

# The History Of The Sheaffer Pen Corporation

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## Walter Sheaffer – A Spirited Entrepreneur

Walter Sheaffer was born in Bloomfield, Iowa on July 27<sup>th</sup> 1867. He was the son of a jeweller, Jacob Sheaffer, who had moved to Bloomfield from California where he had been unsuccessful in securing wealth during the gold rush of the 1848-1855. Despite this setback, Jacob established a successful jewellery business and was able to invest in the Bloomfield Insurance Company. A second dose of financial bad luck was heaped upon Jacob Sheaffer when the assets of the insurance company were lost as a result of the Chicago Fire in 1871. In order to pay his debts, Jacob Sheaffer had no choice but to sell his jewellery business.

Walter Sheaffer had an impressive work ethic and entrepreneurial streak from a very young age, seeking employment from the age of 12 whilst also studying to complete his high school education. His early occupations included running a peanut stand and working in a grocery store. Upon completing high school, Walter Sheaffer began his apprenticeships in the jewellery trade twenty miles from his home town, in Centerville and later in Unionville, Missouri, before returning to his father's newly re-established jewellery business.



*Image of Sheaffer jewellery store*

His father's business was struggling in the face of competition from newly established department stores that were able to offer items at a similar price to the cost paid by independent jewellers such as Sheaffer. Walter's innate sense of business led him to advise his father against competing with these larger stores

and instead to diversify into the high end of the watch market. Walter's plan paid off resulting in a turn-around of the finances of the Sheaffer jewellery store.

Once Walter Sheaffer married and started his own family, the store faced greater financial strain as it was now supporting two families. Walter established a side business, selling pianos and organs. His determination to make sales was admirable and often saw him lugging a piano to potential customers twenty miles outside of the town and subsequently offering to assist the customer with household or farming duties in exchange for the opportunity to demonstrate the piano afterwards.<sup>i</sup>

By the end of 1906, Walter Sheaffer was in a position to purchase his own jewellery shop and it was the following year that he developed his design for a self-filling fountain pen.

### **Self-Filling Pens – Sheaffer's Opening Act**

The first commercially successful fountain pen had been designed by Lewis Waterman in the late 1880s. This pen, together with others designed in the decades that followed, required filling with a glass eye dropper that placed the ink directly into the barrel of the pen. This process could be messy and the race was on to design a filling system that did not risk spillages or leaks either during or after the filling process.

*Image of eye dropper used in fountain pen*

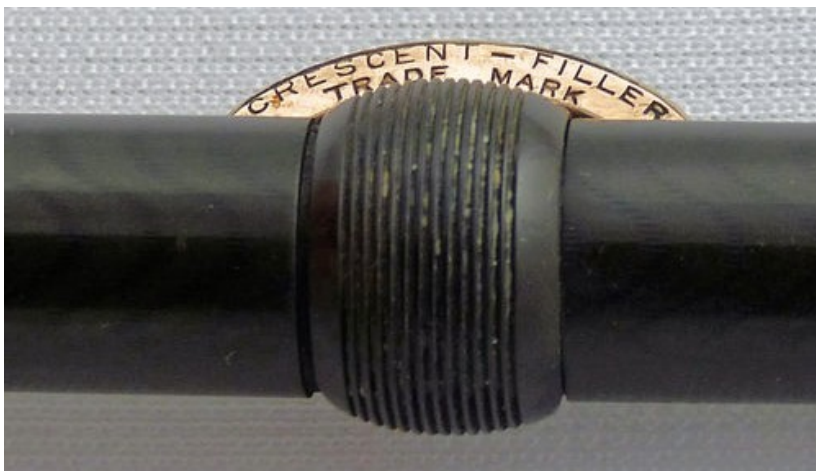


The development of a rubber sac as a container for the ink within the barrel was the first step in the process towards a cleaner self-filling mechanism; with the real breakthrough coming with Conklin's crescent filler that was invented at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Conklin's design featured a slim bar fitted within the barrel of the pen that rested on the rubber sac. Attached to this bar, and protruding through the barrel was a crescent shaped bar that would be depressed by the writer, whilst the nib was placed into the ink bottle. The compressed rubber sac would then draw up the ink as the crescent was released. Whilst there had been some previous attempts at



similar filling mechanisms before, Conklin's was vastly superior due to a locking feature that prevented the crescent being accidentally depressed whilst the pen was in use.



*Image of Conklin's crescent filler*

The crescent filler was a significant advancement but Walter Sheaffer felt that there was still room for further improvement and his lever filling system was patented in August 1908. In the place of Conklin's crescent, Sheaffer installed a lever which fitted into a built-in recess of the pen's barrel ensuring a more comfortable holding position for the writer and a more streamlined appearance.



