day at \$12.50 each.

The ballpoint concept, around since 1888, had had problems. Created as an improvement over messy fountain pens, early ballpoints continued to have a flaw: If the ink was too thick, it wouldn't come out; if it was too thin, it ran out.

Two Hungarians, Ladislas and Georg Biro, had improved the ballpoint pen in the late 1930s and settled in Argentina. Their first pens depended on gravity for ink flow, which made the pens awkward to hold. They later used capillary action to move the ink, a major step forward.

When WWII flyers ran across the pens in South America, they loved them; ballpoints worked at high altitudes and didn't require frequent refills. Two writing implement companies, Eberhard Faber and Eversharp, bought the rights to the creation from the Biro brothers.

While the companies continued to refine the Biro design and bring the cost down, Chicago salesman Milton Reynolds vacationed in Argentina. He saw the pens and quickly began manufacturing them.

Reynolds made the deal with Gimbel's and became wealthy before flaws with his pens were discovered and competitors diluted the market with pens with retractable tips and other improvements.

But you might still say that Reynolds was really on the ball.