

DOCUMENTING THE TWITTER OF 1886

Douglas Wilson is a 29-year-old graphic designer and letterpress printer by trade, and *Linotype: The Film*, a documentary about the amazing Linotype machine, is his first movie. For the last year and a half, he and two friends have been researching the history of the Linotype, traveling from rural Iowa to the modern headquarters of the manufacturer, in Germany. The result is a rich study of Ottmar Mergenthaler's contraption, whose importance is next to that of Gutenberg's press in shaping the way typography—and, thus, words, messages, and ideas—are presented to the public. In anticipation of the film's premiere this month, I asked Wilson how it came about.

By Steven Heller

Why a film on Linotype? Did you have any previous connection to printing or typesetting? I taught myself letterpress printing as part of my B.F.A. senior-thesis project. During that time, I visited a local letterpress trade shop and encountered my first Linotype. I was instantly hooked.

The more I researched the Linotype, the more I realized how very little information was out there. For such a common machine that was once in every city in the world, the Linotype didn't have much written or recorded about it. It was as if everyone became so wrapped up in the newer typesetting technologies that they didn't take the time to think about what they were tossing out the back door.

I had the good fortune to work at *The New York Times* a few years before it transitioned to cold type. So I walked through the old and newer tape-fed automatic typesetting machines. What was your first or most striking discovery on encountering Linotype? The mechanical genius and story behind the invention of the machine continue to amaze me. The Linotype is as complex as

a computer but completely mechanical. Mergenthaler approached the problem of mechanizing typesetting from a different angle from anyone else. Once he solved it, a syndicate of newspaper owners tried to remove him from his own company.

That sounds familiar. What was your goal in making this film? I felt the story needed to be told. For a machine that was as ubiquitous as the Linotype, very few people know about it. As I further studied the invention of the Linotype, I found a story as captivating as *Citizen Kane*. I also found out there were a few people still using these machines, and I wanted to know why.

***Citizen Kane* is a high bar. I hope the film lives up to that. One of your interview subjects says Linotype tells us more about the future than the past. To what is he referring?** The Linotype is a machine that points forward into the future in a surprising way. I often call the Linotype the Twitter of 1886 because it allowed communication to multiply from a weekly to a daily (and sometimes an hourly) newspaper. We take

these advancements in communication for granted today, but the Linotype was the first step toward the instant updates that we now incorporate into our daily lives.

I recall how happy many of us were when Linotypes were replaced by quiet keyboards and dirt-free setting. Are we apt to get too romantic about this noisy, cumbersome machinery?

There is certainly a tendency to become too nostalgic about the Linotype. I have to be honest: It is not the easiest machine to use, and you cannot be impatient. It is large, difficult to operate, and extremely complicated. As was told to me by an operator, the Linotype does not suffer fools; if you are not careful, you can seriously injure yourself.

The point of the film is not to reminisce about the good old days but to highlight an overlooked machine that impacted the world without anyone realizing it. We are not out simply to champion the Linotype but to show the surprisingly emotional connection that some people have with these machines.

In the film *Farewell Etaoin Shrdlu*, about the end of hot type at *The New York Times*, the old craftsmen lament the loss. Do you believe the printing, type, and design fields have indeed lost something? Without wanting to sound too old and crotchety, the craft of printing seems to be in short supply these

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Most everyone knows the name Gutenberg as well as his invention. You say that Ottmar Mergenthaler is as important as Edison. How do you make your case? Why isn’t his name famous? Growing up, we all learned about Edison, Bell, and Ford because they invented things that greatly impacted our lives. I believe that Ottmar Mergenthaler should be included in that list because his invention directly impacted society, education, and literacy.

The problem is that Mergenthaler invented something that was not a consumer-facing product. It created consumer-facing products such as newspapers, books, and magazines, but the Linotype itself was always relegated to the back of the print shop. Because of this, the name of its maker is not known among the great inventors of that time.

How many working Linotypes are there? And in the computer age, what’s their point?

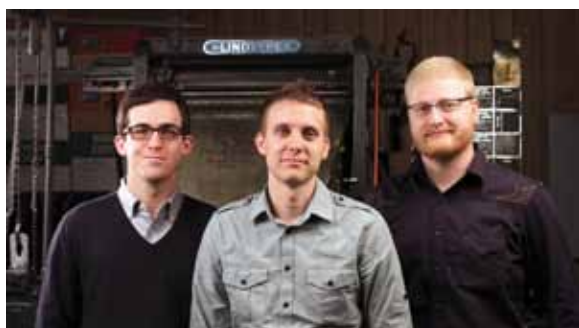
We know that over 100,000 typesetting ma-

chines (including those of Linotype’s rival, Intertype) were built. There is no official count of Linotypes that have escaped the scrapyards. The best guess is that around one thousand machines still exist, and of those a few hundred are in operation. Linotypes continue to be used to create type for specialized printing techniques such as embossing and foil stamping. Even everyday items such as customized pencils and golf tees still are printed using mostly hot metal type.

I am the first to admit that the Linotype is outdated and not necessary for modern printing and design. But I don’t see the need to completely forget everything that has come before just because it is old. There are many Linotypes over 75 years old running beautifully. I can’t say that about my 5-year-old laptop. These machines aren’t disposable like most things today are, yet people are scrapping them for the weight of their raw metal.

What do you want your audience to take away?

I want people to learn about something that impacted their lives even though they never knew it existed. I also hope the film gets people thinking about how we communicate and how that has an impact on the world, both in the past and present day. It’s a little bit of pulling back the curtain and seeing what is there. In this case, there is an amazing machine that people connect with in fascinating ways. If nothing else, I hope my mom likes it. ■



Clockwise from near left: The type designer Matthew Carter holding a sign from his days working at Linotype; Ray DesChamps with the Linotype in the Museum of Printing; the librarian Nick Smith working on a Model 31 Linotype; and the Linotype film crew (from left), Brandon Goodwin (cinematographer), Douglas Wilson (director), and Jess Heugel (audio recordist)