*Image of Sheaffer's lever filler*

When the pen required refilling, the lever was lifted and this action caused the internal pressure bar to depress the rubber ink sac. A further improvement to the design in 1912 provided the impetus for Walter Sheaffer to make the permanent leap from jewellery into pen production. This filling mechanism was so popular that it was adapted by many other manufacturers who were able to exploit technical loopholes in the US patent for Sheaffer's original design.

### **Early Success**

Walter Sheaffer joined together with George Kraker and Ben Coulson, who were both former salesmen for Conklin, and the W.A Sheaffer Pen Company was incorporated in 1913 for \$35,000 and in its first year of trading, the newly formed corporation had earnings of \$17,000 (or approximately \$403,000 today).

By 1917, Sheaffer had purchased the Fort Madison Plow Company buildings to enable the establishment of an extensive factory capable of producing parts, such as the gold nibs, that previously had to be obtained from suppliers across the United States. In the four years since incorporation, Sheaffer were now producing 100,000 pens annually.

## Sheaffer's Key Innovations

### A Pen for Life

In 1920, Sheaffer introduced the Lifetime pen which came with a lifetime guarantee and an \$8.75 price tag (the equivalent of approximately \$100 today). This compares with the Parker Duofold introduced a year later, with a 25 year guarantee and a \$7 price tag. Whilst there were fountain pens available at just a third of the price of the Lifetime pen, Walter Sheaffer believed that a customer would always choose the best quality pen that he could afford with the money available to him. This philosophy proved accurate and the popularity of the Lifetime pen quickly grew with it soon becoming the bestselling pen in the United States.

### A Writing Fluid rather than an Ink

In 1922, Sheaffer developed Skrip, which was described as a writing fluid rather than an ink. Many fountain pen users made negative associations with the word 'ink' as many inks available at the time had a corrosive effect on the workings of the fountain pen. Skrip described itself as the 'successor to ink' <sup>ii</sup> and claimed to be less damaging as it used aniline dyes, originally used to stain wood and as a fabric dye, and now a common feature in the chemistry of many modern fountain pen inks. The design of the Skrip bottle was also very popular as it contained its own ink well, enabling the writer to refill their pen whilst minimising the mess.



Image of skrip bottle



## Breaking the Mould – From Hard Rubber to Radite

Most fountain pens in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century looked remarkably similar due to the limits of the material used; namely black hard rubber which could only be produced in either red or black.

In 1924, Sheaffer produced a line of pens manufactured from *radite*. This material, which is also known as cellulose nitrate or celluloid had a distinct advantage over its predecessor, in that it was possible to produce it in a wide range of colours, including pens made from a combination of swirling colours. The first colours to be produced by Sheaffer were jade green and solid black and within two years, Sheaffer had ceased using hard rubber in its manufacturing process. These first plastic pens were an immediate hit with customers who appreciated the wide range of colours available that could reflect something of the individual writer's personality. One drawback of the wonder material, not discovered until decades later, was that the plastic barrel could be discoloured over time from gases that slowly seeped from the rubber ink sacs held within.



*Image of Sheaffer radite pen from late 1920s*

## Sheaffer's famous White Dot

In the same year as Sheaffer launched its new radite pens, the signature trademark of the White Dot was introduced. This branding was originally added to pens to indicate that they had a lifetime guarantee. The position of the White Dot has changed over the decades of production, to accommodate changes in the raw materials used in manufacturing as well as design changes necessary to conform to military uniform regulations. Pens were a common gift sent to loved ones serving during the Second World War and the position of the pen clip on Sheaffer pens meant that the pens could not be worn in the shirt pocket.

Sheaffer recognised the potential customers that this could dissuade from making a Sheaffer pen purchase and so changed the position of the cap and White Dot on certain models which were then



marketed directly at those in the military. It was also during the Second World War that the nature of the lifetime guarantee changed, covering only the nib of the pen, rather than the pen in its entirety.

### **Sheaffer Balance – a new design concept**

The Sheaffer Balance pen was introduced in 1929 and had a unique feature in that it was shaped more like a torpedo rather than a uniform cylindrical shape which was the common shape seen across most manufacturers. The concept of streamlining was also beginning to feature in architectural circles, popular amongst designers such as Raymond Loewy and Norman Bel Geddes.<sup>iii</sup> Pens prior to the development of the Balance had the majority of its weight at the back end of the pen. This meant that the nib of the pen instinctively lifted away from the paper and could place a strain on the writer's hand. The weight in the Balance pen, as the name suggests was centred and this allowed for a more comfortable writing grip with this design feature at the heart of the marketing campaign; this was an ergonomic and comfortable pen for the writer, as well as looking good. This shape proved to be so popular that the term 'balance' became synonymous with this shape for any fountain pen, regardless of its manufacturer.

