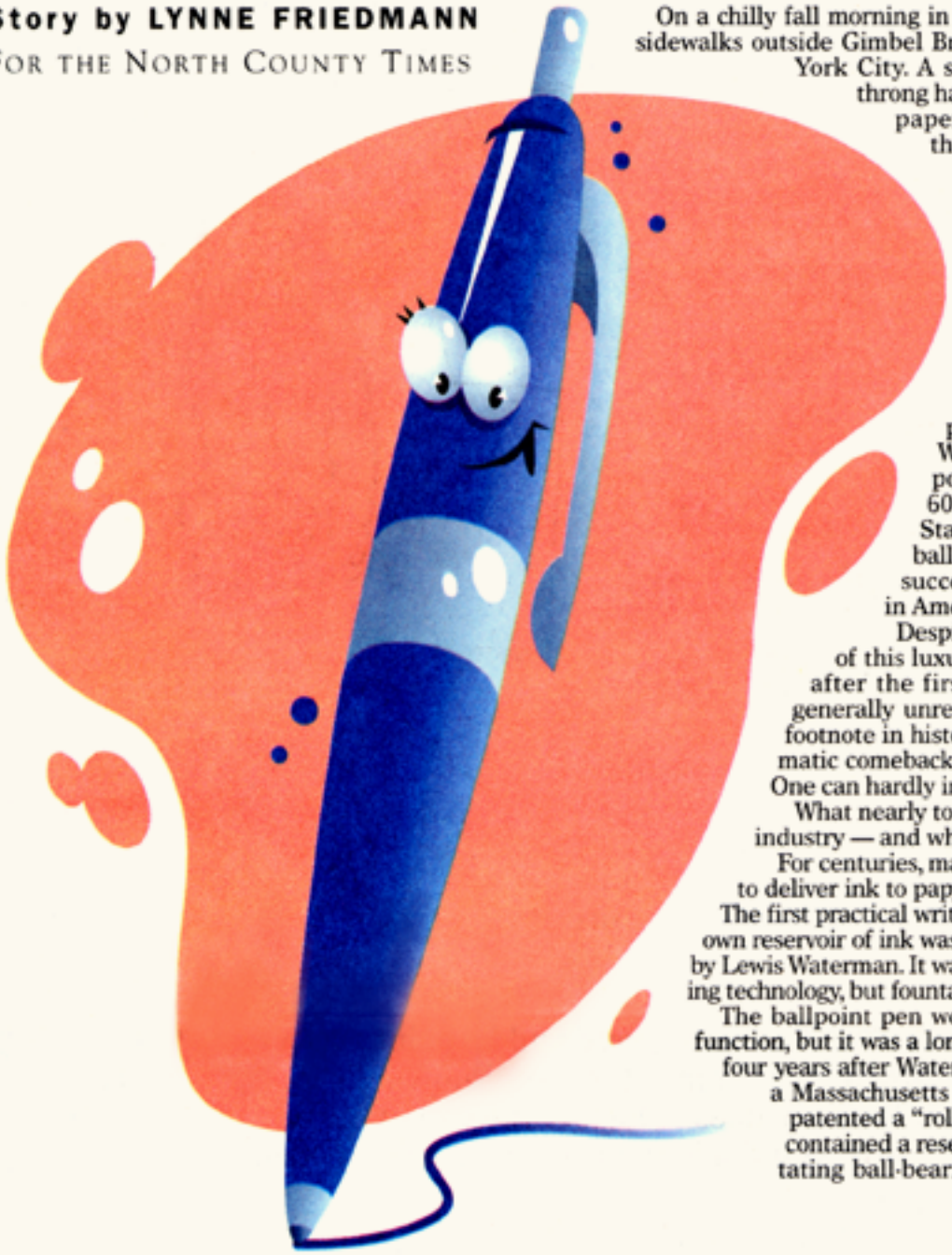
The ballpoint pen industry survives dramatic ups and downs to mark its 60th anniversary

Story by LYNNE FRIEDMANN
FOR THE NORTH COUNTY TIMES



On a chilly fall morning in 1945, 5,000 shoppers jammed the sidewalks outside Gimbel Brothers Department Store in New York City. A sea of fedoras and overcoats, the throng had been drawn by a full-page newspaper ad the day before announcing the sale of the first ballpoint pens in the United States. The new writing instrument was heralded as "fantastic ... miraculous ... guaranteed to write for two years without refilling!"

Six hours after store employees unlocked the doors — and jumped out of the way — Gimbel's entire stock of 10,000 ballpoints was sold at the eye-popping, postwar price of $12.50 each. Within three months, 2 million ballpoint pens would be sold through 60,000 retail outlets in the United States and 37 foreign countries. The ballpoint pen remains one of the most successful new-product introductions in American history.

Despite its auspicious debut, the price of this luxury item soon dropped to 19 cents, after the first ballpoints proved shoddy and generally unreliable. But instead of becoming a footnote in history, ballpoint pens managed a dramatic comeback to become an indispensable item. One can hardly imagine the world without them.

What nearly torpedoed the nascent ballpoint pen industry — and what ultimately saved it — was ink.