### **Touchdown pneumatic filling system & snorkel**



Sheaffer's expertise in fountain pen filling systems was once again evident with the development of the Touchdown pneumatic filling system which was introduced in its high end fountain pens in 1949. This was a very successful and robust vacuum filling mechanism which compressed the ink sac using air pressure from a plunger tube. Small holes permitted the pressure to be released and subsequently the sac would re-inflate, drawing in ink at the same time, when the plunger reached the end of the tube. This filling system remained in place until 1963 and was still manufactured until the 1990s.

The development of the touchdown led to the invention of the Snorkel pen in 1952. The Snorkel resembled the needle of a medical syringe which extended from under the nib when the end cap was rotated. The writer would submerge this needle into the ink bottle when refilling to prevent the nib having to make contact with the ink; a measure to reduce mess and waste whilst refilling. Its development was shrouded in secrecy and was launched with the most extensive marketing campaign in the history of the company. The Snorkel enjoyed success until the end of the 1950s.

### **Enduring Success**

In 1928, The Sheaffer Pen Corporation was launched on the New York Stock Exchange, by which time

the company held a quarter of the American pen market, sharing this position with the other big brands of the time; namely Parker, Waterman and Wahl-Eversharp. Whilst all of the major pen manufacturers experienced great success in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sheaffer's growth was five times that of its rivals.<sup>iv</sup>

Despite the Stock Market Crash of October 1929 and the start of the Great Depression, Sheaffer continued to experience success with marked improvements in sales figures throughout the 1930s and the opportunity to reward employees with bonuses as part of Sheaffer's profit sharing scheme.

Whilst it could be said that the impact of the Great Depression on Sheaffer was limited as many of their pens were luxury items, it is important to note that Sheaffer did not forget the customer with less money to spend;

"Sheaffer's philosophy was this; if someone could only afford a \$1 pen then he was entitled to buy the best pen he could for that sum, even if it meant lower profits or even a loss for the company."<sup>v</sup>

Whilst it was important that all customers were pleased with the quality of the Sheaffer pen they had purchased, Walter Sheaffer knew that it was better to sell one \$10 pen than ten \$1 pens as it was the more expensive pens that generated brand loyalty and the most positive impression in the marketplace.

Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, Walter Sheaffer was succeeded by his son Craig as president of the company. Craig was tasked first with navigating Sheaffer through the manufacturing diversification that affected many of the writing instrument companies who were needed for the production of military equipment as part of the war effort. Following the war, and shortly after the death of his father, Craig Sheaffer committed to maintaining pre-war prices to encourage and support both customers and the economy back into growth.



By 1951, Craig Sheaffer was in a position to consolidate the 3 manufacturing plants in Fort Madison, Iowa with the construction of one expansive headquarters at a cost of \$2.5million. By the following year, the company sales figures were in the region of \$25 million (close to \$216 million today). 1951 also saw the manufacture of the 50 millionth Sheaffer pen.

*C Sheaffer & employee with 50 millionth pen*



## **Sheaffer & the Ball point pen**

Milton Reynolds launched the first ball point pen in the United States in October 1944. Whilst Reynolds had little experience of pen design or manufacture, Sheaffer's reputation had led to their involvement in the ball point pen design process some months before Reynolds' launch. The War Department contacted Sheaffer requesting some prototypes of ball point pens that would be suitable for military use, following the success of the pens in the British Royal Air Force.

Whilst the War Department were not satisfied with the first prototypes, Sheaffer were ready to launch their first ball point pen for sale in September 1946. The *Stratowriter* series were priced between \$12.50 and \$67.50 and were brought to the market at a time when the number of pen manufacturers in the United States was growing at a phenomenal rate. By the end of the 1940s more pens were being manufactured each year than people lived in the United States and there were three times as many pen manufacturers as had been in business before the arrival of the ball point pen.<sup>vi</sup> The popularity of the ball point pen was short lived as many failed to live up to their extravagant marketing promises and equally extravagant price tags.

Despite consumer apathy with the ball point pen, the *Stratowriter* series continued in production until the early 1950s when it was replaced with a wider range of models including the *Skripriter*. By this time, production techniques and ink recipes had improved sufficiently to enable greater reliability and lower costs. Whilst many pen manufacturers ventured into the disposable ball point pen market, Sheaffer continued to produce a range of pens and refills as well as ball point pens as part of gift sets sold alongside mechanical pencils and fountain pens.

## **Sheaffer as a Global Brand**

After more than 50 years as a family business, Sheaffer was sold to Textron Inc, in 1966. Textron began as a small textiles company in the 1920s and is a multibillion dollar conglomerate today which includes brands such as Cessna and Bell Helicopters. Textron merged Sheaffer with Eaton, another stationery firm in 1976, before selling the company to Gefinor in 1987

Gefinor were a Swiss merchant banking company who saw that the potential of Sheaffer Eaton had been somewhat neglected during its time as part of the Textron group. Investment was made in the creation of a new line of luxury fountain pens which would suit the European market more so than the American market. Whilst many of these pens were priced between \$75 and \$175, there were also more expensive writing instruments such as a solid gold Masterpiece pen which sold for \$4000 in the early 1990s.

After ten years as part of the Gefinor group of companies, Sheaffer was sold in 1997 to Bic, who were looking to improve their reputation in the luxury pen market. This acquisition by Bic was not as straightforward as previous sales, due to an attempted buyout from within the company. A group of Sheaffer executives determined that they had the right to first refusal on any sale of the company, but this

was not judged to be the case when the matter was taken to court. Soon after the Bic acquisition, the process of moving operations overseas and away from the famous Fort Madison, Iowa site began. This site finally closed in 2008, although it has been suggested that the original date for the plant closure was 2006, but there had been a difficulty in finding a suitable operation capable of the manufacturing of Sheaffer's famous inlaid nibs.<sup>vii</sup>



The 'Big Four' American pen companies had now all succumbed to takeovers with Parker sold to Gillette in 1993, Waterman in a reverse merger with Bic in the 1950s and Wahl Eversharp being acquired by Parker in 1957 and ceasing production in the 1960s.

The closure of the Sheaffer Iowa plant marked the end of an era as it was the last of the big American fountain pen manufacturers to produce pens on home soil.

*Image of the fort Madison site*

## **The Sheaffer Legacy**

Sheaffer is extremely popular as a fountain pen brand amongst collectors due to its ready availability and wide range of products to suit all price brackets. The most collectible Sheaffer pens include Balance pens manufactured during the 1920s and 1930s as well as the Pen For Men models manufactured in the 1950s. Whilst the Balance came in a huge range of colours, many experienced discolouration due to gases emitted by the rubber in the sac mechanism. If it is possible to find a Balance pen in a colour that was most susceptible to this discolouration (such as Jade or Pearl) and yet remained in good condition, this would also provide much excitement amongst collectors.<sup>viii</sup>

Sheaffer continues to enjoy a reputation as a manufacturer of quality luxury pens with a net annual income of \$36 million and 250 employees worldwide. A number of the pen ranges that feature in the Sheaffer catalogue today are based on the early models whose endurance in the marketplace echoed the spirit and determination of the company's founder, Walter Sheaffer.

<sup>i</sup> This anecdote is described in the *History of Sheaffer* article located at: <http://www.sheaffertarga.com> Its author cites that

<sup>ii</sup> Taken from [http://dirck.delint.ca/beta/?page\\_id=4062](http://dirck.delint.ca/beta/?page_id=4062)

<sup>iii</sup> According to Richard Binder in his article, *Profile: Sheaffer's Balance* located at <http://www.richardspens.com/?page=ref/profiles/balance.htm>

<sup>iv</sup> Statistic taken from <http://www.answers.com/topic/sheaffer-pen-corporation>

<sup>v</sup> Quotation taken from *History of Sheaffer* article located at: <http://www.sheaffertarga.com>

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<sup>vi</sup> Statistics taken from <http://www.answers.com/topic/sheaffer-pen-corporation>

<sup>vii</sup> According to Walter Chang in his article on Sheaffer pens located at: <http://captainchang.com/pens/sheaffer.html>

<sup>viii</sup> See endnote vi

#### IMAGE CREDITS

Image of Sheaffer jewellery store -

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Image of eye dropper used in fountain pen -

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Image of Conklin's crescent filler -

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Image of Sheaffer's lever filler -

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Image of advert for Lifetime pen - <http://www.sheaffertarga.com/Sheaffer%20History/Images/1922%20lifetime%20ad.jpg>

Image of skrip bottle -

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Image of Sheaffer radite pen from late 1920s -

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Image of advert for military clip Sheaffer pen - <http://www.penhero.com/PenGallery/Sheaffer/Pics/SheafferWhiteDot11.jpg>

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Image of C Sheaffer & employee with 50 millionth pen -

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