For centuries, mankind had devised numerous ways to deliver ink to papyrus, parchment and writing paper. The first practical writing instrument designed to hold its own reservoir of ink was the fountain pen patented in 1884 by Lewis Waterman. It was a significant leap forward in writing technology, but fountain pens were notorious for leaking.

The ballpoint pen would be the ultimate in form and function, but it was a long time in the making. In 1888, just four years after Waterman introduced the fountain pen, a Massachusetts leather tanner named John Loud patented a "rolling-pointed fountain marker" that contained a reservoir of ink in a cartridge and a rotating ball-bearing tip, constantly bathed on one

➤ WRITE, F-7

Continued from F-8

side with ink, for the application of a thick ink to mark leather. But Loud's pen was never manufactured.

Over the next five decades, 350 additional patents would be issued for similar ball-type pens, but none would advance beyond the sketch pad. The ballpoint pen was an idea waiting for the right moment in history.

It was physics and World War II that eventually led to the downfall of the fountain pen as an everyday writing instrument.

In the European and South Pacific theaters of war, fighter aircraft played a major role in military operations. When not engaged in aerial combat, pilots kept detailed logbooks of their missions that included important, potentially life-saving information on aircraft performance. But at the reduced air pressure of high-altitude flying, pilots discovered that their fountain pens flooded. A new type of pen was urgently needed.

The British government got wind of a ballpoint pen design invented by Hungarian brothers Ladislas and George Biro, a newspaperman and chemist, respectively. The Brits licensed rights from the Biros to produce the first ballpoints for the Royal Air Force. Literally field-tested in battle, the ballpoint more than proved its worth.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, American flyers stationed in Argentina made their own discovery of Biro ballpoints, after the brothers fled Europe for Buenos Aires and introduced the product there. This prompted the U.S. War Department to ask American manufacturers to create a similar writing instrument.

Thus fortune smiled on the Biro brothers in May 1945, when the American company Eversharp paid $500,000 for the exclusive manufacturing and marketing of the Biro ballpoint for the North American market.

Convinced it was poised to make a financial killing, Eversharp poured millions into product development, production and advertising in order to rush the pen to the U.S. market as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately for Eversharp, an American named Milton Reynolds arrived in Buenos Aires on a business trip in June 1945 and stumbled upon a Biro pen. Reynolds immediately saw the potential for the ballpoint. He promptly bought several, and quietly returned to Chicago.

Discovering that Loud's original 1888 patent had long since expired, placing the ballpoint in the public domain, Reynolds wasted no time making a poor knockoff based on the Biro design.

Capitalizing his pen company with $26,000, Reynolds set up a makeshift factory with 300 workers who began production on Oct. 6, 1945, stamping out pens from precious scraps of aluminum that hadn't been used during the war for military equipment or weapons.

Just 23 days later, the "Reynolds Rocket" ballpoint caused the stampede at Gimbel Brothers Department Store.

Following the ballpoint's debut in New York City, Eversharp sued Reynolds, but found that it didn't have a legal leg to stand on because the Biros had failed to secure a U.S.patent on their invention. Meanwhile, a feeding frenzy erupted, as dozens of companies saturated the market with poorly designed ballpoints, each pen boasting new and better features.

Ballpoints flew off store shelves, but despite the hoopla, the Reynolds Rocket and other early ballpoints were junk. Primitive writing instruments, they skipped, bled or rolled heavy, gelatinous ink that refused to dry.

To the horror of bankers and attorneys, early ballpoint ink faded when exposed to light. The Reynolds Rocket was derided as the only pen that would produce eight carbon copies and no original. The same people who lined up for blocks to buy ballpoints were now angrily demanding refunds. Soon, Milton Reynolds was out of business, never to be heard from again.

As the ballpoint pen market grew, other businesses sprang up to support the industry with specialty services and products, most centered around ink. In fact, it was commensurate improvements in ink that saved the ballpoint pen industry.

Once recovered from its initial stumble, the ballpoint pen couldn't have come to market at a better time. The U.S. population had nearly doubled from 76 million at the turn of the century to 150 million by 1950. More significantly, the United States experienced phenomenal economic growth following World War II. More Americans now considered themselves part of the middle class, and they were eager to spend. A central part of many advertising campaigns, ballpoint pens imprinted with product names and company slogans were freely given away. Ballpoint pens were suddenly found everywhere.

In addition to a large consumer population, the postwar era witnessed the first wave of baby boomers entering grade school. Whereas a generation before, children wrote their lessons with a shared stubble of chalk on a slate board and only the affluent could afford a fountain pen, now every child carried ballpoint pens to school. And the majority of those were manufactured by BIC.

While other inventors and entrepreneurs had paved the way for this revolution, Baron Michel Bich, founder of BIC Pens, deserves full credit for firmly embedding the ballpoint into the fabric of everyday life through mass production and aggressive marketing.

BIC was the first inexpensive ballpoint that wrote smoothly and didn't leak or jam. Introduced in Europe in 1953, BIC entered and quickly dominated the U.S. pen market five years later.

In September 2005, BIC announced that it had sold its 100 billionth disposable ballpoint pen.

Lynne Friedmann is a freelance science writer who resides in Solana Beach. She is the author of a forthcoming book on the history and science of ink.